

OLDER CHINESE WOMEN IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR LEISURE EXPERIENCES: BEFORE AND AFTER EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: The concept of leisure has generally focused on men. This is especially true in Chinese society where women seldom have the right to speak about leisure or mention leisure activities. For many Chinese women, the integration of household and leisure has been necessary to find meaning in life. Based on this concept, we explored older Chinese women immigrants' leisure experiences before and after their emigration to the United States and barriers that they faced in the United States. The researchers used an in-depth interview approach to discover how 9 older Chinese women immigrants interpreted their leisure. Following the in-depth interviews six themes emerged: 1. women's leisure experiences (e.g., watching TV, walking, shopping, exercising, attending church and gardening) after emigration; 2. barriers (e.g., language, transportation and cultural differences) the women experienced in the United States; 3. traditional Chinese values and their effect on the women; 4. religious activities as an important social link; 5. free time or leisure not a problem, and 6. satisfaction with life and positive attitudes toward the future. The findings are useful because more and more Chinese people are emigrating to the United States, and the number of Chinese older immigrants is increasing. In addition, the results give insight into barriers Chinese women face. This information will allow recreation, tourism and resource managers and researchers to think about how they need to market and manage their resources for this ethnic group. As for the marketing aspect, managers and planners may create promotional pieces in Chinese and hold activities for the women in parks and other recreational areas. In terms of management, they should recognize the women's unique language and cultural barriers and recruit bilingual and bicultural professionals to understand the women's needs for adequate leisure activities or programs.

Introduction

"It seems to be a unique rule that when men have established themselves as rulers, they proceed at once to make laws and evolve doctrines to limit the freedom and power of women" (Tseng, 1992, p. 74). In traditional Chinese society, marriage is the final fate for a Chinese woman. She not only marries, but also dedicates her life to her spouse's family. She has to undertake all the daily

chores and responsibilities, such as serving her parents-in-law, taking care of her spouse, raising or nurturing their children and doing all the household chores. To her, it is her duty, her life.

Today, unlike traditional Chinese society, Chinese women are more conscious of their own being and desire to be treated equally (Tseng, 1992). Constraints, however, still exist in that even if a woman works outside the home, she still must assume responsibility for the household duties with little time to think about herself and even less time for leisure.

In 1965, the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act equalized immigration opportunities to the United States for Chinese people, especially for Chinese women (Cafferty et al., 1983). Before 1965, because of the immigration and naturalization restrictions for Chinese people, most Chinese immigrants were men. After the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the number of Chinese women and Chinese older immigrants increased gradually. Immigration to the United States has had an effect on Chinese culture. Kim, Kim, and Hurh (1991) indicated a movement away from the traditional Chinese value that older Chinese immigrants are to be taken care of by and to live with their children. Gutierrez (1992) found that the failure of service planners and providers to offer culturally relevant services may be based on assumptions that family members or their own communities act as caregivers to Chinese older adults; however, few studies support this notion.

In the past 10 years, there have been numerous studies about leisure and older adults in the United States; however, little leisure research has been completed on America's ethnic minorities, especially on older immigrants. Barriers to social interaction and interpersonal communication experienced by many older Chinese people accelerate their depression and psychosomatic illness. Older Chinese women immigrants with problems such as language barriers, cultural differences, loneliness, helplessness and economic disadvantage may encounter more diseases, psychological problems or a lack of a social network than native older adults. Many older Chinese immigrants cannot read, speak, or write in English and cannot drive, isolating them from and causing a lack of integration into American culture (Kauh, 1999; Tsai & Lopez, 1997).

Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the number of foreign-born Chinese immigrants was 1,107,000 in 1997, and predicted that more and more Chinese people will emigrate to the United States. Goldstone (1997) estimated that, in the next decade, the conflicts between the Beijing regime and Hong Kong or Taiwan could raise attempted emigration from China, also increasing the number of Chinese people in the United States. Leisure researchers, however, have not studied Chinese people's leisure experiences in the United States, especially concerning those of older Chinese women immigrants and barriers affecting their leisure experiences creating a need to explore this topic.

Constraints on Women's Leisure

In the past 10 years, there has been a tremendous growth in research on women's leisure. Much of this research is focused on the relationship between gender and leisure. Shaw (1985) examined three approaches to the analysis of women's leisure and discussed ways to integrate the ideas and concepts from these different approaches. The first and dominant approach was to understand how women's leisure is constrained. "Evidence of gender inequality in many areas of social life leads to the expectation that inequality is likely to exist in leisure as well" (Shaw, 1985, p. 9). The strongest argument here is that women are so oppressed that it is impossible for them to have a fulfilling leisure experience. Other common constraints to women's leisure include temporal constraints, economic constraints and lack of opportunities or facilities (Jackson, 1988). The ethic of care is also connected to women's roles as the first caregiver in the family and helps to explain how family responsibility restrains women's leisure.

The "leisure as constraining" was the second approach focusing on how participation in certain kinds of activities influences women's lives and positions within society. Samdhal (1992) held this view and suggested that leisure is not a gender-neutral aspect of social life. The narrow range and stereotypical nature of the social activities considered appropriate for women constrain women's leisure participation. Leisure may constrain women by reducing options and opportunities for non-traditional activities.

The third approach Shaw (1985) used to analyze constraints on women's leisure examined ways in which women's leisure has the potential for resistance from societally imposed constraints. The ideas of agency and leisure as freely chosen or as self-determined are two important theoretical notions that support the argument for resistance. The idea of agency notes that women (and men) are social actors who interpret social situations and actively construct their responses (Mead, 1934). This argument is also based on a conceptualization of leisure while penetrating notions of personal choice, control, and self-determination. Through these notions, traditional views are challenged and women may regain or create a sense of themselves, even effecting gender equality (Shaw, 1994).

The three different approaches are compatible, based on three guiding principles to formulate a framework – 1. recognition of the contradictory aspects of leisure in women's leisure; 2. the different ways in which constraining factors are associated with women's leisure and, 3. the different ways in which resistance can be associated with women's leisure (Shaw, 1994). Then, this broader framework incorporated by these ideas recognizes the diversity of women's lives and experiences and emphasizes the need to understand women's leisure in the context of their everyday experiences as mediated by social structures.

Immigrants Studies

In recent years, the analysis of leisure behavior among specific ethnic populations has received widespread

attention. The increasing older immigrant population places great demands on federal, state and local government agencies to respond with policies and programs that are sensitive to the needs of culturally diverse older immigrant populations (Allison & Smith, 1990).

Allison and Geiger (1993) interviewed 25 older Chinese-American individuals about the types of activities they engaged in, the nature of those activities and the reasons for continued participation in those leisure activities. They found that the types of leisure activities the older Chinese-American immigrants engaged in (e.g. walking, gardening, watching television and reading) did not appear very different from other older cohort groups. Further analyses revealed that these same activities were traditionally characterized by Chinese culture.

Tirone and Shaw (1997) asked 10 women from India about their understanding and appreciation of the North American concept of leisure and to ascertain what life concepts were not central to them. The qualitative approach reflects the meaning, significance, value and role of leisure in the lives of people who are marginalized by ethnic identity or by cultural heritage (Hughes, Seidman, & Williams, 1993). Tirone and Shaw's study illustrated the centrality of family and the lack of private time, which is often associated with reducing opportunity for leisure. Leisure was not viewed as something important or desirable for these immigrant women. The results indicated that for some immigrants, cultural traditions from the person's country of origin continue to effect the person's life. One cannot assume that the Western view of leisure will be viewed positively by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds who have different life experiences.

In traditional Chinese culture, a woman's status is confined by gender roles. One Chinese maxim states that "a woman before marriage must identify her fate with that of her father, after marriage with that of her husband, and after the death of her husband with that of her son" (Tseng, 1992, p. 78). Today, the norms are not so stringent, but women's roles are still limited to family.

Most older women (and men) live with their adult children because "filial piety is the very important Chinese social value that promotes caring relationships between children and parents" (Tsai & Lopez, 1997, p. 80). Since most young couples must work, the household and child care naturally become the work of the older adults, especially older women. Taking care of grandchildren and doing daily chores are not viewed as 'work', but rather a type of leisure. Church is another important aspect of older immigrants' lives because it acts as a socialization outlet (Pogrebin & Poole, 1990). Some active older women participate in religious activities to help others. During these activities, they make their own decisions and achieve a sense of satisfaction.

More and more Chinese people, including Chinese older adults, emigrated to the United States because of the passage of the Magnuson Act of 1943 that removed many

immigration and naturalization restrictions for Chinese people (Cheng & Cheng, 1984). However, problems such as language barriers, cultural differences, loneliness and economic disadvantage limited their activities. They must rebuild their social network, a difficult task for them, because American's form of life was a new experience. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to ascertain the leisure experiences of older Chinese women immigrants before and after immigration to the United States and to discover barriers they encountered in their leisure pursuits.

Method

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes human interaction as mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions (Mead, 1934). The main idea in Mead's analysis is that the human being has a self and can be the object of his or her own actions (Blumer, 1995). The presupposition is that "human society is made up of individuals who have selves (that is, make indications to themselves); that individual action is a construction and not a release, being built up by the individual through noting and interpreting features of the situations in which he acts; that group or collective action consists of the aligning of individual actions, brought about by the individual's interpretation or taking into account each other's actions" (Blumer, 1995, p. 209). Symbolic interactionists believe that human actions are constructed by themselves through interpreting situations or others' actions instead of reacting to others' actions. From this basis human beings interpret the world they belong to by themselves. To understand life experiences, researchers need to know how people interpret situations and construct actions while interacting with others.

The researchers used the phenomenological approach, focusing on "what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which case one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself)" (Patton, 1990, p. 70). The phenomenological approach seeks to reflect the meaning, value, role and experience of leisure in the lives of people who are isolated by ethnic identity and by cultural heritage (Hughes, Seidman, & Williams, 1993).

Participants were selected from a Chinese church and a Chinese association. One researcher visited the church and the association and asked for volunteers. A total of 9 women agreed to participate in this study. Immigration status for the women included three permanent residents and six naturalized citizens. Their ages ranged from 60 to 76 years old. All women had been married and two of them were widowed. The length of stay for all women in the United States ranged from 2 to 40 years. Two women lived in the United States less than 5 years, two women between 6 to 10 years, three between 11 to 20 years and two more than 30 years. Five women came after their adult children emigrated to the United States, two women came with their adult children and two came to the United States as students. Four women were living with their husbands, sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren and three were living close to or in the same community as their adult children. One woman had no children and was living with

her husband. Four women could not speak any English and three women could speak only a little English. Two women who had been in the United States for more than 30 years speak fluent English.

The researchers used a small-scale qualitative research method under the symbolic interactionist theoretical framework. One researcher, fluent in Chinese and English, conducted the interviews. A bilingual assistant accompanied the interview to assist in interpretation and clarification. The researcher and her assistant met each participant individually in a quiet, private place (the researcher's apartment, the participant's house, and the Chinese church).

The interviewer asked all participants to talk about their leisure experiences, about their families, their children, and about what contributed to their enjoyment, fulfillment and satisfaction before and after their emigration to the United States. The researchers created four primary research questions (Henderson, 1991) based on the qualitative philosophical assumption that there were multiple truths which were socially constructed. The four research questions included: What activities would you consider 'recreation' in your daily life? How do your roles as wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, friend, etc. affect your recreation? Describe an experience you enjoyed doing when you were in your homeland? How did your recreation activities change after emigrating to the United States? The interviewer maintained control of the interview by reminding participants to express their opinions, giving encouraging feedback and responding to both positive and negative emotions that gained the participant's confidence and contributed to the quality of the interviews. The interviewer also recognized problems that were associated with interviewing. For instance, the participants did not understand what "leisure" meant, so some familiar words such as "recreation", "enjoyment", "relaxation", and "satisfaction" were used as synonyms (Tirone & Shaw, 1997). The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed in Chinese, and then translated in English. Following the transcriptions, the researchers compared interviews to discover themes regarding leisure experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Following the qualitative analysis, six themes associated with traditional Chinese values and diverse life experiences emerged.

Experiences of Leisure after Emigration

The women described all of the activities in which they engaged in during a typical weekday and weekend. Watching television, walking, shopping, exercising (e.g. morning exercises), attending church and gardening were the most common activities.

I usually get up at 6:00 a.m. every morning and exercise alone in front of our house. Sometimes, my husband and I take walks around the community or exercise together.... Almost every

weekend, I go shopping with my son and daughter-in-law. I do not go anywhere to have fun, but sometimes my son takes me to church on Sundays.

I love watching Chinese videotapes. I don't understand English.... He (my son) installed a cable TV for me, so I can watch a lot of Chinese programs. I watch these programs every night and then go to bed.

The researchers then asked the women about the experiences they would consider leisure.

I think the most important thing is relaxing. For instance, if you are in a hurry while practicing Tai Chi, you cannot relax, and cannot gain health from exercise, not to mention that you cannot experience "recreation" (leisure). So I think relaxing is very important when I experience "recreation" (leisure).

Actually, I never think about it, I never even think about taking a rest.... I always think I want to do my best to take care of my husband, my children, and my grandchildren. They feel happy and so I feel happy.

The participants then talked about their personal interests and activities in which they participated in their hometowns in Taiwan and China.

After retiring, I went to exercise and practice Tai Chi with my friends in a park every morning. There was a senior's club near my house. There were many kinds of activities there, such as Tai Chi, chess, older adults' disco and something else; I sometimes went there.

The women engaged in a lot of activities when they were in their homelands in Taiwan and China. In the United States, however, they indicated that they seldom participated in activities, even those activities they enjoyed in their hometowns.

Actually, I don't engage in any activities. I know, in the United States, there is a place I can go to practice Tai Chi, but it is too far from my house, so I don't go there.... I love to exercise with friends just like I did in China; I don't like to do it alone. So, after emigrating to the United States, I just take walks with my husband; I do not do those other activities any more.

Barriers Experienced in the United States

Most participants talked about how barriers limited their opportunities to make friends and to become part of mainstream society. The amount of time they had been in the United States influenced these issues. One woman who had lived in the United States for 16 years said:

I still remember three big problems we met after our first arriving to the United States: having no car, and not being able to speak and read English. I felt I was like a mute, a blind person and a person with no feet.

Four women in this study identified cultural differences as barriers. One woman said:

I hope my children can "walk out", that is, to be involved in society; I really hope they can do so. We have been here more than ten years, but our living space is still very limited.... My children asked me many times, "Mom, why cannot we be involved in American society? Even ABC (American Born Chinese) cannot, either." I don't know how to answer; I sincerely hope they can "walk out".

Effect of Traditional Chinese Values

As the women in the study reflected on their lives, traditional Chinese values played an important role in their lives.

In traditional Chinese values, taking care of children is the most important thing, then taking care of your husband; these are more important than I am.

Childcare was the most important responsibility to these older women, especially when their children were young. In most cases, the women had no time for themselves and no time for leisure when their children were young. A good summary of this is in the following statement:

When I was in China, I was very, very busy and my daily life was like a battle. I have four children. I had to work six days a week and did a lot of housework on Sundays.... The hardest time I had was the time that my children prepared for the entrance exams and I was even more nervous than they were and could not sleep well during those periods of time because if they did not pass the entrance exam for going to college, they could not have found a job.... My life was so hectic during that time; I had no time to think about myself, not to mention time for leisure and also my health was not good either. I did not feel released until my youngest child passed the exam. It was the greatest relief to parents.

Importance of Attending Religious Activities

The language and transportation problems limited the opportunities for these older Chinese women to be involved in society and engaged in activities. Religious activities became the center of their lives and contributed to their satisfaction, fulfillment and enjoyment. The Chinese church is a social network support for the older Chinese women immigrants.

I do not feel lonely, even if I do not have a lot of friends here. I plan to engage in more religious activities and I believe I will meet a lot of friends there.

Effect of a Lack of Free Time or Leisure

The experiences of leisure were not something that the older Chinese women could easily discuss. Their roles - wife, mother, grandmother or daughter - had occupied most their time so that leisure was not central to them. One woman remarked:

I do not think being a mother affects my recreation. I never complained in front of my children no matter how tired I was.... I hardly complain because, in my opinion, a mother should do her best to take care of her family and her children. This is beyond doubt. Hence, I do not think I make a sacrifice; I do my best in whatever I need to do.

One woman summed up how important it is to take care of grandchildren:

My mother is in China now and she is 98 years old. When I stay with her, of course, I cannot go to exercise as usual. But I always think that she is old and may not have too many years to live, so I feel that taking care of her is a kind of recreation. It depends on how you look at it.... In the United States, taking care of my grandchildren has the same meaning for me.... You know, during the Cultural Revolution in China,... I had no time to get along with my children, to talk to them. Frankly speaking, I could not experience the feelings between mother and child. Now, when I take care of my grandchildren, I found the feelings I lost; I have recovered them.

Life Satisfaction and Expectations for Future

Although the women faced many problems in the United States that limited their opportunities to engage in previous recreational activities, most women still felt satisfied with their lives in the United States. They gradually adjusted to the American way of life and had high expectations for the future. One woman said:

I am getting used to living here and I really appreciate it...especially after retiring, I do not have to worry about anything; I feel released completely.

Discussion

The results of the study indicated that leisure for the women was as a state of mind or an experience that coincided with Neulinger's (1982) definition of leisure. More than half of the women thought relaxation was the first and foremost thing to experience leisure. The main concern for the women in experiencing leisure was not

what activities they engaged in, how often they participated in those activities, or how much they might benefit from doing those activities, but how they perceived the experiences (e.g., relaxing, enjoyable and satisfying). Definitions and meanings associated with leisure as typically understood by those in the leisure profession were hard for the women to comprehend. To segment leisure from work was not appropriate for investigating the meaning of leisure for the women.

The leisure activities in which the women engaged in the United States differed from those they enjoyed in their hometowns in Taiwan and China. Though barriers such as language, transportation and cultural differences changed their activities after their emigration to the United States, the women perceived pleasure, enjoyment and fulfillment by engaging in such activities as shopping and attending church. The findings implied that the women participated in different activities before and after their emigration to the United States, but the concept of leisure for the women was the same. By doing these different activities, they pursued experiences that contributed to their feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment and fulfillment.

Traditional Chinese values had a profound effect on the women. In most cases, the women had no time for themselves and no time for leisure while their children were young. They considered their children and husbands more important than themselves. Filial piety was also a very important Chinese value that promoted caring relationships between children and parents.

Attending religious activities was an important social link for the women. Because of language and transportation problems, their opportunities for being involved in society and experiencing leisure were constrained. Religious activities, instead, became the center of their lives and contributed to their satisfaction, fulfillment and enjoyment.

The women did not recognize a lack of free time or leisure as a problem. Their roles as wife, mother, grandmother and daughter had occupied most their time so that leisure was not viewed as important to them. However, almost half of the women in this study considered taking care of children and grandchildren leisure. They valued leisure in terms of how well they were able to care for their children and grandchildren. Only one disagreed because she thought taking care of children was even more important than that; it was her vocation, not her avocation.

The leisure experiences of the older Chinese women immigrants changed after their emigration to the United States. Barriers such as language, transportation and cultural differences prevented them from engaging in their previous leisure activities. These barriers, however, did not affect the women's feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment and fulfillment after their emigration. Although the women engaged in activities in the United States that were different from those they enjoyed in their hometowns, their concept of leisure remained the same. For example, why did most of the women consider taking care of children or grandchildren leisure? Why did some women prefer working at a factory after retiring? Why did some women

devote most their time volunteering at church? And why did some of the women like playing tennis or going to concerts? Engaging in these activities gave them a sense of satisfaction, fulfillment and enjoyment, and they regarded engaging in these activities as leisure. Leisure has no cultural boundaries. The women participated in different activities from those they enjoyed in their hometowns, but their concept of leisure did not change. Whether practicing Tai Chi (as the women did in their hometowns), attending religious activities (as the women did in the United States), or taking care of their children and grandchildren (which they continued to do in the United States), they pursued the same goal – to have fulfilling leisure experiences.

Leisure became more meaningful to the women only because they integrated leisure with many aspects of their lives, such as their families and religious activities. This finding is consistent with previous research involving older adults in which leisure was intertwined with life's activities (Henderson & Rannels, 1988; Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Siegenthaler & Vaughan, 1998). When investigating the experiences of leisure for older Chinese women immigrants, the qualitative paradigm provided an appropriate framework for exploring the symbolic interaction of the women.

Filial piety was another important Chinese value that maintained the caring relationships between children and parents, so most of the women in this study lived with or close to their adult children. The results implied that traditional Chinese values had a profound effect on the women. The findings corresponded to Tirone and Shaw's research (1997) in that cultural traditions from the person's country of origin continued to affect the person's life. Chinese society is based on its centuries-old feudal society. Although modernization and industrialization have changed Chinese society, patriarchy still prevails.

Recommendations

The leisure experiences of the older Chinese women immigrants changed after they emigrated to the United States. The results of the study derived from in-depth interviews reflect the characteristics of the older Chinese women immigrants in Columbia, Missouri, and suggest several implications for future studies.

First, language barriers were the most important reasons mentioned by the women that limited their opportunities to make friends with others and to be involved in society. The researchers suggest studies comparing immigrant women with diverse cultural backgrounds to see if they have the same barriers as those identified in the study and to see if their view of leisure is the same as that of Chinese women.

Second, the study raises questions about definitions of leisure for Chinese women, the effect of Chinese traditions on women's lives, the inability to segment Chinese women's lives into work/leisure dichotomies, and the centrality of family on Chinese women's lives. The themes identified here may provide hypotheses for future studies that could examine the lives of Chinese women as integrated through work, leisure, free time, religious

activities and family life. Researchers may also study whether women in Western society have the same characteristics as Chinese women. For instance, do work and leisure intertwine in Western women's lives? Is family the center of their lives? Perhaps there are similar characteristics among women from diverse cultures, and the difference is only a matter of degree.

Third, the top three barriers (e.g., language, transportation and cultural differences) experienced by older Chinese women immigrants prevented them from engaging in leisure activities, even those activities that they enjoyed in Taiwan and China. To target these barriers, local government and community officials may recruit bilingual and bicultural professionals to understand the women's needs and consult with leisure professionals to provide adequate leisure activities or programs for the older Chinese immigrant women. This issue cannot be ignored, as future Chinese immigrants will encounter the same barriers.

Fourth, the researchers suggest local communities organize educational programs for immigrant women to learn English, to understand the local customs and practices, and to learn national, state, and local laws. With the help of such services, the women may 'walk out', be close to American society and participate in leisure activities.

More and more Chinese people are emigrating to the United States, and so the number of Chinese older immigrants is increasing; their unique language and cultural barriers differentiate their leisure needs. Policy makers and practitioners should be sensitive to the needs of older Chinese immigrants and respond with policies and programs to help them with life in the United States which will contribute to their life satisfaction.

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