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Advancing Women In Leadership

Adjusting to A New Society: A Study of Educated Chinese Women's Acculturation in the United States

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Meeting the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and social life from a professional to a housewife places a great deal of pressure on these educated Chinese women. They have strong desires and motivation to continue their professions, but have not obtained the support necessary to accomplish their goals. As housewives, their social circle is very limited, which leads to isolation in the host culture.

Leaving one's motherland for a new country where a different language and culture dominates often results in barriers which must be overcome. However, I had never realized how hard it was to adjust to a new cultural and language environment until I immigrated to the United States. The most prominent change that I experienced in this new land was the shift from a professional to a housewife. Fortunately, this status did not last long (a year and a half) before I had the opportunity to pursue a higher degree. I was, then, able to resume the career that I had enjoyed in the past.

Today, with an earned doctoral degree, I often reflect on my personal experiences in the past six years in the United States and wonder what happened to other Chinese educated women who are not able to pursue their careers in the new country but remain housewives instead. How do they adjust themselves to the host country? What are their reactions to their current status? What support and help do they need in facilitating the process of adjustment? What are their desires and hopes? With these questions in mind, I conducted research on married Chinese female immigrants who were well-educated and employed in China.

By the middle of this century, Chinese women had been playing a subservient role for more than 2,000 years. In a woman's lifetime, she was supposed to obey her father when she was a girl, obey her husband when she got married, and obey her son when her husband died. She had no right to inherit family property and was not even allowed to keep her own name after marriage; she was addressed as her husband's wife or her child's mother. In addition, women were deprived of the right of education, and it was a virtue for a woman to be uneducated. The social status of women changed dramatically over the

past few decades. They were encouraged to walk out of their houses and become active participants in society. Although many critical issues still exist in women's status in China (Croll, 1995), Chinese women, especially those who live in urban areas, have witnessed fundamental changes in education, employment, and marriage.

The majority of Chinese women who joined their husbands in the U.S. were well educated and employed in respectable professions in China. These female immigrants are usually unable to find a job to resume their professions in this new country due mainly language and cultural barriers. Therefore, they may encounter more difficulties in acculturation than those women who originally were in the traditional roles of housewife and mother.

For this study, I interviewed three Chinese women who were all college graduates and who worked as a teacher (Mrs. Z), an administrator (Mrs. P), and a journalist (Mrs. C), before they immigrated to the US. They have been living in the US for 9, 8, and 3 years respectively. Except for Mrs. Z, who has been working in a plant for a few months, the other two have not been employed since coming to the U.S. In this manuscript, I focus the analysis of their responses in the following categories: language/cultural barriers in adjustment, self-evaluation of current status in the host culture, reaction to gender issues, and attitude toward the pursuit of a higher degree.

Language/Cultural Barriers in Adjusting to the Target Environment

Mrs. Z was a middle school English teacher, so her English was good enough for basic daily communication. However, she admits that she has both language and cultural barriers yet to overcome. "Although it is important that you should have high language proficiency to communicate effectively, there seems to be as much of a cultural barrier as there is a language barrier. Little is shared between people from different cultural backgrounds, and few common topics exist between them. For instance, I do not have much communication with my American colleagues, except for exchanging greetings and discussing the movies we have seen. Most of the time, I associate with Chinese workers."

Mrs. P, a former administrator at a university, and Mrs. C, a former journalist at a national newspaper, are both full time housewives, taking care of their husbands and kids. They claim that language barriers prevent them from getting involved in the social life and hinder their professional development in the new environment. Everyday they communicate with other Chinese immigrants but seldom interact with native English speakers. As a result, they feel very much isolated in the host culture.

All of the three women report that when they first arrived in the U.S. they attended English language development classes but soon dropped out. Their general impression of the quality of the classes was unanimous -- not positive, though their specific comments on the ineffectiveness of the classes vary. Mrs. Z explains: "I dropped out mainly because the level of the class was too basic. What I need is to enroll in an advanced class, so that my English can be improved. I am sure that my English can be greatly enhanced if I had the opportunity to study in a formal educational program."

Mrs. P's reaction to the limitations of the English classes is similar to that of Mrs. Z. "You may learn the basic skills for daily communication, but little support was provided for language advancement." She lists further reasons for the ineffectiveness of the class: a) the teachers were not well trained, b) various proficiency levels of students in the same class made it harder to focus instruction, and c) the teaching materials were not adequate.

According to Mrs. C, the English classes she attended did not help very much because of ineffective instruction. "Vocabulary was the focus of teaching. We learned and memorized many words that we seldom or never use in daily life. I think listening comprehension is a major area that needs to be stressed, which was unfortunately ignored in the class. Since only English was used for instruction, I often failed to comprehend what was explained. The games we played, on the other hand, were too easy. Another weak area of teaching was that grammar was not taught at all. Therefore, we only know isolated words but do not know how to use them properly."

It is interesting to note that all participants chose to have the interview done in Chinese because they could explain themselves better in their native language. Perhaps language is not the only issue here; culture may have a lot to do with their choices. It is still questionable whether the Acculturation Model (Schumann, 1978) explains all about second language learning, but the participants' experiences do indicate that language learning is closely related to social interaction, or vice versa.

Self-evaluation of Current Status in the Host Country

Since the Chinese women's social lives underwent a dramatic change due to immigration, they were asked to compare their current status with that in China. Their adjustment in the host country not only includes knowing a new language and culture but also experiencing the change from professionals to housewives. Are they happy with their current status?

"I am not quite satisfied with my current situation because I have not been merged in the social life here," says Mrs. Z. Mrs. Z continues, "Ever since I came to this country, all I have done was give birth to two daughters. Though I have a minimum wage job now, I am still not involved in the society. I guess one of the reasons for the isolation is that I do not have a chance to be educated." Mrs. Z states that she would rather go back to China if her life and status remain the same in this country. "An individual needs to make contributions to a society. So, my strongest desire is to change my current status by starting a profession that I like and becoming an independent woman again."

Similarly, Mrs. P is disappointed at her current status. "Now I do not have my own social life. There is a major difference between being a housewife and a professional. You do things playing either role, but you can only enjoy the feeling of accomplishment when you complete tasks as a professional. You work everyday as a housewife, yet you still feel you are nowhere." Except for volunteering as the principal of a Chinese Sunday school, Mrs. P has never officially been employed in this society. She has been trying very hard to find a job, but has been rejected so far. "I wish I could go back to China to continue my career. However, I have to stay to take care of my husband and two sons. I do not know exactly how my experiences here would affect my life in the future, but one thing is for sure -- I am wasting my time for my career."

Isolation and the feeling of being lost are also the primary worries of Mrs. C. "As a professional, I often felt exhausted at the end of a day but was happy. Whenever my articles were in print, I enjoyed my achievement. Language and cultural barriers prevent me from making use of my expertise and being recognized in this society." Mrs. C does not see herself being involved in the mainstream life yet. "I still eat my Chinese food and keep my own life style. I do not know very much about the American customs." Her communication circle is limited to Chinese people. She is not sure how the experience would affect her life in the future, however. "I have gone through a lot of psychological pressures which prepare me to

handle a new environment better." Mrs. C is expecting her second child in eight months, and can only plan for her future when her husband graduates.

Reaction on Gender Issues

In the interview, the participants evaluate women's status in the U.S. compared to that of Chinese women. They also comment on whether the barriers they encountered in the new environment were related to gender differences. Interestingly, their responses to the issues represent different views.

Instead of directly comparing women's status in the two countries, Mrs. Z admits that age makes a major difference in the way U.S. women fit into family and society. For the traditional (older) women, husbands are their bosses and they are very obedient. But the younger female professionals, are more independent and have a more equal relationship with their spouses.

The reflection of Mrs. P on women's status in both countries is rather straight forward: "I think Chinese women are much better off than the American women in terms of independence and professional development. Almost all Chinese urban women are employed and have a more equal relationship with their husbands. In this society, you hear stories of family violence and battered women all the time."

Holding an opposite view to that of Mrs. P, Mrs. C thinks American women are well treated. "Quotas prevent women from discrimination in job searches. When a couple is getting divorced, the wife can still get economic support from the husband if she is not independent. Women's rights are well protected. For instance, a pregnant woman can always get the nutrition she needs for the baby's and her own health from the government."

All of the women agree that the pressure one is under in adjusting to a new culture is more universal than gender related. However, their opinions on the amount and types of pressures experienced by males and females differ.

Mrs. Z believes that her husband has more pressure than she does. "He has to worry about holding his job so as to provide economic support for the family. My pressure is rather caused by the tedious routines and boring life. Other than that, I do not have to worry about my food on the table." Mrs. P indicates both she and her husband have pressures but their pressures are different. He has the responsibility of supporting the family, while she is concerned at the change of her current status by finding a job. She further explains that no matter whether one is a male or a female, s/he must deal with many difficulties in adjusting to a new culture. "But I think it is even harder for a woman because she has more family responsibilities, such as taking care of kids. If I were in China I could get help from my family, and now I have to handle everything all by myself."

Like Mrs. P, Mrs. C admits that she and her husband have different types of pressures. "My husband's pressure is mainly from his career. He is not young anymore, but has to work hard to support this family. I, on the other hand, do not have economic pressure but am caught in a dilemma: if I stay here, I cannot resume my career; if I go back to China and do what I enjoy, I have to leave my husband." Mrs. C further states that both men and women will encounter difficulties when they are in a new country. However, men are more independent than women in adjustment. Women are usually dependent on their husbands and have their specific problems to deal with such as bearing and raising children. "I do not have anything else to do now, so it is the best time to have children. Children make me feel wanted and bring me joy."

Obviously, these participants express very different views in their evaluation of women's status in the U.S. A possible explanation to the phenomenon could be that none of them has actually looked into the issue, and their responses are primarily based on the nonsystematic information available in their lives.

Attitude Toward Education and Pursuit of a Higher Degree

Asians view education as a means to improve their lives (Scarcella, 1990), and the three Chinese women are no exception. They all understand the relationship between continued education and the development of their careers in the US, but only Mrs. Z has an immediate goal to work on a higher degree. The other two both suggest that it is not realistic for them to continue their education due to language, culture and age barriers, responsibilities in their family, and limited support available. However, Mrs. C plans to choose a career that requires less language skill. "I would like to do something in a Chinese community or select a profession that does not require too much language proficiency, such as running a Chinese restaurant. Making money is important, but my priority is to maximally develop my potential."

Although the Chinese women have experienced many difficulties in their adjustment and still feel lost, they have not given up. They have been trying persistently to find a way out so that they may develop their potential in the new environment.

Meeting the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and social life (from a professional to a housewife) results in a great deal of pressure on these educated Chinese women. They have strong desires and motivation to continue their professions, but have not obtained the support to accomplish their goals. As housewives, their social life circle is very much limited, which leads to isolation in the host culture. They are fully aware of the relationship between acquiring the new language and pursuing their careers in this country, but they are not yet able to improve their English proficiency.

Implication/Conclusions

An implication of this study related to English teaching is that a good understanding of students' needs is fundamental for effective instruction. If students do not see much progress in language learning, it is not only a waste of time, but their self-confidence may be negatively affected. Moreover, English classes should also create opportunities to have students well connected to the new society to both improve their language proficiency and facilitate the acculturation process. Social/psychological distance seems to play an important part in students' language acquisition. In other words, their isolation from the target language group slows down the process of English learning. Language, culture, and opportunities through jobs are key elements to newcomers' success in this complex society.

The three interviewed women were eager to participate in this new society but found major language and cultural barriers. As the country with the largest number of immigrants in the world, it is important that U.S. institutions be established to serve the immigrants' needs in language acquisition, education, and employment. If timely guidance and support are provided, the acculturation process of immigrants would be greatly facilitated. The sooner Chinese women immigrants find their positions in a new society, the less pressure they will have to deal with, and the sooner they can make contributions to the society if they choose to pursue their careers.

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