

Exploring Chinese and Taiwanese Wives' Acculturation Process in the United States

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Abstract

A phenomenological research design was employed to explore how Chinese and Taiwanese wives experience the acculturation process and how their spouse influences their acculturation. Qualitative themes were analyzed based on Berry's acculturation model. Results of this study would expand counselors' knowledge on how cultural diversities and spousal influences affect Chinese and Taiwanese wives' acculturation process in the United States as well as enhancing these wives' emotional well-being and cultural integration after immigration.

Keywords: Chinese and Taiwanese wives, acculturation process, immigration, culture

Berry (2010) asserted that the acculturation process occurs among all individuals, especially when dealing with people of different cultures. Acculturation involves cultural and psychological exchanges emerge among all groups during their contacts (Berry; Park, 1928). The acculturation process occurs when people of diverse cultural backgrounds accommodate with each other or experience intercultural relations (Berry). It is inevitable for individuals of all ethnicities to experience acculturation. Asian Americans are expected to increase to 33.4 million by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The Chinese population is the largest Asian ethnic group, which has increased 57% from 2000 to 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, 2013). Their negative emotions are not recognized by their family and society (Zhang, Smith, Swisher, Fu, & Fogarty, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate (a) how Chinese and Taiwanese wives experience the acculturation process in the US. as viewed through Berry's acculturation model and (b) how their spouse influences their acculturation process. These wives' acculturation

process was investigated. Spousal influences were explored because the spouse appeared to be a crucial contact influencing these wives' daily life and acculturation process.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to explore the lived experiences of Chinese and Taiwanese wives' acculturation process in the US.

1. What is the Chinese and Taiwanese wives' acculturation process in the US as viewed through Berry's acculturation model?
2. In what ways do spouses of Chinese and Taiwanese wives influence the acculturation process?

Theoretical Framework

Berry (1970, 2013) asserted that his acculturation model can be used as a framework that allows researchers to consolidate findings and develop implementations regarding acculturation. Berry proposed four stages of acculturation, including integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. According to Berry (2010), his acculturation model was developed through his overseas research experiences in comprehending the acculturation process of diverse ethnic issues in the pacific region, including China. Therefore, Berry's acculturation model serves as the theoretical framework for this research study.

Research Design

Moustakas (1994) defined a phenomenological research design as a research method that allows researchers to explore participants' lived experiences and worldviews. A phenomenological research design proposed by Moustakas was employed in this study. The participant observation approach proposed by Malinowski (1922/2012) was used to explore Chinese and Taiwanese wives' lived experiences based on Berry's (2010) acculturation model. Malinowski and Shank (2006) proposed participant observation as a direct research approach that allows researchers to observe and report participants' statements, which increased trustworthiness of the data collection.

Data Collection

The data collection procedures included the interview protocol, demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, interview questions, audio recording, and transcripts to amply the credibility of the data collection (Creswell, 2007). As proposed by Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study focuses on in-depth data. Achieving a full comprehension of interviews boosted researchers' elucidation of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Selection of Participants

Creswell (2007) proposed that researchers use a purposeful sampling in a phenomenological research. Three participants with significant experiences are a sufficient sample size for a phenomenological research (Creswell; Dukes, 1984). Participant interviews continued until the collection of the phenomena was rich, thick, and saturated (Creswell). Six participants included five Taiwanese and one Chinese wives with a variety of occupations reached the saturation of the data collection of this research study.

Data Analysis

Credibility was validated through emic coding from participants' worldviews, member checking of transcriptions, triangulation of a three-member coding team for defining recurrent themes, emic coding, and open coding (Creswell, 2007). Emic coding allows researchers to define meanings from the participants' narratives and to analyze data from their perspectives and worldviews (Creswell, 2007). Open coding allows researchers to discover major themes (Creswell, 2007). The three-member coding team used textual descriptions to discover in-depth meanings and capture participants' lived experiences by detecting significant phrases and sentences through the transcripts (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Results and Discussions

Findings and Discussions of Research Question One

Berry's (2010, 2013) acculturation model involves an ongoing process of four acculturation stages. The assimilation stage is noted when individuals pursue the mainstream culture and turn aside from their culture of origin. Integration represents multiculturalism. This benchmark acculturation stage validates individuals' integration of their culture of origin with the dominant culture. When individuals maintain their culture of origin and refuse other culture, the separation stage occurs. The marginalization stage reflects those times when individuals refuse both their culture of origin and the dominant culture (Berry). Emergent themes from participants' acculturation process are presented as the following.

Rating of acculturation stages. Chi who lived with her spouse for four years in the US rated 4 (1 being low and 10 being high) for her practice of following her culture of origin. She expressed living in a town with a low Chinese population reduced her opportunity to practice the Chinese culture. Chi articulated that without Taiwanese family nearby and in-laws being Americans, she came to accept the U.S. culture more. Conversely, Hue who lived with her spouse in the US for 27 years rated 9 for her practice of the Chinese culture. She asserted that she followed the Chinese culture consistently although she rated her acceptance of the U.S. culture with 8. Zhen rated following the Chinese culture with 4 and 6 for the U.S. culture. She specified that she came to accept the U.S. culture more than keeping the Chinese culture because the length of time she lived in the US is longer than Taiwan. Zhen further noted that being a chemist who had to delineate the importance of her research increased her opportunities to learn the U.S.

communication style and culture. Fen who lived with her spouse for 20 years in the US stated that because of cultural shyness and an introverted personality, she rated a 5 for both cultures. Fen explained because of her work as a mail–woman, she lacked opportunities to interact with colleagues. Hence, she did not experience much the U.S. culture. Mei, a residential nurse, rated 7 for following the Chinese culture and U.S. culture. She stated that communicating with patients helped her become familiar with the U.S. culture. She said she kept practicing the Chinese culture through interactions with Chinese church members. Bao, an artist, lived with her spouse in the US for three years rated her acceptance of the U.S. culture with 5. She assumed that she would increasingly accept the U.S. culture after living in the US longer. She stated that attending classes and art exhibitions increased her opportunities to interact with Americans and positively influenced her acceptance of the U.S. culture.

Integration of religion and compassion. Chi, Mei, Hue, and Zhen mentioned that living in the US brought them more opportunities to experience Christianity, which motivated them to integrate religion as a part of life. Hue stated, “Religion is a culture to me. Through religious guidelines, I know what to do [in daily life].” Zhen shared she and her spouse practice Christianity through sponsoring a Chinese church group. Chi stated, “Christian are more understanding and patient with foreigners, so that helps [me with acculturation].” Mei integrated her religion into daily life and shared, “I feel less stressed after converting to Christianity. I share my emotions with church sisters.” Receiving compassion in the US encouraged participants to reach out to others. Bao commented, “People have more compassion here. Most of my classmates are very willing to assist me.” Mei shared, “People took me to learn English at church and assisted me in getting a driver’s license. I became more considerate.”

Integration of expressing emotions and viewpoints. Interacting with people in the US increased the participants’ self-awareness. Five participants, Chi, Mei, Bao, Hue, and Zhen, shared they integrated expressions of emotions and viewpoints. Chi mentioned that she felt Americans support her expressing emotions and viewpoints. Mei also mentioned, “Americans feel comfortable to genuinely express positive and negative feelings. They will tell you ‘I get hurt’ without hiding emotions.” Bao disclosed that American ways of expressing emotions and thoughts match well with her communication style. Bao declared, “I like Americans express feelings and thoughts directly.” Fen shared, “My American colleagues speak up for their rights and disagreements. I began to express my viewpoints.” Zhen stated confidently, “I can boldly express my opinions at work, at home, and in many situations. People appreciate them. If they don’t agree, they present their viewpoints. We can discuss.”

Integration of financial management. Bao explained how she and her Caucasian spouse integrated consumer behaviors. Bao shared with a smile, “After we get married, he no longer borrows on credits for shopping. And I am no longer stingy.” Fen revealed that she retained the Chinese culture of saving money, but also enjoyed the U.S. culture of spending money for a comfortable living. Fen described, “I give him [husband] my salary [for saving], I ask for money from him whenever I want to spend money. I never feel any financial pressure [giggling].” Chi shared how she and her Caucasian spouse integrated their financial management. Chi stated, “We have an agreement about spending. If I want to spend over \$50, I seek his approval, same to him because it is our money.”

The analysis of findings showed all six participants integrate the Chinese and U.S. types of financial management through a balance of saving money and comfortable living. The findings further revealed all participants received compassion from individuals in the US. Their appreciation of compassion prompted them to practice compassion, which was evidenced through four participants' attending church activities, having a faith, and involving in church ministries to demonstrate compassion in the acculturation process.

Assimilation to the U.S. social convention. Compared to complicated social relationships in their countries of origin, all six participants shared that they favored the easy and simple social conventions in the US. Fen described herself as introverted, but shared that she came to actively greet her colleagues whenever eye contact was made. Hue who is a house wife expressed, "Americans usually give you a smile in an aisle or in a grocery store." Fen and Hue mentioned that being greeted by others or saying "hello" to acquaintances made them happy.

Both Bao and Mei expressed they liked the freedom to dress casually in the US without worrying about social expectations. Bao shared, "There was a standard rule for everyone, so people had to dress according to their ages and occupations in China." Zhen articulated that she felt comfortable without wearing makeup in the US. Additionally, three participants mentioned that relocating to a southern state enabled them to enjoy the ample physical space. Fen and Mei expressed that they liked the way people give others space when shopping or walking. Fen felt "respected and learned to give people more space when waiting in a line or checking out." Chi affirmed that she enjoyed having more space in the US compared to Taiwan.

Assimilation to the U.S. direct communication style. All participants addressed it was easy to adopt the direct communication style without worrying about assumptions beyond verbal communications. Bao specified her "struggles in comprehending underlying meanings." Bao stated, "My friend in China kept saying she bought a new car. My mother told me that my friend was expecting me to give her some money as a congratulation courtesy." In the US, Chi felt comfortable to genuinely express her thoughts. Chi shared, "I say what I think. I always get to the point." Chi expressed it was easy for her to adopt the direct communication style.

Assimilation to the U.S. positive emotions. All participants disclosed positive feelings through facial expressions in addition to verbal communications. Zhen shared, "We [I and my spouse] want to make America our home." Zhen expressed, "I feel I am happier here because I felt restrained in Taiwan." Bao stated, "I felt happy after I moved here." She stated, "I no longer feel ashamed about myself. They [family in China] looked down at me for being an artist making no money. But people here [in the US] respect my career." Mei, Fen, and Chi expressed it was easy for them to adjust to living in the US. Mei stated, "I adjusted to the U.S. culture pretty well." Fen uttered that "My work place is a causal environment, so it is easy for me to adapt." Chi mentioned, "It's very simple and easy to maintain the relationship with in-laws in the US."

Participants' responses supported Berry's (2013) research that in the assimilation stage, individuals absorb the mainstream culture based on their knowledge, assumptions, and experiences of challenges. Participants' personal preferences influenced what they adopt from the mainstream culture. Four participants enjoyed the overall cultural egalitarianism in the US and felt at ease with greetings and casual dress without concerning about a dress code. The U.S. value of equality allowed participants to feel confident in pursuit of career choices.

Separation from the U.S. unhealthy eating behavior and paying for meals individually. Five participants shared that they retained the Chinese style of healthy diets in opposition to some U.S. customs. Chi emphasized, “We [Chinese people] eat healthy foods. I don’t particularly like cheese. I have not adjusted to eating Mexican food because it’s too rich and greasy.” Mei asserted, “I like Chinese food more than American food. I don’t like fried dishes or barbecue.” Bao expressed, “I’m not fond of American foods.” Hue described her persistence in the Chinese diet and stated, “I like the Chinese method of cooking healthy meals. The American recipe, if you take out dressing, butter, and cheese, I don’t have much to eat.” Additionally, Mei and Zhen shared preservations of some cultural behaviors. Mei shared, “Americans go Dutch. Chinese people like to buy friends a meal.” Zhen disclosed, I am not used to eating your own portion and not sharing foods with others. Hence, I encourage my American friends to share their foods with me.

Separation from the U.S. levels of connection. Three participants revealed levels of support received from people of their ethnicity and Americans were quite different. They felt somewhat distant from Americans. Zhen disclosed most Americans did not feel comfortable contacting people from different countries. Zhen explained, “Sometimes, they [American people] think Chinese are different. It’s not about rejection. They don’t know our backgrounds and cultures. They are afraid to offend me, so they keep a distance.” Chi shared, “Levels of connection between American and Taiwanese friends are different. I can talk about most things with American friends, but I can talk about whatever I want to with Taiwanese friends.” Mei disclosed she received most assistance from Taiwanese people and expressed, “People from my country assist me a lot. They took me to learn English at church. They assisted me in getting a driver’s license. I really appreciated their support.”

Separation from the U.S. literal communication. Two participants shared their intense feelings of abandonment and disrespect resulting from the U.S. style of literal communication. Based on their perceptions, Americans spontaneously share their thoughts. Chi gave examples of how a literal communication style resulted in her feelings of abandon. She shared, “I take things literally. A lot of times [American] people say: ‘I want to hang out with you.’ And they do not make plans. I was counting the days and waiting. A lot of times, they don’t mean it.” She further addressed, “Americans claim to be committed to love until death, but they divorce when they don’t like each other anymore. A commitment is not supposed to be changed.” Bao explained how the spontaneous communication style resulted in her feelings of disrespect, “My husband’s student asked lots questions about me and how we met. It was my initial contact with him. I felt disrespected by his curiosity with a focus on questioning why I married my husband.”

The analysis of findings confirmed that participants felt more comfortable to share their emotions and issues with their culture of origin group than the dominant group. The findings supported the process of enculturation, which referred to socialization within immigrants’ own ethnic group (Inman, Howard, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007). A participant, Chi, rated for her following the Chinese culture with 4 and 6 for accepting the U.S. culture; yet, she felt more comfortable sharing personal issues with her culture of origin group. The findings revealed the support and understanding from the culture of origin group were more substantial to participants.

Marginalization of communication styles and accent. When the dominant group compels the marginalization of non-dominant individuals, exclusion occurs (Berry, 2010). Bao disclosed, “[American] People have little tolerance for my accent and communication styles.” Zhen explained, “There is a big difference between the Chinese and American cultures in terms of communication. Miscommunication brings hardship; especially when I speak English with an accent. When people hear my accent, they think I am dumb.” Fen also shared her feelings of prejudice. She stated, “I have an accent. When I made a complaint phone call about my account, a young Hispanic girl laughed whenever I spoke. I felt disrespected.” Chi and Mei shared they were excluded in social life because they could not comprehend American jokes.

Marginalization of prejudice and disassociation. Bao shared experiences of rejection. She disclosed, “My step children dislike me because I’m a foreigner. My stepdaughter refused to introduce me throughout her graduation. My family does not accept my husband because of different living styles. We experience objections from families.” Bao also voiced rejection from Chinese people in China and the US. Bao described, “Lots of Chinese people in the US give me a strange look because I married an American. People in China criticize me. They think I look for my husband’s money and green card.” She stated, “My husband was discriminated in a Chinese restaurant. They call Americans “鬼佬” [smart-asshole]. I dislike the discrimination.”

When asked about marginalization, all participants responded that they did not view themselves as marginalized. However, the analysis of findings indicated four participants perceived prejudice against them. The findings evidenced a stigma and prejudice. Stigmas include fear and embarrassment, and avoidance that affect immigrants’ resettlement to society (Rogers-Sirin, 2013). Four participants were hesitant to vocalize their perceptions of prejudice. Their self-doubt was evidenced in their responses. It is possible that the participants had a strong will to practice diverse cultures. Therefore, they continued to interact with diverse cultural groups even though they perceived prejudice.

Themes Across and Beyond Berry’s Multidimensional Acculturation Model

Berry (2010) asserted that all groups experience a multidimensional and reciprocal acculturation process. This was evidenced by participants’ ratings on assimilation to the U.S. culture and maintenance of the Chinese culture. Participants acknowledged their acculturation stages were influenced by cultures, family, spouse, in-laws, personality, and social interactions. Their acculturation process was not static in one stage; it changed during interactions with diverse people. The following themes did not simply fall into one stage, but multiple stages, which supported the multidimensional movements. According to participants, the following themes affected their resistance, discomfort, and anxiety in adjusting to living in the US.

Individualism and collectivism. Zhen explained, “American people emphasize individualism and personal rights. Chinese people emphasize family relations. For example, our family name goes first before our first name. It’s very different.” Chi revealed “I and my [Caucasian] husband struggle between independence and collaborative harmony. He needs to limit open house. My family cannot come to visit us whenever they want to. Chinese parents get involved with children’s marriages a lot.” Fen also shared her struggles. Fen stated, “It is challenging for me to speak up when I disagree. We [Chinese people] don’t insist on our rights.”

Personality factors. Three participants said personality affected their acculturation process. Chi defined herself as extroverted and enjoying socialization with diverse people. Fen, clarified how personality affected her socialization, “I am introverted. I rarely participate in any activities after work.” She shared that her introverted personality reduced her opportunities to experience the U.S. culture. Hue revealed that personality differences affected her receiving spousal support. She stated, “My husband doesn’t defend his right, but I do. My husband has the tradition not arguing with people outside of family.”

English proficiency. Three participants shared lacking English proficiency reduced opportunities to express their viewpoints, seek careers, and comprehend conversations. Fen said enhancing English proficiency helped her secure a career. Fen said, “He [My spouse] encouraged me to enroll in an English program and career training.” Bao stated lacking English proficiency affected her socialization and communication with her spouse. Mei disclosed, “It is challenging for me to express myself in English, and I struggle with listening comprehension.”

Cultural traditions. Three participants mentioned lacking knowledge of cultural traditions and historical backgrounds hindered their communications and comprehension. Mei vocalized, “It is challenging for me to understand American humor.” Chi mentioned after her spouse explained American jokes and cultural traditions to her, she had “topics to talk to people.” Bao revealed difficulties in comprehending the U.S. history. She stated, “My husband helps me understand American traditions, histories, and foods.”

Findings and Discussions of the Research Question Two

Five out of the six participants expressed appreciation that their spouse influenced various facets of their lives. Two participants described themselves as independent and religious women who relied on faith in God and did not expect the spouse to influence their acculturation process. One of these two participants mentioned that her spouse supported her financially and spiritually, but hindered her acculturation process when he did not want her to be assertive.

Positive influences and acquiring information. Hue, a house wife, proudly shared, “I am independent. My husband never checks on how I spend our money.” Bao appreciated her spouse and shared, “He encourages me to attend art exhibitions. He values all my art works. He helps me learn American history by finding me the Chinese version of America history books.” Fen expressed appreciation toward her spouse’s influences and stated, “He saved money for our immigration and sponsored for my career training. We talk during meal times, and we feel at ease.” Zhen shared deep connections with her spouse. Zhen declared, “We are a team. We encourage each other to understand American ways of expression.” Chi stated her spouse positively influenced her acculturation, “I can always ask him. He patiently explains to me.”

Spiritual inspiration. Chi, Hue, and Zhen shared participating in church activities enhanced their social life and confidence to address acculturation. Hue stated, “We are both involved in church life and with people of different cultures.” Zhen proudly declared, “We invest our time in church ministry. After 9/11, we reach out to our American neighbors.”

Taking responsibilities to make life easier. Chi, Fen, Hue, and Zhen shared their spouse helped make lives easy in the US. Fen and Bao appreciated that their spouse offered a stable life and helped reduce their acculturative anxiety. Fen said, "My husband takes care of many responsibilities. We have a stable life. He helps me a lot." Bao boasted, "He researches art exhibitions. He encourages me to attend exhibitions. I no longer feel ashamed about myself."

No expectation of spousal influence. Two participants shared that they were not influenced by their spouse. Mei vocalized, "He is a traditional Taiwanese. He does not like to communicate. Because of religious beliefs, I trust God creates every individual differently. Hence, I am not influenced by my husband's viewpoints that much." Another participant, Hue, declared, "We have different personalities. We are independent. We don't share about the acculturation process. Both of us have strong relationships with the Lord."

A polarity of spousal influence was evidenced by participants' responses. The findings indicated when participants were dependent on spousal support, their spouse had significant influence on their acculturation process. Findings further revealed independence was not about the spouse, but the participants who decided whether or not to be influenced by their spouse.

Implications

Researchers asserted Chinese clients, from a collectivistic culture, are often reluctant to disclose issues and concerns in counseling (Wei, Liao, Heppner, Chao, & Ku, 2012). Counselors are recommended to acquire cultural knowledge prior to counseling clients of diverse cultures (Deng, Liang, LaGuardia, & Sun, 2016). We suggest that counselors explore with Chinese and Taiwanese wives (a) how cultural traditions and communication styles affect their acculturative stress and (b) how their coping skills affect their perceived prejudice and rejections during the acculturation process.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

This phenomenological research is the first research to address how spouses influence the acculturation process from Chinese and Taiwanese wives' perspectives. The participants revealed a phenomenon that they are resilient in overcoming acculturation challenges and reluctant to admit prejudice against them. In conclusion, these wives were determined to make the US their home. The findings and discussions of this research would benefit counselors and researchers to advocate for Chinese and Taiwanese wives' acculturation. Recommendations for future research include: (a) exploration of how personality differences between the couple affect their acculturation process and (b) a comparison of spousal influences among the Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, and Chinese spouse on their Chinese or Taiwanese wife.

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