# Rural Mental Health: Marginalization of Chinese Immigrant Wives in the United States

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## Abstract

This article advocates for minority rural mental health of Chinese immigrant wives in the United States. The research results revealed that stigmas resulting from cultural differences triggered marginalization and exclusion. Participants shared ways of defeating marginalization.
*Keywords:* rural mental health, immigrants, marginalization, stigma, Chinese wives

## Introduction

Researchers noted the need to promote minority rural mental health and explore factors preventing individuals from seeking mental health such as perceived stigmas, language barriers, confidentiality issues, immigration status, and dual relationships (Cristancho, Peters, & Garces, 2016; Oetinger, Flanagan, & Weaver, 2014; Singh, 2017). A lack rural mental health providers and very little service provided MD and PhD level rural mental practitioners tend to result in individuals' anxiety, depression, and hopelessness (Cristancho et al., 2016; Hollingsworth & Hendrix, 1977). It is essential that professionals enhance cultural awareness and training on well-being and community context to promote rural mental health (Cristancho et al., 2016; Fifield & Oliver, 2016). According to Berry (2010, pp. 95-102), Berry & Hou (2017, pp. 254-264), and Park (1928), all individuals experience acculturation including cultural, behavioral, psychological, and value altercations when they contact diverse individuals. Berry (2010) and Berry and Hou (2017) conceptualized four stages of non–directional and reciprocal acculturation process including integration—maintaining heritage culture and engaging adopted society, separation—preserving heritage identity and avoiding engaging adopted society, assimilation—merging into adopted society and abandoning heritage identity, and marginalization—abandoning heritage culture and avoiding engaging adopted society. The *Wheel of Wellness* model proposed by Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer (2000) noted that cultural identity is one of life tasks affecting individuals' life satisfaction and health. Berry and Hou (2016) noted that when immigrants experience low sense of satisfaction and belonging to both adopted society and heritage cultural, their acculturation is defined as marginalization. When dominant group marginalize non-dominant individuals from their heritage and dominant cultures, immigrants would experience exclusion (Berry, 2010).

## Purpose of the Study

Acculturative stressors affect immigrants' wellness and overall health (Liang, La Guardia, Furgerson, & Boswell, 2017). According to these authors, there is a lack of research on Chinese immigrant wives' wellness in the United States. The purpose of this study was to explore (a) the lived experience of marginalization of Chinese female immigrants who married U.S. citizens and (b) ways of conquering minority stigmas, defeating marginalization, and promoting rural mental health of immigrants. This study is the first research to explore marginalization of Chinese female immigrants who married U.S. citizens. This research was done to enhance counselors', health professionals', and researchers' comprehension of legal immigrant wives' marginalization and coping strategies in order to promote rural mental health.

## Research Questions

Marginalization of Chinese wives was explored through the following research questions:

1. How is the marginalization experience of Chinese female immigrants who married U.S. citizens?
2. How do Chinese wives enhance wellness when experiencing marginalization?

## Interview Questions

The following interview questions were designed to assist participants in rating their stages of acculturation, evaluating cultural reconstruction, and examining marginalization:

1. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 is low and 10 is high), indicate how much you continue to follow the Chinese culture. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 is low and 10 is high), indicate how much you have adapted to U.S. culture.
2. Please describe the most challenging aspect for you about U.S. culture, values, and customs. Please provide examples, if any, when you felt rejected or disrespected by the Chinese culture, the U.S. culture, or both cultures.

## Research Design and Data Collection

A phenomenological approach and participant observation were adopted to better capture participants' interpretations and identity development as well as elucidate existing essences and facets of investigated phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Iwamoto, Negi, Partiali, & Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Field notes were taken to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of data collection (Day, Lawson, & Burge, 2017; Malinowski, 2012).The IRB approved interview protocol, demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and interview questions that were introduced to participants to enhance credibility and ethical consideration. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality and report results. Based on assertions of Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994), in-depth interviews were conducted for recruiting

participants with essence of phenomena until data were rich, thick, and saturated. The in-depth interviews were conducted to enhance credibility of data collection. A purposeful sampling was used to select participants with a variety of occupations for investigating phenomena of participants with diverse occupations.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics and Acculturation Levels of Participants with Pseudonyms*

|  | Chi | Fen | Mei | Bao | Hue | Zhen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Occupation | Counselor | Mail–woman | Nurse | Artist | Housewife | Chemist |
| Years with spouse in U.S. | 4 | 20 | 18 | 3 | 27 | 27 |
| Age | 36 | 53 | 52 | 38 | 61 | 54 |
| Country of origin | Taiwan | Taiwan | Taiwan | China | Taiwan | Taiwan |
| Languages spoken | Chinese Taiwanese English | Chinese English | Chinese Hakkas English | Sichuan Chinese Cantonese English | Chinese English | Chinese Taiwanese English |
| Religion | Christian | Zen Buddhism | Christian | Agnostics | Christian | Christian |
| Country married | U.S. | Taiwan | U.S. | China | U.S. | Taiwan |
| Follow Chinese culture (1-10) | 4 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 9 | 4 |
| Accept American culture (1-10) | 6 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 6 |
| Degree earned | Master, U.S. | Associate, Taiwan | Associate, Taiwan | High school, China | Master, U.S. | Ph.D., U.S. |
| Degree of spouse | Bachelor, U.S. | Bachelor, Taiwan | Master, U.S. | Master, U.S. | Ph.D., U.S. | Ph.D., U.S. |
| Household income | 55,000-75,000 | 55,000-75,000 | 55,000-75,000 | Over 125,000 | Over 125,000 | 75,000-125,000 |

## Data Analysis

Analyzing clusters of meanings from participants' descriptions was used to enhance credibility for capturing participants' reflective interpretations of phenomena and identifying themes (Moustakas, 1994). As I am fluent in both English and Chinese, my comprehension of the participants' descriptions enhanced the credibility of transcripts and translations from an audio recording. Credibility of data analysis was validated by emic coding of defining participants' perspectives of worldviews (Creswell, 2007). Open coding was employed to discover theme categories from participants' lived experiences. Using an audio recording for interviews boosted the credibility of my data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2011).

## Results and Discussions

**Marginalization of Communication Styles**

A participant reported her communication style was marginalized in both heritage culture and adopted society. Chi mentioned that criticisms with good intentions from family members in the heritage culture are hard to digest. She further shared that liberal communication without commitment in her adopted society upset her. Chi shared, "She [My Mom] would say you are too dark, you need to lose weight, or you have too many pimples. They [Taiwanese] have very good intentions, but the way they tell you is not good." On the other hand, Chi was marginalized from the liberal communication style in her adopted society. She mentioned, "A lot of time [American] people say I want to hang out with you. They don't mean it. I feel let down. I thought we are going to hang out, but it's not going to happen. They didn't follow through." It appeared that Chi felt hurt and disappointed at the communication styles of both cultures.

**Marginalization of Expression**

Several participants mentioned concerns of capturing underlying meanings in the country of origin and comprehending expressions and jokes in adopted society. Further, some participants were viewed as blunt communicators in the heritage culture, but they were viewed as not assertive in adopted society. Bao shared,

> Chinese people are cautious in expressing thoughts. It is challenging for me to understand the underlying meanings beyond Chinese people's statements. I could not understand why my friend kept saying she brought a brand new car. My mom explained that my friend intended to ask for a red envelop [with cash as a gift].

Chi was misunderstood and marginalized by people in both the heritage culture and her adopted society. She shared,

> The U.S. culture is a low–text culture with a focus on direct verbal communication. The Chinese culture is a high–text culture with a focus on non–verbal communication. In Taiwan, people think I am westernized [a blunt communicator]. I always get to the point. I might hurt [Taiwanese] people's feelings that I did not know. Some people hold grudges. The grudge thing is pretty difficult to deal with. When I interact with Chinese people, I need to watch out what I say….But here [In the US] if we forget to do that [to clarify non–verbal communication], they [Americans] misunderstood me because I did not explain. I can give you an example. Last Monday was my father-in-law's funeral. They passed out white flowers. I didn't take them. It's because my father-in-law passed away and the flowers will die. It will make me sadder after the flowers die eventually. That's why I don't want to take them. They [My in-laws] were thinking I rejected because they are white flowers.

Because of culture differences, another participant, Fen was also viewed as passive when she did not express her viewpoints related to her adopted society. Fen stated "It is challenging for me to speak up when I disagree with others. As Chinese, we don't insist on our rights. My

American colleagues speak up for their rights and disagreements."

## Social Exclusion

Diverse cultural backgrounds and different communication styles appeared in results for participants' feelings of social exclusion. Bao stated "It is challenging for me to communicate with people in the US. People have little tolerance for my accent and communication styles." Chi and Mei also shared perceptions of social exclusion because they could not comprehend American jokes. Chi expressed, "I don't understand [American] jokes." Chi further shared that not understanding American jokes and current events resulted in her difficulty in joining conversations with people. Mei described, "It is challenging for me to express my viewpoints in English and understand American humor." Zhen provided examples of social exclusion resulting from culture and her accent. She said, "There is a big difference between Chinese and American cultures in terms of communication. Sometimes, the language you speak makes a difference. Miscommunication brings hardship; especially when I speak English with an accent."

### Exclusion due to an Accent

Several participants shared feelings of exclusion as a result of having an accent. Zhen, a chemist with a PhD, shared, "I speak English with an accent. When people hear my accent, they think I am dumb. I have to go an extra mile to prove to them even though I don't speak good English, I can solve the problems." Fen stated, "I have an accent. When I made a complaint call about my account, a young Hispanic girl laughed whenever I spoke. I felt disrespected." It appeared that some individuals despise participants because of an accent.

### Exclusion Due to Different Nationalities and Cultures

Because of nationality differences, Bao suffered rejection from families. She stated,

My step children dislike me because I'm a foreigner. My stepdaughter refused to introduce me to her teachers and ignored me throughout her graduation event. My [Chinese] family members do not accept my husband because of different living styles. We [my spouse and I] experience rejection from our families on both sides.

The results indicated that generalization and misperceptions across cultures contributed to exclusion. Bao reported that she was ridiculed for marrying a U.S. citizen for the purpose of receiving her U.S. citizenship. Her American spouse lacked commitment in their marriage. Bao expressed frustration and irritation toward rejection from her heritage country and adopted society. She described,

A lot of Chinese in the US disrespect me. They give me a strange look because I married an American man. People in China criticize me. They accused me of marrying for my husband's money and green card. My husband was discriminated against by waiters in a Chinese restaurant [in the US]. The waiters told me that Americans give up marriage easily like the way they read a page in a book. They call Americans "鬼佬" [smart–asshole]. I dislike their discrimination against my husband.

**Themes Associated with Marginalization and Exclusion**

According to participants, there are themes related to marginalization and exclusion. However, these themes could not be categorized into the above discussed emergent themes because participants could not identify what resulted in the discrimination and disassociation against them. Details follow:

**Discrimination.** Hue shared,

I took my friend to the airport. We were waiting in the line for check in. A guy after us started his own new line. We still followed the original line. Right before our turn, a male clerk told us to get into the line. I was so furious. We were in the line all the way for 15 minutes. I could not believe that he did not see us. He did not say anything to the person who started the new line, and he served all the people in front of us. When it is our turn, he asked us to get into the new line. I told my husband this is discrimination and I am going to sue the clerk. Soon after the male clerk heard it, he let us check in. He walked with us, told us that he visited Taiwan, and upgraded our friends' seat to first class.

**Disassociation.** Chi disclosed her feelings of disassociation from Americans. Chi stated,

Sometimes I feel lonely because the connection that I have with Taiwanese is different from Americans. Sometimes you think you are friends but maybe they [Americans] think you are just an acquaintance. It's not the same. It's just hard to make friends in that way. It's a different degree. I try to pursue the friendship. If they don't respond, then I would not pursue it. I learned that friendship is a two-way street.

**Inequality.** Mei responded that she rarely feel discriminated against. However, she experienced inequality related to ethnicity. Mei recalled, "A former American colleague always asked me to take care of her difficult patients. She never asked American colleagues. She used to send all her difficult patients to me. I was not her supervisor."

**Conclusion and Implication**

In summary, five out of six participants perceived different degrees of marginalization resulting from an accent, communication styles, cultural differences, and ethnicity. Berry (2010) asserted that the acculturation process is non-directional and reciprocal. Thus, participants would undergo marginalization and exclusion and also experience assimilation and integration. Findings of this research indicated that practicing assertiveness, speaking up for rights, explaining personal viewpoints and culture differences, and pursuing equality in friendships allow participants to prevent margination and to receive respect from their adopted society. Expressing viewpoints cautiously, addressing non-verbal communication, and considering the good intention of constructive criticisms helped participants accept their heritage culture. Counselors and researchers are encouraged to acquire relevant cultural knowledge when assisting clients of different cultures (Liang, Butler, & Nichter, 2015). Counselors can explore their clients' attributes that contribute to their emotional well-being as a therapeutic intervention.

## Recommendations for Future Research

This research explored the marginalization of Chinese immigrant wives in the US. The recommendations for future research include comparing factors resulting in marginalization of immigrants with diverse cultures and comparing unrepresented issues between legal immigrants and immigrants without documentation. Researchers may further investigate ways to help diverse immigrants enhance wellness in their adopted society.

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