

**Employment Challenges, Access to Services, and Resiliency:
Experiences of “Earlier” Mainland Chinese Skilled Immigrants in
Toronto**

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Context

In 2004, the Chinese immigrant community in Toronto was shaken by the suicide of a Mainland Chinese skilled immigrant, Zhaohui Geng, who jumped out of his apartment balcony after being unemployed for more than a year. Under enormous economic and psychological pressure, Geng chose to terminate his life, leaving behind his also unemployed wife and two toddlers (<http://news.xinhuanet.com>). Sadly, this occurred just a few months after much media exposure of the experience of another skilled Mainland Chinese immigrant, Liu An (Anonym), a former civil engineer in China who became homeless after effortful pursuit of employment in Canada (World Journal, March 16, 2004). One issue that triggered much discussion within the Chinese community was that neither Geng nor An had considered social services to be an effective resource for support when in desperation, despite having been in Canada for more than three years. An had persistently rejected applying for social assistance or utilizing other types of services (including shelter) offered by community workers who approached him.

Canada requires skilled immigrants to maintain an adequate level of economic growth in order to counterbalance the aging population, as such, the successful settlement of skilled immigrants has a significant impact on the country's well-being. Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants have represented the largest skilled immigrant group in Canada, as well as in Toronto since 1997 (CIC, 2004). The difficulties facing this population are drawing increasing attention of both researchers and social service organizations working with immigrants. Unemployment and underemployment have been identified by many studies as the primary challenge that most immigrants face. Various secondary issues associated with employment, such as poverty, family conflict, and mental health deterioration, have become increasingly noticeable among the Mainland Chinese community (George, Tsang, Man, & Da, 2000; George, Fong, Da & Chang, 2004).

Understanding how social services can assist immigrants in tackling these multiples challenges, and better facilitate the settlement process has long been a prominent theme in immigration research and policy development (Neuwirth, 1999; The Department of Canadian Heritage, 2005). While much attention has been given to the structural barriers to employment for immigrants (i.e. foreign credential recognition), the subjective psycho-social experience of unemployment in multiple cultural contexts has received relatively little attention. In addition, immigration studies tend to focus on new immigrants, who have been in Canada for less than three years. As a result, there is limited information available regarding the service needs and settlement process of "earlier" immigrants who have been in Canada for a longer period of time, and are therefore no longer eligible for settlement services geared to newcomers. Finally, in research as well as policy development, the Chinese immigrant community, as in many other ethno-cultural communities, tends to be viewed as a homogenous group. The diversity and power differentials within the community, and how the intra-group dynamic affects immigrants' life and their interaction with social services, are scarcely examined.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes and strategies of socio-cultural adaptation, and the ways in which the various socio-cultural-economic backgrounds of Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants intersect with inter-and intra-community dynamics in the Canadian context. It specifically examined the role social services play in these processes, and issues impacting effective service provision for this population. The study particularly focused on the experiences of those earlier immigrants who have been in Canada for a period of 4-10 years

(“earlier” immigrants). The major research questions included: 1) how do earlier Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants experience the resettlement and cultural negotiation processes in Toronto?; 2) what are the barriers that earlier Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants encounter in their settlement process, and how do these experiences affect them in a way different from more recent newcomers?; 3) what are the strategies that earlier Chinese immigrants adopt to tackle the difficulties they face?; 4) how are social services utilized by earlier Mainland Chinese immigrants, and how effective were these services found to be during their settlement? 5) what factors motivate or hinder the effective utilization of social services by earlier Chinese immigrants?; and 6) how can social service providers and policy makers creatively respond to these issues?

Methodology

A grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was adopted for data collection and analysis in order to develop a conceptual understanding of the subjective experiences of the study participants. Specifically, a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000), which is more interpretive than the earlier, objectivist models of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), was used. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology in which the process of data collection and data analysis is conducted simultaneously to allow explanations of the phenomena to emerge from the data. The process of data analysis is first inductive as initial coding is conducted and themes explored, and later becomes more deductive as the emerging categories and themes are applied back to the rest of the data for constant comparison. The constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000) guided the analysis process.

The data collection methods included: (1) key informant interviews (9 interviews; n = 13); (2) focus groups with skilled immigrants (4 groups; n = 29); and (3) in-depth interviews with skilled immigrants (n = 29). Focus groups and in-depth interviews were supplemented with background questionnaires asking about participants' past and current occupations, educational backgrounds, family status, their intention to stay in Canada, and other pertinent pieces of information that would help contextualize the interview/focus group data. The interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. Interviews in Mandarin were translated into English and NVivo qualitative software was used to assist the data management and analysis. Study participants were also invited back for roundtable discussions to obtain their feedback on the study and its findings. The study utilized community collaboration through its community partner, the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, as well as community consultations with both agencies and individuals. In addition, an open public forum (held at the University Settlement House, Toronto) was organized to discuss the study findings and best practices in terms of addressing the issues and making recommendations for social service delivery and policy development.

Recruitment:

Since we wanted to make sure those who utilized social services are included in the sample, the purposive sampling targeted some of the major social service agencies working with Chinese immigrants in Toronto, as well as email listservs that include a wide range of skilled immigrants. Later in the sampling process, potential participants with certain characteristics were sought in order to maximize the variations of sampling (e.g., gender, age, family status, those skilled immigrants who were also working in social services).

Participants:

Participants were all voluntary and signed informed consent forms prior to participation. Those participating in in-depth interviews and focus groups were compensated for their time and transportation costs (\$25). In terms of demographics, participants came from a wide range of geographical locations across China, ranging in age from late 20s to early 50s. Employment status varied from professional vocations to unemployment and language proficiency from quite good to poor. Seventeen of the participants were female and twelve male.

Some of the Key Findings

The experiences of the participants were diverse – some had successful careers comparable to the ones they had in China, while others were still underemployed, working in factories and warehouses and unable to utilize their professional and educational credentials they had obtained back home in China. Some had accompanying family members (children, spouse) who enjoyed living in Canada, and others were (or had children or spouses) with serious health or mental health conditions that created much psychological and financial stress on themselves and their families. However, there were prevailing themes that emerged from these diverse experiences.

Employment

Employment related challenges were found to have a major impact on the lives of earlier immigrants who have been settled in Canada for a period longer than three years. Participants thought that the earlier immigrants tend to have more job stability than their more recent newcomer counterparts. However, they continue to face underemployment, limited career development opportunities, and discrimination and exclusion in the workplace which hinders them from obtaining high job satisfaction.

Language

As reflected in existing literature, the difficulty of speaking English was identified as a major obstacle in the path to satisfactory employment and integration. Very often, frustration with communication is not simply a matter of one's skills in using the language, which could be improved through training and practice, but is also complicated by the social implications of language use and how one is received and treated as a result. Participants discussed the impact of language difficulties in terms of the impact on their employment, the size of their social networks, their ability access services and their self-identity and independence. The participants also found that English was not the only language needed to fare in Toronto, but that they also faced difficulties in placing themselves into sub-cultural groups of the Chinese community. Prior to 1997, the majority of Chinese immigrants to Canada came from Hong Kong. The significance lies in the cultural and language differences between those immigrating from Hong Kong and those from Mainland China. Not only do those from Hong Kong employ a different dialect (Cantonese as opposed to Mandarin), but as a British colony, Hong Kong was also much more "Western" in its social, economic, political, cultural and linguistic systems. As such, those immigrants coming from Mainland China arrived to find a well-established Chinese community with ethno-culture-specific services and neighbourhood amenities functioning on a solid Cantonese-Chinese culture, reflective of the needs of earlier Hong Kong immigrants (George et al., 2000). This Cantonese-Chinese community was no less "foreign" than the larger Canadian society, and participants commonly reported difficulties in taking advantage of the readily available community resources due to communication barriers, cultural differences, and misunderstandings between the two sub-Chinese groups.

Luocha and Mental Health Issues

Stressed by unemployment or underemployment and having experienced disillusion about

leading a “better life” (participants’ words) in Canada, earlier immigrants thought they suffered from mental health issues of greater prevalence and severity as compared to newcomers. Participants felt that depression, family conflict, and extreme cases, such as suicide, occurred more often to earlier immigrants than to newcomers. “Loss of self”, “no face”, “no future”, “waste of life”...these words used by the study participants to describe their life after immigration indicate tremendous psychological stresses. Trapped in labour jobs, some interviewees felt embarrassed when comparing themselves with their peers of their home country, which would reinforce their feeling of *luocha*, which in Chinese means falling down. The word was frequently used by the participants to describe the loss in their social status and deskilling in employment after immigration. All the participants, without exception, experienced falling-down of their social statuses after immigrating to Canada, although the degree of the “falls” deferred by individuals.

Coping strategies and resiliency

Participants developed various coping strategies to address the challenges they faced, including: 1) the use of the Internet as a new tool for gathering information; 2) seeking support from friends and family in Canada and/or China; 3) using alternative medicine or returning to China to treat medical problems (the ineffectiveness and low service quality of the Canadian health care system pushed immigrants to consider alternative ways to attend to their health needs); 4) staying positive as a self-help strategy; 5) creating own mutual help networks or associations; 6) acknowledging the contributions that previous Chinese immigrants have made, and take advantage of existing services. Many immigrants reported finding it hard to see a way out of the difficulties other than relying on their own strong will and persistence, they encouraged themselves, as well as their friends to stay positive, which was a theme commonly heard in the community after Zhaohui Geng’s suicide.

Recommendations for Social Service Provision and Policy Development

- The need to expand the service eligibility and tailored services for earlier immigrants so that earlier immigrants are not excluded from the settlement/employment services that they need.
- Improved access to healthcare and social services in the initial settlement process; it is important to target and tailor services to immigrants starting from the time of their arrival.
- Awareness of diversity within an ethno-cultural group, as well as the intersection of identities, reflected in social policies for skilled immigrants.
- Creating dialogue among different groups of people within the diverse "Chinese" communities (e.g., between Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking; Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong Chinese; more settled immigrants and newer immigrants) to foster understanding and appreciation of the contribution of different segments of the communities (e.g., different histories among earlier Chinese and more recent Chinese newcomers).
- More flexibility on the funding requirements that social services need to meet (e.g., number of clients served); the easing of the pressure that the agencies are under would make room for more tailored services.
- Recognizing and drawing upon the experience of the autonomous mutual help efforts developed by immigrant communities, as part of identifying best practices for facilitating fuller integration of immigrants.
- Social policies and services focusing on supporting and facilitating community building and development from a strengths perspective.

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Dissemination Efforts to Date:*Public Forum Organized:*

- Sakamoto, I. & Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (2005 July). *Public Forum: Voices of Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants in Toronto – Employment and social cohesion issues facing “earlier” Chinese immigrants*. July 10, 2005, University Settlement Recreation Centre, Toronto, Canada. Funded by SSHRC Multiculturalism Grant and CERIS Grant & Co-sponsored with Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter.

Presentations:

- Sakamoto, I. & Wei, Y. (March 2006). The Role of Language in Accessing Social and Health Services: Immigrants' Experience. *8th National Metropolis Conference*, Vancouver, Canada, March 23-26, 2006.
- Sakamoto, I., Zhou, R., Wu, F., & Wei, Y. (Jan. 2006). Immigrant Access to Social Services: Chinese Skilled Immigrants in Toronto, Canada. *10th Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research*, San Antonio, Texas, USA, Jan 12-15, 2006.
- Sakamoto, I. (Nov. 2005). Employment challenges and resiliency: Everyday lived experiences of multiculturalism of “earlier” skilled immigrants from China. Paper prepared for the *SSHRC Policy Forum*, Ottawa, Canada. Nov 3-4, 2005.

Manuscript:

- Sakamoto, I. & Wei, Y. (under review) Are we really speaking the same language?: Examining workplace diversity and multicultural social service provision for skilled immigrants.