

## The impact of migration on the Chinese family

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### Introduction

Migrants who aim for a better life or are forced to leave their homeland for political reasons find themselves facing multiple changes and challenges after migration. Many Chinese migrants have prepared themselves for the physical move and for the challenges of a new language and culture, but may not be aware of the enormous adjustment and changes which their family will face. They are therefore often unprepared for those challenges. The huge and unavoidable sacrifices demanded by migration are often at the expense of the family relationship. This chapter examines the impact of migration on Chinese families.

### Migration stress

Migration itself involves many changes, which become potential stressors for Chinese migrant families. Grief over losses created by the process of uprooting is often expressed in feelings of homesickness. Unresolved grief may lead to physical complaints, sleep problems, emotional distance between family members or forms of dysfunction in the family. The dual task of grieving over losses and mastering resettlement

at the same time causes a lot of stress in Chinese migrant families.

Physical changes in the living environment, in lifestyle and in the climate are potential stresses. Being cut off from prior social support systems and ties with the extended family creates isolation, especially when the family is unable to organise a rapid replacement of the original support system (McGoldrick, 1989). The language barrier and sometimes the inability to have qualifications recognised in the new country have trapped many Chinese immigrants in unsuitable jobs, under-employment or unemployment. The wide gap between a family's status before and after immigration becomes a significant stressor for many. Financial difficulties, disappointment and frustration can increase the sense of loneliness and helplessness, which impedes family functioning.

Other stresses may be associated with a family's desire to return to their home country. If the family desires to ultimately go back to the homeland and its members therefore view themselves as sojourners, it may exaggerate a sense of uncertainty and feelings of being uprooted. Consequently, this can create severe stress and impede the family's efforts to adjust to

the new culture. Some of the migration stress may not show up in the beginning of the immigration process because the family is fully engaged with issues of practical living, or their ties with the Chinese community serve as a temporary cushion against such stress. But if family conflicts or strain remain unresolved, postponed stresses may manifest themselves later – even in the next generation (Lee, 1989; McGoldrick, 1989).

### **Cultural transition**

Chinese immigrant families often experience culture shock from contact with a new culture, and have feelings of loss, confusion and impotence as a result of missing their accustomed cultural cues and social rules (Winkelman, 1994). Such culture shock may cause them to suffer from psychosomatic and physical illness, cognitive distortions, fatigue, emotional problems, and role shock or identity loss. Confronted with different cultural norms and values, the family can feel pressurised to change at the personal level, which may run counter to their family values. Several aspects of traditional Chinese family functioning can be sources of conflict for family members who are at different stages in the transition process. This is particularly true of the emphasis on parental authority, filial obligation, valuing family interests over self-interest, and gender role expectation (Fong, 1973). The most significant transitional stress

occurs when family members differ greatly in their rate of adaptation and acculturation (Landau, 1989; Lee, 1989). Chinese children and adolescents often find it easier than their parents to master English and adapt to the new culture. For example, Tina is a 16-year-old girl from a Chinese immigrant family, who wants to date, go out with friends, be alone with her boyfriend, stay out overnight and have her own privacy. These wishes are commonly viewed as inappropriate and unacceptable by her parents in the context of Chinese cultural tradition. The ensuing acculturation gap between generations causes a great deal of conflict and stress in many families.

In some cases, children and adolescents become more involved in the decision-making process within a family and are responsible for the family's interaction with people outside the family, because they have a better mastery of English than their parents and thus serve as interpreters or guides. The younger family members may then feel their position to be superior to that of their parents. Parents, threatened by such a loss of power, are likely to try and maintain control and retain family bonds by imposing stricter family rules or retaining traditional values about such misbehaviour. Young people may become emotionally distanced from their parents or rebel against their parents' rigidity by rejecting traditional

values as being inferior or outdated. Once again, such intergenerational conflict during the period of cultural transition can lead to serious strains within family relationships.

### **Changes in family structure and roles**

Immigration affects the family's structure, the defined roles of its members and the balance of authority and power. Even formerly well-functioning families run the risk of disrupting family unity as they adjust to Western culture. During the process of immigration there are often multiple separations, as some family members are left behind, and sometimes there are reunifications. The alteration of the family structure may cause significant family problems. For example, a young couple was forced to give up its established nuclear family lifestyle after the wife was found to be pregnant. The couple needed to bring the man's parents out to New Zealand to stay with them, because the couple needed help with child care. This reunion changed the family's structure from a nuclear one back to an extended family system. In the process, the wife in particular experienced many difficulties in adapting to this change and in relating to her in-laws.

In traditional Chinese culture husbands usually act as the breadwinner, disciplinarian of the children, decision-maker and head of the family. However, immigrant family members in New

Zealand are influenced by the new culture, which emphasises equality within the family. Prestige and authority may be redistributed because of such cultural influence, or by a wife's new earning power. Husbands may feel very threatened by such changes and express their frustration or anger by distancing themselves from other family members or by being violent towards them. This further impedes the family's adaptability.

### **The astronaut family**

"Astronaut families" are created by immigration and involve a husband, who returns to or remains in the home country to continue his job or business, while the rest of the family lives in New Zealand. Such single-parent families with a female head of the home have become a common phenomenon within the Chinese community in New Zealand. The term astronaut refers to the lengthy period of time that some of those people spend flying back and forth (Leung, 1992).

This phenomenon creates many problems in the family by altering the original family structure and family roles. The wife is forced to take over a combined role as a "husband-wife-father-mother" in the family structure. Gradually the wife may feel more independent due to the frequent absences of her husband. While a husband can feel increasingly like a stranger in the new environment, wives often seem to adjust quite well to

their new way of life, because of the time and effort they have spent in adapting to this country. Many husbands feel threatened by them and find it hard to cope with the changes in status and power (Leung, 1992). Time and distance have an eroding effect on family cohesion and communication, and especially on the marital relationship (Leung, 1992).

Because of the frequent separations and the absent father, the children are virtually raised in a single-parent family. They lack a father-figure in their upbringing, lose his role-modeling during their formative years, are unable to seek advice or support from him at times of need, and may experience problems in developing their self-identity.

Due to the long times of separation, couples may try different ways to satisfy their emotional and sexual needs, making astronaut families more vulnerable to the risk of extramarital affairs. Chinese people find it hard to stay with and forgive their partner once an affair is exposed and this may lead to separation or divorce. As a result, the whole family may suffer from a break-up.

Those families who choose to stay in the country together may find themselves having more time with each other than before, which may help to improve or strengthen relationships. But for those whose relationships were already strained before immigration, having more time together may increase family conflict and worsen relationships.

Traditionally, Chinese people are family orientated and they are best understood in the context of their families. Understanding these challenges and the impact of immigration on Chinese families can help us to be more culturally sensitive to the needs of Chinese students and their families, and offer more effective interventions to them.

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