

## How Chinese migrant couples develop resilience

John Wong and Hans Everts

### Introduction

As illustrated in other chapters, Chinese families migrate to New Zealand for a variety of reasons (Friesen, Ip, Ho, Bedford & Goodwin, 1997; Trlin & Spoonley, 1997), and face a wide range of challenges when they get here (Ho, 1995). What is highlighted in this chapter is how at the heart of each family stands the parental couple. It is this couple who typically make the initial decision to migrate. It is they who are primarily responsible for the physical and psychological well-being of individual family members, especially the children, and for ensuring that the community's requirements for education and other civic responsibilities are met. And, in the face of all the changes and challenges of migration, it is up to the couple to maintain stability, consistency and integrity; without them, the family often falters or breaks down (Young & Long, 1998). For these reasons, it is crucial for those who work with Chinese immigrant family members to understand what makes such couples strong and able to stand up to multiple challenges – in other words, to be resilient – so that we can be of appropriate help to them in achieving this resilience.

### What makes couples strong and resilient?

Recent research has shown that there are certain qualities and skills which make couples able to cope with outside challenges and maintain, if not enhance, the quality of their relationship in the process (Everts, 1999). These qualities and skills fall into four categories – the *individual resources* of each partner, the *emotional quality* of the couple's relationship, the *skills* partners use in managing challenges together, and the nature of wider *community resources* which are available to them. At the *individual* level, each partner can be strengthened by an *awareness* or understanding of what is happening inside and around them; by a sense of *optimism* and hope; by a measure of *religious or spiritual faith*; by *personal resilience*, or emotional courage and determination; by a sense of *positive self-esteem* or self-worth; and by *physical well-being* and health. Such qualities and skills are brought by a partner into the couple relationship and contribute to its overall quality. This *emotional quality* of a relationship is enhanced by the *love and affection* that the partners have towards each other; by their *commitment* or

determination to see matters through together, for better or worse; by the extent to which they share *similar values* in the face of so much change; and by their *tolerance*, patience and flexibility towards each other.

In addition to its emotional quality, relationship skills and resources used to manage tasks and challenges enhance a couple's relationship. Good relationship skills and resources include having enough *intimate time* together; having good *communication skills* such as caring listening, open self-sharing, finding win-win solutions, and effectiveness in action; being able to *collaborate* or work together in facing challenges; making occasional *self-sacrifices* for the sake of the relationship; having enough *material resources* like money and housing; and accumulating a *history* or track record of experience to draw on for guidance and inspiration. The final factor, which influences a couple's resilience, comes from its *relationship with the wider community*. Couples benefit from having a *support network* of family, friends and professionals; from having *role models* who have dealt with challenges successfully; and from being able to *protect themselves* against others who seek to influence them against their own best interests.

While the above findings have been found true in general terms, a specific survey was carried out by John Wong of 15 Chinese migrant couples in Auckland who had been in New Zealand for up to

10 years (Wong, 2000), in order to ascertain how true the above findings were for them, and what this would imply for community helping professionals who work with Chinese migrant families and their members. His findings are included in the points made below.

### **The initial challenge and the couple's typical reaction**

It has been noted elsewhere that the challenges facing Chinese migrant couples are many, and result in the development of a very different lifestyle in most cases. These challenges include a new language, changes in employment or employment status, a frequent loss of income, a different educational and welfare system, strange foods, an unaccustomed amount of free time and time together, different transport and driving customs, the purchase and furnishing of a new home, and the loss of existing family and social ties.

It is hardly surprising that a couple's initial reaction usually includes surprise, shock and recoil. When seen in terms of the aspects of couple functioning at the *personal* level, people's awareness is overwhelmed by new information; several survey respondents talked about being "completely lost". Their emotional strength or resilience drops, and their level of self-esteem diminishes, at times to the point of feeling depressed and worthless. Their initial optimism is dented and the hoped-for rosy future

seems to disappear. With both partners stressed at the personal level, their relationship typically suffers as well. For many, the *emotional quality* of the relationship provides an initial bulwark, and the partners are able to draw on mutual love, commitment, and a sense of holding on to shared values and purpose. In the face of multiple issues to deal with, however, their *relationship skills* often falter. Survey respondents talked about deterioration in communication, with more complaints and arguments, difficulties in collaboration around decisions to be taken in spite of personal sacrifices made, a diminution in material resources because of financial constraints, and a lack of prior experience to guide them successfully through all these challenges. Not only are the partners under personal and relationship pressure, but in terms of *community relationships* they find themselves far removed from their accustomed support network, sometimes facing prejudice, and without role models who have successfully dealt with the demands of adaptation – leaving the couple uncertain and alone.

### **Strength through adversity – the development of couple resilience**

It is in this situation of ongoing challenge and crisis that many couples find or develop resources which enable them to deal effectively with tasks they face, and to maintain or even enhance the quality of their relationship. The

couples in our survey illustrate the development of resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity. Conversely, a couple's inability to draw on or develop certain relationship skills and qualities can leave them struggling, if not failing in their attempt to adapt to life in New Zealand and to keep their relationship healthy. It is therefore vitally important for those of us who work with migrant couples and families to understand what contributes to a couple's resilience and its development, so that we can provide appropriate support and assistance for them as they settle into New Zealand. Our survey findings and other research (Everts, 1999) indicate that there is no one formula or sequence of steps that guarantees success in a couple's development of resilience, though some skills and qualities are seen as more prominent by the couples surveyed. Rather, it is how such skills and qualities combine and reinforce each other over time that creates the difference between a "winning" couple and a "losing" one.

Given this, it helps at the *personal level* for partners to hold fast to their sense of hope and optimism that, in spite of challenges and setbacks, the vision that brought them to New Zealand can be attained – even if not in the shape that they had originally imagined. Such optimism is reinforced for many people by their religious or spiritual beliefs – that being where they are and doing

what they are is right in terms of the meaning and purpose of their lives. When combined with a sense of emotional determination that is encouraged and supported over time, it allows people to feel good about themselves, even when things do not go according to plan. In the survey, one man recounted how "When I made my decision to come to New Zealand, I treated it as my second home. No matter what difficulties I would face, I would settle here and not return." Such determination is aided by people increasing their awareness and understanding of the many aspects of life in New Zealand that allow them to make appropriate decisions – whether it has to do with housing, employment, education or leisure. Where people shrink from building up such essential awareness and knowledge by not learning English or confining themselves to a small and safe cultural enclave, adaptation and resilience do not readily develop. Awareness or understanding is also important when it comes to managing family relationships. According to one woman interviewed, "When I was cooking in the kitchen and blaming and yelling at the family, I was not fair to them." Personal qualities like optimism, faith, determination and self-esteem, combined with competencies like understanding family and community, and speaking English, reinforce each other and leave partners personally stronger and thus more able to contribute to the

couple relationship. Confidence and competence are associated with physical well-being, and for some Chinese couples their physical health serves as an index of their overall level of functioning.

The connection between personal well-being and the quality of the relationship is a close and mutually reinforcing one. A confident and well-functioning person will feel more positive about a partner and will interact more effectively, while the presence of a supportive partner fosters personal confidence and competence. Much of this is evident in the *range and level of skills* that partners bring to how they communicate and collaborate. Since many Chinese migrant couples find that they have more time together than they expected, there is plenty of opportunity to communicate and make decisions. It helps if both parties want to and are able to listen to each other, and find solutions which meet the needs of both. As one respondent reflected: "When we had more time together, we had more conflict. With time, we found that it was no use to deal with a problem when either one of us was moody; it only put more pressure on the other." Such constructive use of communication skills promotes a *better quality relationship* as reflected in the presence of more love, greater commitment and a higher level of tolerance. It is within such an atmosphere of mutual goodwill that self-sacrifice works best: "His wife became a vegetarian like him, because she loved

him and was willing to sacrifice for that. He really appreciated that.”

When self-sacrifice is not rewarded, as when a husband always expects to have his own needs met, regardless of hers, the very essence of love, commitment and tolerance are drained out of the relationship, and it may wither in the face of continuing outside pressures. Good communication is the basis of good collaboration, and many Chinese migrant couples interviewed found that working together was a somewhat novel but very satisfying experience – whether it had to do with housework, employment, shopping, sightseeing, or buying and furnishing a house. “When she first got a job, she could not drive, so her husband provided transport, took care of the children and did the housework. They worked as a team.” While there is no doubt that financial constraints make life more difficult, such constraints by themselves do not determine the success of a couple’s relationship. Rather, it is how they react to such a challenge that can make or break the relationship. If challenge brings a couple closer together and makes them work hard at their teamwork, they end up stronger and more resilient. If a couple does not develop the above skills and qualities through challenge and crisis, their relationship may well be impoverished and ultimately disintegrate.

It is here that the phenomenon of the astronaut family, where one partner

returns to the country of origin for financial reasons, provides a poignant example of how couples find themselves unexpectedly under enormous pressure (Leung & Chan-Sew, 1989; Pe-Pau, Mitchel, Iredale & Castles, 1996). In terms of the above criteria, frequent and good-quality communication, a strong commitment to each other, maximum collaboration around issues of common concern, much mutual support, and high-quality time together when they do meet all help to keep the relationship functional. However, there are further complications and details, which are beyond the scope of this article, that bear on how such couples develop the resilience that keeps them together and functional. Whether we are dealing with united or astronaut families, it is striking to see how Chinese migrant couples, with dedication and goodwill, can achieve a quality of lifestyle and relationship resilience which is different from what they had expected at the outset. While there are inevitable losses, the achievement of other goals can make the entire process of migration worthwhile. As in the case of one couple interviewed, they both agreed that their relationship had become better. The lifestyle here promoted their relationship. Since they do not have the work pressure here that they had previously, they have more enjoyable time together. They have become closer and support each other, as they do not have relatives here and only some friends.

Because they did not have a language problem with English, they had more confidence in their ability to overcome the transitional stressors of migration. They have more time with the family and are closer to the children. Although the husband could not find a job, he took it easy, as they have reasonable savings and expect him to find a job in the end. Thus a couple can create its own narrative and tradition of building strength and resilience in their relationship.

The final aspect of couple functioning that needs to be considered involves the relationship between a couple and the surrounding community of family and friends. Coming to grips with the loss or drastic curtailment of their prior support network constitutes one of the most significant challenges faced by Chinese migrant couples, used to a close and extensive network of social relationships and role models in their country of origin. Apart from learning to depend more on each other, as noted above, couples surveyed built local support networks as rapidly as they could. Sometimes this includes bringing out other members of the wider family group. Sometimes it involves joining local church communities, which provide social support, affirmation of religious or spiritual faith, and sometimes role models in the form of other migrants who have successfully mastered some of the issues confronting them. Such new local networks may also include profes-

sional experts such as doctors, educational tutors or even counsellors and psychologists. While social networks are a significant source of support, couples find (sometimes to their discomfort) that they need to develop new means of self-protection. For example, many have noted that some Kiwi neighbours and other locals have been very welcoming, but that most keep a distance and thus leave the migrant couple isolated or confined to their own cultural network. Couples need to learn to stand firm together in the face of challenges like prejudice and racism from the Kiwi community or criticism from members of their own family network for becoming too westernised (in the case of older relatives) or remaining too traditional (from the younger generation). Such examples again illustrate the need for partners to maintain a common and mutually supportive stance as a couple, as well as developing meaningful, new support networks.

### **Implications for those contemplating migration or those working with Chinese migrant couples**

When asked what help or advice intending migrant couples should receive, the most common answer by those surveyed came down to the principle of “forewarned is forearmed”. In other words, intending migrants should prepare themselves by:

- Realising that they face a lengthy period of multiple challenges and crises.
- Learning about what these challenges are, so as not to find themselves unnecessarily surprised and disappointed.
- Developing personal determination, optimism and faith that such challenges can be met.
- Accumulating maximum financial resources to cope with an inevitable period of underemployment or unemployment.
- Developing a loving commitment to each other, a tolerance of differences, and a readiness to stand together in the face of adversity.
- Developing open and full communication, mutual need fulfilment, collaboration on tasks to be achieved, and leaving time for the relationship.
- Preparing for the disappearance of a significant support network, and the need to build up a new one.
- Being open to change in personal expectations and values, and the way that partners relate to each other in the process of achieving their migration dreams.
- Recognising the qualities and skills that couples have, or need to develop, in order to enhance their resilience and ability to deal effectively with tasks like parenting.
- Contributing to the kind of formal and informal support networks that are needed by Chinese migrant couples in New Zealand.
- Providing information, guidance, training and encouragement that helps couples develop necessary awareness and skills, as noted above.
- As we deal with particular issues in, for example, education, we can model and encourage the development of open communication, mutually satisfying collaboration skills, as well as the opportunity for couples to make good use of intimacy time.
- Providing the emotional support, affirmation and sometimes challenge needed to foster the development and consolidation of the skills and qualities which are pertinent to a couple's resilience, as highlighted above.

Those of us working with Chinese migrant couples, their children and families can aid the process of successful adaptation by:

- Being clearly aware of the multifaceted challenges that these couples and their children have to deal with.

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