

# The Changing Meaning of Family Support Among Older Chinese and Korean Immigrants

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**Objective.** Our objective in this study was to examine how family social-support expectations have changed among older Chinese and Korean U.S. immigrants.

**Methods.** Fifty-two Cantonese- and Korean-speaking immigrants older than 60 years participated in eight focus groups. Transcripts were translated into English. Themes were developed based on a coding structure and compared to past research.

**Results.** Participants discussed changed perspectives of family social support and the need to integrate both American and Chinese or Korean culture, thus becoming bicultural. Three distinct perspectives of family emerged: (1) participants felt they had become peripheral family members, (2) parents were no longer authority figures in families, and (3) participants were more independent. Finally, participants described how factors such as a changed economic environment, living alone, and extending their social network beyond family, promoted a move to biculturalism.

**Discussion.** These results suggest that the integration of two cultures, or biculturalism, is an indicator of successful adaptation to immigration later in life; older Chinese and Korean immigrants are adjusting to living in the United States and blending multiple cultures simultaneously. Thus, acculturation frameworks implying a linear process may not be theoretically valid as ethnic identity, particularly for those who immigrate to different countries, changes over the life course.

**B**ETWEEN 1990 and 2000, the Asian American population grew faster than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. The total Asian population increased 63%; both the Chinese and Korean ethnic groups grew by more than a third. According to Census 2000, 13% of Koreans and 18% of Chinese in the United States are aged 55 years and older, and of these, most are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The majority of older Chinese and Koreans immigrated to the United States later in life to be reunited with their family members. More than two thirds of older Chinese and Korean immigrants gain entry as parents of U.S. citizens (Treas, 1995), often settling into domestic roles such as helping their adult children with child care and housekeeping tasks (Min, 1998). They usually have limited education, limited English-speaking ability, and little or no work histories in the United States (Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). As a result, many are poor and must rely on family and Supplemental Security Income for subsistence (Van Hook, 2000).

The importance of family is a core social value among Chinese and Koreans (Sung, 2000). Family remains the central location through which culture is defined and interpreted (Luborsky & McMullen, 1999; Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1997). Filial piety, a central family value to Chinese and Koreans, can be defined as the expression of responsibility, respect, sacrifice, and family harmony that regulates children's attitudes and behavior towards family-based support (Sung, 2000). Children are raised to respect their parents and socialized to care for them as they age, and adult children are to be considerate and attentive to their parents' desires (Li, 1985). Filial children, especially the oldest son, are expected to sacrifice their own interests for the well-

being of their elderly parents. Daughters-in-law, who become part of their husband's families, are obligated to carry out their filial duties by caring for the son's older parents within a hierarchical concept of serving, rather than the more egalitarian concept of caring (Kim, Kim, & Hurh, 1991; Lan, 2002).

Older Chinese and Koreans living in the United States have experienced shifts in their expectations of filial piety and thus are often ill-prepared for late life. Although they sacrificed personal gain for the betterment of their family and committed themselves to the education of their children (Yoon, Eun, & Park, 2000), their children may not perceive a reciprocal filial obligation to care for their aging parents. Furthermore, failure to achieve filial piety involves minimal financial consequences for the adult children. In Asia, financial wealth (e.g., money, land) flowed from parents to children, but in the United States most adult children obtain their income from the market economy, and are less reliant on economic resources provided by the family. In addition, contemporary daughters-in-law are often part of dual-income households, so those who were once considered the primary caregivers to older parents are no longer obligated to fulfill their filial duty. Finally, older Chinese and Korean immigrants also face social isolation within their own families (Kaugh, 1999; Kim & Kim, 2001) because their main source of support, adult children, often do not live in close proximity.

As a result of the changed economic and social structures, upon immigrating to the United States, older Chinese and Koreans are forced to integrate their values and expectations of family into American culture. They are becoming bicultural, which can be defined as the adoption of the host (e.g.,

Table 1. Demographics of Chinese and Korean Focus-Group Participants

Variable	Chinese ( <i>n</i> = 29)	Korean ( <i>n</i> = 23)
No. of focus groups	4	4
Gender (%)		
Male	45	22
Female	55	78
Age range	69–85	63–89
Average no. of years in U.S.	24	16
Living arrangements (%)		
Living alone	34	70
Living with spouse	45	21
Living with adult children	21	9

Note: All participants were monolingual in either Cantonese or Korean.

American) cultural values and the retaining of the native (e.g., Asian) cultural values (Kaugh, 1997, 1999; Yoo, 1997a). Seeking help only within the family remains a strong Asian value (Wong, Yoo, & Stewart, 2005). Chinese and Koreans rarely seek help from English-speaking service agencies, an issue that is complicated by additional challenges of adjusting to a different value system, language, customs, lifestyle, and the Westernization of their children and grandchildren (Gelfand, 1989; Mackinnon, Gien, & Durst, 1996; Mutchler & Angel, 2000). Yet, adoption of residential separation and financial independence is much more the norm for older Chinese and Korean parents living in the United States (Lan, 2002).

Despite the cultural changes faced by older Asian immigrants, reliable social support from the family is still a major determinant of their quality of life (Mui, 1996). Social support is typically defined in terms of functional domains (e.g., instrumental and emotional support) and refers to any process through which social relationships might promote health and well-being (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000). Receiving and giving social support occurs through an individual's social network, where the social network is defined as the web of social relationships that surrounds an individual (Fischer, 1982; Fischer, Jackson, Steuve, Gerson, Jones, & Baldassare, 1977).

In an effort to provide insight into elder care arrangements and adequacy of community resources, we examined the expectations of family support among older Chinese and Korean immigrants and determined how these expectations have changed since migrating to the United States. Exploring changes in family social networks is the first step toward understanding how older immigrants adapt later in life to changes in their social support system.

## METHODS

### Participants

Eight focus groups, four Chinese and four Korean, were conducted in the San Francisco Bay area. These ethnic groups were chosen because they represent two of the largest groups of older Asians in the United States and they share similar levels of linguistic isolation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). We enlisted service providers at six community-based organizations and two churches in San Francisco to help recruit participants according to the following eligibility criteria: (1) speaks either Cantonese or Korean, (2) aged 60 years or older, and (3) immigrated to the

United States. Each organization was given \$100 for recruitment and the use of their facilities, and each participant was paid \$5 for participation. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, San Francisco.

### Procedures

Focus group questions were developed from a literature review of cross-cultural social support studies of Asians, interviews with senior faculty in the Department of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, and one author's (GY) past work with Asian immigrants (Yoo, 1997a,b, 1998). Each focus group of six to nine participants lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and was conducted according to standard procedures (Krueger, 1994). Fifty-two Chinese and Koreans (*n* = 29, *n* = 23, respectively), aged 63 to 89 years, participated in the study (Table 1). Most were female (65%) and had resided in the United States for an average of 16 (Koreans) or 24 years (Chinese). Most Koreans lived alone (70%) whereas most Chinese lived with a spouse or adult child (66%).

Given the limited investigators' Cantonese and Korean language skills, two bilingual (English and Chinese-Cantonese or Korean) and bicultural research assistants, trained in focus group methods, facilitated the group discussions. Investigators were also present to help probe the dialogue. All focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed in Chinese or Korean, and translated into English. To ensure translation accuracy, the original transcripts were compared to the English translation by a bilingual research assistant who was not involved in the initial transcription or translation process.

### Analysis

Two investigators (SW & GY) independently coded the transcripts using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2004). Following the procedures for grounded theory analysis (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) the investigators developed and used codes to give structure and organization to the transcribed text. Coding was iterative and the final definition of each code was refined until consensus was reached. Within each coding category, text was evaluated to determine whether it accurately fit the definition of the code. Conceptual saturation was reached when no new categories were generated. The resulting conceptual categories were compared to past literature to validate and identify gaps in our current understanding of older Chinese and Koreans' expectations of family support.

## RESULTS

Two overarching themes emerged from the participants' dialogue: (1) changed perspectives of family and social support, and (2) becoming bicultural.

### Changed Perspectives of Family and Social Support

Participants revealed three distinct perspectives of family: (1) older Chinese and Koreans felt that they were now considered peripheral to the family, having been replaced by the nuclear family, (2) parents were no longer authority figures in families, and (3) participants were more independent and did not rely solely on their adult children for support.

*Central versus peripheral.*—Many Chinese and Koreans felt that their place in the extended family had changed with their immigration to the United States where more emphasis is placed on the immediate family. Participants expressed a belief that the needs of their adult children's immediate family had usurped those of the extended family. One Chinese participant described how older family members, who once were the center of the family unit, had been replaced by young children.

My children got married and started to have a family of their own. Their family is not ours, but their own. We are now no longer the center, but on the peripheries of their families. Even when we take pictures, we don't stand in the center but on the side. It's totally different in China. Even when we took pictures, parents would be pictured in the middle. We were taught to care about the older members in the family. But nowadays, everything has changed. Our adult children are in charge. We no longer have the right to say anything.

Other participants illustrated how their peripheral position in the family unit changed their expectations of elder care.

He was educated in America and grows up here. . . . They don't need to take care of their parents in the American tradition. (Chinese participant)

As parents, we surely hope that adult children take care of us when we are old. This is the Chinese tradition, . . . however, it's totally different in American society. They have their own family, they need to take care of them first. (Chinese participant)

She used to go out with me [in Korea] but I can't ask for it now because she's so busy with her house [in the United States]. They have their own work to do. They can't help you because they are busy too. (Korean participant)

The focus groups also revealed that older Chinese and Koreans experience different levels of comfort within the family unit. Although more Koreans than Chinese lived alone, Koreans more often expressed feeling central to the family and were therefore more comfortable asking their children for help.

My youngest, she comes with me [to Price Club] and they call me every evening. So I keep in good touch with them although I can't go to them. (Korean participant)

Yes, that's why you have daughters and sons . . . because if I got sick I can't do anything . . . I would ask my daughter to help me to the hospital. (Korean participant)

*Parental authority versus the authority of adult children.*—Participants commented on the changed model of authority within the context of their position on the periphery of the nuclear family. They revealed that offering advice to children and their spouses was seen as confrontational and a source of disharmony in the family.

That's why I moved out and live alone now. It will happen probably because different people have different opinions. I try to avoid this situation. . . . I will keep quiet and say nothing about that. If there is a chance, I will give some suggestions but not too much. I would like to be silent because I don't want to make things worse and make them [daughter and spouse] unhappy. (Chinese participant)

In the past, we thought our children would be helping us when we are old, in Korea. But, they all have their own family . . . they don't want to listen to us. . . . I am over 70, my

children are married and they have husbands and wives, then they are not my family [anymore] so I have to be careful about what I say and what I ask them to help me with. (Korean participant)

Those who encountered confrontational situations often kept their feelings and thoughts to themselves for fear of alienating their child. One Korean participant described his relationship with his daughter-in-law.

Once I immigrated I realized there are cultural differences between the U.S. and Korea especially when it comes to family dynamics. For example, I can't always say what I would like to say to my daughter-in-law. I follow the American ways and have given up trying to tell her what to do. If I tell her my dislikes, she would really not like it. When we were young and in Korea, if we did not listen to our elders we got punished. But now Korean elders in America do not admonish the young people. I would like to tell my daughter-in-law to punish the grandchildren when they misbehave. But in America, us elders do not have the right to say this. I just keep these thoughts to myself.

*Independence versus interdependence.*—After living in the United States, participants realized that their children had often developed nontraditional attitudes toward parental care that did not reflect the ideals of filial piety.

Because we were born in different times and we have different living styles, I don't want to live with them and make some trouble. (Chinese participant)

My children call to see if I am all right, or to see if I have died. Sometimes I say to them 'Why do you call? Are you calling to see if I am dead?' Even if I were dead, what could they really do for me? I just try to handle things on my own and try to solve on my own any difficulties that I face. (Korean participant)

Many participants perceived their reliance on their children as an imposition on their children's families. Over time, they felt they would be considered a burden on their children's time, energy and resources. Two Chinese participants stated:

If an elderly parent gets sick, it's impossible for them to look after you 24 hours a day. Maybe it is okay at the beginning, but as time goes on, you know they will start to hate you. They are already exhausted from work and from taking care of their own family. So if you still depend on them, they will be mad at you in the end. As a result, I believe we should not depend on them.

I try my best not to borrow money from my adult children because they have their own family. They need money to raise their own children. Plus, their finances are not so good either. On one hand, I could depend on them, but it would be a heavy burden. Even if they were willing to help me, I feel uncomfortable accepting anything because of their financial situation.

### *Becoming Bicultural*

Older Chinese and Korean immigrants are becoming increasingly bicultural. Participants discussed several factors driving this shift, including a changed economic environment, residential separation from children, and increased independence that extended their social network.

*Changed economic environment.*—Older Chinese and Korean immigrants do not have the same ability to transfer financial wealth to the younger generation. Furthermore, participants' children were, for the most part, members of dual-income families in which both spouses worked outside the home. They could no longer hold the same expectations of filial piety because their adult children now had homes, small children, and worked long hours away from home. Participants recognized the changed context.

As for depending on children, we realize that we are living in reality not a story. It's impossible to depend on them because they have their family and they need to take care of them first [both are working] . . . even though they may be willing to [take care of their parents] they are unable to make it work. (Chinese participant)

I would like to ask for help from my adult children, however, it depends on their financial statements. If theirs are bad, they can't help even if they are willing to. (Chinese participant)

My children can drive me when they are off work during the weekend. I will [wait to] call them then for a ride. (Korean participant)

I can take money from my children as long as they are willing to give it to me, I can't ask them to give me money. (Korean participant)

*Living at a distance.*—Often participants lived separately and far away from their adult children. Many participants, both Chinese and Korean, felt they could not rely on their children for tangible types of social support, such as preparing meals. However, the telephone has become an integral method for adult children to fulfill some of their filial responsibilities and provide emotional support to their aging parents. Many participants spoke of frequent phone calls from their children.

I have a son and a daughter. We contact each other every week by telephone. (Chinese participant)

My oldest son lives in Seoul and my youngest in Bangkok. So, I can't ask them [to carry heavy items or give me a ride] but they call me one or two times a month. (Korean participant)

*Increased independence.*—Government resources, community organizations, and churches provided services that made it possible for some participants to choose residential separation from their children. Those who wanted to be less of a burden to their children's families, valued living separately.

I believe we should not depend on them. . . . I suggest we should save enough money for our future when we are young . . . if you can't make it, you had better apply for living in senior houses . . . so that they [adult children] can drop by when they are free. (Chinese participant)

Others felt that emphasis on the nuclear family had forced them to live independently.

Now I am alone but I used to live with my son. Then, because he is old enough, though he is my son, he doesn't want to listen to me. So I couldn't help but live alone since he got married and had children. Now, I live in the apartment the government gives to elders like me and with the stipend. (Korean participant)

For the most part, however, participants chose to be independent from their adult children, a move that was facilitated by

government benefits such as Supplemental Security Income and Medicare. Limited government support was available in their countries of origin at the time of immigration to the United States, so most Chinese and Korean participants were grateful that the system in place in the United States allowed them to live independently.

In this country, it is reasonable to ask for help from the government. The situation is totally different in Asia. There is no help there, but when you come to America, as long as you work up to ten years, the government will give you insurance and other help. There is no help in Asia at all. (Chinese participant)

We have the best senior's benefits in America . . . if I have a financial problem or disease, I will tell the social worker and ask them for help. (Chinese participant)

Yes, this is a good country . . . even if there is no place for us in the family, we still have comfortable lives . . . our own activities and enough money to spend. (Chinese participant)

I just live with the money that the government gives me and if it is urgent, I ask my pastor to help me. (Korean participant) I am OK. [I do not ask for help from my children] because the translator at the center [adult day health] helps me whenever I come here. Also, when I see my doctor, the translator comes on Mondays and Fridays and helps me out. (Korean participant)

I am thankful for such things as food stamps, bus transportation, and cheaper rates for seniors. (Korean participant)

*Using community resources available in Chinese or Korean.*—Finally, Chinese participants became more independent more quickly than Koreans because of the large number of Chinese-speaking people living in the San Francisco Bay area.

There are a lot of Chinese people here. I come here [a community center for immigrants] everyday to learn English. Actually, I have no problem at all. (Chinese participant)

Chinese quickly gained further independence by making use of community resources, where services were offered in their language.

I come here [Senior Center] for lunch every day. I try to save as much money as I can. I don't want help from others. (Chinese participant).

Although Koreans also made use of community resources offered in their first language, ("They have a Korean who works on days that we come here. She did all things for me. . . . I have some Koreans who help me in my apartment and I don't have any difficulty." [Korean participant]) they generally had more difficulty attaining independence because a critical mass of Korean-speaking individuals was not as readily available.

We have some Korean home doctors . . . but when we need to have surgery, they send us to other hospitals . . . and then we are in trouble because we don't have translators, we have a hard time to explain because the medical terms are even difficult for those who speak English. (Korean participant)

People our age, in their 70s and 80s, don't know English that well. I wish the young people would help us with English. (Korean participant)

Older Korean participants therefore relied on their children specifically for English translation more frequently than did the Chinese participants.

If the government asks me some questions or wants me to do something, because I don't know such things, I ask for help from my children. (Korean participant)

If they [hospital] need something, they call my daughter and she calls me for it. (Korean participant)

If I want to know more about my health, I ask my children to call the doctor and they tell me about my conditions. (Korean participant)

In summary, the meaning of family support has changed for older Chinese and Korean immigrants moving them toward becoming bicultural. With more emphasis placed on nuclear families in the United States, participants felt that they no longer played a central role or were seen as authority figures in an intergenerational family. They discussed being more independent so as not to be a burden to their adult children. Participants also illustrated why and in what ways they have become bicultural. The recognition of adult children and their spouses both working, typically outside the home, as well as having some children living at a distance changed participants' expectations such that they became increasingly independent. Older Chinese and Koreans often preferred to live separately from their children. The availability of government benefits, ethnic community organizations, and churches enabled participants to expand their social network beyond kin.

## DISCUSSION

The strong agreement of focus group participants in this study provides evidence to suggest how living in the United States has changed the view of family for both older Chinese and Korean immigrants. Biculturalism has typically been conceptualized as a midpoint in a somewhat linear model of acculturation (Hurv & Kim, 1990; Liem, Lim, & Lien, 2000; Suinn, Ahuna, & Khoo, 1992). However, these results suggest that the integration of two cultures (American and Chinese or Korean), or biculturalism, is an indicator of successful adaptation to immigration later in life. Older Chinese and Koreans have not only adjusted to living in the United States, they are blending multiple cultures simultaneously (Willgerodt, Miller, & McElmurry, 2002). Thus, acculturation frameworks implying a linear process may not be theoretically valid as ethnic identity changes over the life course. Becoming bicultural is a synthesis of effectively functioning between both cultures or suspending membership in one culture while functioning in any given situation (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Willgerodt et al., 2002).

Family was the predominant mode of support for older Chinese and Koreans in their country of origin (Gu & Liang, 2000; Yoon et al., 2000). Although past research indicates a shift away from family-based support within China and Korea, the change in family support upon immigrating to the United States is far more prevalent. Instead of a hierarchical family relationship where parents have more authority and power, priority is given to caring for the nuclear family, where an egalitarian approach to the parent-adult child relationship is expected. Despite the difference in expectations, our participants emphasized the need to adopt U.S. norms and maintain harmony within the family by keeping their views to themselves. Indeed, previous work has demonstrated that older Korean immigrants choose to live independently from their adult children (Kaugh, 1999; Kim & Kim, 2001) because soliciting support from adult

children often creates friction between adult children and their spouses (Kim, Hurh, & Kim, 1993).

Our study participants perceived that their children did not share their views of filial responsibilities. For example, daughters-in-law, who were once considered part of the son's family and the major caregiver for his parents, are now empowered as part of dual-income households. Adult children may no longer feel obligated to return any debt, such as educational investments and purchasing houses, through filial care of their aging parents (Lan, 2002). The differing views of family and filial piety left participants more sensitive to becoming a burden for their adult children.

Past research suggests that the cultural norms of filial piety and hierarchical parental authority in Chinese and Korean families are modified and transformed upon immigration and resettlement in the United States (Lan, 2002; Yoo, 1997a). This study illustrates that participants successfully adapt to living in the United States by becoming bicultural. They live separately from their children but maintain close relationships through monthly visits or frequent telephone contact. Participants emphasized the importance of self-reliance and the ability to seek social support from sources outside the family. To this end, they expanded their social network but only to include ethnic community organizations and churches that had services available in Chinese or Korean.

The Chinese becoming more independent more quickly than the Koreans is perhaps a reflection of the larger network of Chinese-speaking community resources. In the San Francisco Bay area, for older persons, Chinese-language resources are more available and more integrated than are resources in Korean. The social support gained from a large network can provide individuals meaning and purpose in life, promote a sense of well-being, and allows integration into the larger society, thus influencing health and well-being (Su & Ferraro, 1997).

Among all participants, the majority chose to maintain their residential and financial independence by living alone and relying on government benefits (e.g., Supplemental Security Income) even though the concepts of filial piety and a hierarchical intergenerational family where "elders" are central were still considered ideal. Participants constructed a bicultural context by acquiring skills and traits that enabled them to become involved with U.S. culture while retaining aspects of their cultures of origin. For older Chinese and Korean immigrants, the shift to biculturalism reflects their ability to adjust to complex circumstances in late life.

The findings of this study are limited because the sampling strategy, through community organizations or churches, did not allow us to reach elders who were more isolated or did not use these organizations. In addition, each participant knew at least 2–3 other people in their focus group and may have been reluctant to disclose information.

However, these findings were also shaped by the sampling strategy for at least two reasons. First, community-dwelling elderly persons living in the United States were eager to share their stories of successful adaptation. Second, it is not clear if focus groups in which participants did not know each other would have been an improvement, as both Chinese and Koreans are likely to adhere to the fundamental Asian concepts of face and self-sacrifice and therefore would not express their vulnerabilities. Finally, these focus groups were all conducted

in the San Francisco Bay area, which is known for its multilingual service providers and community organizations.

In conclusion, for older Chinese and Korean immigrants, biculturalism, rather than acculturation, might be considered a successful adaptation to living in the United States. As the aging Asian population continues to grow, it will be important to examine from whom older Chinese and Koreans are obtaining the required support, as this could have implications for the delivery of services and elder care arrangements for this population.

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