Chinese Immigrant Teachers in American Institutions of Higher Education: Challenge, Adaptation, and Development

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Abstract. This paper explores Chinese immigrant teachers’ career challenge, adaptation and development in American institutions of higher education. The researcher used a qualitative approach to explore two respondents and found that language barrier, feeling of isolation, pressure of teaching, difficulty in doing research are the four major challenges that Chinese immigrant teachers have in their experiences. Besides, the researcher also found that personality matter in adaptation. Quiet person tends to adapt to the new culture easier. Because of the challenges, both of the Chinese immigrant teachers have ordinary mind without any aggressive plans in career development. Both of the respondents didn’t feel any racial bias or prejudice in their field. But one of the respondent mentioned that people who get their degrees from American universities or European universities are more likely to be employed in American universities. Those who get their degrees from universities in Asia are difficult to be acknowledged by American universities.

Introduction

The United States, as one of the largest immigration countries, has an immigrant population of 40 million in 2010. Among these immigrants, Chinese American population numbered approximately 3.8 million [1]. These Chinese immigrants have varied reasons for their choice to live in the United States. There may be educational reasons, family issues, employment pursuit, etc. According to US census in 2010, most Chinese Americans work as white collar professionals. Many of them are highly educated, well paid professionals who work in occupations like engineering, medicine, investment banking, law, and academia [2]. Because of the large population of Chinese immigrants working as professionals, it is significant to explore their perception of the work and how they adapt to the new culture.

Statement of the Problem

As one of the largest minority groups, Chinese immigrant teachers have to deal with language, cultural barriers and at the same time they should perform their duties as their peers of native Americans did. According to Jayakumar et la., the challenge minority faculty may have in their work in higher education is ‘raced’ challenges and barriers which negatively influence their work performance. Such challenges include “(a) low numbers of minorities in the professoriate and on campus, (b) barriers to tenure and promotion, (c) feelings of ‘otherness,’ and (d) experiences of racial and ethnic bias” [3]. These problems become obstacles that could hinder Chinese American teachers’ career development on the one hand, and might bring bewilderment to college administrators on how to improve job satisfaction among their minority employees.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and better understand the challenge and adaptation of Chinese immigrant teachers working in American higher education institutions. It aims to examine and develop an understanding of the issues of Chinese American teachers as minority teachers.
Research Questions

The following research questions serve as a focus for the study. The overarching question is “What are the professional challenges that Chinese American teachers face in American institutions of higher learning?” Two sub-questions include:

1. What are the challenges with regard to the Chinese American teachers’ adaptation to American academia?
2. What are the challenges with regard to career development?

Significance of the Study

The researcher explores this topic because understanding how these teachers perceive the challenges they have in their career and how they adapt to the environment influence their working performance, job satisfaction, and career development. This study could provide insights for college administrators regarding racial climate, minority job satisfaction and immigrant faculty retention.

Methodology

Phenomenology is an approach to examine shared culture or shared experience. It provides the richest and most descriptive data [4] and thus is the ideal research process for the study of shared experience of Chinese immigrant teachers.

Respondent Selection Strategy

The researcher used a small, purposeful sample of two respondents for this qualitative study. Purposeful sampling selects cases that are “information rich and illuminative” offering valuable “manifestations of the phenomenon” being explored [5]. The researcher followed the logic of criterion sampling because it works well in phenomenology study when all participants studied represent people who have experienced the same or similar phenomenon [6]. There are three criterions for the respondent selection in the study. First, they should be first-generation Chinese immigrants. Only first generation immigrants have the experience of changing of and adaptation to the environment. Second, they should work as a college teacher for more than five years. Five years could be a good period of time allowing a person to immerse in a new culture and experience conflicts and adaptation. Third, the respondents should have relatively been adapted to their teaching profession. In this sense, they can view clearly the process they underwent the adaptation in a holistic way.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher approached persons who met inclusion criteria and asked them to participate in the study. She tried to invite three respondents by sending them emails first. In the email, she told them the topic and purpose of the study, brief data collection procedure, and promise of keeping confidentiality of all private information. At last, two respondents are recruited in this study. They are Chen and Wang. Both of them are first-generation immigrants and have been working as a college professor in a private university for many years. Chen has been working for over fifteen years. Wang has been working for nearly ten years. Both of them are females and get their Ph. D from American universities. Chen is working in humanities. Wang is in Science.

Interviews. The researcher conducted a 30-minute interview with each of them individually after they signed the informed consent. There are six questions as follows: “1. Why do you choose to start a career in the United States rather than in China? 2. Under what circumstances, you choose to be a college teacher? 3. What are the challenges you have had? 4. What are the most successful experiences in your career? 5. What are the most frustrating experiences in your career? 6. What’s your plan for your near future?” The interview is conducted interactively. In order to encourage respondents to talk more, the researcher tried to be a responsive listener and always give short feedbacks like okay, yes, right, really, etc. Sometimes, she expressed her agreement or disagreement briefly. The interviews were recorded and were transcribed later into word document with nearly seven thousand words.
Documents. The researcher asked Chen and Wang to give her a copy of their resumes, and some of their publications. She also took pictures of their office and surrounding working environment. They are saved as documents for the study.

Observation. There are two kinds of observations. One is the interview observation. The other is a class observation. The researcher took field notes during interviews and noted down their laugh, hesitation, special tone in expressions, etc. Besides, she also observed one of Chen’s classroom teaching and noted down her way of using language when interacting with students and how students react to her teaching.

The transcripts, document resumes, publications, photos, and observation field notes are all saved as the research data to examine the challenges, adaptation, and development of Chinese immigrant teachers in American universities.

Data Analysis Procedures

Moustakas’ phenomenological method was employed in analyzing respondents’ transcripts. First, the researcher went through the two interview transcripts, highlighted significant statements, sentences, or phrases that provide answers to the research questions. Second, she developed clusters of meanings from those significant statements and classified them into different categories which are later developed into themes. Third, the statements and themes are used to describe both respondents’ experience of challenge and adaptation and the context influencing their experiences. Fourth, the “essence” of the phenomenon will be found based on these descriptions [7].

Researcher Bias

As an international student in the United States at the time and a college English teacher in China before the study, the researcher experienced and was experiencing similar phenomenon as the respondents did. They share similar cultural background and similar experience. Therefore, the researcher thinks in the same way as the respondents do and always assume intuitively her understanding and interpretation of her experiences as theirs.

As a former English learner, the researcher learned about American culture and society from textbooks in China. Much information in those textbooks is out of date. But she still assumes that is what the American culture and society is. Some preconceived ideas about the United States embedded in her mind and might have influence on her way of thinking.

Assumptions

There are two types of assumptions. One is the assumptions of findings based on literature as the researcher cited. The challenges minority faculty may have in their work in higher education include “(a) low numbers of minorities in the professoriate and on campus, (b) barriers to tenure and promotion, (c) feelings of ‘otherness,’ and (d) experiences of racial and ethnic bias” [8].

Another assumption is methodological one. The author assumes the methodology she used in this study is appropriate to the problem being addressed and the purpose of the study. The respondents are able to report on their experiences. They can answer the research questions to this study. By combining the interviews, observations, and other documents, the author could reveal the challenges Chinese immigrant teachers have in their profession.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of this study. The study has a small sample size of two respondents who work in the same university. Both of them are female Chinese immigrant teachers. Similar working environment and same gender may lead to similar interpretations of the interview questions. Therefore, their experience being described in this study only represents their own case. They cannot be generalized to that of male Chinese immigrant college teachers’ or the case in other universities. The respondents’ personality influences their sharing of the experience. Chen is a very talkative person. She shared a lot of experiences other than interview questions. Wang is a little bit introverted and sensitive. She did not share too many experiences and she tried to avoid negative reflections on her experiences. The researcher, as an international student from China, shares
similar experiences as the respondents do. Although she tried to engage in the Epoche process, she
could not fully set aside her experiences, preconceived ideas, and biases during the interviews.

Findings

This phenomenological study focused on two female Chinese immigrant teachers who have been
working in a private American university for ten years or over. From two transcripts, thirty six
significant statements were extracted; twelve meanings were formulated. Table 1 includes some
examples of significant statements with their formulated meanings.

Table 1. Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Formulated Meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My English was not that good. No matter how good your English, it’s still kind of like inferior. To write a paper, definitely, it takes much longer time than your colleagues. You are not as articulate as they are.</td>
<td>Language barrier is the biggest challenge for Chinese immigrant teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were not many, kind of, foreign professors. It was pretty isolated in a way. It’s really a lonely work. That was tough at the beginning.</td>
<td>At the beginning when an immigrant came to the United States, they feel lonely and isolated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have to understand students who are very different from other schools. Students are different. We learn our students, our audience, we adjust the way we teach.</td>
<td>Although graduate students have teaching experience, it is still different when they start to work as a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that this major really, kind of, built by myself. We are always busy. You have to work very very hard. Teaching is really heavy. I like teaching. I really enjoy teaching. That’s just very rewarding. I treat that as success. I taught it about for a while and they won’t get it.</td>
<td>Successful experiences and frustrations are all from working environment.</td>
</tr>
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These formulated meanings were developed into four major themes that answered the two
research questions. The researcher also generated from the formulated meanings three minor themes
that reveal some significant phenomenon in Chinese immigrant teachers’ adaptation and career
development. All the seven themes are discussed in the following parts.

Theme 1: Language Barrier

Language barrier is the dominant theme among all. It answers both of the two research questions. The two respondents talked about the influence of language deficiency on their adaptation, and their
work in the United States.

Wang talked about her prior study experience when she first came to the United States. She said her English was not good. She tried to improve her language under the help of an American linguistic professor who gave her some private lessons and taught her how to speak well and reduce accent. She agrees that “language is always a barrier for international students”. Chen also talked about her study experience. Because she was in humanities, she got piles of reading assignments from her courses. She spent days and nights reading those books but still couldn’t finish reading because it is not her language and it’s difficult for her to understand. Compared with her peers, she was always behind the schedule; she had never really finished any reading assignments. This is a very frustrating experience when you are left behind by your peers even though you worked hundred times harder than them. But because of language barrier, you are still left behind.

Language barrier is also influential to their work and career development. Working as a college professor, they have to use English to teach in class and they have to read and write in English for
doing research. Teaching and doing research are the two most important parts for their career development in their university. During the interview and observation of Chen’s teaching, the researcher found many of her language usage are still very typical for a Chinese. She still has accent in pronunciation. She has many language tags, for example, kind of, kind like, etc. She always uses these language tags in her words. Wang also has strong accent; even the researcher could feel a little difficult to catch some of her words. These language barriers brought challenges to them. As Chen shared her idea about her colleagues, she said, “not only they are native speakers, they are also great native speakers, they are professors. So no matter how good your English, it’s still kind of like inferior.” And “compare with your colleagues, you are not as articulate as they are”. When doing research, Chen said that it takes much longer time for her to write a paper than her colleagues. Wang also talked about similar experience. She said it takes less time for domestic teachers to prepare for classes and to write worksheet exams. There is a special point she mentioned about her teaching. She said because English is not her first language, “that’s always a possible excuse for students to blame” her.

Language barrier is the biggest challenge for Chinese immigrant teachers to adapt to new environment and to develop their career. It is also the dominant theme the researcher generated from the study because it is also the root cause that leads to the other three themes, feeling of loneliness, feeling of pressure in teaching, and feeling of difficulty in doing research.

**Theme 2: Feeling of Isolation**

Feeling of isolation is the second theme that answers the first research question. It is one of the challenges for Chinese immigrant teachers to adapt to American academia. Because of minority identity, there are not many people who can really become friends and understand their feelings. As Chen mentioned particularly when she started to work in her university seventeen years ago, “there were not many foreign professors”. Therefore, “it was pretty isolated”. Wang used a word “tough” to describe her feeling of life in the United States at the beginning when she came.

Feeling of isolation usually lasts longer than language barrier. Even when your English is good enough, you still have feeling of isolation because you cannot really immerse yourself in a totally different culture. The people from the new culture always regard you as “others” outside their culture and their circle. Therefore, this challenge lasts long for Chinese immigrant teachers to adapt to their life in the United States.

**Theme 3: Pressure in Teaching**

Theme 3 answers the second research question. It is a challenge for Chinese immigrant teachers’ career development. Feeling of pressure has two causes according to Chen and Wang’s experiences. Language barrier is one major cause and has been discussed in theme 1. Their feeling of pressure in teaching also originates from students.

Both of the two respondents actually have teaching experience before they work as a college teacher. They were trained in teaching when they were studying for their Ph.D. in American universities. But both of them admit that students are different. So when they started to work as a teacher, they still spent efforts to adjust themselves according to students. Chen commented, “You have to understand students who are very different, you know, other schools I taught. [It is] still like a process of learning, because students are always different”.

Wang even had teaching experiences in a top Chinese university before she chose to come to the States. When she talked about the pressure in teaching, she said, “Students are different…especially in [science]…I felt, students in China are more prepared.” Therefore, in her teaching, she said, “we learn students, our audience, we adjust the way we teach. So that’s always, maybe take a long time, adjust ourselves to the classes or groups of students we teach”. She also mentioned that there are always possibilities that students may find excuse to blame on her teaching. Because of that, she said, “we push ourselves to work harder. Try to not give other people, other students excuses that we are not native English speaker”.

In short, pressure in teaching originates from the difference between students they taught and from their identity as a minority teacher.
Theme 4: Difficulty in Doing Research

Feeling of difficulty in doing research is another challenge for Chinese immigrant teachers’ career development. Although both of the respondents have become tenured professors, Chen is also a full professor, because of language barrier and teaching load, they actually experienced many difficulties in doing research.

Chen talked about her experience during the first ten years of her work. She said she worked hard for the first five years in order to get tenure. She taught many classes during semesters. Therefore, she had to use winter and summer vocations to do research. She didn’t really have any holiday or vocation in the first five years. During the second five years, she worked hard for full professor. She did the same thing, taught in semesters and did research during vocations. Maybe this is not particular for minority Chinese teachers, but as a researcher who’s English is not her first language, the time and efforts she had spent on her research is much more than her peer native teachers.

Wang is an associate professor now. She needs to do more research in the following years in order to get full professor. Therefore, when the researcher asked about her future plan, she said, “I want to teach some new courses. And do more research”. She also said that she was going to China in two years for a research project conducted there.

According to the photos the researcher took from their offices, and their publications, it shows that they really worked very hard as researchers. They read piles and piles of books, write and publish papers, present in conferences almost every year. The researcher was astonished when reading their professional experiences in their resumes. It is hard to imagine how hard they work, what kind of life they live. It’s just too much, too hard.

Above all, the 4 major themes are closely related. Theme 1 is the dominant one among the four because it is the root cause of the other three themes. Theme 3 is also related to theme 4. Their relationships are shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The Relations of Four Themes.]

Besides the four major themes, the researcher also generated three minor themes which are not direct answers to the research questions but are significant to the topic.

Theme 5: The Influence of Personality on Adaptation

In the interview, Wang mentioned an interesting point. She said she is a quiet person; doesn’t
want to play everywhere; and she likes easy and simple life. Therefore, she didn’t feel any difficulty in adapting to the new culture and environment. Her quiet personality helps her adaptation. This proves what researcher thought of people who choose to live in another country. These people must have some particular personality unlike others. Personality matters how well people adapt to new environment.

**Theme 6: An Ordinary Mind in Career Development**

When being asked about their future plan for their career, Chen told me she planned to retire. Later she added that she doesn’t have any plan. Wang said in a plain tone, “I want to teach some new courses. And do more research.” The researcher can see that both of them are not aggressive in their career development. They just want to follow the ordinary route as other teachers. They don’t have high expectation for their future. This attitude also proves that they are satisfied with what they have now or maybe they just accept their status as what it is.

**Theme 7: Racial Bias or Prejudice**

Racial bias or prejudice in career development rarely exists according to the respondents’ experience. Wang commented science field she works as “very diversified”. People are very friendly and polite to each other despite color and race. But for education background, as Chen talked about, the American institutions of higher learning tend to acknowledge people whose degrees are issued by American universities or European universities when they recruit new teaching faculties. Chen shared this point when talking about the minimum requirement for being a college teacher in the United States:

In the United States, minimum is Ph. D, and also better from United States or from the Western universities rather than Chinese. I haven’t heard anyone who can get a job whose Ph.D. is from China. Some of them applied even though they graduated from Tsinghua or Peking University, they couldn’t get it. Even Chinese Taiwan, or Tokyo whatever.

According to her experience, Chinese mainland higher education, Chinese Taiwan and Japanese higher education degree are not acknowledged in the United States. In this aspect, there is still prejudice.

**Discussion**

The following discussion centers on the findings of this study and how the findings related to the research questions. Although the respondents provide with their perspectives of the research topic, their responses and descriptions actually reveal some common features of all teachers’ experience of career development in American institutions of higher education.

The first research question is about the challenge with regard to adaptation. The biggest challenge described by the respondents is language barrier. Although they thought their English was good, they could never be compared with their native peers in term of study, teach, or research. Because of language barrier, they have to spend more time in reading and writing. It is more time-consuming for them to prepare a class and to do research. Therefore, they spend more effort than their peers in studying and working. Rong and Goetz even deem language barriers as a factor that influences Asians to enter vocational fields other than teaching [9]. Koh, as a former Asian America college teacher, finally decided to go to Hong Kong because he doesn’t look white, his spoken English is distinctly accented and his legitimacy of teaching English is suspected [10]. The respondents are brave comparing with Koh. They not only chose teaching as their career, but also stayed in their career for ten years. Blum and Johnson emphasize the negative role of media on justification of language ideologies used to cast immigrants and language-minority groups. They believe media should play a positive role in helping language minority groups to adapt to the new language environment [11]. Language barrier is a challenge that usually accompanied an immigrant by a lifetime. How they view it become important for their adaptation.

Another challenge for their adaptation is their feeling of isolation. This feeling is resulted from language barrier and culture difference. Language barrier hinders their communication with others.
and makes them hesitate and retreat from making friends. Culture difference is also an obstacle that confines them from people of other culture. When you enter into a new culture, it’s difficult for you to bracket your own cultural background and to immerse totally in the new one. Therefore, their social interaction is blocked. They feel isolated. The more isolated they feel, the more frustrated they become, the slower they adapt to a new culture. According to Moody, women and minorities have to cope with exclusion and isolation because they are viewed as outsiders and get far less mentoring, inside information, and resources than those regarded as insiders from majority faculty members. If there are little minority faculty in the department or there are hostile colleagues around them, they will have to deal with the stress of being a “solo” or a pioneer [12]. Culotta reveals several reasons of American universities’ difficulty in the recruitment and retaining minority professors [13]. Minority professors’ feeling of isolation is one of the reasons that make them reluctant to choose teaching as their career or stay long in that career. Therefore, feeling of isolation is a great challenge for Chinese immigrant teachers to adapt to their career.

The second research question is about challenges with regard to career development. The first challenge Chinese immigrant teachers have is the pressure in teaching. According to Chen and Wang’s experience, their feeling of pressure in teaching results from language barrier and the students they teach. They need more time and effort to prepare before a class. Their different accent in English and way of speaking make them a little difficult to be understood. They have to adjust their teaching all the time according to students’ need. There are always possibilities for a few students to find excuse blame on them because of their minority identity. Smith and Johnson-Bailey found that students’ rating on non-white female faculty’s teaching effectiveness is lower than that of white female faculty [14]. Princeton historian, Nell Painter also points out that “Students of all races and genders seem extremely judgmental toward non-white, non-male faculty and can make such professors’ lives really miserable” [15]. Therefore, minority faculties strive for becoming tenure in order to get classroom protection from being accused by students because of racial bias. Rodriguez et al. provides a suggestion for improving minority female teaching and career development. They believe that, systematic mentoring programs are necessary in not only professionalizing young women of color to pursue faculty positions but also in retaining incoming female faculty of color [16].

Another challenge to career development is difficulty in doing research which is also caused by language barrier and teaching load. As discussed above, immigrant teachers need more time in reading and writing, let alone academic reading and writing which is professional and difficult. Because of the teaching load they have during semesters, they have to spend time in vocations to do research. Maybe this is not something particular for immigrant teachers, but as a teacher who’s English is not their first language, they have to work harder than their peers anyway in order to fulfill their teaching tasks. There is no literature about Chinese immigrant college teachers’ difficulties in doing research. But there are some related to immigrant college students’ academic writing difficulties. This sheds light on teachers’ difficulties in academic writing, too. Cheong demonstrates English as a second language learners identify academic writing as a new genre of writing; therefore, their experiences with academic writing included the exploration of new cultural norms, values, and practices [17]. Chinese immigrant teachers’ academic writing is also a challenge because of their cultural difference, and differences in their values, and practices. Therefore, they must have difficulties in writing academic papers.

Conclusions

This study explored Chinese immigrant teachers’ challenges with regard to adaptation and career development in American institutions of higher education. The conclusions section addresses the overarching question: What are the professional challenges that Chinese American teachers face in American institutions of higher education?

Chinese immigrant teachers do have some challenges in their profession. Their adaptation to the new culture and environment is challenged by their language barrier and feeling of isolation. Their career development is challenged by their pressure in teaching and difficulty in doing research. But
all these challenges are more of internal factors rather than external ones. Language barrier is a challenge that can be overcome through individual hard working and mental adjustment. Feeling of isolation, pressure in teaching and difficulty in doing research are also much internal that can be overcome through individual adjustment. Personality helps in their adaptation. It also helps in their teaching and doing research if they are not aggressive for career development. According to Chen and Wang, the external working environment in their university is diversified. They didn’t feel much difference from their peer American teachers with regard to career development. Therefore, racial biases or prejudice is not a challenge in their profession. But there is some prejudice on higher education background in term of the country where a person gets his or her degree.

Recommendations for Further Study

As discussed above, this study has many limitations, like small sample size, similar working environment of respondents’, lack of male respondents, and personality side effect of respondents in sharing their experience in interviews. These limitations should be avoided in future studies.

Besides, there are some new research questions that emerged from this study. For example, language barrier is regarded as the major challenge for Chinese immigrant teachers. Then, in what ways can immigrant professionals improve their language proficiency? What strategies are there to improve their efficiency in academic reading and writing? In terms of feeling isolation, pressure in teaching and difficulty in doing research, what kind of personalities is helpful to overcome these challenges? How to adjust teaching according to students? What are the relations between teaching and doing research? How to balance teaching workload with research tasks? All these questions could be discussed in further studies. By answering these questions, people will know how to support immigrant professionals to adapt to the new culture and make contributions to the development of the nation they immigrated.

References


