



ARTICLE

The Deep Plunge

*Luo*cha and the Experiences of Earlier Skilled Immigrants from Mainland China in Toronto

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ABSTRACT

A grounded theory study examined the socio-cultural adaptation experiences of ‘earlier’ Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants; ‘earlier’ refers to those residing in Canada longer than three years and therefore no longer considered ‘newcomers’ eligible for federal government-sponsored settlement programs. Analysis of 29 in-depth interviews and four focus groups involving 29 participants yielded an overarching theme of *luo*cha (deep plunge). *Luo*cha describes the enormous gap skilled immigrants experienced between their current life in Canada and their pre-immigration life in China, and contextualizes the many challenges associated with their sociocultural adaptation (settlement) experiences. At the same time, these immigrants also discussed various coping strategies that they employed to deal with this deep plunge. Recommendations for social service provision and social policy are discussed.

KEY WORDS:

coping strategies

Mainland Chinese immigrants

mental health issues

professional immigrants

settlement

INTRODUCTION

This study developed partly in response to an issue that triggered much debate in the Chinese Canadian community in Toronto. In 2004, the community was shaken by the suicide of a Mainland Chinese skilled immigrant, Zhaohui Geng, who jumped from his apartment balcony after more than a year of unemployment. Reportedly, it was under enormous economic and psychological pressure that Geng chose to end his life, leaving behind his also unemployed wife and two small children (<http://news.xinhuanet.com>). Sadly, this occurred just months after much media exposure of the experience of another skilled Mainland Chinese immigrant, Liu An (Anonym), a former civil engineer in China who became homeless after an unsuccessful pursuit of employment in Canada (World Journal, 16 March, 2004). Reportedly, An had persistently rejected applying for social assistance or utilizing other types of services (including shelter) offered by the community workers who approached him. Following another suicide in 2006 by a Mainland Chinese skilled immigrant who had two doctorate degrees in the USA and Canada, some speculated that at least a dozen Chinese immigrants had resorted to suicide in recent years (Michael Huang, Chinese Professionals Association of Canada, cited in Keung, 16 October 2006).

The focus of this article, *luocha* is a Chinese word meaning ‘to drop from great heights’, which emerged as a central idea to conceptualize the lives of Chinese skilled immigrants in the research study presented herein. *Luocha* encapsulates ‘the depth of the fall’ from the perceived peak of their personal and career success in China to the uncontrollable and continued downward spiraling of their new life in Canada. Thus, it captures the deep and profound sense of loss of identity and status related to the settlement experience and manifested in a range of issues including employment, family integration, language barriers, and mental health, and the inability to bridge that gap. In this article, we explore the complexities of *luocha* in order to better understand the settlement experiences of skilled immigrants from Mainland China living in Toronto, while also paying attention to their resiliency and coping strategies.

Skilled immigrants are economic immigrants chosen for their educational backgrounds and professional experiences under the point system and are granted a permanent residency status upon entering into Canada; their successful integration into Canadian society has a significant impact on the country’s well-being (Watt et al., 2008). In 2007, skilled immigrants and their families accounted for nearly 42 percent of all new immigrants to Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2008). Ontario was a leading province in receiving skilled immigrants in Canada, accounting for 48 percent (46,781) of all skilled immigrants, and Toronto was the most common destination for new immigrants (CIC, 2007).

The high rate of unemployment and underemployment of Canada's skilled immigrants, however, has been documented widely (Hawthorne, 2008; Li, 2003; Man, 2004; Reitz, 2005). Recent research also reveals that the economic outcomes for immigrants for the most part have declined continuously for the past 25 years or so with an increased earning gap between immigrants and Canadian-born (Picot, 2008). While recent years have seen some welcome policy changes and new government and voluntary initiatives (e.g. Grant, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2007, 2008; Taylor, 2008), the broad impact of these new initiatives is yet to be seen. What statistics do show is that skilled immigrants, regardless of their years of experience, continue to face serious employment challenges (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Since 1997, Mainland Chinese immigrants have been the largest immigrant group in Toronto and in Canada (CIC, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009), with 29,336 immigrants (11.9% of new immigrants) arriving in 2008 (CIC, 2009), and the majority of these Mainland Chinese immigrants were skilled immigrants (24,319 in 2005; CIC, 2006). Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants face many challenges in settlement including employment, linguistic and communication difficulties, discrimination and family conflict (George et al., 2000, 2004; Salaff and Greve, 2003; Sakamoto and Zhou, 2005). Further, statistics have shown that Chinese immigrants would currently need more than 20 years to close the earning gaps with the general Canadian population (Wang and Lo, 2004). Such challenges have led some skilled immigrants to consider returning to their home country or moving to another country after immigrating to Canada. This phenomenon, known as 'return migration', has been documented in a recent longitudinal review by the Canadian government (Aydemir and Robinson, 2006) and media (Qiao, 2009). Many others choose to stay on in Canada and try to 'make it' despite the challenges they face.

While much attention has been given to the structural barriers to professional employment of immigrants, such as the unwillingness to recognize foreign credentials (Akhter et al., 2006; Bauder, 2003; Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades [PROMPT], 2004), immigrants' subjective psychosocial experience of underemployment in multiple cultural contexts has received limited attention. In addition, when psychosocial experiences are discussed, the research is often limited to new immigrants, who have been in Canada for less than three to five years (George et al., 2004). Newcomers are able to apply for citizenship after three years of permanent residence, a timeline that directly informs newcomer eligibility criteria in CIC funded settlement programs. As a result, there is limited information available regarding the service needs and settlement process of immigrants who have been in Canada for a longer period of time, and therefore are no longer eligible for the settlement services geared to newcomers (Omidvar and Richmond, 2003). However, as demonstrated by the suicide deaths discussed earlier, issues of settlement do not

simply resolve themselves after three years of residency when landed immigrants often become citizens – through eligibility for settlement programming many times does. Therefore, we focus our attention on ‘earlier’ skilled Mainland Chinese immigrants to explore their subjective experience of settlement and how this might affect their relationship with social services in general. Our specific focus is on Chinese skilled immigrant professionals in Toronto, who have been here for at least three years, to explore their experience after the initial adjustment period beyond which they do not qualify for certain federally-funded settlement programs and services (chiefly settlement and language programs for newcomers).¹ No longer defined as newcomers, they must access other social services.

METHOD

A qualitative study was conducted collaboratively with a community-based advocacy agency (Chinese Canadian National Council, Toronto Chapter). With the paucity of research examining sociocultural experiences of skilled immigrants especially those focusing on earlier immigrants from China, a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Ferguson and Islam, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was adopted for data collection and analysis in order to develop a conceptual understanding of the subjective experiences of study participants. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology in which the process of data collection and data analysis is conducted simultaneously to allow explanations of the phenomena to emerge from the data. The process of data analysis is first inductive, as initial coding is conducted and themes explored, and later becomes more deductive as the emerging categories and themes are applied back to the rest of the data for constant comparison. University of Toronto’s institutional ethics review board approval was received prior to data collection.

Data Collection

Various data collection methods were used to allow for triangulation, as having multiple data sources help to more accurately capture complex realities from different angles (Drisko, 1997). The data collection methods included: (1) focus groups with skilled immigrants (4 groups; $n = 29$); and (2) in-depth interviews with skilled immigrants ($n = 29$; 24 interviews in conducted in Mandarin Chinese and 5 in English according to the preference of the informants). Focus groups and in-depth interviews were supplemented with background questionnaires asking participants’ about past and current occupations, educational backgrounds, family status, their intention to stay in Canada, and other pertinent pieces of information to help contextualize the interview/focus group data. The study presented in the current article is a segment of a larger study, and information from key informant interviews was used to shape questions posed

in the interviews and focus groups presented here, but not included in the analysis (cf. Sakamoto, 2007; Sakamoto et al., 2008).

The interviews were semi-structured focusing on the following topics: (1) general experiences of settlement; (2) self/identity construction and reconstruction during cultural negotiation and different factors affecting cultural negotiation; (3) interaction with social services; and (4) recommendations for social services and social policies. Focus groups also centred on these four domains but participants were encouraged to discuss and exchange information with one another while facilitators attempted to solicit a diverse range of opinions. Two of the focus groups were conducted in English and 2 in Mandarin Chinese, totaling 29 participants. One group was women-only (in Chinese) in order to avoid the possible effect of gender dynamics.

Among the 29 participants of in-depth individual interviews, four were focus group participants who were invited back for in-depth interviews as they had raised potentially important issues for further exploration. Eight of the interviewees (four women, four men) were service providers themselves working with Mainland Chinese immigrants in Toronto, participating as anonymous individuals on their own time (paid honorarium), and not as official agency representatives, so that personal narratives of their work experiences as Chinese skilled immigrants working with other Chinese skilled immigrants can be explored.

Participants

All participants were voluntary and signed informed consent forms prior to participation. Those participating in in-depth interviews and focus groups were compensated for their time and transportation cost (\$25 CDN). The immigrant participants included skilled immigrants (principal applicants) and their spouses from Mainland China who immigrated to Canada 4 to 10 years ago. A diverse sample was sought as much as possible.

Recruitment Methods

In the absence of an established sampling framework for skilled immigrants from Mainland China, we utilized several approaches to purposive sampling including venue-based sampling, targeted email advertisement and snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). Venue-based sampling through social service agencies attracted service users, while email advertisement via email lists unconnected with service agencies helped to recruit individuals who had no direct experience with social service agencies in order to diversify our sample. The research team received support in the recruitment process from representatives of the social service agencies who acted as key informant purposes earlier. Other participants were referred by those who had already participated in interviews

or focus groups (snowball sampling). We aimed to select the most diverse group of participants possible in terms of gender, age (under or over 40), family status (single, married or divorced; with or without children), and employment status (unemployed, underemployed, or successful professional career comparable to previously held positions in China).

Characteristics of Study Participants

Of the 52 skilled immigrants and their spouses who participated in individual interviews and focus groups, 32 were women and 20 were men. The ages of the participants ranged from 29- to 54-years old, with a mean of 38.96-years old (4 did not state their age). They represented diverse geographic regions of China (e.g. including 21 cities of origin), and various professional backgrounds though all had an education level higher than college/university. Eighteen participants (34.6%) had postgraduate education. All of the participants had resided in Canada for a period of 4 to 10 years (mean = 6.37 years). More than two-thirds (36 persons, 69.2%) of the participants were married or partnered, while seven (13.5%) were single and six (11.5%) were divorced. Additionally, two-thirds (35 persons, 67.3%) had children (2 missing data). Thirty-seven (71.2%) of our study participants were employed, among which 29 were in white-collar positions (clerical, technical, managerial, professional), three of them working as general laborers and five of them working part-time. Fourteen interviewees (26.9%) were unemployed and five were in school (one just graduated, employment data missing for one participant). Regarding the possibility of permanently living in Canada, two-thirds (35 persons, 67.3%) of the participants said they were either 100 percent sure that they would stay or would most likely stay, while close to one-third (16 persons, 30.8%) said they were unsure about staying in Canada permanently (answering 'maybe' or 'not sure'; 1 person did not answer the question).

Data Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Interviews in Mandarin were translated into English by the bilingual research assistants who conducted the respective interviews. NVivo qualitative software was used to assist the data management and analysis. The core research team that carried out day-to-day research activities consisted of the PI and the three research assistants who met weekly or bi-weekly throughout the data collection and analysis. These research assistants were all recent immigrants from Mainland China who had, or were pursuing postgraduate training, similar to many of the skilled immigrants in our study. The initial thoughts and impressions of the research team were noted in written memos (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and analyzed. A number of techniques were used to make the data analysis trustworthy and reliable, including triangulation (use of multiple methods and

researchers, offering multiple perspectives), an audit-trail (recording the thought processes behind data analysis), prolonged engagement (the research team's personal or professional involvement in Chinese skilled immigrant communities), thick description (when documenting the data collection processes and memo writing, details were described as much as possible before drawing conclusions), purposive sampling, negative case analysis, member checking, and comparisons with available theories in the later phase of the research (Charmaz, 2006; Drisko, 1997; Earlandson et al., 1993; Padgett, 1998).

Community Partner and Community Consultation

Our community partner, a Chinese Canadian advocacy agency, was an important part of this research project, reflecting some of the key principles of community-based research (Israel et al., 1998). In addition to consulting on the development of grant proposals, our community partner's Research and Social Planning Committee offered consultancy in key phases of the research project. Once the core research team had assembled the preliminary research results, an advisory consultation roundtable with service providers, activists, and researchers with extensive experience working with Chinese immigrants ($n = 12$) was assembled to obtain feedback on the initial findings of the study. Next, a roundtable discussion with the study participants ($n = 8$) was organized to see whether our analysis accurately captured their experiences (member validation). Finally, an open public forum ($n =$ approx. 80) was held to discuss the study findings, including the wise practices for addressing the issues, as well as making recommendations for social service delivery and policy development. From this public forum came a working group on skilled immigrants' employment issues, which included service providers, advocates, and skilled immigrants themselves.

FINDINGS

***Luocha*: An All-Encompassing Settlement Experience**

A common theme that emerged in the research was a sense of failure and loss that resulted from challenges in multiple arenas such as employment, family integration, mental health and language barriers. Participants referred to this experience as *luocha*. *Luo* means fall and *cha* means difference in height or gap. The experience of *luocha* among Mainland Chinese immigrants is caused not only by the declined financial status due to un/underemployment, but also by language barriers, losing control of their future, feeling alien to the cultural and social environment, decreased social network, altered roles in family and workplace, changes in relationships with peers in China and a general disillusion with their new lives. In short, Mainland Chinese immigrants view their lives from the perspective of *luocha*:

Newcomers are all kind of depressed. It's really difficult to figure things out here, especially when you had a good life in China, good job, fairly good income, high social status. You would feel a huge '*luocha*' here . . . (121; emphasis added)²

These sentiments were echoed by others highlighting the sense of loss and a drop in status exemplary of the participants' concept of *luocha*:

I used to be a teacher in the university, which is a respectable career, although the income was not high, it was not too bad compared to others at that time. But living in Canada, I have an obvious feeling of loss. I feel . . . how can I do this kind of job? For example doing labour work in a factory, even running a convenience store, like how can I do this kind of meaningless work that doesn't require any professional skills? It's a waste of my life. (115)

And you compare with your peers at home. You are fighting to get an entry-level job while they are manager[s] realizing their dreams. You know you are the same, or somehow you are even better, and that makes you feel, depressed. And you feel it's such a waste. (103)

In terms of the quality of life, I think it went down compared to my life in China due to the limitation of our income. We are now very frugal. We cannot just buy the things we want. Most of our clothes were brought from China. (109)

Luocha is also expressed as a loss of one's sense of competence and ability to bridge the cultural, linguistic, financial and status gap in the society, resulting in overwhelming anxiety and a sense of helplessness.

Before, I'm an associate professor in China. I was a very good teacher and good researcher. Everything, you know, is higher social level . . . [Here] language is a big problem for me. I found that even on the way, I asked where to go I don't understand what people talking about. I pick up the phone. I don't understand . . . I think my English is good in China, at school and other activities, I always think my English is very good. But actually it's not . . . You go out on street, you lost. You go to the bank, you don't know how to talk . . . (111E)³

Now I always feel unstable, unsafe. I always have all these worries . . . Actually the status of my family is not too bad, but I still feel unsafe. In China I didn't have this feeling. If it is in China, I wouldn't worry even if I don't have a job. But in Canada, actually my husband and I are both working, I still feel unstable . . . In China . . . you are familiar with the society, the community. You know where to seek for assistance even if you don't get help from your family or friends. You are so familiar with the environment. But here, you are not that familiar with it, and you never know what attitude surrounding people hold towards you. You don't know what the mainstream, the majority is thinking. You don't know whether they welcome you or not. I still can't get rid of the feeling of being a guest at somebody else's home. (123SP)⁴

Related to this issue, *luocha* is about a loss of self-identities and the familiar cultural and social environment that sustain those identities:

I had very broad social connections. If I want to do something, you know, in China, you have things done through your social connections. So at least in my city, I could find friend for almost everything . . . No matter what I wanted to do, I managed to do it anyways . . . But after I got here, I knew nobody. I had to ask my husband to do it for me if I want to do anything. ‘Hey, can you make a phone call for me?’ He’s doing everything. I feel like I’m limping now. My wings are broken. (109)

I was so anguished. Everybody said we came to Canada for a ‘better life’, but after coming, we even could not speak the language, and we lost our own profession. I cried every day for more than one month after coming. I missed my life in China. I was the Dean of the Department, and early March (the time when I came here) should have been the busiest time in my school. I should be coordinating curriculum and classes at the beginning of the semester. I should be going around supervising the teaching in the school. Here I had nothing to do. I even couldn’t speak. I was so depressed. (105)

This sense of loss of competency also interacted with gender. They experienced a loss of status as women in Canada compared to China as they were unable to contribute to the society in a meaningful way. The Chinese government promotes the ideology that ‘women hold up half the sky’ but these women expected that ‘[as] a democratic country, women should have more rights [in Canada]. Actually we lose [sic] that [the status as women in Canada]’ (103). While they upheld the importance of women’s status, some women resented or were disappointed by their husbands’ inability to be breadwinners in Canada. Others felt that their husbands were very supportive and their relationship grew closer as they renegotiated the gender roles in Canada. At the same time for some women who became just caretakers of the family, their relationship with the husband changed from one of egalitarian relationship to one with conflicts.

Lacking the ability to construct a competent identity, immigrants cannot claim a meaningful space and therefore become the ‘Other’ in their new society. *Luocha* is therefore profoundly about the regulation of immigrants through a complete decomposition of competent identity.

Coping with *Loucha*: Compromised Expectations, Resigned Life Attitude

To survive the assault on their professional status, financial stability and individual and family well-being, earlier immigrants compromised their expectations for their lives in Canada. Despite experiencing long-term and repeated rejections, some of the earlier immigrants did not consider returning to China as an option.

Previous research with newcomer skilled immigrants from Mainland China (Sakamoto and Zhou, 2005) suggested that despite facing employment challenges, which also affected other areas of their lives, newcomers commonly held high expectations of their future life in Canada (e.g. 'things will get better if I keep trying hard.'). In comparison to recent newcomers, it appears that earlier immigrants hold a more compromised, and perhaps more realistic perspective on their employment prospects in Canada. While newcomers may tend to idealize their past life in China and maintain hope of going back if things do not work out in Canada (Sakamoto and Zhou, 2005), earlier immigrants adopted a more critical view towards the thought of returning to China.

A primary concern in considering a return to China is the challenge of catching up with the tremendous changes that have occurred there recently. By returning, it is very likely earlier immigrants would re-experience the process of settlement just as they had upon first arrival in Canada. Subsequently, earlier immigrants expressed feeling that they were 'stuck' in their current situation, having no choice but to make the best of it. Facing this reality, most immigrants assign their dreams and hopes of a better life to their children as a way of balancing their losses and gains after immigrating to Canada, though this is not without consequence:

Our life value was changed. In the past, we always lived in the 'future'. We always were planning for the future, thinking about what next step to take. Now, especially after my child got depression, I found one shouldn't be too ambitious – it's too much pressure. (105)

They also learn to live with and expect less financial resources:

Our living style is different from that of Canadian people. I think Canadian people cannot live with so little income. However, as for Chinese people, we think that our life is OK with the little income. At least the life here is not worse than that in China. I mean living situation, clothing, and food we have now are not worse than those we had in China. However, you could not have much expectation. For example, most Canadian people have vacation every year. For sure, I do not have spare money for traveling in vacation. (117)

Self as the Locus of Change

Another coping strategy, although a negative one, was to blame themselves for their adjustment difficulties. The self is much more under one's control than systemic discrimination:

When I got pregnant, the language in this field was quite new to me, so I couldn't speak a lot with the doctor. Usually she took 5 minutes with me, but she would talk a long time with others. She's a Canadian. I want an obstetrician close to where I live, but I couldn't find a Mandarin speaking one nearby . . . Was I

worried that I would get less information than others if the doctor spends much less time with me? Well, I don't blame her. It's my own fault: I don't speak good English. (122)

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

Most Chinese people's English is not good enough. So it's understandable that people do not think highly of you if you cannot communicate effectively with them.

In evaluating their level of social participation against their own criteria, the majority of study participants did not consider themselves to be fully integrated into Canadian society. They believed that such integration must involve achievement of the following (listed in no particular order): (1) having sufficient *English language skills* and improved presentation/public speaking skills (FG1E)⁵; (2) building *social networks* which are not limited to Chinese acquaintances (FG1E); having Canadians as close friends whom one can 'exchange heart with' and who can offer help when one is in crisis (112); (3) Finding *employment among 'white Canadians'* (115); (4) *Sharing hobbies and cultural customs with the dominant group*, such as watching Hockey games, joining social gatherings, etc. (FG1E) and appreciating Canadian social system and culture, and 'laughing together with Canadians and weeping together with Canadians' (115); (5) *understanding the nuances of Canadian culture* (123SP); having some understanding of 'mainstream' religions, such as Christianity (105, 118); (6) not only 'behaving or speaking in a Canadian way', but also '*thinking in a Canadian way*' (FG1E); (7) being knowledgeable about *Canadian laws* (105); (8) *Improving civic participation* and thus having a sense of being a citizen (117).

As evident from this list, the participants expected a lot of *themselves*, not of our society. Every item involved a change within themselves. Taken together with their self-blame, it is clear that the immigrants expect very little help and accommodation from our system of settlement and integration. Still, some participants questioned the idea of merely changing themselves in order to adapt to the society – changing one's long-held beliefs and values to become a Canadian. They pointed out that integrating into a new culture should not mean giving up one's own cultural characteristics. Instead, the following indicators should apply: (1) Being proud of one's own culture in a multicultural society (117); (2) Being able to combine good things in both cultures to benefit one's life and work (108). These counter-narratives may suggest that the assimilationist messages have not overwhelmed all immigrants completely.

Other Coping Strategies

Immigrants in our study also adopted other coping strategies to deal with the problems they faced here in Canada. Seeking help from friends and family in

Canada was the strategy most commonly employed by immigrants. They felt that their spouses and other Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants understood their situations most. Others reported that they receive comfort and support from family members in China, although some were hesitant to do so because they did not want to worry their family back home. Many immigrants also used the Internet as a new tool for gathering information. The majority of participants reported that websites and online discussion groups established and facilitated by Mainland Chinese immigrants are useful in seeking information and providing support to each other. Some took more active roles and created new self-help organizations by and for Chinese skilled immigrants. With regard to coping with medical issues, participants commonly reported finding the Canadian health care system to be ineffective and of low service quality, stating that this pushed them to consider alternative ways to attend to their health needs such as traditional Chinese medicine or returning to China for treatment. Finally, participants shared that staying positive was a useful self-help strategy. Many immigrants found it hard to see a way out of the difficulties other than relying on their own strong will and perseverance.

I feel as long as you work hard you will have your opportunity in Canada. Compared with China you may need to work harder here, because you are not educated here and you are not at a same starting point as the people here. It took me almost five years to realize my earliest dream that I could make \$20 per hour. The process was hard. But pressure is also motivation. I read an article saying that during long distance transportation, fish often die. But people found when a natural enemy of most fish is put into the water, most fish strived to survive. Under pressure the fish need to keep swimming, and their survival ability would be increased. Immigrants' life is like that. (112)

In addition to encouraging themselves and their friends to stay positive, a commonly articulated theme in the community after Zhaohui Geng's suicide, they also seek out friendships and network to establish themselves even as they cope with *luocha*:

I like to make friends very much. When I was going to leave the restaurant [job], I helped a woman from Wuhan, China to get the job I was doing. Then we became friends, and later she helped me find my third job. (105)

The Effect of *Luocha* on Earlier Immigrant Professionals' Relation to Help-Seeking

If *luocha* is the framework of understanding and constructing skilled Mainland Chinese immigrants' settlement experience in Canada, the question that follows is how *luocha* affects immigrants' help seeking strategies and behaviour.

Access to Social Services and Underutilization

Earlier immigrants in our study reported low utilization of social services, specifically those targeted at immigrants, both upon arrival and after the initial settlement period. They tended to have the most interaction with services aimed at the general public, including health care and childcare. Reasons for underutilization during initial settlement included a lack of understanding of the Canadian social service system, inadequate information about the services available, and lack of services in or near the neighborhood.

A further issue in earlier immigrants' service use was that as their settlement needs emerged over time, they were no longer eligible for settlement services which are geared towards more recent newcomers (i.e. in Canada less than three years who don't have citizenship):

I think only 10% of social services would help older [earlier] immigrants. I joined an employment training workshop when I was about to get my citizenship. I was told that the training is only for new immigrants and not for citizens. I got in because I was still immigrant then, but I had to show them my landing [immigration] paper every time I went there, because I was at the 'edge' already. I think this system is stiff. People need help not because they are immigrants, but because they have the needs. For example, I didn't have a job at the beginning of March, so I needed help. At the end of March I became a citizen, but I was still unemployed and needed the help. (123SP)

Immigrants felt reluctant to use certain services, such as mental health services, because of the stigma associated with mental health issues in Chinese cultures.

The dissemination of the service is also important. Eastern people are not very open to mental health issues. Even though they have some problems with mental health, they may not know that they needed to seek counseling. (117)

When we mothers get together we would ask what happened if somebody looked in bad mood. We would tell each other, but we would not tell people such as social workers, because Chinese regard family conflicts or mental health issues as 'no face' things to talk about. (106)

No, I really do not know how the counseling can help me. I was wondering whether the counselor could help me. I never sought counseling service before. In addition, in Chinese culture there is a stigma related to counseling. (117)

The aversion to service utilization can partly be explained by the value placed on self-sufficiency by both the Chinese society and reinforced by the neoliberal expectations of immigrants to remain independent. Our participants expressed the notion of '[r]elying on oneself and being independent from social assistance'

and '[s]taying positive and believing in self-efficacy'. Coming from a society that has a very different welfare system, and not having access to (or not realizing the availability of) comprehensive information about how Canadian social services operate, Mainland Chinese immigrants tended to understand social services as a crisis-based support system under the purview of the government:

Many Chinese people have a concern. They are afraid it will have a negative impact on their record here if they apply for welfare. That it will influence their future application for their parents' visit or immigration. So they live a very simple life or do some labor work to solve their problems. (109)

Issues in Social Service Utilization

For immigrants who went to social services for support, some were able to utilize the services offered. At the same time, participants identified a series of issues in their interactions with the system. For example, participants reported that employment and language training for immigrants did not meet the specific needs of Mainland Chinese immigrants. Employment services were criticized as too general, and language training programs were found to hardly help with improving profession-specific communication skills. Participants also pointed to the difficulties of effectively using services due to lack of coordination among different service sectors, and criticized social services for lack of language and cultural competency. Multiple participants reported problems with misdiagnosis, delays and harassment. Our study participants believed that unfair treatment was largely due to their level of official language competence, their foreign accents, country of origin (from Mainland China) and occasionally their employment status (e.g. unemployed). The readers should be reminded, however, that the participants in this study are 'earlier' immigrants who immigrated to Canada between 1994 to 2001 and the availability of accessible social and health services may have improved since.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we have explored the psychosocial experiences of earlier skilled immigrants from Mainland China and the theme of *luocha*, which permeates through their settlement experiences, including employment challenges, language barriers, decreased social networks, and loss of social status and 'face'. Although *luocha* is expressed as an individual feeling of loss of identity and status, it is ordered by social circumstances; thus it is simultaneously psychological, personal, individual and structural. The examination of *luocha* helps us explore the interconnections between individual life circumstances (or at least what is seen as individual) and the macro issues of settlement policies, immigrant politics and exclusion of immigrants from full participation in Canadian

society. That it is such a commonly expressed experience indicates that the production of *luocha* lies in their group experience, therefore more likely to be structured by social and political processes both in Canada and transnationally.

In global cities such as Toronto, diversity is recognized (Martiniello, 2003) but subjectivities are highly regulated (Rouse, 1995). Such forms of multiculturalism shape people's attitudes towards their place in the society including reconciling 'the discrepancies they encounter between the promises they are offered and the realities in which they live' (Rouse, 1995: 362). For example, instead of recognizing this dissonance, immigrants find themselves attempting to construct themselves as 'good' against 'bad' immigrants who have no business in these democratic places (Razack, 1999). They are 'welcomed' to Canada as 'good immigrants' on the basis that they are flexible workers who can easily cope with changes expected of the new global worker who anticipates career changes and work shortages (Ong, 1999). The alternative is to become the 'bad immigrant', who drains the country of its resources. Admitting that one cannot achieve this flexible subjecthood and then seeking help for this lack of flexibility would be tantamount to admitting one's absolute failure.

To contextualize these findings, it is helpful to discuss the concept of integration. For example, Weinfeld and Wilkinson (1999) distinguished integration in different domains such as: economic domain; residential patterns; health and social services, thereby allowing them to explore the specificities of a complex phenomenon. However, this definition remains unsatisfactory and integration remains an elusive concept as aspects of immigrant experience cut across many of these domains. The narratives of the participants in our study reveal that mental health issues (such as anxiety and depression) are connected to their experiences in the economic domain, the social domain, and access to health and social services, just to name a few. It makes more sense to allow research participants' narratives to dictate how we frame the issue of integration. We enter the discussion of exploring their settlement by relying on a persistent and powerful theme – their experience of loss – of social and economic status, of power, of self-esteem, of positive evaluation of one's ability to live and survive in Canada, etc. – captured as *luocha* or deep plunge in its Chinese meaning. While we may not have a finer definition of settlement or integration, earlier Chinese skilled immigrant professionals' experience reveals their unsettlement and lack of integration. We focus on this particular reality (*luocha*) as it helps us ground the experience of settlement from the perspective of the research participants.

While skilled immigrants from Mainland China construct their difficulties with employment as an issue of *luocha*, we have tried to demonstrate through their narratives that *luocha* is socially produced. The inability to live up to the expectations of a flexible worker in a Northern global city is a way to download the cost of global development. It is not an individual deficiency that

immigrants find themselves unable to cope in a society where there are invisible social, political and economic processes that produce the disillusioning discrepancies that lead to the tragic suicides of skilled immigrants who come to Canada with high expectations of success.

Limitations

Transferability of our findings (e.g. generalizability to other 'earlier' skilled immigrants in Toronto or other parts of Canada) should be approached with caution, as our aim was to explore in-depth meaning of the experiences of 'earlier' Chinese skilled immigrants and not to focus on the representativeness of the sample. In the absence of a total 'population' or representative-sample based data, we are unable to assess how 'typical' our respondents are in their experiences. However, the authors did seek to diversify the sample as much as possible through the use of purposive, venue-based (agency) and internet-based sampling strategies, which successfully recruited participants with a broad range of backgrounds and experiences with social services. Another theme emerging from the study was the effects of gender and national origin (within the broader Chinese community) on the settlement experiences of earlier skilled immigrants from China. Although these are very important topics, they are not explored fully here due to page limitations.

Next Steps

In considering next steps, several questions arise. For example, how are the settlement experiences of skilled immigrants likely to differ from those of less-skilled immigrants? How do newer skilled immigrants from Mainland China experience settlement now that there are more social services available to them and some of these immigrants were well aware of the earlier immigrants' experiences of *luocha*? Do newcomers still experience *luocha*? Are there differences in the experiences of earlier skilled immigrants who have been in Canada for three to five years, as opposed to those here six years or longer? Although not within the scope of the current paper, these issues are worth noting for improved understanding and future exploration of the experiences of earlier immigrants.

Recommendations for Social Service Provision and Policy Development

The information revealed by study participants indicates that settlement issues go beyond service provision. We need to arrive at a framework for policy enhancement and service provision that will help immigrants participate more fully in Canadian society. We propose the following specific recommendations and guidelines for social service provision and policy development. First, respond to the urgent need to expand service eligibility and tailor services for earlier immigrants so that they are not excluded from the settlement/employment services that they need (cf. George et al., 2004). Second, target and adapt services

to immigrants from the time of their arrival. Doing so will help to decrease the number of immigrants falling through the social welfare safety net. Health and mental health care should be made more accessible to newcomers as arguably successful settlement is a social determinant of health (Nerad et al., 2007). Third, social service agencies are highly pressured for achieving certain targets and quotas, and funders need to ease the pressure on the agencies and loosen the funding requirements that social services need to meet (e.g. number of clients served), which will in turn allow for more flexibility in service provision. Fourth, recognize and draw upon the experiences of the autonomous mutual help efforts developed by immigrant communities as a key to identifying promising practices for facilitating fuller integration of immigrants. In the same way, it is also imperative to focus on supporting and facilitating community building and development from an empowerment perspective – in terms of both policy development and service provision. This could also be achieved through community-based and participatory research to guide services and policy development. Drawing on the strengths, resiliency, and networks among and across different skilled immigrant groups would help create and implement successful social policies and social services.

Beyond the issues of service provision and policy development, we must challenge the valuing of immigrants solely in their ability to contribute to the economy as flexible workers. If immigrants are discouraged from accessing services by subjective understandings of what a good immigrant or citizen is, then we have to begin at the discursive level, challenging the politics that define immigrants as subjects. This would remind us to value the input of various community-based organizations that work to shift the discourse over racial minorities and racialized immigrants. A healthy multicultural society fosters the development of these organizations, and facilitates minorities' negotiation with the state. Through such politics of negotiation, immigrant identities will be constructed from their perspectives rather than hegemonic demands.

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Notes

- 1 For more information on the eligibility of services sponsored by the Canadian Federal Government, see <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/guide/section-04.asp>
- 2 These numbers after quotes represent the ID numbers given to the interview participants to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.
- 3 'E' stands for the interviews conducted in English, as opposed to Mandarin Chinese.
- 4 'SP' signifies those immigrant interviewees who themselves are service providers working with Mainland Chinese skilled immigrants.
- 5 'FG' denotes the data came from a focus group. This particular focus group was conducted in English.

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