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Xia, Yan Ruth; Zhou, Zhi George; and Xie, Xiaolin, "Strengths and Resilience in Chinese Immigrant Families: An Initial Effort of Inquiry" (2005). *Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*. 81.

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Authors' Note: The present research was partially funded by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Layman Award and by a contribution of the University of Nebraska Agricultural Research Division. We want to express our sincere thanks to Dr. John DeFrain, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for his consultation on this study.

Strengths and Resilience in Chinese Immigrant Families: An Initial Effort of Inquiry

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The landscape of American demography has changed dramatically since the middle of the 20th century. Research indicates that the number of immigrants to the United States will continue to increase rapidly over the next three decades (Day, 1996). As the immigrant population grows, so does the necessity for family researchers to build theories to describe and explain the experiences of the new immigrant families. The research that we present here is aimed at expanding the knowledge base in relation to the resilience of newcomers in the Midwest; this study involved the use of both qualitative (holistic) and quantitative (scientific) methods. Our specific objectives in this case study are to identify the strengths of new Chinese immigrant families and to add to the family strengths model.

Family Strengths Model

Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) identified six strengths in their study of Caucasian American families: affection and appreciation, commitment, positive communication, ability to cope

with crisis, time together, and a sense of spiritual belief. Studies of family strengths with other cultural samples remain patchy. Xie, DeFrain, Meredith, and Combs (1996) found that families in China perceive a sense of harmony as being a family strength. Nilufer, Larson, and Parul (2000) conducted a similar study in India and identified among Indian families five of the six strengths that Stinnett and DeFrain found among Caucasian Americans as well as three additional strengths: harmony, support and overall well-being, and cooperation and dependability.

Methods

Because of the scarcity of existing research on the family strengths of new Chinese immigrant families, we began our inquiry with semistructured interviews to examine the perceptions of our research questions among new immigrants from this cultural group. Subsequently, we developed a survey questionnaire based on the strengths identified by the initial interview-

ees. As a part of the theory-building process, we then conducted a pilot survey. Although it would have been desirable to use structural equation modeling for confirmative factor analysis to determine the construct validity of the measures and test the theoretical model (Bandalos, 1996), we employed exploratory factor analysis owing to the small size of the pilot sample.

Studying immigrant families entails greater challenges than studying nonimmigrant populations. One particular challenge with immigrant families is to secure their participation in the research. Most newcomers are dealing with financial instability, lack of friends and other social supports, discrimination, language and communication barriers, and overwhelmingly unfamiliar social institutions and bureaucracies, such as those dealing with immigration law, schools, health care, and banking (Pipher, 2002). Family members also have to redefine and adjust their roles, responsibilities, and relationships with each other. All too often, these challenges leave them little time or energy to attend to issues that are not essential for survival. Thus taking part in research studies is not a priority. Moreover, it is uncommon in many cultures (including Chinese culture) for individuals to reveal personal information to persons who are not family members or friends, so it can be difficult for researchers to establish trusting relationships with potential participants from such cultures. Given these problems, the recruitment strategies that researchers commonly use to engage study participants may not work well with new immigrant and minority populations, so subject recruitment and data collection can be a lengthy process. For this study, we began building relationships with the Chinese immigrant community prior to data collection; as Chinese Americans, we were able to become involved in the Chinese church and Chinese school as well as various community events. We also offered workshops for the newcomers on parenting, marital relationships, communication, and health care issues.

Another challenge that researchers face when

studying immigrant and minority populations is the need to develop culturally sensitive measures. For this study, our success in understanding and describing the resilience of new immigrant families relied on the cultural sensitivity of the measures used. We chose to develop measures by gathering information on immigrants' perceptions of their family strengths through semistructured interviews rather than use existing measures developed for studies of nonimmigrant families. Ideally, the validity and reliability of new measures should be tested with a random sample. However, because of the challenges of collecting data among immigrant populations (as discussed above), researchers studying such groups are likely to find that random sampling and the use of mail surveys result in very low response rates and thus low representative samples. An alternative method is to use "snowball" recruiting followed by survey interviews.

We identified as new immigrants 40 Chinese who had arrived in the United States in the past 20 years and recruited in three midsize cities in Illinois and Nebraska for the initial interviews. Later, we surveyed 94 new Chinese immigrants using the pilot questionnaire (see the table for details on the characteristics of the participants). Unlike the early Chinese settlers, who came to the United States as cheap labor, most new Chinese immigrants follow a path of seeking advanced degrees and establishing careers as professionals in America. The Chinese in our sample reflected this change in demographic characteristics.

Results and Discussion

Based on our interviews, we were able to identify several major themes related to family strengths among the immigrants in our sample: family support, social support, communication, spiritual well-being, and the balancing of host and heritage cultures. We developed the Chinese Immigrant Family Strengths Survey to measure these five identified constructs. The

Chinese Immigrant Families: Characteristics of Study Participants

| | Interviewees (N= 40) | Survey Participants (N=81) |
|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Age (years) | | |
| Mean | 37 | 28 |
| Standard deviation | 8 | 6 |
| Gender (%) | | |
| Female | 62.5 | 64.7 |
| Male | 37.5 | 35.3 |
| Years in United States | | |
| Mean | 8 | 11 |
| Standard deviation | 5 | 5 |
| Marital status (%) | | |
| Single | 0 | 8.3 |
| Married | 100 | 86.9 |
| Divorced and missing | 0 | 4.8 |
| Education (%) | | |
| High school/GED | 7.5 | 4.7 |
| Bachelor's degree | 20.0 | 21.2 |
| Master's degree | 42.5 | 24.7 |
| Ph.D. | 30.0 | 49.4 |

survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale with 17 indicators that demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .80$). Except for the Social Support subscale ($\alpha = .50$), all the subscales showed good or acceptable internal consistency for exploratory study (Family Support, $\alpha = .81$, three indicators; Communication, $\alpha = .64$, three indicators; Balancing Cultures, $\alpha = .73$, four indicators; Spirituality, $\alpha = .61$, two indicators).

Exploratory factor analysis resulted in six principal components with eigenvalues above one. The six components accounted for more than 71% of the total variance. Thirteen indicators had factor loadings greater than .70, and four ranged from .50 to .65. Three components were the family strengths constructs of family support, spirituality, and communication. The multiple measures for each of them clustered, and each component was distinguished from the others, which suggests empirical evidence

for convergent and discriminant construct validity. However, the measures for social support and balancing home and host cultures were not well validated by the statistical results and should be revised.

An inspection of the five indicators on the Social Support subscale revealed that two of them were not worded in a culturally sensitive manner. These were items 5 and 6, which read, respectively, "We can disclose our difficulties to our friends" and "We seldom seek outside help when we have family problems." Keeping face by not airing one's dirty laundry in public is a traditional Chinese value. Higher scores on these items, showing reaching out for help, may indicate greater acceptance of American values, but not necessarily stronger social support as we had expected. These indicators may bear the intended meaning only for those respondents who are relatively assimilated into American

culture. It may be that our own values and acculturation levels affected how we designed the meanings of the indicators.

Another observation may also shed some light on the low internal consistency we found. The results showed that the subscales in which all indicators were phrased positively yielded higher reliability (i.e., Family Support, $\alpha = .81$; Balancing Cultures, $\alpha = .73$), whereas those with indicators phrased both positively and negatively tended to have lower scores (Social Support, $\alpha = .50$; Spirituality, $\alpha = .61$; Communication, $\alpha = .64$). One explanation for this is that negative statements are not often used in Chinese Mandarin, and so items worded negatively may have been confusing to Chinese native speakers. Some of the survey participants provided written feedback indicating that they found the negative statements confusing; in addition, we noticed that some participants went back and forth in selecting their responses on these items. This example illustrates how important it is for researchers to go beyond techniques such as back translation (Riordan & Vandenberg, 1994) in their efforts to achieve cultural equivalence in measurement and examine culturally influenced processes such as communication patterns, language structure, and logical thinking as well as the values and acculturation levels of both participants and researchers.

Chinese immigrants, like other immigrants, experience stress engendered by migration (Xie, Xia, & Zhou, in press). Consistent with Stinnett and DeFrain's (1985) findings with Caucasian Americans, the successful Chinese immigrant

families in our sample reported communication and spirituality to be among their family strengths. The strength that we call family support in our study is similar to Stinnett and DeFrain's commitment and appreciation. Our study also revealed a family strength that is highly salient for immigrant families: the ability to build social support. As we have noted, migration entails disruption in the family's social environment, loss of social status and support, and feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially during the initial stage. To combat these negative effects, many immigrants strive to reestablish their social groups by becoming involved in ethnic associations and churches. The responses of the participants in this study clearly demonstrated the importance of social support.

In summary, the findings of this study, which utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods, delineate the family strengths of new Chinese immigrant families in the United States. Chinese immigrants represent a growing population that has received scant attention in the study of family strengths and in discussions of cultural sensitivity in methodology. The initial effort reported here, which resulted in a five-construct model, is one of very few to date that have focused on building a theoretical framework to describe Chinese immigrant family strengths. We will use the findings from this study to modify the Chinese Immigrant Family Strengths Survey in preparation for a future large-scale study designed to test the newly built model.