

# **New Home, New Learning: Chinese Immigrants and Unpaid Housework and Care Work**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the learning experience of Chinese immigrants through unpaid housework and care work. Based on the interviews with 8 Chinese immigrants (4 women and 4 men) in the Great Toronto Area, who immigrated to Canada from Mainland China in the previous five years, this paper explores the challenges and difficulties these people encountered in their unpaid labour in the homeplace. In so doing, the paper tends to reveal the voluntary and involuntary housework or care work those immigrants engaged in, the visible and invisible learnings associated with this life transition and the diverse ways they acquired those learnings in their new home in Canada.

It is 9:00pm. I put on the table, also used as my reading desk, the dishes I cooked for dinner: white rice, soup, green vegetables, roast chicken and dessert, a combination of Chinese and Western food. During dinner, I shared with my daughter, a Grade 11 student, a bad experience I had that day. I learned that afternoon at our regular project meeting that I didn't get a summer graduate assistantship because of my misunderstanding of the procedure for applying for a summer GA. During the meeting I unintentionally turned away for something else and didn't realize until after the meeting that I was actually expected to join the discussion on something I considered irrelevant to me. I compared it to my experience with another group meeting I previously attended, the members of which are mostly Mandarin-speaking Chinese, with whom I didn't find any difficulty communicating and figuring out what I was supposed to do. I also compared it to my experience that morning with a Group of university senior administrators from China, for whom I worked as interpreter for their training here in Toronto and with whom I shared some of my experience as a student here in Canada. In the end I lamented: " Sometime, I don't know who I am. When I am with the Chinese Group, I feel, more often they feel, I am very much Canadian. But when I am with the Canadians, like people in our project, I feel I am a typical Chinese!" And my daughter immediately replied, "Alienation. That's cultural alienation!"

In a way, she is right. As I got more involved with Dr Eichler's SSHRC project on unpaid housework and lifelong learning, especially after my interviews with some new immigrants from Mainland China, I realized that this is not unique to me. I kept wondering "How common is this among the Chinese immigrants? What challenges do they encounter in their new homes in Canada? What do they have to learn and how do they learn to cope with their day-to-day life in a new world that is quite different from their own, both culturally and physically?" It is on these questions that this paper intends to focus and explore.

## **Literature Review**

Most literature on lifelong learning focuses on educational policies in adult education (Collins, 2003; Edwards, 2000; Hart, 1992; Jarvis, 1999; Schuetze, 2000), learning for paid work (Livingstone, 2002, 2004; Fenwick, 2004) and rarely deals with learning in the homeplace (Gouthro, 1998, 2005).

Literature on housework in the past decades have explored extensively upon the effect of housework on women's paid employment (Shelton & John, 1996; Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2000), gender roles (Presser, 1995) and gender equality in the family (Sanchez, 1994), usually through the study of the time women and/or men spend on housework (Artis & Pavalko, 2003; des Rivières-Pigeon, Saurel-Cubizolles & Romito, 2002; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000).

Literature on immigrants in Canada often focuses on their paid work (the National Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, 2001), and barriers immigrants encounter such as racism and sexism in the labour market (Ng, 1992, 1996; Sharma, 2002), language barriers (Paredes, 1987; Peirce, 1993; Williams, 1996; Bron, 2003; Han & Salaff, 2004), and lack of Canadian work experience (Mojab, 1999, Man, 2004; Raghuram & Kofman, 2004). Studies on immigrants' learning experience are mostly work-oriented or for paid employment (Majob, 2000, 2003), such as language learning for paid employment (Wang, 1996; Duff, Wong & Margaret, 2002) or learning for citizenship (Bron, 2003; Joshee & Derwing, 2004) learning through violence (Mojab & McDonald, 2001). Except for a handful literature on immigrants and housework (Ng, 1982; Haddad, & Lam, 1994) and care work (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004; Spizer et al, 2003; Treas & Mazumdar, 2003) and their adaptation to the new environment (Ng, 1998), almost nothing has been written about immigrants' learning experience through unpaid housework and care work.

Studies indicate that in Canada, both low and medium to high skilled immigrants are disadvantaged in terms of employment, even compared to low skilled native-born adults (Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2003, [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)). National survey (LSIC, 2001) further reveals that many new immigrants with university education (55%) have to get further education or training (67%) and that language barriers and lack of Canadian experience and transferability of foreign credentials are the most critical hurdles to employment. Even if they do, over half of immigrants did not work in the same field after immigration (6 out of 10).

Since the late 1990s, immigrants from Mainland China have ranked on the top of all immigrants came to Canada each year, from 32,300 in 2001 to 14,400 in 2004 ([www.cic.gc.ca](http://www.cic.gc.ca)). As most recent immigrants from the Third World, Chinese immigrants experience all those problems mentioned above. This paper intends to explore how the above employment-related issues that the Chinese immigrants encountered in their workplace affect their private life and unpaid labour in the homeplace.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The sample for my interviews comes from a previous WALL survey, with respect to the learning associated with unpaid housework they have done in the past five years. Although the survey

involved nearly 10,000 people across Canada, the sample of new Chinese immigrants was extremely tiny. I was given a list of only 10 Chinese immigrants in the GTA for my interview, of whom, after initial telephone contacts, I was finally able to locate eight: four men and four women, who agreed to be interviewed (the success rate is 80%).

All interviews were about 1.5-2 hours long, of which six were done in English, one completely in Chinese, one in half English, half Chinese. Five of the interviews took place in the project office at OISE/UT, three were done at the respondents' home. The interviewees were between the ages of 25 to 44 years old, and immigrated to Canada from Mainland China in the previous five years. Of the eight participants, two were single (a woman and a man), six had families (five of them with one child in each family and one has a pregnant wife). Except one participant who has a college diploma, all the others had a university degree and three of them completed their graduate degree before immigration. At the time of the interviews (the last three months in 2004), three respondents were full-time students at a Canadian educational institution (university, college and adult high school level for each), one just completed her studies and got a job on the day of my interview. Of the four who were employed, 2 were working in a field relevant to their previous jobs before immigration, one was self-employed and one was working part-time.

### **The Phase and Goal of the Interviews**

My interview with recent Chinese immigrants is part of the project on unpaid housework and lifelong learning. This project consists of 4 phases: Phase 1 is a mailed survey to members of women's groups across Canada; Phase 2 involves 11 focus groups of both women and men, from different ethnic background, including a group of Chinese immigrant women; Phase 3 is a follow-up interview of respondents from WALL survey who have experienced one of the following major life changes: immigration, disability, losing job, losing partner, getting a new job or getting a child; Phase 4 involves interviews with cleaning ladies and nannies who do housework and childcare for pay. My in-depth qualitative interviews with Chinese immigrants belong to Phase 3, the purpose of which, based on the hypothesis that major life changes lead to learning, is to unveil how life transition such as immigration affected the housework and care work, what learning was involved and how they learned it. The goal of the interviews is not to find out what people actually do, but what they say they do, as our goal is not to determine how much housework individuals do but to discover what categories of work are mentioned when questions are posed in an open-ended manner. Our method is actually not appropriate to finding out what people actually do - time budget studies are best for this (also see Hook, 2004; van der Lippe, Tijdens & de Ruiter, 2004 in Patrazia, Overview of the Project). Our intent was to establish to what degree people are conscious of performing higher level functions when engaging in unpaid work. We hypothesized that if people are unaware of what they actually do, they will certainly be unaware that they have learned something about something they don't realize they do. In other words, we suspected that respondents are likely to be "competence-blind" (Butler, 1993,) with respect to the skills required and acquired while doing housework and care work (For more information about the phases and goal of the project, see Patrazia's Overview of the Project). In this paper, I choose to put unpaid housework and care work together mainly because both of them are important part of unpaid household labour and frequently inseparable from each other. An exclusion of either of them will lead to an incomplete portrayal of the learning experience of the recent Chinese immigrants in their new homeplace.

## **Data Analysis And Preliminary Findings**

### **Narrow definition of housework and care work**

To most of respondents, housework was narrowly defined as cooking, cleaning and washing, and care working simply as child care. Rarely did they mention any other types of care, such as elderly care, because most of my respondents were either young and single or only had their small families here in Canada. When asked about what they learned from the unpaid housework and care work, all my respondents seemed to focus exclusively on the low level, repetitive, routine tasks such as cooking, laundry/cleaning, grocery shopping, childcare, home maintenance or repair, etc., which are consistent with our findings in Phase 1 and Phase 2, which are also the concern of most of the studies on housework (see Acero et al., 1991; Sullivan, 1997; Twiggs, McQuillan and Ferree, 1999; Arrighi & Maume, 2000; Baxter, 1997, Eichler, *The Other Half (or More) of the Story*, in Patrizia's Overview of the Project). Hardly did anyone include higher level functions such as emotional support, organizing, planning, managing or arranging matters; dealing with crises; maintaining contact with family members or friends; self care; and conflict/crisis resolution (a list of high level household activities drawn from more critical literature ex. Butler, 1993; Hook, J.L. 2004. See Patrizia's Overview paper). However, when we asked them whether they engaged in this work, and uniformly they said "yes" and provided examples. Nonetheless, as many of the above activities were not perceived as work at a conscious level (Eichler, *The Other Half (or More) of the Story*), most of my respondents were not actually aware of the type and amount of learning they did by constantly saying "Oh, I didn't realize that is housework/care work" or "I never thought about it before".

### **Challenges and difficulties encountered**

When asked to identify the challenges and difficulties they encountered in unpaid housework and care work since immigration to Canada, all the respondents ranked pressure of getting a job, abrupt decline in family income, drastic increase in the housework and care work, language barriers on the top of the list. In some cases, even though immigration was not identified as the most important event at the beginning of the interview, as the interview proceeded, however, I found their unpaid housework and care work were unanimously affected by this life transition. Low family income and lack of support from extended families are among the most frequently cited reasons for the increase of routine chores such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping and childcare.

Despite their high educational background and working experience in professional jobs before immigration, most of my respondents, with one or two exceptions, had to settle with low-paid, less/low skilled jobs in their new home country. At the time of my interviews, half of my respondents were going back to school with the hope of getting a Canadian diploma/degree in order to find a professional job in the future.

All my respondents considered inadequate English language skills as the greatest barrier in their getting a decent/professional job or pursuit of academic study, in communicating or making friends with the local people, or in searching for help from the community and benefits from the

government. Insufficient English competence in communication, particularly in listening and speaking, made difficult some of their daily household activities such as shopping, watching the news from the mainstream media, and helping their children with their schoolwork.

### **Learning Acquired through Unpaid Work**

To deal with the growing amount of housework, most women respondents learned time management as a way to balance their domestic responsibilities and their paid labour or academic studies. As women did most of the routine chores, their learning are largely related to cooking, whether it was the new food they learned to cook, either Chinese or Western, or the new ways of cooking, such as baking instead of stir-frying. An interesting thing I found in my interviews is that women's learning of cooking was more related with Western food, while men's learning of cooking tended to be more traditional Chinese.

However, my interviews indicate that although most women did much more housework and child care in their new home in Canada, compared to what they did in China, almost all of them felt that they were not doing enough housework, as they were supposed to do, especially in keeping the home clean, tidy and comfortable, because they were short of time and because they had to go out to work or study. More women than men expressed their worries or frustrations for being unable to help their children with their homework due to their poor English ability.

All men claimed that they did much more housework than before. Prior to immigration, as they said, they didn't do much, if any, housework. Housework and child care, they claimed, were women's job in China. Men were only responsible for the financial support of their family. The reasons for this change are summarized as follows. First, as they stated, reduced family earnings no longer allowed them to eat out as frequently as they used to do in China. Second, without grandparents around, and unable to hire nannies, they had to take sole responsibility of childrearing. Third, as they couldn't see a promising future in their paid employment, no matter how hard they try, and also as they realized that the social life here is more family-oriented than workplace-oriented, they gradually shifted their focus from the outside world of work to the private world of family life. Interestingly, as all tools are available for housework, and also as part of their effort for integration into the mainstream culture, men started to show interest in doing some type of housework, such as home maintenance and repair, gardening, etc, especially after they bought their own house. One male respondent reveals this point as follows:

“[I]mmigration has changed so much. The big change is, here in Canada, people think housework is fair, ...to men and women [it's fair for both men and women to do housework]. You can, a lot of people stay at home, like that [doing housework]. But in China it is not easy. [Here]You have more suitable housework to do, like renovating your house, like painting, gardening, a lot. That's interesting. At home [in china], I remember you can't do much about your house, just the cleaning, the mop[ping]. It's more for woman. But here, I like to do a lot of housework here. There is a good condition [there are many facilities or tools], so you can do a lot of housework. That's what I enjoy most.” (Fredman Ti)

As most of my male respondents do not have their own house yet, most of the unpaid work they said they did (except for the unmarried man) was care work such as playing with the child; home repair/renovation to protect little child from being hurt, taking care of his pregnant wife (in one case). More significantly, most men claimed that they were more concerned about child's future, and were more involved in child's education both in and outside of school, such as music or sport classes after school or help child with their homework.

### **Changes in attitudes toward housework and care work.**

One of the most obvious changes for the Chinese immigrants, both men and women is an increased awareness of the importance of housework and care work, although there was still an obvious gendered division of labour in their families. This is especially true with those who didn't do housework and/or care work before immigration. Now they realized how time-consuming it was, doing household chores and taking care of children, and started to appreciate and respect those who did most of the housework for their family. As they learned to cook and budget time and money, one young respondent said, "I didn't do much housework [in China]. I didn't realize how much time-consuming it was. I need much respect for the person to do that job... I am much more considerate than before because of doing a lot of caring work" (Ling, 23).

Despite the narrow definition they gave to housework and care work, there seems to be a confusion between the two terms. When women talked about care work, they focused on the physical care of their child and family/husband, such as cooking nutritious food, providing a clean and comfortable home environment, etc. and their learning through care work was also related to information on nutrition, health, emotion. Men, on the other hand, emphasized care of child's future, school education, extra-curricular activities such as music and sports. Thus, their learning was more related to understanding of the school system here, new ways of educating the child (e.g. understanding instead of pushing or physical discipline). In the case of the respondent with a pregnant wife, he consistently viewed all the housework he did such as cooking, tidying and decorating the apartment as taking care of his wife. His learning was more related to healthy food for both the pregnant wife and her fetus. However, in one family, where the woman was more fluent in English, she took more responsibilities in supervising the child's homework and taking the child to after-school activities such as swimming and other sports.

### **New views of oneself and the meanings of life**

Almost all my respondents said that immigration changed the way they view themselves and the meanings of life. According to several respondents, they used to believe that if they tried hard enough, there would be nothing they couldn't do, no goals they couldn't achieve in life. They were very confident about their ability for success in both work and life in their new homes in Canada. However, immigration made them realize that, as new immigrants, there are something beyond their control, such as cultural barriers, language difficulties, obstacles in getting a professional job. Many of them felt helpless/powerless in changing their present situations. This is also one of the reasons why they gradually turned their focus from their paid work to their private family life after immigration. Some of them turned to church for spiritual consolation. Some of them found pleasure in housework such as painting and gardening, some began to explore Chinese culture. The most important change for all of them is that they are learning to enjoy life more than their work, than making money. As one respondent stated:

“After I lived here for around one year, I changed a little bit about my thinking of the life, because the Canadian people I was communicate with them, and also some TV program, or some report or for some discussion with other people living there, I think I change something about my thinking of the life. I would like to enjoy the life, no matter what kind of job---, just trying my best to do a good job, and then for the rest of my time, I would like to spend on enjoying life such as travelling, such as getting together with friends. But in China, I usually, when I do a best job, I wanted to do it better. So I always focus on how I can try my best to do better” (Ling, 25).

Despite an overall downside in family income, many of my respondents did not seem to regret for their decision of immigrating to Canada, and were optimistic that their life will eventually improve in the future as they get better jobs, making more friends and getting more accustomed to the culture here in Canada.

Interestingly, all respondents didn't seem satisfied with their English language ability and claimed that they made little or no improvement in their English whatsoever. Nonetheless, when I asked them to compare their English levels before and after immigration, they all admitted that they actually did make significant improvement in their language skills, especially in listening and speaking. The reason for not being aware of the progress, as I found out during the interviews, was that the language proficiency they achieved was as not as high as they had expected.

### **Diverse ways of learning**

All my respondents are highly educated, as is the case with the majority of recent Chinese immigrants. Therefore, the ways they learned in unpaid housework and care work were quite similar, and relatively hi-tech. Internet, for instance, has been mentioned by all my respondents as the one of the most important sources for search of cooking recipes, information on child care in relation to health and benefits, job search and job applications, as well as for entertainment, news, and maintaining contact with family and friends back in China. The following is a summary of the most common ways they acquired learning in different situations:

- a. Learning from friends, colleagues, neighbours or roommates for daily routine work such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, home maintenance/repair, childcare.
- b. Learning from professionals, friends, seminars, community centers, for budgeting and financial management.
- c. Learning from TV, newspapers, Internet, magazine and/or books for social, political, and environmental issues.
- d. Learning from schools, classes, friends and the public media for improving English language skills, and for information on educational systems and cultural traditions and customs.
- e. Learning from friends, or from their own past experience new means of providing emotional support, solving conflict/crisis and maintaining contact with distant family members or friends.
- f. Learning about new meaning of life through the contact with the church or believing in religion.

g. No learning is said to be necessary for managing time, organizing things, and planning their days or week differently, as many of my respondents claimed “it happened naturally, you don’t have to learn, just by doing it.”

### **My own learning experience in Canada**

Life has changed a lot since I came to Canada two years ago, in particular since my daughter joined me last July. As a PhD students from China and a single-parent here, I found myself constantly juggling between my academic work and my domestic responsibilities. I had to take more time away from my study for housework such as grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. Still I remember hearing my daughter complaining several times about late meals and tasteless food on the phone to her grandmother in China, with whom she used to have lunch since she entered elementary school when she was 5, and dinner as well in the past 4 years. As my collection of cooking recipes grows and my cooking skills improve, I hear fewer and fewer complaints.

Long before she came, I started to search for information about which high school to send her to in Toronto. I browsed the website of Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to see what schools are nearby. I consulted my fellow students who works in high school on issues such as which school is more suitable for my daughter, what courses to take, and how to select those courses, in addition to information on volunteer work, and other requirements necessary for graduation and for going to university.

From my research on unpaid housework, I became increasingly aware of the importance of women’s work in the homeplace and would not complain or feel guilty if I spent more time doing housework or taking care of my daughter and myself. I learned that career success and economic independence should not be the goal of my whole life, even though I am very proud of my academic achievement. I began to enjoy simple things in life such as going out for a walking to the Lakeshore, finding a new recipe for my favorite dishes, or simple sitting on a lawn under the clear sunny sky.

Now both are students and both are new here in Canada, my daughter and I often compare our life and learning experiences with each other and with our lives and studies/work back in China. Some of the experiences are quite amusing, others are very frustrating. Both of us have experienced difficulties in our studies due to language and cultural barriers, Meanwhile both of us are curious and are eager to learn everything that is new to us. Together we tried new exotic dishes, making efforts in adapting to our new home environment. Together we share sorrows, but more often, joys for every little achievement we made in our new home. Far away from our family and close relatives and friends, we learned to understand each other and provide emotional support for each other. As we get more familiar with the new country and new city, and our new ways of life here in Canada, we deeply fall in love with our new home and are optimistic for a better life in the future.

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