

## **Exploring the Emotional Dimensions of Household Work: Chinese Immigrants' Perspective**

Willa Lichun Liu, PhD Candidate, OISE, University of Toronto

**Abstract:** So far most of the family literature has focused on gendered division of household labour; few researchers go beyond the routine household chores to cover the different dimensions of household work, including emotion work. Based on the interviews with 19 Chinese immigrants from the Greater Toronto Areas<sup>1</sup>, this paper explores the emotional dimensions of household work in Chinese immigrants' families. The author demonstrates that immigration has increased not only the visible routine household labour, but also the invisible tasks of emotional care for spouse, children and the elderly, and that emotional carework involves a lot of learning that has remained largely unexplored.

### **Introduction**

Since the late 1990s, Chinese immigrants have ranked top among all immigrants coming to Canada ([www.cic.gc.ca](http://www.cic.gc.ca), 2005). Immigration not only changes the family dynamics in unpaid housework and care work but also resulted in different ways of performing this household tasks, as well as changes in attitudes towards household work in general, especially in providing emotional care for spouse, children and the elderly. It is on the emotional dimension of household work and the learning involved in providing it that this paper intends to explore.

### **Emotion, Emotion Work in Family Literature**

#### *Sociological Studies on Emotion*

Historically, the home has been considered a place of emotion, and unpaid household work has been conceptualized as a “natural” extension of “a labour of love.” (Daniels, 1987; Hochschild, 1989). In their attempts to demystify the nature of the family work, feminist scholars have provided new views and definitions of emotion. For instance, Hochschild (1979: 551), Shott (1979:1318), and Kemper (1981:339) treat emotions as “states of physiological arousal” that are influenced by the societal, and the cultural environment a person lives in (see Shott and Kemper cited in Danzin, 1983). Based on this definition, Danzin (1983) argues that emotions are not mere cognitive responses to physiological, cultural, or

---

1 My research presented in this paper is part of the project on Unpaid Housework and Lifelong Learning. It is one of the 12 case study projects in the research network on The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) from 2002 through 2006 as a Collaborative Research Initiative on the New Economy (Project No. 512-2002-1011). For further information, please go to the network website at: [www.wallnetwork.ca](http://www.wallnetwork.ca).

structural factors, but social acts that involve self and other interactions (pp.407-408). To Danzin (1983: 404), emotion is a social, interactional, linguistic, and physiological process that draws its resources from the human body, from human consciousness, and from the world that surrounds a person.

### *Emotion Work in Family Literature*

Traditionally emotion work has been defined as “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild, 1983:7). This conception of emotion management has been adopted by some scholars in their own definitions of emotion work (Wharton and Erickson, 1993). For example, Erickson (1993, 2005: 338) defines emotion work as “activities that are concerned with the enhancement of others’ emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support.” It is also synonymous with Rosenberg's (1990: 4) concept of emotional display, which refers to "the self-regulation of emotional exhibition for the purpose of producing intended effects on others' minds." England and Farkas (1986) and Strazdin and Broom (2000) have used a similarly term *emotional work* in their studies, with the former refers to it as “efforts made to understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings as part of one’s own” (see England and Farkas, 1986:91, cited in Strazdin and Broom, 2000: 357), and the latter describes it as “actions and intention to improve psychological well-being in others” (Strazdin and Broom, 2000: 357)

Many studies indicate that women do the great bulk of emotion work just as is the case with housework and childcare (DeVault, 1999: 55; Erickson, 1993, 2005; Hochschild, 1989). However, due to the gendered nature in emotion provision, emotion work has largely remained invisible, unacknowledged or devalued, as is the case with housework and carework. Limited literature on emotion work suggests that emotion work is closely related to one’s psychological health and marital satisfaction. Strazdin & Broom’s (2004: 357) study on emotional work and health argues that like the gender imbalance in housework and childcare, the gender imbalance in emotional work also confers health disadvantages. When emotional work is shared equally, relationship norms of care and responsiveness are reinforced and both partners have access to emotional resources in the family. When wives do more emotional work, their experience of the marriage as a source of emotional support, care, and mutuality is eroded, posing a psychological health risk to women. In their study of emotion work among dual-wage couples, Erickson and Wharton (Erickson, 1993; Wharton and Erickson, 1995) reveal that women who do more emotion work, especially those who say that their husbands share that work, report more happiness in marriage. Therefore, they suggest that emotional support is work but it can be a source of satisfaction.

## Preliminary Findings and Discussion

### *Changed Attitude Towards Spousal Care*

Transnational migration poses a number of challenges to Chinese immigrants in Canada. Many immigrant parents find that they have to re-configure or renegotiate their familial and gender roles due to altered resources associated with immigration. The first and most obvious change is a sudden increase in housework and childcare. Far away from their kin and the lack of domestic helpers whom they used to rely on for childcare and other domestic responsibilities, many new immigrants who were professionals before coming to Canada find that they have to do all the household labour and childrearing all by themselves. In several cases, the respondents claim that they do more housework as an emotional support for their partner. This is especially the case among those who didn't do much, if any, housework before immigration. Here is what Jacob said:

*In China, I cooked less, my wife cook more. Actually she did most of the housework, cleaning, washing, cooking, everything. But here, when we moved to Canada, both of us have to work in order to cover all the expenses. My wife and I work in factories. Everyday, seeing my wife coming home from work exhausted, I feel quite guilty. So I can not let herself to do all the housework....I have to take more responsibilities, do more housework....Actually I did more. Actually I take 70%, sometimes, of the housework.*

Qiang, a student at U of T at the time of interview, talks about his care of his pregnant wife through the food he cooks for her.

*I paid a lot of attention to my wife.... I read books, and learned something about pregnancy, how to take care about pregnant wife, and how to take care of the kid [baby] in the future. When I cook now, I become more careful.... I don't use, garlic, and ginger any more, less chilli pepper...[because] I know she doesn't like them. Also more fruit, like watermelon, less meat. We now eat almost only vegetables.*

Ming claims that he never did any housework during his ten-year marriage in China. Now he is helping his wife by sharing some of the housework such as doing the laundry, cleaning, shopping as well as playing with his little son. Similarly, Hong, a young mother with a 13-month son told me that she does all the cooking and most of the childcare as an emotional support for her husband so that he can concentrate on his work. In another interview, Fang, a 58-year-old women said that she takes up all the housework such as cooking, cleaning and grocery shopping so that when her husband comes back home, he can have his meal right away, and have more time for relaxation. Through her contact with people in

the church, Fang has expanded her understanding of love, and has learned to express her concern for her husband by saying “Drive carefully” when he goes out and “How was your day? (or You must have a hard day today) when he comes home from work. Almost all the women respondents mentioned about buying and cooking healthy food as a way of emotional care for their family.

Several women respondents claim that they have learned to cherish more their spousal relationship as they have to depend on each other for mutual emotional support. What Linda describes is quite typical among the women respondents I interviewed:

*I used to be a strong-willed woman, and do whatever I want to do. When I was in China. I often fight [fought] with my husband because he always came home late. He often went out with friends after work and got drunk. That was very bad for his health....But here I always make good relationship with my husband because I think we are away from our home country...Life is not easy here. ...I want to make my family happy and harmonious. In China, I didn't care about that, because everybody was busy: my husband was busy, my son was busy. But here, as my husband does not have a job yet, we have a lot more family time together and we communicate more.*

Immigration has also changed their ways of solving conflicts. Many women recall that in China they can always turn to friends and relatives for help, in case a conflict arise between them and their husbands. Here they rely more on themselves to solve their problems. This is the case with Annie, who claimed that, unlike in China, where she used to go to stay at her parents' home, if she had a fight with her husband, who, after a few days, would always go there and bring her back with an apology. Here without a place to go, she has to stay home and face the problem. This is what she does now:

*I am becoming more tolerant with him [her husband]. In China, there was no way for me to give in... Now, I show more respect to his self-esteem. Whenever there is a conflict between us, I would give in, just to save his face. I would say, 'ok. If you don't change, then I will change.'*

Many women express similar changes in their ways of handling family conflicts. For example, Mei admits that she has changed her temper since immigration. Instead of yelling at her husband who rarely does any housework, she stays silent and does not speak to him. Or she diverges her attention by talking to friends on the phone. Jill's attitudinal change is also quite obvious: “I used to shout when I didn't feel happy. Here I just keep silent. I think because there is more life pressure here than in China...I think I am more understanding of people's situation, their emotion.” While some of the respondents attribute their change to immigration, others, however, relate this change to their growth in age rather than to the immigration.

### *Emotion Work in Cross-cultural Childcare*

Although emotion work abounds in childcare and elderly care, literature on emotion work rarely touches upon those areas, especially in elderly care. Many Chinese immigrant parents find that trying to adjust to their new life in Canada by juggling between their low-paid physical labour and increased amount of unpaid household work is both physically and mentally exhausting. However, ideological changes in childrearing and child education pose a greater challenge to many new immigrant parents. Although many of them no longer believe in or practice the old Chinese belief of “beating is affection, and scold is love”, they are quite concerned about how to discipline their children when physical means is not acceptable in Canada. Ming, a father with a 3-year old son, shows his concerns and worries about how to educate his son properly as he grows. “I like the clean, and free environment in Canada,” he said, “but what if he smokes and even uses drug when he reaches teenage? What can I do to educate him, if physical discipline is not allowed?”

Several parents talked about the effort they exerted in helping their children with their schoolwork. Jacob and Jenny mentioned about reading their children’s textbooks so that they can help solve their science problems right away. Meanwhile, many Chinese parents, as many immigrants from non-English speaking countries, find their English inefficiency limiting their potentials to offer the necessary help to their children, both academically and socially. That’s the reason why, according to Karen, she decides to go back to college: it is not only to learn a skill for paid employment, but also to improve her English, so that she can continue to “care” her son in his study as he grows.

Many parents take an active role in learning new knowledge and skills as well as strategies through various means in order to bridge the cultural gaps in child rearing and child education. Hong, for example, she has learned from the internet, and books on children’s education by Western writers as the major sources of such information. She also talked about sources of learning nutritious food for children of different ages by consulting with her child’s doctor, by reading pamphlet and brochures on children’s nutrition, or by calling parents in China or friends who have little kids for their experience in raising children. Karen, a woman with a 9-year-old son, talked about learning from her own LINC class, from daycare centre, from her kid’s school teachers about rules/laws on child care. “I learned,” she said, “that it is illegal to leave children under 12 alone at home...If my son made a mistake or did something wrong, I can only talk to him about it. I can not scold or spank him.”

Emotional care is most obvious in families with adult children. Fang recalls how she encouraged her adult daughter to continue to pursue her study in Canada so that she could find a good job here in the future. Gloria talks about how she has helped her 18-year-old daughter on issues of making boyfriends. Fredman, a father with a 12-year-old son, reveals how he has learned to communicate, to understand his

child first in order to lead him to follow his advice. “It is a big adjustment for me,” Fredman said, “trying to understand him. In China, you don’t care whether they understand it or not. If you think it is good for them, you just do it and believe that they will understand you in time, in the future.” Meanwhile, several other parents also admitted that instead of ordering their children to listen to them, they have learned to respect their children’s privacy and independence.

Jenny, a woman with a 15-year-old daughter says, “Before, in China, I always order her to do this, to do that. Now I can no longer do it. I have to talk with her, discuss about it with her. Even with homework, if she doesn’t like me to read it, I cannot do so. I have to ask her for permission.”

### *Transnational Emotional Care for the Elderly*

Chinese culture emphasizes *filial piety* (xiao) that demands unconditional services, and obedience to ancestors, parents and elders (see Hsu, 1991, in Spitzer et al., 2003: 269). As the only son in the family, both Ming and Qing talk about how they have provided transnational emotional care for their widowed parents in China by making phone calls and by offering advice to their problems. However, just as unpaid housework and childcare are done mostly by women, transnational emotional care for the elderly is also highly-gendered. Women, particularly daughters-in-law, bear most of the physical, financial, and social sacrifice of the provision of care for the elderly (See Sung, 1991; You et al., 1999, in Spitzer et al., 2003). In a different interview with Mei, wife of Qing, a PhD student mentioned above, Mei told me what sacrifices she had made for her husband, and how that has affected her current life. Mei, a gynaecologist in China, gave up her career to come to Canada together with her student husband while he was pursuing his degrees. Mei also shared with me her transnational experience of household management and emotional care for her sick father and her widowed mother-in-law in China:

*I’ve been managing the household for my father and for my mother-in-law in China all those years. ... I have arranged everything for our live-in caregivers so that they know in advance what to do for each day... Besides, I often call my brother and ask him about my father’s condition and make arrangements for his surgeries and check on the medicines they use and the treatment they provide for him.... I flew back immediately whenever I learned that his condition was getting worse. That’s why I kept going back to China in the past few years, at least once a year.*

From my interview with her I also learned that because of her caregiving responsibilities, she has not been able to locate any full-time job in the past seven years in Canada. Just as she was thinking about registering for a certificate course related to her previous career at the end of last year, her husband completed his PhD and went back to China a week before my interview with her. Although she really

wanted to pursue her intended certificate study, she told me that she already bought the ticket and would join her husband soon after she completed everything (like selling the car, closing all the bank accounts and credit card, disconnecting telephones and cables, and disposing her furniture, etc.). In an informal chat after the interview, she revealed her reluctance of going back but also pointed out that she had no other choices as keeping close familial relationship is her top priority.

Her transnational caregiving experience was shared by several other women respondents who claimed to have provided similar long-distance care and emotional support to their elderly or sick parents in China. While many claim that they have learned, as a result of immigration, to cherish more about family relationship and kinship than before. Some of the women even expressed their frustration as well as regret and guilt for not being able to go back and take care of their aged parents in person except for paying them “lip services” only (such as asking them to eat well, doing more exercise) or in some cases, sending money back on specially occasions (such as Chinese New Year, etc.). Being physically away and unable to visit her parents and in-laws, Hua, a woman in her 40s, said that she has created her own way of commemorating the dead and praying for the living. For example, she would burn incense sticks on special occasions as a way of commemorating her dead father and father-in-law. She would also place a few good dishes with burning incense sticks around, and make several bows if she learned that her surviving mother or mother-in-law was ill. “I never did this in China.” She claimed, “Now as I live far away, by performing those rituals, I feel as if they could see me, or hear me [my prayers], ...as if they could understand what I said, and eat the food I prepared for them.” By doing so, she find herself connected both emotionally and spiritually with her kin back in China.

## **Conclusion**

In my discussion of emotional care for spouses, children and the elderly, I have demonstrated that emotion work is deeply embedded in housework and care work and thus is inseparable from one another. My study also confirms the fact that, emotion work involves a lot of learning that has remained largely invisible and unexplored. Therefore, it is my hope that more research will be done in emotion work; particularly the learning involved in its provision, and the policy consequences for emotional care, especially for children and the elderly.