

Chinese Female Professors at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Struggles for Negotiations and Assimilations in the Cross-Cultural Setting of China and America

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Abstract

Assimilation is a lifelong job for foreign-born Chinese Americans due to the fact that Chinese and American cultures are drastically different from each other. Thus, they have to struggle for negotiations between two cultures. This paper will discuss how Chinese female professors at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign struggle for negotiations and assimilations in the cross-cultural setting of China and America. During ten weeks of fieldwork, I used ethnographic approaches, including interview, participant observation, and "go-along" method. This paper will present the research group's struggles for negotiations and assimilations in America through shaping sketches of them, describing their struggles in the cross-cultural marriages, and mapping their houses both in China and in America.

I. INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on how Chinese female professors at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign struggle for negotiations and assimilations in the cross-cultural setting of China and America. My informants were raised in China and are now living in America. Chinese culture and American culture are so different from each other that they have to struggle for negotiations between two cultures. Therein, Chinese culture tends to be a collectivistic culture that focuses on the group's interest and relations with others. American culture is associated with individualism that emphasizes individualistic achievements (Brand 2004, p. 58). Before I entered the field, my original hypothesis was that they struggled a lot for negotiating between Chinese culture and American culture, and thus they struggled a lot for achieving assimilations in America. Yet, after researching for a week, my findings caused me to see the problem differently and change my hypothesis. After this extensive investigation I changed the original hypothesis. My final hypothesis was that female Chinese professors at UIUC negotiate between two cultures well enough to blend the two cultures into one way of life.

For this study, I conducted ten weeks of fieldwork. The methods I mainly used were interviews and "go-along" method. The "go-along" method is a combination of participant observation and interviews, which can help fieldworkers gain a wide picture of a larger group of subjects. Moreover, compared with interviews in the office, this method allowed me to observe everyday activities of the subjects, which means subjects can behave more naturally. I contacted 15 female Chinese professors and interviewed them. To ensure the professors' comfort and allow for easy communication, I communicated with them in Mandarin and translated our conversations into English at a later time.

II. FICTIONAL TYPES & OUTLIER CHARACTER SKETCHES

A major method used during my research process was the qualitative interview. "In the qualitative interview the respondent provides information while the interviewer, as a representative of the study, is responsible for directing the respondent to the topics that matter to the study" (Weiss 1995, p. 8). According to the 15 informants I interviewed, I chose the most common characteristics across

the 15 interviewees to make up a typical image of female Chinese professor at UIUC, Jenny. The common characteristics are as follows: They were born in rich families in big cities. They graduated from top universities in China. They came to America for master's degrees. They majored in natural science. They married Chinese. Most of their friends are Chinese. They nurtured their children both Chinese and American values. However, I found that one of the 15 interviewees, Emily, did not share those characteristics as others. Emily was an outlier of my interviewees. For example, instead of majoring in natural science, she majored in social science; instead of marrying Chinese, she married an American. Thus, Emily is worth recording because of her unique experience and image. By describing a fictional type, I can get knowledge of their common experiences of struggling for negotiations in the cultural borderlands and their ways of assimilations in America. By recording a real outlier character sketch, I can avoid neglecting the diversity of my informants. Studying common characteristics of a group is important, but we can not neglect individual differences within the group. Juxtapositions of these two sketches can help to get a comprehensive analysis of Chinese female professors' struggles for negotiations and their ways of assimilations.

Jenny, is a Chinese female professor in a natural science department at UIUC. She is from an affluent family in China. She graduated from a famous research university in mainland China. She based her decision of going to U.S. on the popularity of going study abroad in the late 1990s in China. As a superpower with some of the best universities in the world, America was her first choice. She received her master's degree and doctorate's degree in America. She married a Chinese when she was working for her Ph.D. After starting a family in America, it became more appealing to live there permanently. It was the first time that she had a fresh feeling, a sense of belonging, in America. Without feeling stigmatized or discriminated by Americans, she adapted to life in American well. In Jenny's opinion, being American means speaking

English and accepting American individualistic values. By contrast, being Chinese means speaking Chinese and accepting Chinese collectivistic values. Individualistic cultures conflict with collectivistic cultures in many aspects. The contradictions between these two cultures lie in the emphasis of collective identity or personal goals. For example, if Chinese people are asked, "You play basketball very well!" They will say, "No, not at all. Just a little bit." Although they play basketball very well, they will say, "No. Just a little bit." Chinese people are always humble. By contrast, Americans can express themselves however they want. If they are praised for their ability, they will admit their capacities and say, "Thank you!" Humility is a virtue in Chinese culture while it is a kind of poor self-esteem in American culture. Although there are many differences between two cultures, Jenny tries to negotiate the differences between two cultures and identifies herself as both a Chinese and an American. It means that her identity can be culturally and contextually appropriate. When she goes along with Chinese people, she perceives herself as a Chinese and thus behaves and thinks in a Chinese way, such as being humble and collectivistic. When she meets Americans, she identifies herself an American and thus behaves and thinks in American way, such as having high self-esteem and confidence. Jenny has a close circle of social networks that is full of Chinese friends who are professors in universities in America. She has never faced discrimination from Americans at UIUC. The process of being promoted at UIUC is fair because there is evidence to show what research faculty conducted and how they performed. She does not think that a glass ceiling exists at UIUC. Moreover, she is not ambitious about getting a promotion. She has to balance her family and her career.

I make all of these generalizations according to the answers that interviewees gave to my questions during the interviews. The questions centered around three main areas:

1. What's their background information?

2. What are their experiences of being Chinese professors at UIUC?
3. How do they negotiate between Chinese culture and American culture in the cultural borderlands of China and America?

According to the answers to the first question, 14 of 15 interviewees graduated from famous research universities in China; 14 of 15 interviewees majored in natural science; 12 of 15 interviewees went to America in the late 1990s; 9 of 15 interviewees married Chinese when they were working for their Ph.D. According to the answers to the second question, all of them were satisfied with their work at UIUC; all of them denied the existence of glass ceiling in the process of promotion at UIUC. As for the last question, all of them achieved assimilations in America through wifehood and motherhood; all of them identified themselves as both Chinese and Americans. Therefore, we can see that a large proportion of Chinese female professors at UIUC fit into the category of Jenny.

Emily (pseudonym) is a Chinese female professor in a social science department at UIUC. Her parents who received college education in U.S. encouraged her to go study in America. She married an American who was a lawyer when she got her master's degree. Her cross-cultural marriage was supported by her family and friends because they thought she could easily gain citizenship. She mentioned that the only divergence between her and her husband was how to bring up their children. Emily persuaded her husband to bring up their two sons in Chinese ways. She forced her children to study Chinese, Chinese history and Chinese culture.

As for Emily's career as a professor in social science, she struggles with English frequently when she is doing research. She prefers doing research on Chinese society than on western society because of language, familiarity, and her own interest. Most of her colleagues at UIUC are from the U.S. or from English-speaking countries, like Australia and Canada. Yet, she does not feel lonely because

she is used to living in America. She adapts herself to America when she is a wife of an American and a mother of two Americans. Even though she cannot accomplish her assimilation in American society through wifehood, she still can fulfill it through motherhood.

III. ASSIMILATIONS THROUGH WIFEHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

According to Wang (2005), "Sociological studies have also emphasized the importance of social networks that provide the connections needed to migrate safely and cost effectively" (p. 218). Thus, I chose to study three informants and their social networks. All the informants I chose have been in America for almost ten years, which means their social networks are stable. Yet, there exist some differences in their individual experiences. The first informant, Amy (pseudonym), a Chinese female professor in a natural science department, married a Chinese man. The second informant, Tiffany (pseudonym), is from the natural science department. Her husband is an American. Emily (pseudonym), the third and final informant, is a professor in a social science department, who married an American.

As for Amy (pseudonym), when asked what were concerns in her life, she said, "My family, my husband and one 3-year-old daughter, is the center of my concerns. My career as a professor is not my center of my life. After all, I'm a Chinese woman and I wanna obey Chinese women's traditions of being a good wife and a good mother first, then to be a good working woman." She added, "Even though I have a high salary, I obtained almost everything through my husband's help, including my citizenship, house, and so on. Perhaps my family is more a 'Chinese style' than an 'American style.' In American families, it's normal for wives to have higher salaries than husbands.' Yet, it's not normal for Chinese families. I obey Chinese style of families." The second informant, Tiffany (pseudonym), told me

that she had many other American friends, besides Chinese ones, who are her husband's friends. Yet, Tiffany is unwilling to make friends with them because making friends with people from a different culture is costly. She explained, "I have to spend much more time to understand their feelings. Even though I can speak English fluently, English is a foreign language to me forever. Sometimes I cannot understand them. Sometimes I just feel tired of speaking English. Moreover, I can hardly find common topics to talk with them because we have different values and different experiences in two different countries. When I talk of Jay Chou, my favorite singer, they don't know who he is. When they talk of American politics, I know three names of American presidents at the most. You see, I have to make more efforts to find topics to talk if I want to be close friends with Americans than with Chinese." Unlike Amy with her shy personality, Tiffany is so outgoing that she is the one who always holds parties for Chinese professors at UIUC. She described, "I have a group of Chinese friends here. Some of them are faculty at UIUC. Some of them are my neighbors. Some of them are my children's friends' parents. No matter what their jobs are in America, all of us are Chinese when we get together. We recall our past in China. We are of the same ethnicity like a family." She added, "I have two children who go to elementary schools now. I began to make friends with parents of my children's classmates. They are Americans. Sometimes, children are a great topic for adults, especially for parents. Gradually, we become friends." The third informant, Emily (pseudonym), is the outlier with whom I had many interviews. As the only female Chinese professor in social sciences, her social networks seem a little bit different. Most of her intimate friends are Americans. She said, "The sources of these American friends include my colleagues and my American husband. I became intimate with my husband's friends after I got married. As for my American colleagues, they often visit my house to see my children after I became a mother. In a word, I had a family with my husband and my children first, and then I had

my American friends."

We can see that there is one common point between the three informants' social networks. Their family life is the center of their social networks. They initiated their social networks through wifhood and motherhood. In the words of Wang (2005),

"Migration becomes a social norm and family ties become a source of social capital, defined as the wealth of informal family, kinship, and community ties among migrants built up cumulatively between two countries. For households, social capital reduces the risk involved in migration because of greater information prior to migration and facilitation of border crossing, job connections, and economic assistance" (p. 218).

My informants have a sense of belonging in America through wifhood and motherhood. My informants cannot control their social networks independently, but rather, depend on the above factors. Even though they are well educated and have high salaries, their vulnerability is obvious from analyzing their social networks.

IV. STRUGGLES FOR NEGOTIATION IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGES

I did a survey of my informants' transnational marriages. The aim of designing this survey questionnaire was to explain a surprising phenomenon that many of my informants described. Specifically, 4 of 15 informants married Americans. Their Chinese friends hold adverse attitudes to their intermarriages with Americans. Some of their Chinese friends even casted slurs on them, like "shame on you". Therefore, I designed a survey questionnaire to delve into their objections, and how respondents react.

Two aims existed in this survey questionnaire. One was to figure out if the adverse attitudes of my informants' Chinese friends in America towards their Chinese-American marriages are general phenomena

among Chinese people in America. The other aim was to figure out the hidden reasons for the adverse attitudes.

Two kinds of people filled out my survey, Chinese students and Chinese faculty at UIUC. I used the quota sampling method to choose respondents. According to LeCompte and Schensul (2010), "Quota sampling involves deciding how many subgroups there might be within the population of interest and then selecting a set number of individuals (a quota) of people from each of these subgroups" (p.124). I chose 20 Chinese students (4 undergraduate students, 9 graduate students, 7 post-graduate research) and 20 Chinese faculty (11 visit lecturers, 9 tenure-track professors) to be my questionnaire respondents. I sent the questionnaire by email, and they were sent back to me anonymously. There are 16 questions, including 4 open questions and 12 closed questions. I received answers from 18 Chinese students (two undergraduate students missing) and 20 Chinese faculty (no one missing). I wish had fewer open-ended questions because my respondents provided so many varying answers to these questions. It was hard to draw a general conclusion.

The questionnaire resulted in 2 major findings. First, the adverse attitude towards Chinese-American marriages is a general phenomenon among Chinese people in America. Second, one major reason of the adverse attitudes is that they think Chinese marry Americans for citizenship. Chinese people stigmatize those who marry Americans as being too ambitious to get the U.S. citizenship.

Thus, we can see that Chinese female professors who married Americans have to negotiate between their Chinese friends and American husbands. For one thing, they have to prove to their friends that they married Americans not for citizenship but for love. For another, they have to adapt themselves to their husbands' American culture and values. April (pseudonym), one of four informants who married Americans described, "I lost some of my Chinese friends after I married an American.

I explained to them that I married my husband out of love. It has nothing to do with immigration or citizenship. Some of them understood me at last while others just lost contact with me. I resented my husband when I was blamed for my marriage by my Chinese friends. Yet, later I realized that I had to negotiate between my Chinese friends and my American husband. I had to show them I can achieve negotiations successfully. My method was to be Chinese when I got together with my friends and to be American when I was with my husband. It's hard but it's my life, and thus I have to make efforts to handle it."

V. LIVING IN AMERICA VS LIVING IN CHINA

Another method I used throughout my fieldwork was cultural mapping. I asked my 15 informants to draw their houses in both China and America after interviewing with them. The images of households reflect their states of mind and personal experiences. Lynch (1960) claims that "image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action" (p. 4). Through face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, I have already found that my informants are traditional Chinese mothers and wives whose center of life is their family. So, their homes are important spaces. By comparing the images of their houses in China and in America, I hoped to figure out what different feelings they had between living in America and in China. According to the analysis of their social networks, we can conclude that families are the centers of their concerns. Their houses are main cultural sites where my informants have emotions in them. Thus, by having them drawing their houses, we can see their sense of belonging.

Most of my informants lived with their parents in China. Even though many of them have not gone back to China for several years, they can still remember the details in every room, such as the color of the curtain, a craft on

the table, and even the beautiful sunshine in their room every morning. One informant told me when she was drawing the picture, "It is where I grew up. I will never forget what it looks like and how I feel living in it." In general, it only took ten minutes or so for them to draw their pictures of the houses in China. Some of them even drew the whole community, gardens, and roads around their houses. They evoked a lot of memories and stories when drawing their houses in China. The images of their homes were ingrained in their minds. By contrast, when they were drawing their houses in America, it was obvious that they spent more time drawing them. They drew the pictures in detail as well, yet, they described their houses in America with only several words, such as "big" and "bright."

The most interesting aspect is that all their houses in America have space for ancestor worship. Most of my informants had their husbands' ancestors for obligations. Others who married Americans had their own ancestors for obligation. The ancestral rite is an integral part of the house in China and therefore kept this tradition in their American houses. During some traditional Chinese festivals, like Spring Festival, and Qingming Festival, they always perform ancestor veneration in their American houses.

VI. CONCLUSION

There is no denying that female Chinese professors at UIUC have to struggle for negotiations and assimilations in the cross-cultural setting of China and America. Yet, to some extent, it would be inappropriate to simply define them as a "vulnerable group", given their class background, high levels of education, and high salaries. This is a consistent characteristic among all you interviewed and observed. Such ambivalent and complicated features of Chinese female professors make their experiences different from other Chinese immigrants. They negotiate between Chinese culture and American culture through wifehood and motherhood. They do not possess ambitions

to achieve assimilations in mainstream American society because they are satisfied with their current situation. They identify themselves both as Chinese and American. Similarly, they nurture their children with both Chinese culture and American culture. In their careers as professors at UIUC, they have hardly faced glass ceilings. Similarly, they haven't faced difficulties with employment and building social networks in America.

However, it does not mean that Chinese female professors can easily negotiate and assimilate in the cross-cultural setting. Their negotiations and assimilations have much more to do with resources that were already available and building a core family life. Of those I surveyed, interviewed, and observed, 2 of 15 informants remain single; 3 of them are married but do not have children; 2 of them might not be considered "middle" or "higher class" in mainland China. They cannot take advantage of their husbands' resources that were already available to achieve assimilations, such as citizenship, houses, and friends. Neither can they have a sense of belonging by building a core family in America. Thus, it is extremely difficult for them to negotiate and assimilate in America. They cannot get financial supports to achieve assimilations from their family. Therefore, being single and having fewer resources initially would affect the ease of negotiations and assimilations in the cross-cultural setting, and ways in which female Chinese professors might negotiate and assimilate in American society.

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TRANSCRIPTS

Subject 1, College of Business:

(M: refers to the researcher; S1: refers to Subject 1)

M: Have you ever experienced discrimination or cultural problems from your colleagues in your profession at UIUC?

S1: Never, many of my colleagues are foreigners, too. They are from diverse background as well.

M: Are there some limitations of being a female Chinese in your career as a professor at UIUC?

S1: Indeed, Yes. Compared with White male professors, we are not typical images of professors in business. Talking of professors, people always think of White males. In teaching courses, we are not up to students' expectations. Therefore, they would be doubtful for your comments. Sometimes, we have to repeat and explain points many times.

M: Do you have some real examples?

S1: Not yet. It is my own opinion. I prefer to repeat and explain for several times so that students can trust me more. My students are undergraduates. If I teach MBA students who are older and have working experience, it would be difficult for me to teach them. Because I do not have much working experience. I don't have common background with them. Fortunately, I teach undergraduates. About 25% undergraduates in college of business are Asians. It is easier for me to communicate with them. This character of my department helps me to adapt cultural problems in America.

M: Here are some questions about your family. If you are not willing to answer them, please tell me.

S1: Okay.

M: Are your family members in America now?

S1: My parents are in China while my husband and my children in America.

M: Does your job as a professor at UIUC influence your family's life?

S1: Yes, it influences a lot. My salary is high enough to support my family. Therefore, my husband does not have to work any more. He once supported me to get my master's degree. But now, he can do whatever he likes.

M: Are your friends Chinese or Americans?

S1: Chinese. 100% are Chinese. Basically, they are faculty at UIUC.

M: How do you evaluate your experience of being professors at UIUC for six years?

S1: It was very stressful from the first. I have to achieve many publications. It was hard. I got many rejections. But now, everything

goes well. I get used to being a professor and I gained a lot of research experience.

M: Do you expect your promotion in your career?

S1: Honestly, no. I am satisfied with my current situation. I have never dreamed of being a professor in a top business school, like Harvard. Professors in top business schools should be tall White males. I have to balance my family and my job. I prioritize my family first. As for my profession, what I can do is to try my best. I am not ambitious at all.

Subject 2, Natural Science,

(M: refers to the researcher; S2: refers to Subject 2)

M: Have you ever experienced discrimination or cultural problems from your colleagues in your profession at UIUC?

S2: No, even though there are few foreigner faculty in my department, I have never faced cultural misunderstandings from my colleagues. Sometimes, we should naturalize some phenomenon of so-called "discrimination". In other words, we should not be much too sensitive.

M: Are your family members in America now?

S2: My husband is an American who is a faculty at UIUC as well.

M: Are your friends Chinese or Americans?

S2: Half of my friends are Americans. I got to know them through my husbands. However, we are not intimate.

M: Why?

S2: Making friends with foreigners are costly. I mean, we have to spend more time in being

familiar with each other, because we are from different background. I won't make friends with them without my husbands. Some colleagues always went to my house to see my children. They are very cute. Gradually, we become intimate. I have some American friends who are parents of my children's classmates at school.

M: Are your best friends Chinese?

S2: Yes. We always have parties. I am the organizer.

M: As for your family, how do bring up your children? In a Chinese style or American style?

S2: Both. We wish them to have the Chinese tradition of frugality and the American style of independence. In general, we hope them to be both.

M: How do you evaluate your experience of being professors at UIUC?

S2: Fantastic. There is no glass ceiling because every research is recored.

M: Do you expect your promotion in your career?

S2: If I can get promotion, I will be very happy for sure. But I don't worry about it. I care my family more. I am satisfied with my profession.

M: So, you have never suffered from cultural problems before?

S2: From Americans, never. But I have been stigmatized by Chinese because of my transnational marriage. They viewed my marriages as "instrumental marriages". They viewed me as an ambitious woman. I once felt depressed a lot because of this.

Subject 3, Social Science,

(M: refers to the researcher; S3: refers to Subject 3)

M: Have you ever experienced discrimination or cultural problems from your colleagues in your profession at UIUC?

S3: Well, English. I struggle with English and French all the time when I am doing research. I suffer from more barriers of language than professors in natural science. Sometimes, I prefer doing research on Chinese society than western society because of language, familiarity, and own interest. It is a big limitation in my career as a professor. There was no English courses in schools when I went to my high school. I have never studied English systematically. I studied English from my parents. Therefore, my English was not very well, especially my spoken English, when I started my life in America. I spoke English with accents. You can call it Chinglish. Maybe it's even worse than Chinglish. But now, I view my identity of a Chinese as a strength.

M: Why?

S3: For people who study social science, diverse opinions are necessary. I always study sociology from a perspective that is different from my American colleagues because I am from China, a totally different society and culture from western world.

M: Are your family members in America now?

S3: Yes, my American husband and my two sons.

M: Have you ever stigmatized by your parents or Chinese friends because of your transnational marriages?

S3: No, instead, my parents hoped me to stay in America. They were happy for me when I married an American because I could get

citizenship without efforts. As for friends, most of my friends then were Americans. They were kind enough to accept me as one of them.

M: As for your children, how do bring up them? In a Chinese style or American style?

S3: I force them study Chinese, Chinese history and Chinese culture. I want them to identify themselves as overseas Chinese, or at least, half-Chinese. I want them to behave in Chinese style rather than American style. I want my sons to possess Confucian opinions, such as filial duty, collectivism, and tradition of frugality. The reason is that I still appreciate my own culture and Chinese modes of personhood, even though I have been an American citizen for a long time.

M: Generally speaking, have you adapted yourself to American life?

S3: Yes, I am a wife of an American and a mother of two Americans. How can I not adapt myself to America or American universities? Even though I can not accomplish my integration into American society through wifehood, I can fulfill it through motherhood.