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ABSTRACT

The unique characteristics of immigrants from Taiwan are explored, and the strategies they use in adapting to life in the United States are described. Recent Taiwanese immigrants have been characterized by their diversity in background, their high economic and social status, a variety of reasons for immigration, and sequential migration patterns. Communication is one of the common problems for Taiwanese immigrants because they do not have formal American education. Loss of family unity is another common adjustment problem. Role and status changes face Taiwanese immigrants as they do members of other groups. Six case studies of immigrant families illustrate the experiences of immigrants from Taiwan and their common difficulties. Splitting the household is a common strategy immigrants from Taiwan adapt for economic reasons. High investment in education and pursuit of adult education are strategies they also use to advance in their new country. Religious affiliation and community involvement provide support for many immigrants from Taiwan. Suggestions are made to enhance the mental health of immigrants from Taiwan in the United States. The family is advised to stay together, and parents are also advised to study the English language and the American culture and to have realistic educational expectations for their children. (Contains seven references.) (SLD)

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Psychosocial Adaptation of the Taiwanese Immigrants in the United States

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Running Head: Taiwanese Immigrants

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Introduction

The target population discussed in this paper refers to the recent Chinese immigrants from Taiwan; especially those who do not have the opportunity of being international students in the United States prior to immigration. This population includes Taiwanese immigrants who immigrate to unify with their families, to engage in business and investment, or to work for the American employers as professionals and skill labors. There exist distinct differences in immigration process and immigrant characteristics among mainland Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese and Taiwanese. It is recognized that the society of last residence is much more relevant than birthplace, especially is this the case for the Taiwanese, many of whom were born in China but had lived 40 or more years in Taiwan prior to emigration (Tseng, 1995). Their life experiences in Taiwan directly affect their adjustment in the United States.

There are increasing number of Taiwanese immigrants in the United States. The population of Taiwanese immigrants has grown dramatically ever since 1965 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. According to the U.S. census, the number of Taiwan born immigrants to the United States has tripled from 75,353 in 1980 to 253,719 in 1990. However, the U.S. census total of 253,719 Taiwanese immigrants in 1990 is a serious underestimation because a great number of those categorized as China-born actually had come from Taiwan (Tseng, 1995).

Taiwanese immigrants are the most recent arrivals among the Chinese immigrants. According to U.S. 1990 census data, 71.4% of the Taiwanese immigrants in Los Angeles County immigrated to the U.S. after 1980 (Tseng, 1995). The Taiwanese immigrants as a whole is the least studied and understood Chinese subgroup. Most of the research findings on Chinese immigrants and their psychosocial adjustment

may not be applicable to recent Taiwanese immigrants due to their unique characteristics. For instance, unlike the early Chinese immigrants, Taiwanese immigrants rarely face blatant and often violent racism or are denied citizenship (Matsouka & Ryujin, 1991). Many of these Taiwanese immigrants were professional and executive prior to emigration, they may lack the blood, sweat and tears experienced by the old coolie immigrants, their immigration experience nonetheless are full of emotional and psychological struggles. The purpose of this paper is to explore the unique characteristics of Taiwanese immigrants, their common experiences and psychosocial difficulties, and their adaptation strategies based on literature review, clinical experience, and community observations.

Characteristics of Taiwanese Immigrants

Recent Taiwanese immigrants can be characterized by their diversity in background, high in education and social economic status, variety in reasons for immigration, and sequential migration pattern. These characteristics of Taiwanese immigrants are elaborated as the following.

Taiwanese immigrants are comprised of Chinese from Taiwan with differences in age, occupation, household composition, dialect spoken, birthplace, education, religious and political affiliation. They include the owners of small and medium-sized business, retired civil servants, teachers and skilled professionals. Using a class model, Chen (1992) classified the Taiwanese immigrants into four groups according to their occupational and economic status: (a) the working class: workers in knitting factories, garment factories, restaurants, stores; (b) the owners of small business: self-employed owners of knitting factories, small shops, restaurants; (c) the professionals: professors, civil servants, doctors, managers; and (d) the capitalist class: owners of large factories, companies, hotels, restaurants.

Many of these Taiwanese immigrants are older than 30 when they come to the United States and have established family and career in their homeland before migration. They are not chiefly rural emigrants, like the early overseas Chinese. Many come from sophisticated urban backgrounds, and even those born in rural Taiwan had study or work experience in cities before they came to the United States (Chen, 1992). Based on U.S. census data, Tseng (1995) found that college graduates are twice as common among Taiwanese immigrants as among immigrants from China. High in premigration socioeconomic status is the most salient characteristic for the Taiwanese immigrants, especially for those who choose to settle in Los Angeles. According to Tseng (1995), executives, professionals and teachers comprised 87% of all Taiwanese who intended to reside in Los Angeles, in comparison to only 38% and 67% among Los Angeles bound PRC and Hong Kong immigrants.

One would wonder why the Taiwanese with established career and family want to emigrate overseas. According to a 1991 survey (Hsiao, 1991), one in eight Taiwanese indicated the desire to migrate overseas. In recent years, over 20,000 Taiwanese have been emigrating a year (Teng, 1995). Taiwanese are leaving for their children's education, family unification, business opportunities, a better living environment, or for fear about the political future of the island. There isn't one overriding reason for their emigration. The United States is one of the most popular destination of Taiwanese emigrants for her quality of education, living environment, opportunities for employment, business, and investment.

Under the U.S. immigration policy, kin sponsorship accounts for 80% of the annual quota. Sponsorship by kin already in the U.S. is a very important factor in the Taiwanese migration process (Chen, 1992). This is broadly referred to as "chain migration" or "sequential migration". The first flow of immigrants usually are students who later become permanent residents after completing their graduate studies and

working as professionals in the U.S. Their parents and sibling may immigrate to the U.S. in a later time. Parents usually immigrate after retirement.

Common Experiences and Adjustment Difficulties

Communication is one of the common problems for the Taiwanese immigrants because they do not have prior formal American education. They differ greatly from those who stay after finishing studies in the U.S. The former have money but find it difficult to communicate. Among the four occupational and economic classes, Chen (1992) found that language is the most serious problem for most Taiwanese workers. Language constrains them to work only in a Chinese ethnic enclave. Regardless of socioeconomic status and reasons for immigration, it is well established by many immigrants that language is very important to life adjustment after immigration.

Loss of family unity is common among Taiwanese immigrant families. Due to economic reason or children's education, only part of the household immigrate to the U.S. while the rest of the family remains in Taiwan. They are sometime referred to as "half-emigrated family" in Taiwan. The other common phenomena is that the male head of the household return to work in Taiwan after the whole family immigrated to the U.S. The male head of household would visit their families in the U.S. a couple of times a year. This kind of "astronaut" phenomenon is similar to their counterpart in Hong Kong (Leung, 1991).

In these father-absent families, their family lifestyle is similar to one with a single female headed household except that the head of the household is not the breadwinner and the family is visited periodically by the father (Huang, in press). Wives from these split household families often complain that after taking care of the children by themselves for many years, they have no lives of their own. Due to this kind of household arrangement, marital relationship is often at great risk if there is a lack of strong bonding between the couples.

Like other immigrant families, Taiwanese immigrants are faced with role and status changes due to differing rates and levels of acculturation. Many men with professional skills are unable to practice in the new land and are forced to change their career or to work for less paying jobs. Due to better communication skills and adaptability, women tend to find jobs more easily than their spouse. Children pick up the language and assimilate to the culture faster than their parents. Some Taiwanese parents might depend on their teenage or adult children for communication with the host society and find parenting their children quite a struggle.

Parenting is another common problem for Taiwanese immigrant families. Many Taiwanese parents are not well equipped to educate their Americanized children. What they already know about parenting from the past in Taiwan is very often not applicable to today's children in the U.S. According to Chen (1992), parents from working class and small businesses usually do not have time and sufficient language capability to supervise their children's homework. Taiwanese parents, like other Asian parents, are often complained of limited school involvement.

Migration to the U.S. has different meanings for different immigrants. For some divorced Taiwanese women, it means an emancipation from criticism and sadness and the chance to begin a new life. These women feel more at ease in the U.S. because people here usually do not question your past, and you can restart life here easily. It is also true for some immigrants, men and women, from other countries who escape from their abusive and difficult families by coming to the U.S.

Taiwanese Immigrants: Six Case Vignettes

Six non-clinical cases are used to illustrate the characteristics of Taiwanese immigrants and their common experience and difficulties. Their personal identities have been altered for the reason of confidentiality.

1. Mrs. T, an immigrant mother of two teenagers, has junior college education and has worked as a bookkeeper in Taiwan. She and her two sons, age 17 and 15 immigrated to the United States last year for reasons of pursuing better school and avoiding compulsory military service. Mrs. T is the designated parent to take care of the sons and to make sure they do well in school. Her husband remains in Taiwan to continue his work and to take care of his two elderly parents. He only comes to visit her and the sons once very three months.

For the sake of her sons' education, Mrs. T has to sacrifice her marital life to keep her sons' company while husband remains to work in Taiwan in order to support them in the U.S. On a day to day basis, Mrs. T functions like a single parent. She complains that she is given a great deal of pressure to make sure her sons do well in school and eventually attend a good college. While sons are in school, she attends ESL class in a local adult school. Her daily schedule is filled with transporting sons to and from school , attending adult school , and learning English. With limited English and social support, Mrs. T's stress of coping with daily difficulties is tremendous. There are times she feels relieved because she is free to do whatever she wants while husband and parents-in-law are not with her. However, she feels the increasing difficulty in disciplining sons because they become to have their own mind and do not always listen to her.

2. Mr. K is a scheduler of a public transportation company. Mr. and Mrs. K and their daughter immigrated to the U.S. almost 12 years ago under his sister's sponsorship. Before the migration, Mr. K worked for a bank and Mrs. K worked for a Chinese newspaper as an editor. Despite their college education and professional skills, they couldn't find any suitable job after the migration. Mr. K had worked many different jobs, including real estate agent, salesman, and bus driver before he became a scheduler at a public transportation company.

The Ks remains as an intact family. They have gone through many adjustment difficulties, including unemployment, marital discords, and parent-child conflicts. Since all of Mr. K's parents and sibling are in the United States, he has social and financial support from his extended family. Mrs. K's parents and sibling are all still in Taiwan and she misses them from time to time. Since career wise they are not advancing, they devote most of their time and energy to their daughter's education, family life and community activities.

3. In their 40s, Mr. and Mrs. C and their then 10 year-old daughter and 8 year-old son immigrated to the United States. They came to the U.S. for better business opportunities and for better education for their children. They first went to Florida for several years and later moved to Southern California. Mr. C is an owner of a trading company specializing in agricultural machinery. He was a business executive before migration and he brought with him capital and business expertise to the United States. He has invested in various businesses, including hotel, real estate, and others. He travels at least once a year to Taiwan. At this time, he seems to be doing relatively well in his business and both of his children are in graduate schools.

4. Mr. H is an owner of a small computer store. Ten years ago, in his 30s, Mr. H came to the United States with his wife and 7 year-old daughter. With a master degree in Chinese literature and history from a prestigious university, he worked for a few years as a teacher in Taiwan before the migration. He couldn't find any job with his educational background and skills. At the assistance of his cousin, he became a technician and owner of a computer store. Although his computer retail business just about breaks even, he enjoys his work and life after the migration. Through his business and other investment, he is able to support his family. Mr. H only socializes with his extended family members and feels less needs for community involvement. There is father-daughter tension because Mr. H puts a great deal of pressure on his

daughter to pursue a top ten university. His daughter is very upset for being unable to choose her own university.

5. Mr. B, owner of a small business, immigrated to the U.S. when he was 56 year-old. He and his family was granted a permanent resident status of the U.S. but he didn't actualize his immigration until he took an early retirement from a pharmaceutical company as general manager. Since he doesn't have a license to practice pharmacy in the States, he bought a small video duplication service and is a self-employed. His wife was a professor in nursing in Taiwan and she now works part time at a preschool.

6. Ms. W is a single mother who escaped from an abusive relationship in Taiwan and came to the U.S. with her new baby seven years ago. Her husband is a compulsive drinker and gambler. He destroyed her life and business. She used to live in fear and felt that she had no future if she would have stayed in Taiwan. Her only way out from the abusive relationship was to emigrate overseas. Despite many financial and life adjustment difficulties, she find emotional comfort and social support from Christian churches. By working as a beautician, she struggles to support herself and the child. After seven years of recuperation from previous abusive relationship, she is now ready for a new romantic relationship.

Adaptation Strategies

From the above case illustrations and this author's clinical experience and community observation, the common adaptation strategies adopted by Taiwanese immigrants are the following:

1. Split household. It is a common practice among the recent Taiwanese immigrants to maintain a household in Taiwan while establish a second home in the United States, especially for the families that already have a successful business in Taiwan or the fathers who already have promising professional careers in Taiwan. In order to provide on going financial support to the wife and children in the U.S., the

fathers have to stay and work in Taiwan. The duration for this kind of household arrangement can range from months to years depending on each family's unique circumstance.

2. Continuing close tie with homeland. In Tseng's study (1995), 65% of Taiwan business owners visit their homeland at least once a year. Regardless of household arrangement and occupations, Taiwanese immigrants often seek on going emotional support and financial assistance from Taiwan. The close tie with homeland is strengthened further by today's convenient air transportation and communication technology.

3. High educational investment. With their Confucian tradition, Taiwanese immigrants have a high expectation on their children's education. Seeking better education is one of the popular reasons why Taiwanese parents immigrated to the United States. It is believed that good education will guarantee the next generation a secured and satisfying life. Immigrant parents invest not only a lot of money but also emotion on children's school education and extracurricular. It is a common complaint by many Taiwanese immigrant teenagers that they are given extremely high pressure to excel in academic pursuit.

4. Attending adult schools. Many Taiwanese immigrants attend ESL, English as Second Language class at adult schools in the first few years after immigration. It is reported that adult schools provide an ideal transition for many immigrants. They not only teach new immigrants the important tool for communication but also assist them to cope with life adjustment difficulties. Some Taiwanese immigrants find adult school a place for social and emotional support in their early immigrant days.

5. Religious affiliation. Religious organizations, e.g., Buddhist temples and Protestant churches, play an important role in the Taiwanese immigrant community. They not only meet spiritual needs but also help new immigrants adapt to the new

environment. Churches and temples often provide a network of social support for their members and help them go through the difficult immigration process.

6. Joining social or business association. Taiwanese immigrants usually form their own support groups, e.g., commerce association, alumni association, Taiwanese or Chinese American association. Due to the difference in dialect and the lack of shared experience, Taiwanese immigrants seldom join the old Chinatown's clan or district associations.

7. Community participation. In contrast to early Chinese who tend to live and work in Chinatown, recent Taiwanese immigrants tend to live and work in suburban and ethnic mix communities. While they prefer to stay close to their own ethnic community, Taiwanese immigrants slowly learn to participate in mainstream activities and be active members of the host society. It is considered a healthy sign for immigrants to interact with other ethnic groups and to participate in local school and communities activities.

Mental Health Suggestions for Taiwanese immigrants

It seems a right place to end this paper by offering some mental health suggestions for Taiwanese immigrants and for mental health providers who serve them:

The immigrant family is advised to stay together. If separation between the couples and between parent and children is unavoidable, it should not be too long. Five or Ten years of marital separation or parent-child separation is not uncommon among Taiwanese immigrants. As Chen (1992) has pointed out that family unit is the main source of emotional and social support for Taiwanese immigrants. In contrast, clan association was the main source of support for the old Chinese immigrants from Canton in the past. Recent immigrants from Taiwan brought families, capital, and skills to pursue their American dream. It is very important that the Taiwanese

immigrant family could stay together. A strong family bonding and support will not only make immigration adjustment less traumatic but also enhances their mental health.

Immigrants need to learn English and American culture. The immigrant parents are strongly advised to attend adult schools or language institutes to learn English and American culture. Educational institutes usually provide a supportive learning environment and socialization opportunities for newcomers. Immigrant parents should not rely on their children for communication with the host society. Mastering English will allow the immigrants to communicate more effectively with others, including their children. It also increases their chance of succeeding in their career and enable them to enjoy their lives in the new land even more.

Taiwanese parents are advised to have a realistic educational expectation on their children. Many Taiwanese parents claim that they gave up what they established in Taiwan and came to the U.S. because of the children. It may be true to some degree that some parents immigrated to the U.S. for better education and a better life for their children. However, it becomes unhealthy for the parents to focus almost all of their energy and emotion on children's academic achievement. Many Taiwanese children complain that they do not have their own social lives because they are asked to study all the time and they are told that to play is wasting time. Immigrant parents are advised to adjust their educational expectation on their children according to the individual's ability and to follow the common educational practice in the United States.

Taiwanese immigrants could benefit from participating in various social support groups. They are encouraged to develop a social support network through religious organizations, adult schools, newcomers clubs, alumni associations, and business associations. There are many social support groups existing both in the immigrant community and in the mainstream community. Taiwanese immigrants could choose to participate according to their level of English acquisition and acculturation.

Immigrants are encouraged to utilize available community resources, e.g., social service, health service, mental health service, child care service, educational service. Although more public and private Mandarin bilingual human services need to be advocated, eligible Taiwanese immigrants should take advantage of available bilingual community services. In the areas of health and mental health, immigrants are advised to seek professional help for early prevention and treatment. Like other Asian immigrants, Taiwanese immigrants tend to avoid contact with mental health professionals until their mental and emotional problems get very serious. Recent immigrants need to be educated about proper use of community resources and mental health services.

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