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Reintegrating Self: Theorizing Women's Self-Transformations in Cross-Cultural Contexts

By Dongxiao Qin¹

Abstract

A grounded theory is developed to explore the processes of Chinese immigrant women's self-transformations in cross-cultural contexts. A series of psychological processes, 'integrating self,' 'fragmenting self,' and 'reintegrating self' are identified from interviews with ten Chinese women who immigrated to the United States in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Women's senses of self-transformations are interpreted from phenomenological, cultural, anthropological, and critical feminist perspectives. The implications of this research are theoretical and practical. It contributes to critical feminist theories of women's self-transformation within the context of cultural mobility from their culture of origin to the host culture. It also contributes to feminist psychological practices by enhancing mental health professionals' understanding of these women's diverse experiences and providing them with information on immigrant women's self-transformations in the changing sociocultural contexts. The theoretical and practical implications of this research to feminist theorists and clinic practices are discussed.

Key Words: self-transformation, grounded theory, critical feminist theory

Introduction

Today's world is an interconnected and changing place, and those immigrants who live in different cultural contexts are conscious of the changes of their lives, experiences and processes of self-understanding across borders from their culture of origin to the host culture. In late 80s and early 90s there was an increased number of Chinese immigrant women who accompanied their husbands (husbands as graduate students, visiting scholars or professionals) to live in the United States, among them were a large number of working-class immigrant women whose sociocultural and psychological experiences within the host culture have not been the focus of study or concern within feminist psychological researchers and mental health professionals. This research based on the grounded theory approach explored the processes in which a small group of Chinese immigrant working-class women made meaning of their life experiences and understood their senses of self-transformation across geographic, cultural and psychological borders.

Like many immigrant women from other countries, Chinese women who accompanied their husbands to enter the U.S. with particular goals and expectations yet faced many unknowns in a new cultural context. For many it was the first time of being *minority* women and *working-class* immigrants in a foreign land. As immigrant women of color they experienced marginalization due to the shifted culture, ethnicity, language, race, social class, and gender in the host culture. For the first time in their life, they

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began to wonder who they really were and what changed in their senses of self in a new land. This study specifically focused on the psychological processes of their self-transformations and hoped to generate a grounded theory toward better understanding and supporting these immigrant women's self-development in the host culture.

Theoretical Framework

The authenticity of self

"To the things themselves!" is the slogan of phenomenology. In Being and Time we are told by Heidegger (1962) that to be a self in an authentic way means *being-in-the-world*. World is the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person exists and in the design of which he/she participates. "Being-in-the-world" expresses that self and world are a unitary and structural whole and each is understandable only in terms of the other. The self is revealed when reflected in the worldly beings with which one constructs his/her self. The self is always one's openness and involvement with other beings in the world. One comes to know oneself not so much by abstract self-reflection as by interacting with others in social groups into which one was born. To be a human always means to be in connection with other people. To be an authentic self is to be contextualized in the world. Based on Heidegger's claims about the authentic self as *being-in-the-world*, I perceive the authenticity of self as a continuum, an extension of the inner psyche (a bundle of traits) to the embodiment of worldly beings contextualized in the meaningful relationships at large. The authentic self is one that is constantly being in connection and interacting with others in changing sociocultural contexts.

Cultural Critiques

In reflecting on the concept of authenticity of self and its relationship with culture in the context of American philosophy vis-a-vis Chinese philosophy, I am struck with the following general contrast. In America the ideological and philosophical stance has been based on *individualism*, whereas in China, the ideological and philosophical stance has been based on *relationalism* (Lykes & Qin, 2001). In the course of American history, the self has become ever more detached from the social and cultural contexts that embody the traditions. In order to affirm a self-celebratory cultural belief, Western psychology has participated and encouraged the belief in a negative relationship between self and other. The existing mainstream psychological theories concern the common notion that self-development evolves through stages of ever increasing levels of separation and spheres of mastery and personal independence. The "separate self," an autonomous 'self-contained entity' is highlighted in western cultures (Sampson, 1993). Challenges to the modern Western view of self have come from anthropologists and cultural psychologists who study how self and culture are co-constituting and co-constituted in cross-cultural contexts (Geertz, 1975; Shweder, 1984, 1990, 1991). As noted above, the modern Western view is *peculiar* in its cultural emphasis on individualism. Many other cultures value collectivism and do not conceptualize the person apart from his or her relationships (Brabeck, 1993; Ho, 1993; Howell, 1981; Kagitcibasi, 1989; Katiyama & Markus, 1995; Kim & Berry, 1993; Kirkpatrick & White, 1985; Lykes & Qin, 2001; Qin, 2004, 2009). For example, the Chinese self is very much influenced by traditional Confucianism, which is primarily concerned with human relationships and interactions (Tu, 1985). The

uniqueness of the self in Chinese perception is immanent within a ceaseless process of broadening and deepening relationships. The authenticity of Chinese self is perceived as '*being-in-webs-of social relations*' (Qin, 2004, 2009).

Critical Feminist Perspective

In the past few decades critical feminist theorists have redefined *culture* and *self* in the context of social class, power, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, and they critically analyze differing material and social relations resulting in cultural and historical differences (Brabeck, 1989, 1996; Crawford, 2006; Collins, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Gergen, 1993, 1994, 2001; hooks, 1984, 1989, 1990; Lykes & Qin, 2001; Qin, 2004, 2009; Qin & Lykes, 2006; Unger, 1988, 1989; Wilkinson, 1991, 2001; Fox, 2010). Women's sense of self and gender is grounded in their everyday life and shaped by their unique 'cultural DNA' (Fox, 2010). Rather than a unified culture, a complex combination of critical cultural elements (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity) are forged, reproduced, and contested within asymmetrical relations of power that constrain and facilitate one's developing self (Qin, 2004). Cultural feminist *essentialist* claims of similarly *gendered* experience across women's diversities ignore the ways that culture is composed of asymmetrical material relations. Recently I called attention to re-conceptualize *culture* as *critical* and *local* (Qin, 2004). In my grounded theory research with a group of Chinese international women students studying in US universities, I perceive self-construction as occurring in a changing socio-cultural contexts, with attention to how power is articulated in race, gender and other critical components (Qin, 2009). I posit that one's self-understanding changes as a border-crosser moves from his/her culture of origin to the host culture. I developed the metaphor of 'reweaving a fragmented web of self' to describe how women participants experienced changes in self-understanding resulting from their move to the United States to study (Qin & Lykes, 2006; Qin, 2009).

A critical feminist interpretation of culture and self helped to frame my grounded theory analysis of a small group of Chinese women immigrants' self-transformations in cross-cultural contexts. I assumed that the process of moving into a different culture and facing the accompanying psychological, emotional and social changes may challenge these women to rethink themselves in the host culture. I sought to explore *how* these Chinese working-class immigrant women understood the shifts of their life experiences and *what* alternative ways they reconstructed their "selves" in a cross-cultural context. This study sought to contribute to our knowledge about Chinese immigrant women's self-transformations in the context of cultural mobility from their culture of origin to the host culture.

Method

Sample

A small group of ten Chinese immigrant women who came to the United States in the last two decades of the twentieth century were invited to participate in this study. All of the participants were from Han ethnic group in mainland China, a group that represents dominant and mainstream Chinese culture. Although most of the participants

were middle-class professionals in China, after immigration they became working-class assembly workers who did the semi-skilled testing work in a US computer company. The range of their ages is from 32 to 45. The years of their residence in the United States were between 10 to 15 years at the time of research. Most of women had college degrees in China and they were all married and mothers with children of different ages. These Chinese women immigrants were considered as an under-studied group in psychology research. The grounded theory research strategy and attainment of a saturated sample (Charmaz,1990) set the limited number of participants in this study.

Procedures

The ten participants were selected from a company located in the greater Boston area through snowball sampling. As the research progressed, I employed theoretical sampling to purposively select participants whose experiences contrasted with those of the women whose stories I had already collected and analyzed (Glaser, 1992). Each participant completed two audiotaped interviews that lasted a total of approximately two hours each. An interpretive phenomenological interview structure (Seidman, 1991) was used to construct the semi-structured open-ended interview questions. These questions include three parts which focus on their past, current life experiences, and their future life goals. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin so that participants could provide more accurate narratives of their life experiences. I then translated the transcripts into English. In terms of the descriptive and interpretive validities, I asked a bilingual Chinese scholar and a Chinese doctoral student to check the accuracy of these translations.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory analysis using constant comparison procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1976) began with my first interview transcript, the first slice of data. The analysis developed through the steps of open coding, categorization and theoretical coding. In the first step, I looked for what I could define and discover in the data. At the same time I also paid attention to the leads, ideas, and issues in the data themselves. Glaser (1978) advocates line-by-line analysis of the first interview, questioning each line of transcript. I then wrote down code names and included samples from transcripts. By studying the emerging data and coding, I created an initial order of codes. Focused coding is the second step of the coding process, i.e., creating categories. I took a selective set of useful categories that were developed in the initial coding phase and applied them to larger amount of data. Categories were taken either from the natural language of the participants (an in vivo code) or from my analytic interest. I looked for codes that indicated similar processes, patterns, relationships, ambiguities or kinds of events and how they were constructed. I then grouped several codes into one inclusive theoretical label of the many concrete and descriptive accounts that seem to express a similar issue, which enhanced the theorization process by entering an abstract level of analysis. Finally, I identified and labeled an overarching basic psychological process, that is, 'reintegrating a fragmented self.' Subsequent interviewing was directed at evaluating and redefining this model.

Findings: Being professional women in their homeland

Integrating Self

The theoretical category ‘integrating self’ captures the psychological processes through which the majority of these women immigrants constructed their senses of self in the web of relationships in China. Women participants spoke about their family traditions and parental influences, mothering/daughtering experiences, folklore theories of harmonious ways of being, power of being middle-class professional women, and networks in their workplaces etc.

Family tradition and parental influences

All of the women talked about their family relationships and parental influences in their ways of being in China. They also talked about Chinese traditional values on “being-in-webs-of-belongings” that is, the *relational contexts* that facilitated their self-growth in their early life experiences. Jian-Lei, a mother of two kids and a former company manager in China, came from a large extended family. She spoke with pride of “being together” in her family.

“There were eight people in my family, my grandma, my parents and five siblings. We lived in a small apartment. My grandma was in charge of everything and my parents took a very good care of her and kids. We were very close and emotionally attached to each other...My grandma is the head of the family, as you know, the elder person with grey hair is honored in Chinese culture.”

Honor mothering and daughtering

Wen-Yan, a former middle-school teacher in China, talked about her mother’s way of being and doing that had such an impact on her later life.

“My mother was a traditional Chinese woman who loves her children, cares for her husband and respects the elders. She played a critical role in fulfilling those obligations. She had so much energy and skills to make everyone happy. She is a great role model to me.”

Xiao-Xia, a former financial analyst in China, talked about how she played a daughter’s role as she learned those family obligations from her mother since childhood and how she is mothering and daughtering in a large family in China.

“I took care of my mother-in-law since she moved in to live with us.... We were really close. She treated me like her daughter and likewise I loved her as my own mother. Maybe that’s because how well my mother treated her-mother-in-law. You know it was the way women were supposed to be together in my family.”

Listening to these women's narratives, I was impressed by their constructions of the ‘gendered self’ through honoring the traditional roles of "mothering" and "daughtering" in their respective families. They honored mothering as always being-in-relations. The relational skills learned from their mothers influenced these women's ways of being daughters thereafter.

Folklore theories of harmonious ways of being

Ping, a former staff member at an elementary school in China, recalled that her family lived in a building with eight families on the same floor.

“We were like a big family together, people on the same floor were very close and getting along harmoniously.... We often visited one another, chatted and sometimes exchanged foods and share things.... Especially on holidays, like Chinese New Year, people would go around to send their greetings to each family...”

The harmonious ways of being together with neighborhood and community supported one of Chinese folklore sayings ‘neighbors are dearer than distant relatives.’

Power of being professional women

Almost all women participants were middle-class professionals in China. Among them were teachers, staff members, company managers, financial analyst, program director, physician assistant, government employee etc. Hong-Hong, a college professor of Chinese literature, felt it lucky to be a woman faculty at a good university.

“I was a professor and well respected by my students in China. I had this power, the power to empower my students with knowledge. Also it was a well-paid job with good benefits and vocations. I was lucky!”

Jia-Ling, a former government employee in China, mentioned her sense of power and pride as a professional woman.

“I was a very busy person, one of few women staff members working for the city mayor. I felt powerful to get hands on those important documents, met important people, and dealt with many issues on a daily basis. I had the sense of power and accomplishments in China.”

Weaving network relations

The sense of power and privileges empowered these women’s sense of selves in multiple ways. Xiao-Xiao, a business woman at an international company, talked about her feelings of being connected within a large network in business relationships:

“Without networks in China, you couldn’t accomplish anything. My job required me to make relationships with customers, other company partners, and government officials. Once the networks were built up, it was much easier

to do your business. I assume that you were not able to survive without networks. Whether it's good or bad it's all about Guanxi (relationships)!"

Women's reflections on their life experiences in China were based on their integrated family traditions/values on 'being-in-webs-relationships.' *Integrating self* for these women was dependent on their collective senses of self constituted by traditional values on harmony and relationships. As middle-class professional women, they developed a sense of self-worth and power in their homeland.

Becoming working-class immigrant women in the United States

Fragmenting Self

The process of 'fragmenting self' reflected women's *fragmented* senses of selves generated from their lived experiences as working-class assembly workers in a US company. The major categories that were developed from their narratives to describe this fragmented psychological process included 'feeling isolated,' 'being dumb and deaf,' 'feeling powerless,' 'mother's guilt,' 'it hurt!'"

Feeling isolated

Ze-Hui, a mother of two kids and the wife of a doctoral student, sadly said:

"Four of us squeezed in this small two-bedroom apartment and I had no contact with my neighbors. Part of the reason is that my English is limited and I could only speak a few words. Also my neighbors seemed very busy. I lived there for almost two years, we didn't really know anyone and I felt pretty isolated..."

Feeling dumb and deaf

Many women participants came to this culture with limited English. Some of them encountered language barrier in the new land. Hua, a technician in China, expressed that:

"I lost my voices here! I mean my English is so poor that nobody could understand me. I just worked hard on this assembly line, no talk! I only speak Mandarin to my kids and my husband at home. If I go to the public places or go shopping, I'm deaf...my 9-years-old daughter had to translate everything for me. It's a shame to be so dumb and deaf here."

Feeling powerless

Many women participants were middle-class professionals in China, yet they became assembly workers on wages due to the limitation of their English and professional training in the host culture. Jian-Lei, a former company manager in China, commented that:

"When I was a manger in China, I had very good relationship with the

employees. I treated them like my family members. But in this US company, the relationship between the boss and us was so distant, very cold and harsh...I was made to work overtime on a daily basis. And I had no control on whatsoever. It made me feel so powerless!”

Mother Guilt

Wen-Yan, a former government employee in China and a mother of three kids, expressed her sense of ‘mother guilt’ in the host culture.

“I had the secured and well-paid job in China and I thought myself as a good mother who was able to fulfill my kids’ needs. But now I couldn’t afford to live in a nice neighborhood area with good public schools....besides I am not capable to help with my kids’ homework in English. The worst was that I couldn’t communicate well with their teachers due to my limited English. Those things really made me feel bad and guilty as a mother...It’s painful!”

It hurt!

Hong-Hong, a former college professor and mother of two kids, expressed her feelings of being hurt by the discriminations that her daughter experienced at school:

“One day my 6-years-old daughter, Tina, came back home with swollen eyes. She just couldn’t stop sobbing. Finally she told me that she was teased by a kid in her class ... The kid was called to go to principal’s office afterwards...Tina felt so sad and humiliated. It hurt me more than my kid...”

Women participants expressed different levels of psychological pain, guilt, powerlessness, humiliation and dysfunctional roles as mothers as they moved from their culture of origin to the host culture. Many of them expressed their disappointment and sadness of the ‘paradise lost’ after they relocated to America. The psychological and sociocultural dislocations (due to the shifted cultural values, social class, power, gender and ethnicity) put them in a sense of ‘fragmented self’ in the host culture.

Reintegrating Self

The process of ‘reintegrating self’ in the host culture involves re-thinking and re-integrating the fragmented facets of self to create a new and more *resilient self* in the host culture. The major categories generated from their narratives include ‘being helpful to others,’ ‘empowering others,’ ‘being strong for my kids,’ ‘God is my shepherd,’ ‘keep on dreaming’ etc.

Being helpful to others

Ze-Hui shared her courage to reach out and offer help to her neighbors.

“I always wanted to be helpful and make friends with others. There was this

single mother with four kids in my neighbor. One day I met her in the elevator with two babies in her arms, I offered to help her...She smiled and let me hold one of her babies. Then I chatted with her in probably broken English, but she understood and thanked me again and again.”

Empowering others

Jian-Lei, the former manager in China, broke her silence and realized that she had something to empower others.

“In fact I knew what a good and efficient supervisor was supposed to be in this company. My boss did not have to be ‘tough’ or ‘harsh’ on us (employees). He could learn some relational skills to empower others. I wrote him a letter with some advices on his management (my husband helped to translate the letter into English). He got that letter and asked me to have lunch with him...he actually appreciated my advice to him. That changed everything...our relationships and his attitudes toward other workers are getting much better. It made me feel so powerful!”

Being strong for my kids

Many women actually had much to offer their kids as they struggled to regain self-esteem as good mothers in the host culture. Hong-Hong shared her changing perception of mothering after experiencing much pain of devaluing herself:

“I realize that it hurt me and my kids if I keep on blaming myself...My daughter once said to me “Mom, I need you to be there for me!” That waked me up! You know I used to be a very strong woman in China, loving and capable. Still I am! I can work harder to improve my English. I want to get a master degree someday. I have to be strong for my kids!”

God is my shepherd!

Some of women participants became Christian believers after they experienced difficulties in their life transitions in the host culture. Meng-Yue is a mother of three kids and a wife of a restaurant waiter. She said:

“It was a blessing to become a believer here. I used to worry all the time. The burden of life and work often threw me into darkness....But now I have God in my life. HE is my shepherd and I shall not lack of anything. I have no worries and fear in God’s love. I can always count on HIM!”

Keep on dreaming

After years of struggles and adjustment of life and work here, Xia-Xia expressed her hope and faith on herself in the future:

“I need to keep my dreams and hope for the future. If you have no

dreams, your spirit will die eventually. I have many good dreams for my kids and I also have dream for myself, I hope to get into a graduate school to study finance...I dream of working at a top finance company someday. “

The process of *reintegrating selves* for these women participants engage in multiple lived experiences which include reweaving new social relations, re-empowering themselves, reconstructing mothering/daughtering, and regaining spiritual strength through personal efforts and pursuits. Immigration to the United States offered an opportunity for these Chinese women to rethink the meaning of being a woman in a new land, which, in turn, deepened their understandings of self and others.

Discussion

Results from this study suggest a series of processes through which these Chinese immigrant women developed a critical understanding of their lived experiences and self-transformations within a context of cultural mobility. The major processes of ‘integrating self,’ ‘fragmenting self,’ and ‘reintegrating self’ captured the processes of their self-transformations from their culture of origin to the host culture. Findings from this study also support critical feminist perspective, that is, self is not static but an active and fluid subjectivity that constantly integrates and reintegrates diverse threads into an ever-changing web of power relations (Lykes & Qin, 2001; Qin & Lykes, 2006; Qin, 2004, 2009). I hope the concepts of ‘fragment self’ and ‘reintegrating self’ help us to develop critical understanding of Chinese immigrant women’s authentic self-transformations in the shifted cultural contexts. Their self-transformations were shaped by the shifted power relations of class, gender, ethnicity and cultural values in the host culture. The concept of ‘fragmenting self’ reflects a critical feminist perspective that challenges the perception of self as a stable and unified entity. ‘Reintegrating self’ also critiques essentialist feminist claims that there is a universal ‘gendered’ self. Changing cultural experiences, conflicts, gaps and inconsistencies of diverse women’s life experiences reflect the local, historical, and sociocultural particularities as understood through the repositioned cultural values/belief, gender, class, power, language, and ethnicity (hooks, 1984; Lykes, 1985, 1989; Collins, 1990; Unger, 1990; Unger & Crawford, 2000; Crawford, 2006; Gergen, 2001; Qin, 2004, 2009; Qin & Lykes, 2006; Fox, 2010). Chinese immigrant women’s self-transformation in cross-cultural contexts supported the critical feminist perspectives on culture and self (Qin, 2004, 2009).

Implication for feminist theory, research and clinical practices

Theorizing Chinese women immigrants’ self-transformations from a critical feminist perspective would advance feminist research and clinic work in the following ways. First, to avoid generating an *essential* theory of *all* women’s “gendered” experiences, feminist researchers need to produce a *local theory* based on diverse groups of immigrant women’s self-understandings and the meanings that they make out of their unique lived experiences. The *local theory* is in contrast with *grand narratives* of essentialist feminist self theories that often serve as normalizing discourses and generalizing women experiences. Secondly, no single feminist self-theory can possibly

capture the "truth" about *all* women, as every truth is incomplete, partial, and culture bound (Qin, 2004, 2009; Qin & Lykes, 2006). Thirdly, in place of these grand theories, critical feminist theorists suggest looking for multiplicities, or micro-theories. Feminist researchers need to focus on developing *specific and local* knowledge that informs and leads to understanding women's different senses of self across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Such *local* theories are useful to address questions of specifically how social relationships of culture, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and power are exercised and transformed in women's lives.

Since the range of diversity among women immigrants in the American culture is getting more complex, this has far-reaching implications for mental health professionals. To advance clinical and mental health practices working with immigrant women from critical feminist perspective, one of the important aspects of intervention is to develop in-depth and critical understanding of women's lived experiences and the changing processes of their self-transformations across differing contexts. It involves a way of critical analysis of women's *repositioned selves* based on their experiences of psychological conflicts, emotional difficulties, and socio-cultural gaps in the changing context from their culture of origin to the host culture. For clinical and mental health professionals, one of the important aspects indicates helping immigrant women to cope with differences without diminishing their unique sense of self embedded in the critical cultural contexts. Experiences based any interactions between critical cultural elements (i.e. race, class, gender and power) may vary from one individual to another. In order to deepen their understanding of diverse women lived experiences, the clinicians and psychologists are challenged to gain the clarity about each immigrant woman's socio-cultural background, and to explore their *fluid and changing* senses of self grounded in their local and specific historical contexts. It involves becoming aware of any diverse perceptions and attitudes on one's sense of self that one had integrated or changed over the course of cross-cultural mobility. It challenges clinicians and mental health professionals to help women immigrants to reintegrate their fragmented selves in the host culture. The very process of helping needs mental health professionals' critical thinking, compassion and lifelong commitment to the large number of women immigrant population in the United States.

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