

Emerging Identity of Chinese American: From Adolescence to Late Adulthood

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The first and only time I ever had the opportunity to see Mr. C was through a screen. His face carried gentle lines that became more pronounced with each expression he made while telling me his myriad of stories. He had a quiet presence reminiscent of a flowing river, a motif I noticed in a glass mosaic of a body of water framed on the wall behind him. His salt and pepper hair blew in the air, partly due to the breeze from the ceiling fan above him, resembling an actor on a movie set. Indeed, Mr. C's story is no less than a blockbuster in its own right.

Introduction

At 60 years old, Mr. C is a Chinese immigrant working as a chef and restaurant owner in Mason, a small town just south of Urbana, Illinois. He shares his home with his wife, and his two daughters are currently attending university. One is a senior majoring in biology in Illinois, while the other is a freshman majoring in forensic science in New York City.

Adolescence

Mr. C was born in 1962 Sichuan, China. Although the province is now known for its bustling metropolitan scene, Mr. C was born on a small plot of land where his father was a humble farmer and his mother was an outspoken homemaker. He rarely left his village as a young child, enjoying the comfort and security of what he knew and avoiding uncomfortable new experiences. He was the youngest of two siblings, a sister six years older than him and a brother three years older than him. In his adolescence, surrounded by a predominantly homogeneous community, Mr. C's tapestry was woven with shared customs and familial bonds.

The distinct flavors of Sichuan cuisine became both a culinary heritage and a cultural emblem, connecting him to the heart of his community.

Mr. C's socioemotional development is deeply influenced by his upbringing in rural China, shaped by cultural expectations and values. Erickson's psychosocial theory and other social development theories provide a framework to understand the interplay of cultural, familial, and individual factors in Mr. C's life.

Some of Mr. C's earliest memories involve the Confucian principles prevalent in his upbringing. Mr. C described his younger self as confused and constantly questioning the world around him. Based on Kohlberg's 5th and 6th stages of postconventional morality, at this point in life Mr. C was most likely developing a sense of duty not just to his family but also to the broader community (Hutchison). In the Confucian cultural context, moral decisions are often grounded in principles such as benevolence, righteousness, and loyalty. These principles align with the Confucian emphasis on the greater good of the collective and the importance of maintaining harmonious social relationships. During his adolescence, Mr. C developed a moral framework that balanced Confucian values with emerging universal ethical principles.

For instance, filial piety, a cornerstone of Confucian ethics, encourages individuals to prioritize the needs and desires of their parents and ancestors. In Mr. C's case, this translated into a strong sense of duty and responsibility toward his family. However, as he navigated adolescence, exposure to broader cultural influences and perhaps personal experiences contributed to the development of more individualistic and universal ethical principles (Hutchison).

Culturally-driven parenting practices in China, as reflected in Mr. C's case, underscore the importance of education and adherence to social standards. The emphasis on academic

achievement as a pathway to social prosperity, coupled with high levels of parental involvement, shapes Mr. C's parenting philosophy. The shift in parenting attitudes over generations, marked by a move towards autonomy support and increased parental warmth, reflects adaptability to evolving societal contexts while maintaining the cultural value of academic success.

In the context of Mr. C's adolescence and his cultural background, Robert Kegan's theory of affiliation vs. abandonment can provide insights into his approach to relationships and independence. Kegan's theory focuses on the development of a person's sense of self in relation to others, particularly examining how individuals navigate connections with others while maintaining a sense of autonomy. Mr. C very proudly touts the friendships he has retained from childhood. He often returns to stay with these friends when visiting his hometown. In Mr. C's case, the cultural differences in the importance of peer relationships align with Kegan's framework. Chinese culture traditionally places a strong emphasis on collectivism and group harmony, valuing relationships that contribute to the well-being of the larger community. This emphasis is reflected in Mr. C's encouragement of strong peer affiliations for his child, as friendships are seen not only as sources of individual autonomy but also as contributors to the stability and harmony of the group.

Additionally, Mr. C's experience with his two older siblings, where he never struggled to relate to them and felt confident in his social ability, may indicate a strong sense of affiliation within his family context. This positive experience of connection within his family could contribute to his emphasis on fostering similar connections for his child, aligning with Kegan's idea of affiliation as a crucial aspect of social development (Chen).

Mr. C's educational aspirations were marked by challenges faced by rural children in accessing quality education due to institutional inequalities, exemplified by issues like school

consolidation. The cultural emphasis on academic achievement as a path to upward social mobility in rural settings likely played a role in shaping Mr. C's social development. Contrary to the idea that parental absence solely determines well-being, the narratives highlight the significance of stable caregiving arrangements and the quality of care received. The experiences of rural children, including Mr. C, are intricately woven into multi-layered processes of inequality, encompassing factors such as the rural-urban divide and patrilineal gender norms (Liu). On an intrapersonal level, Mr. C referred to his disconnect with school as a point of contention with his parents. While he was relatively high achieving in school, he was drawn towards the artistic nature of life pursuing subjects like painting and calligraphy.

The overarching theme is the dynamic interaction between Mr. C's individual characteristics, his cultural background, and the socioemotional influences in his environment. This comprehensive understanding helps unravel the complexities of Mr. C's development, offering insights into how his experiences in rural China contribute to his current perspectives and parenting practices.

Young Adulthood

In the waning months of the year 1995, Mr. C found himself in the midst of an exciting and terrifying adventure—his immigration to the United States. His journey began through a work-scholarship opportunity and eventually found himself working as a chef in various restaurants around Chinatown. Around this time, he went back to Sichuan to get married and brought his wife to the U.S. the following year. In the coming years, Mrs. C gave birth to their two daughters, all of whom were settled in NYC's Chinatown.

Mr. C recalled a story from his first night moving to the United States. He was staying with a host family and for dinner the family made him a huge feast of pasta, garlic bread, and other Italian dishes. Mr. C, who was not used to the large caloric intake in one meal, was struggling to get the food down. He recalls that he had been clouded by the excitement and adrenaline of the move, but he humorously remarks the Italian food as the first obstacle that brought him to the difficult reality of being an immigrant.

Although he kept a light tone telling that story, Mr. C faced significant challenges related to acculturation and discrimination. Stepping out of Chinatown was always a bit of a challenge for Mr. C, even being in such a diverse city, he often found himself facing subtle challenges stemming from his identity of being an immigrant. For example, a simple five minute conversation at the deli could take up to twenty minutes because of his accent, the restaurant he worked in threatened his job over the use MSG, a key ingredient in many Chinese and American dishes, and supporting his life in the states while also balancing providing for his family back home was seemingly difficult to balance financially. He also recalls feeling lonely when first settling in, and facing subtle discrimination and acculturation challenges may have negatively influenced his self-efficacy beliefs. He often felt unwelcome in finding a community with diverse people, especially with a language barrier, so he turned to the people in his neighborhood that reminded him of home. Social identity theory suggests that individuals often exhibit in-group favoritism, showing a preference for members of their own social group. In Mr. C's case, this manifested in seeking connections within the Chinese immigrant community for social support, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging (Henkens).

In terms of career identity development, Mr. C's approach aligns with moratorium transitioning to achievement as he initially underwent a period of exploration and uncertainty but

later solidified his career goals. Mr. C worked at a Chinese restaurant outside of Chinatown NYC, and the restaurant was run by an American man. Mr. C learned a lot about running a business from his boss, but often was told to adjust his authentic cooking techniques to accommodate American customers. Because of this, the concept of cultural capital is relevant to Mr. C as he faced early challenges related to understanding career paths due to “cultural differences and lack of exposure to certain facets of the dominant culture” (Polenova).

In a study that “examines career identity formation of Asian American college students from first-generation immigrant families as a model of acculturation” (Polenova), participants' sense of obligation to their parents, rooted in filial piety, reflects the impact of collectivist family values on their social relationships. The preference for careers in science and medicine, influenced by family expectations, highlights the interplay between individual aspirations and familial influences, aligning with Erikson's emphasis on the negotiation of identity within the context of relationships. Mr. C, on the other hand, struggled with not aligning to his family's expectations. He often worried about whether or not he would be able to send money back home which put a significant strain on his sense of well-being. The struggle to balance these cultural influences indicates a known hardship, resonating with Erikson's concept of the challenges individuals face in forming intimate connections while navigating societal expectations. Mr. C was able to reconnect with his intimacy after marrying his wife in Sichuan and introducing her to his one bedroom New York apartment. A couple of years later, Mr. C had given birth to two daughters.

In contemplating Mr. C's role in raising his two daughters, it is conceivable that the insights gleaned from the text could shape his parenting approach. Guided by a strength-based perspective, Mr. C actively sought out and nurtured the strengths and positive attributes of his

daughters, acknowledging the valuable contributions they make to their own development. Attuned to the gender differences underscored in immigrant parenting studies, he tailored his parenting strategies to address the distinct experiences and challenges faced by each daughter. Embracing the call for a diversified viewpoint (Guo). With an awareness of transnational parenting dynamics, Mr. C might prioritize maintaining connections with the cultural roots of his daughters, recognizing the impact of immigration on familial relationships. Moreover, cognizant of the role of information and communication technologies in transnational families, he may employ digital tools to facilitate communication, particularly if physical separations exist (Guo).

In summary, the information on young adult immigrants' civic engagement, antisocial behavior, and the role of social connection offers a valuable lens to understand potential dynamics in Mr. C's adulthood, considering his immigrant background and the challenges he may have faced in the United States.

Late Adulthood

In his later adulthood, Mr. C and his family moved out of vibrant NYC to a small white town in Southern Illinois, Mason. He moved out there to an empty building with dreams of running his own Chinese restaurant. Introducing the colorful taste of Sichuan and NYC to a homogenous white town was a risk, but it was a risk Mt. C wanted to accomplish his dream of becoming an entrepreneur and having freedom over his kitchen. He started a family business with his wife, and after many years, he is looking towards retirement.

In his late adulthood, Mr. C grapples with the multifaceted challenges of emerging elderhood. Firstly, he contends with the Acknowledgment and Acceptance of the Realities of Aging, facing difficulties in reconciling with the physical and cognitive changes that aging

brings (Age of). The awareness that he is entering a new life stage, characterized by potential health concerns and a shift in societal roles, contributes to his distress. Concurrently, Mr. C experiences the Normalization of Associated Angst about the Future, encountering common anxieties inherent in Emerging Elderhood. The uncertainties surrounding how to structure his time, fears of isolation, and apprehensions about health and purpose are integral to the normalization process during this transitional period (Age of).

Additionally, Active Reminiscence and Possible Longing for the Past manifest as Mr. C reflects on the purpose and identity derived from his career and active parenting, expressing a yearning for the familiarity of past roles and routines. The Accommodation to Physical, Cognitive, and Social Changes becomes evident as he grapples with adjusting to a new routine, accepting physical changes, and adapting to a different social context—an integral part of the developmental process in Emerging Elderhood (Skerrett). Furthermore, Mr. C undergoes a Search for New Emotionally Meaningful Goals, struggling to find activities or goals that provide emotional fulfillment and meaning in this stage of life. The quest for purpose and relevance emerges as a pivotal aspect of this transition. Lastly, the Expansion of the Capacity to Tolerate Ambiguity and Complexity of Life Circumstances becomes crucial for Mr. C as he faces the overwhelming ambiguity of the future and the complexity of navigating this new phase. Developing the capacity to tolerate such ambiguity is identified as an integral part of his psychological adjustment in Emerging Elderhood (Skerrett).

In Mr. C's case, running a family restaurant may involve the dynamics of familial relationships, responsibilities, and shared goals. The concept of structural solidarity, encompassing living in close proximity to adult children, aligns with the potential scenario of Mr. C working closely with his family in the restaurant venture. The study's findings on the

positive impact of frequent contact between parents and children on depressive symptoms may be relevant to Mr. C's situation, especially if the family unit is actively involved in the restaurant's day-to-day operations.

As Mr. C contemplates retirement, various theories of aging and retirement provide valuable perspectives on how this life transition might impact him. These theories, although not initially designed to address cultural diversity, offer insights into the psychological and social aspects of retirement.

Disengagement Theory, proposed by Cummings and colleagues (1960), suggests that as individuals age, they tend to become less socially connected. While this theory does not explicitly focus on retirement as a career phase, its emphasis on decreased social interactions aligns with the idea that retirement may lead to a shift in relationships. For Mr. C, who has been actively engaged in his career and community, the transition to retirement may involve adjustments in his social connections, potentially impacting how he perceives himself in relation to others (Lytle).

Role Theory, rooted in the work of Mead (1913) and Linton (1936), emphasizes the impact of societal roles on an individual's self-image. In the context of retirement, role theory suggests that the transition can be influenced by societal expectations, and individuals may experience adjustments in their self-perception (Lytle). Mr. C, who has played a significant role as a chef and provider, may undergo shifts in his self-image as he transitions away from the active workforce. Cultural factors, such as expectations within the Chinese immigrant community, may also play a role in shaping Mr. C's perception of retirement.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the engagement skills employed during the interview, the ability to create a comfortable and open space for Mr. C to share his story was paramount. Active listening, empathy, and cultural sensitivity were pivotal in navigating the nuances of his narrative. The interview process reinforced the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of an individual's experiences, beliefs, and cultural context. Lessons learned extend beyond the interview room and will undoubtedly assist in my journey toward becoming a social worker. The importance of embracing diversity, recognizing the transformative power of resilience, and understanding the intricate dance between tradition and adaptation are invaluable insights that will shape my approach to supporting individuals on their unique life courses.

In the symphony of Mr. C's life, themes of resilience, cultural fusion, and intergenerational connectivity resound. His story is a testament to the enduring spirit of immigrants, blending traditions with adaptations, navigating challenges with fortitude, and etching a narrative of hope and perseverance. As he continues his journey, Mr. C stands as a testament to the resilience and strength inherent in the human spirit.

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