

Exploring Spousal Bereavement Adjustment among Older Chinese Immigrants in Calgary

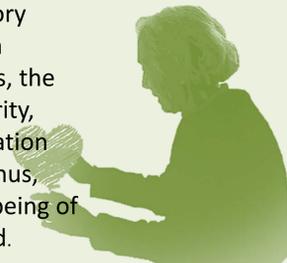
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Background

Spousal bereavement is considered one of the most stressful events that older adults will experience (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). It is also culturally embedded, as it is related to cultural beliefs and attitudes concerning death and family relationships (Jin & Chrisatakis, 2009; Saito, 2013). However, limited research casts light on how spousal bereavement adjustment occurs in certain ethno-cultural groups. Chinese older adults' spousal bereavement and widowhood may be further complicated by other factors including social isolation and migratory stress (Lai & Chau, 2007). In Calgary, Chinese immigrants, the second largest visible minority, make up 6.3% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Thus, investigation into the well-being of this population is warranted.



Research Questions

- 1) What are the lived experiences of older Chinese immigrants coping with spousal bereavement?
- 2) What personal, familial, community, and social supports do older Chinese immigrants use to cope with their widowhood?

Methodology

• Descriptive Phenomenology

Descriptive phenomenology was chosen because it assists researchers in understanding the meaning of a phenomenon (i.e., lived experience coping with spousal bereavement) as it is lived by individuals (i.e., older Chinese immigrants in Calgary) (Davidsen, 2013).

• Sampling Strategies

1) criterion sampling

The inclusion criteria for the study are: a) first-generation Chinese immigrants (or sponsored by child); b) living in Calgary for more than one year; c) aged 65 years old or older; and d) at least six-month post-loss of their spouse due to death.

2) maximum variation sampling

3) snowball sampling

• Demographics

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Marital status	Residence	Employment	Years in Calgary	Years of spousal loss	Religious background
1	Lucy	Female	65	Widowed	Living in a rent room	Part-time job	9	14	Christian
2	Lan Hua	Female	65	Widowed	Living with son	Retired	9	25	Buddhism
3	Tom	Male	66	Widowed	Living alone in a senior apartment	Retired	22 (after 4 yrs in Winnipeg)	4	/
4	Ying	Female	73	Widowed	Living with daughter's family	Retired	7	15	/
5	Cui	Female	74	Widowed	Living alone in a senior apartment	Retired	19	3	Christian
6	Baoyu	Male	75	Widowed	Living in his own house with a renter	Retired	5	6	/
7	Song Jiaxiu	Female	78	Widowed	Living with daughter's family	Retired	4	5	/
8	A Fang	Female	81	Widowed	Living with daughter's family	Retired	8	7	Christian
9	San Gui	Female	82	Widowed	Living alone in a senior apartment	Retired	15	15	Christian
10	Jing	Male	84	Widowed	Living alone in his own house	Retired	24	0.5	Christian
11	Chow	Female	85	Widowed	Living alone in a senior apartment	Retired	20 (after 10 yrs in Red Deer)	5	/
12	Liang	Female	89	Widowed	Living alone in a senior apartment	Retired	24	34	/

• Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese). The interviews were recorded and audiotapes were subsequently transcribed and translated into English.

• Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) seven steps for data analysis in descriptive phenomenology were followed.

Systematic Literature Review

First we carried out a systematic literature review on spousal bereavement and/or widowhood in late life published in the past 10 years. Fifty articles were identified; 40 focused on older adults in general, only five, specifically, concerned immigrants in Western countries and five examined older adults living in China/Hong Kong. Thematic analysis produced the following five categories:

1. Effects of Spousal Loss

Spousal loss contributed to negative effects on physical health or health routines (Lee & Carr, 2007; Richardson et al., 2015). Psychologically, it was significantly relevant to depressive symptoms (Johnson, Zhang, & Prigerson, 2008) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (O'Connor, 2010) and so on in late life. Alternatively, several studies discussed participants' resilience following spousal loss, such as reduced positive emotions after the spousal loss (Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Bonanno, 2010).

2. Adjustment of Spousal Bereavement

Equal family distribution (Halleröd, 2013), better marital relationships (Spahni, Bennett & Perrig-Chiello, 2016), social supports (Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2010; Ha, 2010; Li, 2007; Somhlaba & Wait, 2008), and religious attendance (Carr & Sharp, 2013; Das & Nairn, 2016; Kim, 2009) and other factors were associated with improved bereavement adjustment following spousal loss.

Conclusion

Methodological inconsistencies and limitations yield few solid findings upon which to develop effective practices. Also, very limited attention has been paid to immigrant groups, and Chinese immigrant older adults, specifically.

3. Long-term Consequences of Widowhood

Long-term consequences of widowhood include reduced residential independence (Bennett et al., 2010; Strohschein, 2011), more family-centralized personal networks (Collins, 2017), and increased participation in social activities (Isherwood, King, & Luszcz, 2012) and others.

4. Impacts on Older Immigrants

Two quantitatively studies examined risk factors for mortality (Stimpson, Kuo, Ray, Raji, & Peek, 2007) and factors for depressive symptoms (Monserud & AnotMarkides, 2017) among older widowed Mexican Americans. One quantitative study on older Chinese Americans found women were more likely to live alone, while men were more likely to live with family. Two qualitative studies explored the lived experiences among widowed Japanese (Saito, 2014) and Chinese older women (Martin-Matthews et al., 2013), highlighting the importance of supports from ethno-cultural communities.

5. Impacts on Older Adults in China

Research from China helps to explain Chinese family factors: childlessness (Cheng et al., 2013), worry of not having a caregiver (Xu et al., 2017), and co-residential living with children (Korinek, Zimmer, & Gu, 2011).

Results

The interview data is from 12 participants; three are male and nine are female. They range in age from 65 to 89, with the average age of 76. The average years of living in Calgary is approximately 14 and the average years of spousal loss is approximately 11.

Although on average participants in the study had lost their spouse approximately 11 years before the time of the interview, most described experiencing **prolonged bereavement**:

"Although he has gone, I don't lead a comfortable life by myself. Why? I am thinking of him, thinking of him. It's very sad for me, only myself, to be at home, thinking of him and crying. I think it is more horrible to the survivor than the deceased, because the survivor will think of the deceased all the time." (Ying, 73)



Figure 1. Lived experiences of bereavement adjustment and late-life widowhood.

Individual Level

Grief was private, not shared with others:

"Now I know I have to rely on only myself. No one else can understand your own personal experience. You have to rely on yourself." (Lucy, female, 65)

Some participants described they used certain 'rituals' to maintain a **continuous bond** with their deceased partner:

"I came here right after his death. I wrote a letter to him every year. I have wrote 10 letters for 10 years. For the last few years I did not write to him. This year is the 15th anniversary, and I wrote one again. If you read it, you'll all know what my situation is." (San Gui, female, 82)

"Last year I went back to China, I went to his cemetery to burn paper money to him. I did it the year before last year, too. It's not easy to go back because of my age." (Song Jiaxiu, female, 78)

Faith helped participants accept the reality of spousal loss and manage their sorrow:

"I am optimistic. My daughter's child, she said I will see my wife in the heaven one day, I think so too. So, it doesn't matter. I also have a hope.

two years. But I think we are Christians so there would be no problems. So, I'm not very sad when she's gone." (Jing, male, 82)

Family & Community Level

Although family played an important role in providing psychological and instrumental support for the widowed older adults, the widowed older adults **hid** their bereavement from family members who were then **unable** to provide direct support for the spousal loss. Community level is in a **similar** situation:

"I will not let her know. Because if I am sad, my daughter will be very sad as well. I will not let her know. I won't say I was crying. Because she is sensitive. I don't want her to worry about me, I don't want my girl to feel stressful." (Ying, female, 73)

Societal Level

Most older widowed Chinese adults **do not access social services for bereavement** support as they either are **unaware** of the supports, or **do not consider emotional health supports necessary**.

When they do access bereavement services, older widow(er)s describe them as **ineffective** because they are either **not culturally appropriate** or the widowed **require other instrumental supports**.

"I've been there [counseling] four or five times. But I don't think it's good. I don't think they understand our Chinese ideas..... They think differently from our Chinese people. He wants you to cry. You cry whenever you want to. But you know, we Chinese men don't cry. I don't want to cry, how to cry?" (Tom, male, 66)

Discussion/Implications

- Culturally appropriate bereavement supports need to be developed for older Chinese widow(er)s, who currently experience prolonged grief and suffer in silence.
- Consideration must be given regarding the development of culturally appropriate ways to involve families and communities in supporting bereavement adjustment of older Chinese adults.