

New Foundations: Emotional Acculturation of Ethnic Chinese Abroad

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Ways of Feeling: Expressions of Emotions across Languages and Cultures

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Introduction

Emotions are a fundamentally important part of the human experience. They are simultaneously constructed by culture and reconstitute our understandings of the bounds of our culture(s). Today as we enter an increasingly globalized world, we encounter dualities in perceptions of emotions. As people take on multiple languages and cultural frameworks, they have begun to reconceptualize the ways in which they understand emotions. At the heart of this lies the issue of how multilingual/bicultural individuals experience emotion. It is often assumed that bilingual people express their emotion through their parents' language; we seek to complicate this conclusion by asking: How do the culturally Chinese abroad express and understand their emotions? In this paper, we tackle this question by examining the emotional assimilation of migrant communities alongside their levels of acculturation. We begin our analysis by discussing the experience of emotion through language and then the implications of migration on such experience. Finally, we zoom in on the effects of Chinese immigrants' emotional development on their children's emotional concordance with mainstream American society.

Motivational Background

I would like to offer my motivation and insight into our questions. I am ethnically Chinese, Canadian, and American. I consider myself as having a strongly

learned L2, alongside an actively used L1. My experience has shown me that my emotional experience is broadly American with key points of conflict/inconsistency linked to specific interpretations of Chinese culture. In particular, American happiness served as a site of internal conflict for many years. While I was expected to express happiness outwardly amongst my peers in school, I never understood this expectation during my early education. It has only occurred to me through this class that America expects happiness and that mere internal satisfaction is not good enough. Based on these experiences, I propose that the emotional experience of bicultural/multilingual individuals is neither integrated with their L1 nor their L2. Instead, it is informed by a system of contradictions between their respective cultures. In navigating these contradictions, they ultimately decide upon specific elements of either culture in line with their personal cultural allegiances.

Language Priority

We start our discussion by establishing that the experience of emotion is different depending on the language and consequently the cultural lens used. The first language of a speaker is L1 while the second tongue is L2 (Cook). While L1 is often acquired 'naturally' at home, L2 is usually later instilled in the classroom or social sphere. Generally, but not always, L1 proficiency is higher than L2. Importantly, the level of competency depends on the level of usage. When L1 is a dominant lingua franca in the speaker's community, it is strongly acquired. However when L2 is favored in the speaker's social environment, they are typically found to have a better command of their second language. Notably, heritage speakers of languages find that while they might have learned their parent's native language(s)

first, they are often better communicators in the language they are schooled in and use in their communities.

Research suggests that proficiency in a given language dictates the relative strength of emotional words in said language. In general, native language emotion words motivate greater reactions from speakers than words from other languages. A speaker's native language is not simply L1 rather, it is the strongest learned language. When comparing user's recognition of words in L2, emotion words were more frequently erroneously identified with longer recognition times than concrete or abstract terms (Altarriba). Such results are emphasised when L1 is both the first learned and most proficient language. When learning a second language, the learner is unable to learn the culturally relevant aspects of emotion terms initially (Caldwell). This is to say that our experience of emotion terms is directly linked to the language and culture through which we experience them.

Languages are systems of difference. The categories by which the language separates and legitimates culturally salient emotions shape the ways in which speakers discern emotions. If each language comes with its own set of rules, bilinguals are often found in the overlap between their languages. Often, they are not equidistant from both languages; rather, one language dominates how they see emotion when using any language (Grosjean). How bilinguals navigate in this overlap is of great importance. From here, we proceed to navigate through the effects of immigrant emotional understanding on that of their their progeny.

Emotional Acculturation

Acculturation is the process by which a person becomes integrated with a second culture. Along with language, food, and holidays, expatriates typically begin to understand how emotions operate within the social atmosphere of their host country. Having established that strongly acquired L1 native languages dominate the emotions of immigrant groups, we now move onto what implications this brings to immigrant communities. In particular, to what extent does a host country dominate a Chinese immigrant's emotional experience and what effects linger in generations who remain settled in the 'host' country?

New Arrivals: Learning Emotion

In this section, we focus on the emotional experience of immigrants in their L2. We assume that they are native speakers of their L1s who later learned L2. When people immigrate to a new country, they are often confronted with a new culture. The way they acculture in their new environment dictates how they come to understand emotions. When looking at recent permanent Chinese expatriates in the United States of America, we see that many have attained proficiency in the English language. In particular, modern-day immigrants to America are educated and are proficient in written English. A particular study samples from such a cohort of Chinese expatriates. They found their reading speed to be significantly longer in English, L2, than in Chinese. This particular group was able to produce similarly accurate emotional and imagery-based assessments of literature in both languages. Referring to dual-coding theory, they proposed that native Chinese speakers coded emotional situations more clearly/strongly in their L1 Than in their L2. While they were able to slowly respond to emotional situations in English, they quickly

recognized emotional situations in Chinese (Steffensen). Importantly, this suggests that long-term expatriates can indeed learn a culture's system of emotions to a high level of accuracy.

This level of accuracy is not simply obtained by having spent time in a host country. Instead, it is linked to the amount of social contact had by an immigrant. As an expatriate spends more time abroad, they interact more often with cultural natives. Consequently, their emotions exhibit greater concordance with those of natives (De Leersnyder). This correlation is expressed even more strongly in persons who choose to maintain longer and more intense contact with natives, regardless of their own education level (Hermans). Some immigrants were more willing to be in contact with natives than adopt their culture. Even so, they were found to have the same levels of emotional similarity as immigrants who were eager to adopt a new culture. Further, positive emotions were more easily learned by immigrants than negative ones. It is proposed that since interactions with natives provide more contexts for emotions, migrants will be encouraged to learn the emotional structures of their host cultures through frequent exchanges. Their new emotional capacity is the summation of being able to see new situations as warranting emotion and understand certain situations as warranting new emotions (De Leersnyder).

When expatriates enter a new culture, they are forced to interact with the host people and their culture. This implicit consent to the new culture leads them to acquire the emotional mindset of their adopted home. Therefore, emotional acculturation is not a function of the willingness to learn but, of the time spent with natives.

The Second Generation: Chinese American Emotional Development

In this section, we discuss the effects of acculturation on emotional experience in people who are not strongly acquainted with their L1's culture. In particular, we focus on heritage Chinese speakers and how they learn to deal with their emotions. We assume that the speakers learned Chinese before learning their English in an English dominated environment and have consequently gained greater proficiency in English than in Chinese. Emotions are developed early alongside language in babies. Ergo, first languages have emotional value as people acquire language-based emotions. However, we have seen that as a second language is learned so is its emotional framework. While immigrants learn L2 in artificial environments (ex. Classrooms), heritage speakers have access to the cultural environment of their new language. This allows second-generation speakers to organically learn the situations in which emotions are appropriate in their L2 (Hermans).

At a similar time, heritage speakers are also socialized in their L1 within their family or cultural institutions. On occasion, such children acquire a combination of both cultures' emotions. In fact, their parents fundamentally shape their kids' emotions. Children begin to learn about emotion at the age of two in conversations with their parents. As they age into preschool years, they begin to increasingly express their emotions (Tao). Chinese and American cultures remain distinct in interpersonal relations and consequently the way in which emotions are expressed. In particular, Chinese culture values social harmony as opposed to the emphasis placed on independence by the American culture (单学英). Consequently, American

culture promotes more emotional expression while Chinese culture requires the suppression of extreme emotions (Tao). These differences are embedded in the way in which ethnically Chinese parents teach their children emotions.

During the first years of life, Chinese parents communicate emotion to their American offspring through discussion. When narrating stories, Chinese mothers refrain from discussing emotions connected with the story; instead, they emphasize the behaviors of the character. In doing so, they intended to teach their children a lesson. Rather than pose open-ended subjective questions about emotions like White American mothers, Chinese mothers seek to tell their children explicit standards of emotional conduct (Tao). This is a product of the function of Chinese language; the Chinese language is focused on regulating society so as to encourage harmony (Doan). Further, Chinese parents focus their dialogue on negative emotions more than positive ones. Negative emotions are critiqued as they can be more prone to social disharmony (Tao). Importantly, such observations were found to be more significant with less-acculturated parents. Inverse was true as well (Tao).

When Chinese American children enter American society, the consequences of their emotional upbringing become apparent. While Chinese American children exhibit high levels of competency in their vocabulary of desires, they lack the ability to strongly express their thoughts and feelings (Doan). However, such results are affected by the enculturation and acculturation of Chinese parents. Earlier, we saw that high levels of cross-cultural contact led to high levels of emotional acculturation amongst Chinese expatriates. These effects are passed on to their children. Doan et al. suggests that the cultural orientation of Chinese parents strongly influences their children's ability to see emotion in line with the dominant White American culture. In

particular, high levels of media exposure and language proficiency in Chinese parents positively correlated with their children's emotional ability within an American framework. The exact inverse is also true (Tao). This suggests that the learned emotional habits of adults can be taught to their children.

It is important to note that the emotional framework of Chinese Americans is not rooted in the language used. Previously, it has been proposed that Spanish, L1, is a more emotional language amongst Latino Americans than English, L2 (Santiago-Rivera). When describing emotional situations, culturally Chinese people typically utilize more somatic and social words than culturally European people. This observation holds whether Chinese Americans speak in English or Chinese. Written Chinese expresses many emotions as the aggregate of many smaller characters. Many of these smaller characters are related to the body. However since Chinese Americans who are only speaking Chinese continue to frequently utilize somatic and social words despite not writing or reading, somatic and social conceptions of emotion are not only a product of writing but of Chinese culture. In particular, both highly acculturated Chinese and Americans and their less acculturated peers hold this trend (Tsai et al.). Therefore, we see that social and somatic emotion is not merely an element of the Chinese language but, a product of the Chinese culture to which Chinese Americans are exposed.

Later in adulthood, the effects of a Chinese American upbringing continue to affect the emotionality of Chinese Americans. In particular, Chinese Americans exhibited distinctly Chinese patterns of emotional display in their romantic relationships. When comparing Chinese and European Americans, we would expect greater emotional regulation/suppression within Chinese couples than European

couples based on previous observations of cultural differences. Within high stress situations in relationships, Chinese American couples display similar emotional constraint compared with their ancestors' culture. That is to say that they typically exhibit more restrained and moderate emotional displays than European Americans (Tsai and Robert). Notably, this particular study highlights the social aspects of Chinese American emotional performance in adulthood. While the test subjects were adult university students deemed acculturated to mainstream America, they continued to exhibit Chinese culture in their emotional experience.

Conclusion

In this paper, we first explored the displays of emotion performed by people in between cultures. We found that languages serve as sites of cultural expressions of emotion. Thus as expatriates learn a language, they learn a culture. Regardless of an immigrant's willingness to adopt a new culture, they began to experience emotions in accordance with dominant norms as they acculturated. This acculturation was found to be rooted in cross-cultural exchanges. Later, we turned to the effects posed on Chinese Americans by their parent's bicultural perceptions of emotion. We established that Chinese Americans learn emotions from both their parents and mainstream European American Society. Their emotional understanding is found at the intersection of both cultures. Immigrant parents' orientation to American culture initially shapes their children's emotional understanding. As parents become increasingly acculturated, so do their parenting styles. This leads to greater concordance of their Chinese American offspring's emotional understanding with that of White Americans (Tao). We found that the emotional orientation of Chinese Americans held regardless of language. That is to say that Chinese

American emotion is language independent. Finally, we saw that Chinese Americans maintain some degree of Chinese emotion into adulthood.

Thus, we redefine Chinese American emotion as an unique cross-cultural product at the intersection of America and China. While it is a mix of the two input cultures, it is an emotional framework in its own right (Tytus). Chinese-Americans experience emotions within American society while being informed by their Chinese heritage. Whether they align themselves more with their Chinese heritage or their American reality is fundamentally determined by the ongoing process of acculturation within themselves, their families, and their communities.

Future Directions

While we have discussed Chinese American's emotions through acculturation of their parents and themselves, I did not find much literature on specific emotions. Instead, more literature focused on the psychological stresses of being forced to resolve contradictions between Chinese and American cultures. Concrete manifestations of the effects observed above would be insightful.

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