Nature of Leisure Activities Among the Chinese-American Elderly

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Abstract Despite the growing literature on the elderly population, there has been relatively little research on the nature of leisure among culturally diverse elderly populations. The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the patterns and nature of leisure among a particular ethnic population, the Chinese-American elderly. Qualitative techniques were used to identify the types of activities engaged in, the nature of those activities, and the reasons for continued participation among 25 Chinese-American elderly residing in a large southwestern metropolitan community. Results indicated that these individuals, many of whom had lived in the United States for most of their adult lives, were involved in a wide range of leisure activities including tai chi, mah-jongg, television watching, walking, reading, gardening, and sewing. Participants engaged in many of these activities for entertainment and personal development. These activities served educational and cultural functions as well. For example, activities such as sewing, reading, and cooking were filled with culturally specific content: that is, they were based on the cultural traditions and habits of the individuals involved. Simultaneously, the respondents used many of their leisure activities (e.g., reading and television watching) as vehicles to educate themselves about the language and ways of the American culture. These data are discussed with regard to assimilation and ethnicity theories, and several emergent themes suggested in the data are presented.

Keywords Chinese-American elderly, ethnicity, ethnic elderly, leisure activities.

Substantial demographic data exist that indicate that the elderly, 65 years and older, continue to make up an increasingly large sector of the world’s population. The elderly population is growing at a rate of 2.5% each year. This rate of growth in numbers and as
a proportion is greater than the global population rate of growth as a whole (Dychtwald & Flowers, 1989). This translates to more than 410 million elderly in the world by the year 2000, compared with 290 million today. Within the United States, it is expected that by the year 2000 there will be approximately 35 million people aged 65 years and older (13% of the population). By the year 2050 that figure should increase to 67 million and will represent approximately 22% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988).

Demographers have projected an even greater increase in the number of ethnic elderly, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans. It is projected that from 1990 to the year 2000, the proportion of Hispanics 65 to 74 years of age will increase by 47.2%, and those over age 75 will increase by 61.8%. The African-American elderly population is expected to increase by 14.9% and 27.7% in each of those age groups, respectively. The White population between the ages of 65 to 74, on the other hand, is expected to decrease by 3.5%, and those over 75 should increase by 25.1% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988). As these data suggest, the ethnic elderly populations will be among the fastest growing sectors of the population.

This steady increase in the size of the elderly ethnic population will place great demands on federal, state, and local government agencies to respond with policies and programs that are sensitive to the needs of culturally diverse elderly populations (Allison & Smith, 1990). Simultaneously, social scientists must move beyond research questions that are traditionally studied and validated on homogeneous White, middle-class populations and expand their efforts to explore the nature, role, and meaning of leisure in the lives of other ethnic populations as well.

In recent years, the analysis of leisure behavior among specific ethnic groups has received more widespread attention, although few studies have focused on the ethnic elderly populations. Past work has focused predominantly on the recreational participation patterns of young and middle-aged Blacks and Hispanics (Edwards, 1981; Hutchinson, 1987; Hutchinson & Fidel, 1984; McMillen, 1983; O'Leary & Benjamin, 1982; Stamps & Stamps, 1985; Washburn & Wall, 1980). Much of this research, which relies almost exclusively on survey research techniques, has been limited to the identification of activity types and participation patterns, and although this research has provided insights into the activities that groups tend to engage in, there has been little effort to identify the subjective meaning that such activities hold for the participants under investigation (Allison, 1988).

In recent years, there has been a renewed call for analyses that attempt to identify what Agar (1981) termed "interpretive frameworks," or the subjective view of the participants (Allison, 1988; Glancy, 1990; Henderson, 1991; Howe, 1985). Such an approach allows investigators to identify the "doers" view of the nature and meaning of leisure and recreational participation in their lives. This approach is particularly important in cross-cultural work because the values and meanings of different ethnic groups have been shown, in most anthropological work, to differ in very important ways from the dominant mainstream culture (Barth, 1969; Benedict, 1959; Geertz, 1973). This subjective approach allows the participants to form and communicate their own meanings and understandings to the researcher, helping to minimize the imposition of potentially ethnocentric schemes through the use of fixed, preestablished survey research techniques (Berg, 1989; Denzin, 1978; Jackson, 1989; Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Finally, such an approach allows one to refine the theoretical perspectives and insights about other cultural groups. There is every opportunity, given such work, to clarify and expand long-standing conceptual models and build theory that is more reflective of, and inclusive of, the perspective of culture.
Melting Pot Versus Ethnicity Theories

Two competing theoretical orientations have been reported in past research to describe the nature and dynamics of intercultural contact. The first approach, termed the melting pot theory, suggests that after prolonged and continued contact, ethnic groups eventually assimilate into one another and into the dominant culture (Gordon, 1964). This perspective assumes that ethnic or racial groups will, through the processes of cultural transmission, adopt the values, behaviors, and norms of the dominant, mainstream culture. Assimilation is said to be incomplete so long as any vestiges of an ethnic culture are retained by a nonindigenous population. In recent years, this theory has been criticized for its ethnocentric underpinnings; that is, it assumes that all minority populations over time will, or should, blend into the dominant culture. Applying the melting pot theory to the ethnic elderly populations, it would be predicted that, given their length of residence within the United States, the leisure-related values and behaviors of these groups would largely mirror those of mainstream society.

The second orientation, frequently termed the ethnicity thesis, suggests that ethnic groups, despite prolonged contact with the mainstream culture, maintain patterns and preferences in behaviors and values that are part of their own cultural or ethnic traditions. In fact, work by Barth (1969) and Eidheim (1969) indicated that when ethnic groups come into prolonged contact with one another, ethnic boundaries in a variety of behavioral arenas are created and reinforced rather than broken down. With regard to the elderly ethnic populations, it would be predicted that there would be certain leisure-related phenomena that reflect cultural traditions and patterns, whereas others would reflect the more dominant mainstream pattern. Using this orientation, the question becomes “In what behavioral arenas are expressions of ethnicity reinforced, and in which arenas does assimilation occur?”

There is an ongoing discussion as to which of these orientations best describes the recreational participation patterns and preferences of ethnic group members (Allison, 1988; Dragon, 1986; Dragon & Ham, 1986; Edwards, 1981; Hutchison, 1987; Hutchison & Fidel, 1984; O'Leary & Benjamin, 1982; Washburn, 1978). Although distinct culturally relevant patterns have been described in the types and frequency of participation by ethnic groups in a variety of recreational activities, there is little information regarding the subjective or cultural context in which those activities take place. This investigation attempts to identify not only which activities fill the leisure time of Chinese-American elderly persons residing in a large metropolitan community in the Southwest, but also to interpret those activities within the cultural context of their daily lives.

The Chinese-American Elderly

The Chinese elders in the United States migrated mostly from Kwangtung Province in the southeastern delta region of China beginning in about 1850. Many left southern China because of droughts and floods and came to the United States with a promise of quick riches during the period of the gold rush (Nagasawa, 1980). This initial movement set the stage for a massive emigration from China to the United States (Wong, Applewhite, & Daley, 1990).

Large numbers of Chinese moved from California to the Southwest (e.g., Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) in the mid-1800s to work as railroad construction laborers on routes between California and Texas. When the railroads were completed, many of them settled in towns along the railroad such as Phoenix, AZ, and San Antonio.
TX (Nagasawa, 1980). The majority of the Chinese elders made their living as owners of businesses such as grocery stores, bakeries, and restaurants.

Unlike many of the more concentrated residential areas in large cities in the United States (e.g., Chinatown), the Chinese elderly in this study live within the central areas of a large southwestern metropolitan city and do not have an identifiable section of town that they, or others, label as their own. According to Nagasawa (1980), the Chinese leaders in this region consciously decided to avoid residential concentration, and immigrants apparently felt comfortable dispersed over wider geographic areas.

Nagasawa (1980) has described the life situation of the Chinese elderly living in this community. Among other things, he found that these Chinese elders tended to be satisfied with their lives. Membership and involvement in social clubs tended to enhance their life satisfaction. A large majority, 94%, celebrated Chinese holidays (e.g., New Year's, Moon Festival, and Ching Ming), and 40% ate Chinese food exclusively. Ancestor worship and belief in Nature were still part of the elders' beliefs, although the influence of Christianity was increasingly evident. Most of Nagasawa's sample had lived in the Southwest for more than 20 years; one third had lived in the Southwest for more than 30 years. Nagasawa concluded that the Chinese elders tended to maintain ties with the culture of their youth.

Little is known about the leisure activity patterns of Asian Americans in general or Chinese Americans in specific. One exception to this paucity of knowledge is work conducted by Cheng (1978), who provided a descriptive overview of the leisure patterns of 50 Chinese elderly in San Diego, CA. Cheng found that gardening, relaxing at home, reading, television, and arts and crafts made up 44% of the elders' leisure activities, whereas walking and social activities with friends made up 56% of their activities. Of the respondents, 70% were part of a group comprised solely of Chinese, and 70% celebrated some ethnic, religious, or national holiday. Most of these individuals maintained Chinese friendship networks and belonged to organizations whose members were predominantly Chinese American. They reported diets consisting of predominantly Chinese food, and most celebrated ethnic festivals and holidays with ethnic foods. Cheng concluded that these Chinese elderly had retained many of their ethnic traditions and habits in their daily activities.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze, using interview techniques, the activity patterns and nature of leisure among elderly Chinese-American women and men. Specifically, this investigation examined the types of activities engaged in, the nature of those activities, and the reasons for continued participation in those leisure activities among 25 Chinese-American elderly individuals living in a southwestern metropolitan city. Ultimately, the goal of the investigation was to better understand leisure activity from the perspective of the respondents and to ground that understanding within the cultural context of their lives.

**Procedure**

*Study Site and Population*

The study participants were selected from a Chinese senior center that served as one of the hubs of activity within the Chinese community. The center serves as a gathering point for many Chinese elders because it serves daily lunches and provides recreational programs
as well as facilities where individuals come to socialize and engage in self-directed activities. This site offered several advantages as a research opportunity. First, one of the investigators (Charles W. Geiger) had worked as a volunteer at the center for 2 years, leading low-impact aerobics classes. While working at the center, he had socialized regularly with many of the participants. The investigator’s acceptance at the center was reinforced by the center’s director when permission was asked to interview a number of individuals about their leisure activity patterns. The center director indicated that “the members would be glad to cooperate because they have accepted you [the investigator] as a friend.” Thus, one investigator was highly visible and had ongoing contact with many of the participants. Second, this continued involvement at the center allowed the investigator multiple opportunities to communicate with, and observe, the behavior of many of the participants. Finally, because of this experience at the center, the investigator received the support and cooperation of key administrative personnel within the senior center.

The population for this study included individuals who were over age 60, were born in southeastern Asia, and spoke at least one Chinese dialect. These criteria allowed us to ensure that the sample included individuals of predominantly Chinese descent. The respondents included 25 individuals (10 men and 15 women) between the ages of 64 and 85. All of the respondents were from mainland China; 40% had lived in the United States fewer than 20 years, and 60% had lived in the United States more than 20 years.

All of the respondents considered Chinese as their first language (76% spoke Cantonese, 20% spoke Mandarin, and 4% spoke Toishanese). Slightly more than half of the respondents (56%) spoke English as their second language, with varying degrees of proficiency.

The Interviews

We used open-ended personal interviews to gain detailed information from these elderly Chinese Americans about their leisure time. Interview questions were designed to identify the ways in which the respondents used their free time, the nature of the activities, and the reasons for continued participation in these activities.

The initial questionnaire was evaluated for clarity and consistency and revised on the basis of suggestions made by two Chinese-American senior center staff. Both staff members were fluent in English and Chinese. Interviews were conducted in English or Chinese depending on the respondents’ preference. Those individuals selecting English were interviewed by the investigator, Charles W. Geiger; those selecting Chinese were interviewed by one of two trained Chinese interpreters in the dialect of choice. When the interview was conducted in Chinese, the investigator was present to clarify questions, record responses, and suggest probes when information was lacking. For example, when a respondent identified gardening as a favorite activity, care was taken to ask about the type of garden that he or she had, the types of vegetables or plants grown, and the uses, if any, that resulted from the activity (e.g., vegetables for cooking Chinese food). As one respondent noted,

I like most foods and I like to cook with different Chinese vegetables... I have a garden and grow bitter melon. It has a whitish pulp and red seeds, it's real colorful. I grow yard-long beans, mustard greens, zucchini, and winter melon... it's real good. I also grow scallions, that's all I grow right now.

Although it was expected that the interviews would result in extensive dialogue between the interviewers and the interviewees, it was found that, for the most part,
respondents provided only brief, yet insightful, responses to the questions asked. For example, when respondents were asked to discuss the reasons they continued to participate in their favorite activity, they would offer such responses as "I like to garden" or "exercise makes me feel good" but would offer little elaboration beyond that point. This may be due, in part, to the lack of comfort with the public nature of the interview process (Carp, 1989; Jackson, 1989) and the fact that cultures differ in the level of acceptability in discussing their private selves with others, particularly outsiders. Despite Charles W. Geiger's familiarity with the respondents, his ethnicity alone may have created an "outsider" status with the interviewees. Despite the brevity of the responses, however, a consistent pattern emerged among the types of responses received from the participants. These patterns were consistent with the behavioral observations and informal communications between Geiger and the community center participants. As he noted,

The [center's] participants were very friendly when I participated with them in various activities, such as mah-jongg. I felt a genuine friendship with these people, and although I am sure that our mutual feelings were based on curiosity, it was nonetheless real. They were willing to share their experiences and even their foods with me. They were most grateful when helped with English words and their meanings. They helped me to learn and understand their ways, and I was happy to reciprocate.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of the investigation was to identify the nature of free time activities and the reasons for continued participation in such activities among Chinese-American elderly. We analyzed data for recurrent patterns and themes and interpreted them within the cultural context of the respondents' daily lives.

First, respondents described all of the activities in which they engaged during a typical week or weekend. The most common responses mentioned were watching television, walking, reading, and exercise (e.g., morning exercises and stretch exercises). The women indicated that television watching (73%) and walking (73%) were their most common activities; the men indicated the same activities with a slightly higher percentage (90%) of participation. Women identified cooking (60%) and reading (60%) as their third and fourth most common activities, respectively, and the men mentioned reading (80%) and exercise (60%).

The remaining set of activities most commonly mentioned revealed some gender differences. Whereas the women engaged in activities such as helping others (53%), sewing (53%), attending church (40%), and dancing (40%), the men filled their free time with traveling (50%), learning English (40%), mah-jongg (30%), and gardening (30%).

Respondents were then asked to identify the single activity in which they participated most during their free time. The men identified 4 activities: reading, gardening, watching television, and tai chi. The 15 women, on the other hand, listed a total of 10 different activities, with cooking and dancing the most frequent responses, followed by reading, gardening, tai chi, helping others, sewing, attending church, mah-jongg, and exercise. These patterns are not unlike those previously described by Cheng (1978). Except for the distinctly Chinese activities (e.g., mah-jongg and tai chi), these patterns are not unlike those previously identified in the general elderly population, where activities such as television watching, reading, gardening, and socializing are quite popular (McAvoy, 1979; Peppers, 1976; Riddick & Daniel, 1984: Tinsley, Colbs, Teaff, & Kaufman, 1987).
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The next series of questions asked respondents to explain the reasons they continued to engage in these activities. Many of the responses reflected generalized functions not unlike those expected in the general population. For example, exercise was seen as a way to stay in shape, stay healthy, and take care of the body. As one 84-year-old individual stated,

Exercise is the activity I do most. Every morning when I wake up I exercise my whole body, my eyes, my head, my hair. I am 84 years old, and I have black hair, not grey. My health is good, I feel good. I will always exercise because if I don’t, I don’t feel good.

Walking also provided opportunities for respondents to feel good, stay in shape, and spend some time alone. Television provided an opportunity to keep informed, watch sports, and pass the time. Dancing provided an opportunity to feel young and graceful. Traveling provided opportunities to visit family and friends and a chance to sightsee and share the experience with family. Attending church and helping others was seen as a way to make oneself happy and be a good Christian and to help others and receive God’s blessing. As one 78-year-old woman indicated, "I like people. We need each other and should help one another more. That’s what life is all about, helping one another."

Further analyses, however, revealed a set of reasons for continuing participation that was unanticipated. For example, television was one of the most frequently identified free-time activities. In addition to those reasons mentioned above, respondents indicated that they watched television "to improve my English because saying the words is hard" and "to learn to pronounce words better." Several respondents reported watching Sesame Street to help them identify and spell popular words and learn how to pronounce English. As one 77-year-old gentleman indicated,

I watch television news and sports to keep up with what's going on. But I also watch the education channel, it helps me practice speaking. I read and write English pretty good but I don’t speak well. I want to learn; I like to learn. I write on tai chi, too, in a Chinese paper twice a month [in Cantonese].

A similar pattern emerged with regard to reading and writing. A large majority of the respondents (71%) read materials written in Chinese (e.g., newspapers), and 40% read English materials as well (e.g., newspapers, books, and the Bible). Reading and writing were continually mentioned as important activities because they helped one to learn English and the American way. As one 64-year-old woman remarked, "In America you have to learn English."

These data suggest that activities such as reading and television watching took on a multitude of functions for the Chinese elderly, including entertainment and an opportunity to relax. Beyond that, however, these activities were consciously used as educational tools to help develop an understanding of the nuances of the English language and American culture. Even given their advanced age and their length of residence in this country, many of the respondents used these activities to help foster their proficiency with the mainstream culture.

One might suggest that these data lend credence to the assimilation perspective that holds that, after prolonged and continued contact, groups will eventually adopt the behaviors and values of the dominant culture (Gordon, 1964). At least at the behavioral level, the activities mentioned were what one might consider dominant, mainstream lei-
Sure activities (e.g., television watching, walking, and reading newspapers). In addition, the respondents indicated that these activities helped them function better within the context of American culture (e.g., learn English and speak more fluently). However, deeper analysis of the data suggest that this interpretation is incomplete. That is, many of the other activities mentioned by respondents were filled with a cultural content that was specifically Chinese in nature. One 77-year-old man indicated,

I exercise two hours every morning . . . tai chi chuan and kung fu. Very slow motion movements. I have taught tai chi also. I do it for my health. I believe in it. It has helped me stay active and healthy.

Gardening was another activity in which the respondents described the culturally specific nature of the activities. Several respondents spoke of gardening as a chance to grow Chinese plants and vegetables for cooking or a way to grow native flowers and fruits. Several respondents indicated that they enjoyed cooking for their families, but as one man indicated, "I cook Chinese food because I can't eat American food." A number of women indicated that they enjoyed sewing, and one 72-year-old woman spoke with pride of the costumes and kimonos she made. Another 69-year-old respondent stated,

I crochet and I sew. Sometimes I alter American clothes, but I like my own styles, collars and buttons . . . my own colors and materials. We are little people and have to make special our clothes. We don't want to wear children's styles or materials.

Finally, the majority of reading materials that these individuals read during their free time were written in Chinese. These materials provided the opportunity to read about Chinese and world news and to read Confucian philosophy. As one respondent noted, "I read the Chinese Bible everyday and believe in doing good and helping others. It makes me feel good."

What these data suggest, then, is that the leisure repertoire of these individuals included activities that were traditionally Chinese in origin (e.g., tai chi and mah-jongg) and also activities that were filled with traditionally Chinese content (e.g., gardening, cooking, and reading). More important, this pattern persisted among a population of elders who had lived in this country most of their adult lives. Thus, these individuals maintained a host of culturally related activities that appeared to foster their ongoing sense of identity with their Chinese ancestry.

Assimilation and Ethnicity Theories Revisited

The data discussed thus far reflect the complexity of the assimilation and ethnicity theories. Those holding the assimilation perspective might argue that these individuals had not yet truly assimilated into the American mainstream because the form and content of many of their activities were still imbued with culturally specific content (e.g., behaviors and values). However, one could ask, what would it really take to consider a group thoroughly assimilated? Would a particular ethnic group have to divest itself entirely of any culturally specific activities? As has been suggested previously (Allison, 1988), to assume this is in itself an ethnocentric perspective. Furthermore, such an interpretation clearly overlooks the complexity of cultural transmission and retention. That is, the data suggest that many western activities were adopted, but many relevant, traditional forms
were also retained. The complexity of the cultural transmission and retention process is evidenced in the data in the nature of the relationship between leisure and language. In many ways, the respondents indicated their desire to learn English. They used their leisure time (television watching and reading) as an opportunity to learn English and the American way (cultural transmission). Simultaneously, they continued to read Chinese newspapers and literature as a means of remaining grounded in their own culture (cultural retention). As one 70-year-old indicated, "I read Westerns, Zane Grey mostly. I like to read, I used to teach English in China many years ago. I also read Chinese newspapers to keep up with what's happening in China." These processes of transmission and retention, then, can apparently occur simultaneously. The selective adoption of new activities, and the retention of culturally relevant traditional forms, is much more reflective of the ethnicity thesis. That is, ethnic groups will maintain forms of behaviors and values that are grounded in their own cultural histories and traditions, as well as adopt forms of the host culture. In all probability, these traditional activities, as well as the adopted activities, will undergo change over time, but that, too, is part of the dynamic of culture. Moreover, such data reflect the ability and need of those from bicultural backgrounds to develop a repertoire of skills to function in two cultures simultaneously (Ramirez, 1984).

**Conclusions and Implication for Further Study**

The data from this investigation provide some preliminary insights into the nature of leisure activity among ethnic groups within the broader spectrum of mainstream society. At a superficial level, the types of activities these Chinese-American elderly engaged in do not appear very different from other elderly cohort groups. Activities such as walking, gardening, watching television, and reading were frequently mentioned. However, further analyses revealed that these same activities took on characteristics that were traditionally Chinese in nature.

Several patterns emerged that should be considered in future research among ethnically diverse populations. First, forms or types of activities do not, in themselves, reflect patterns of culture. It is the content of the activities that determines their cultural nature and relevance. As researchers attempt to better understand the leisure patterns of culturally diverse populations, it is essential to move beyond simple listing of activity types and pursue in a much more detailed fashion the nature of such activities within the lives of participants.

Second, the same leisure activities may serve a multitude of functions for individuals and groups. As these data suggest, the leisure activities identified by these respondents served entertainment and educational functions. These same leisure activities also served to maintain ethnic culture, identity, and boundaries. To understand the nature of leisure among culturally diverse populations, all potential functions must be explored.

The third point that emerged is that care should be taken not to assume that assimilation is a necessary outcome of cultural contact, particularly given the expressive nature of the leisure domain. At a conscious level, many of the respondents verbalized a need to learn about the American way and were active in their own process of learning about American culture. At the same time, however, these individuals made conscious choices about their eating and reading patterns that simultaneously allowed them to remain grounded in their own cultural traditions and habits. Both reflect the attempt of individuals to make sense of their world and their environment and adapt to both in ways that are relevant to their own needs.

Finally, the data suggest the dynamic way in which leisure becomes part of the culture
creation process (Allison, 1988). That is, leisure activities are not static vestiges of culture that are simply adopted ipso facto by members of that culture. Instead, the leisure repertoire of individuals is part of a much larger context of social exchange and interchange. Research methodologies must adapt to this dynamism and identify how individuals and groups use their leisure to relate to the world around them.

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