

The Chinese Diaspora and Disability/ Rehabilitation in the United States

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Abstract: In this article, I will discuss disability issues as a second and a half generation American of Chinese descent who has worked with persons with disabilities, has taught rehabilitation counseling as well as having been a rehabilitation psychologist for more than 35 years in the U. S. and Australia. I am pleased to be able to share some of my thoughts and experiences in this article that is a bit less formal than what you may expect in a professional journal. Though I hope that what I share will provoke some thinking and action from those who read these words.

Key words: Chinese diaspora; disability; rehabilitation; United States

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As a second and a half generation (my father was born in China and my mother in the U. S.) American of Chinese descent who has worked with persons with disabilities, has taught rehabilitation counseling as well as having been a rehabilitation psychologist for more than 35 years in the U. S. and Australia, I am pleased to be able to share some of my thoughts and experiences in this article that is a bit less formal than what you may expect in a professional journal. Though I hope that what I share will provoke some thinking and action from those who read these words.

Part of what prompted my writing this was a desire to explore in a personal way the intersection of being of Chinese ethnicity, a Chinese American and more generally in today's American society an Asian American in a disability related occupation. It is interesting to me that how disability may have been thought of in traditional Chinese history continues to have an influence on contemporary life of not only the Chinese in China but Chinese Americans and perhaps even broader to Asian Americans as well.

Who I am today and the attitudes I hold about many things including persons with disabilities is partially a product of being Chinese and this may also be true of other Chinese Americans. The heritage passed on to me by my parents was both spoken and unspoken. And as Chinese Americans are often categorized as Asian Americans, these traditional ideas may also influence a far larger group of people than we realize at first glance. At the same time, I know that the experience of individuals varies and I don't mean to speak for others and what they may or may not believe.

A good place to begin a discussion of disability is the notion of attitudes. My own experience is that disability is not something perceived positively in Chinese culture. For example, I still remember the phrase often used to describe limited function resulting from chronic illness or other physical difficulty and translated in English as being "useless."

As a child growing up in California, my first memories of disabilities and the Chinese community in America were of other

children who were different. (I now know that they had Down syndrome) While these children were obviously different in appearance and often behavior, I remember that in different social functions they were always kept in the background and often not allowed to interact with other children or perhaps we were not allowed to interact with them.

Even after three decades of experience in rehabilitation and with persons who have disabilities, I still wonder what factors have affected my own thinking about disabilities and how attitudes that were held in China generations ago continue to affect today's Chinese Americans and Asian Americans more generally. While perhaps not testable and with no intention to do so for now, my hypothesis is that attitudes we hold today toward disability began for immigrants with the culture and traditions of their country of origin. These attitudes were then transmitted to future generations and intermingled with attitudes acquired as part of the experiences that immigrants had in their new settings. For Chinese Americans in the United States, these notions were also reinforced with the combining of various diverse groups of Asian origins into Asian Americans.

I am hopeful that these comments may be of some interest to colleagues in China regarding the experiences of Chinese who immigrated to the United States with a focus on issues of disability and rehabilitation. The migration out of China to other areas has been well documented and was precipitated by numerous factors ranging from civil conflict, necessity, labor needs of countries as well as individual desires to improve not only one's economic condition but of family as well. The Chinese diaspora obviously include much more than just the Americas and specifically the United States. The diaspora perhaps was in some ways even more pronounced throughout southeast Asian where "overseas" Chinese settled in large numbers and where they became a huge economic influence in many countries. I focus on the U. S. as it is unquestionably a world power with responsibilities extending far beyond its borders plus it is the country of my birth.

Though many Chinese migrated to the U. S. in the 1800's, discrimination and legislation prevented Chinese from entering in large numbers. It is difficult to fathom today but as late as the 1950's the numbers of Chinese in the United States numbered only about 150000. In other words, the majority of the Chinese

living in the U. S. today are fairly recent immigrants.

The first Chinese to come to the United States landed in California in 1820. Records of that time suggest that only ten more Chinese came during the next 20 years. It was not until about the 1850's that the Chinese arrived in America in relatively large numbers. In 1847, Yung Wing and two other students came to America for higher education and were the first Chinese students to study in this country.

However, the circumstances that brought larger numbers of Chinese were events related to the discovery of gold near San Francisco and the need for labor by the builders of the transcontinental railroad. By 1850, four thousand Chinese were working in the gold mines of California. In 1851, the Chinese population in California increased to twenty-five thousand. Besides work in the gold fields, more Chinese were brought to work in railroad construction. When the Central Pacific Railroad construction reached its last stage, Chinese labor constituted about 90 percent of the total work force. Though the Chinese were significant contributors in both endeavors, their presence was not particularly welcome.

Groups of Chinese in the Pacific West started moving east. By the end of 1890, about five hundred Chinese lived in Chicago. When the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago in 1893, there was demand for restaurants and laundries arose which attracted large numbers of Chinese from other cities in America. White Americans often blaming their loss of jobs and complaints that the Chinese did not fit in with western values. In response, the Congress of the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. Under the Act, Chinese laborers, both skilled and unskilled, were excluded from entering America initially for ten years with the Act subsequently extended. In addition, the Chinese were ruled not entitled to naturalization. Due to the treatment of Chinese in California, the Chinese Government launched a campaign to boycott American trade in 1905. It was around this time that the Chinese started organizing most of their tongs and societies. Most of these organizations were created to meet the economic, welfare and legal needs of Chinese immigrants not eligible or unwelcomed by the majority.

While most Chinese workers were building the railroad in the West during the 1860's, other Chinese laborers worked the fields in the South often replacing Black laborers. Others deserted vagaries of fieldwork so dependent on seasons and climate and began to settle in St. Louis and the other Midwestern cities in 1869 with many becoming cigar makers. Work that Chinese did to support themselves and their families often were in areas other workers ignored or were unwilling to perform. I grew up knowing that most of the Chinese I knew worked in restaurants (my father was a waiter in a Chinese restaurant his entire life), truck farming or other small businesses such as a laundry. As circumstances changed, the Chinese were often subjected to abuse and discrimination a pattern that was repeated over and over again.

In 1874, White unionized cigar makers in San Francisco called on the proprietors of stores to boycott Chinese-made cigars. The following year, White cigar makers in St. Louis did the same to Chinese cigar makers there. In 1903, because of the St. Louis World's Fair, an American emissary was sent to China to invite Chinese merchants to participate in the World's Fair. In the meantime, the American Government laid down discriminatory conditions for admitting Chinese laborers for the exposition.

These discriminatory conditions along with the general non acceptance of Chinese were partially responsible for the creation of "Chinatowns" enclaves where the Chinese were able to feel

comfortable and also to maintain their traditions and language. But these conditions may also have reinforced negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities who were different and who were perceived as being unable to contribute to the larger community. Not accepted by the majority society, families with children who had disabilities did not want them subjected to more scrutiny both within and outside of the Chinese community.

It is important to note that the Chinese were not the only Asian group affected by discriminatory legislation and perhaps setting the foundations for Asian groups in the U. S. to begin to build coalitions among themselves. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt negotiated an informal "gentlemen's agreement" with Japan, under which the United States promised to desegregate California schools which had separated Japanese students from others and in return, the Japanese government promised to stop the emigration of its citizens.

These discriminatory laws outlawed immigration from Asian countries and continued until 1965. The Immigration Act of 1965 represented a major reform of all previous immigration laws. It abolished quotas that discriminated against nationalities, substituting an overall limit of 170000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere and 120000 immigrants from the Western Hemisphere. The 1965 immigration legislation represented a significant watershed moment in Asian American history. Reversing decades of systematic exclusion and restrictive immigration policies, the 1965 Act resulted in unprecedented numbers of immigrants from Asia, Mexico, Latin America, and other non western nations entering the U. S. The Act abolished the restrictive national origins system originally passed in 1924 in favor of a quota and preference system. Priority was now given to "family reunification" so that U. S. citizens and permanent residents could sponsor the following types of immigrants in order of preference ranging from their unmarried children, spouses, family members, etc.

Each country in the eastern hemisphere was given a quota of 20000 but children under 21, spouses, and parents of U. S. citizens were exempt from this quota. The 1965 Act was instrumental in changing the Asian face in America and has resulted in the current Asian American population of approximately 4% of the American total population.

Other influences that play a role in the coalescing of Asian groups were the political reality that each individual ethnic Asian group including Chinese Americans were relatively small. This led to a pan Asian approach in attempts to bring larger numerical numbers that is important in harnessing political power within a democratic society.

The United States Census also uses the category Asian American to be inclusive of all Asian groups including south Asian Indians. Thus the term Asian American refers to a widely disparate heterogeneous grouping of people who come from nations with different histories, languages, traditions, religion and who have not always been good neighbors. Persons from the Pacific Islands were also included not too long ago and the category was described as Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI). This further complicated the issue with Hawaiians who are native to the Hawaii islands and with some Japanese and Chinese who have been in the United States for 4~5 generations plus newer immigrants from southeast Asia who have come to the U. S. as refugees^[1].

Within such a general categorization, ethnic identity is often lost in favor of political clout that occurs only with larger numbers. Rather than Chinese Americans, all groups with Asian heritage are subsumed under one category. The specific

effects of such categorization have not been systematically studied. This is especially true regarding the amalgamation or combining of values or philosophies such as attitudes and perceptions of persons who have disabilities.

We do know that traditional views of disability are passed on generation to generation^[2] and that influences of religious practice and tradition obviously contribute as well^[3] along with the collectivistic perspective of Asian cultures. As Hampton indicated, "an AAPI with a disability is not only concerned about his or her problems as the consequence of having a disability, but also the impact of the disability on his or her family, that is, whether the disability will affect him or her in the performance of family duties."^[4] (p. 43). There is a positive aspect to a collectivistic perspective as families are generally very willing to accept the responsibilities of care.

Another notion often found in Chinese and thus Asian thinking relates to the role of fate or the inevitable more often than not of negative consequence in the lives of individuals. As with the collectivistic perspective, fate is at the very least a passive acceptance of reality. Disability may not be welcomed and even perceived as the result of a person's behavior in a previous life yet disability is accepted. The intersection of these beliefs and attitudes towards disability combined with experiences that Chinese or Asian immigrants have further complicate the use of rehabilitation services and the rehabilitation process itself.

Perhaps not unlike the acculturation process and the complex nature of persons who straddle two cultures, there is a need for rehabilitation practitioners to move cautiously and be aware of this duality. For example, the use of traditional interventions – e. g. herbal medicines may be preferred^[5] yet in conjunction with western interventions. It is generally assumed that Asians will "rely more heavily on informal social networks" than other [5] (p. 125) populations but these informal networks can be "infiltrated" and serve to function to advance notions that mitigate rather than hinder the rehabilitation process.

Out of this account, what does it mean for the Chinese and who live in China? I'm afraid I don't have much of an answer or at least anything new. I realize that there have been changes in China and there continue to be changes. What I do know is that the U. S. and China will become further and further intertwined as globalization continues. While the two countries may not always agree they will have to get along. In today's world, persons with disabilities have taken over their agenda that includes their civil rights and full participation in their countries.

Certainly, with regard to disability, China has the China Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF). The aim of the CDPF is to promote humanitarianism, develop the disability undertakings, protect human rights of persons with disabilities so as to enable them to participate in society with equal status and opportunities and share the cultural and material achievements brought about by the socio-economic development. While I don't know the impact of CDPF in China, it has led to an increased awareness in countries outside of China. At the same time China has passed legislation similar to the United States related to persons with disability. These laws such as Protection of Persons with Disabilities 1994 and on Vocational Education contain provisions that discrimination against persons with disabilities to be illegal. But as in the U. S. implementation and enforcement is not easy and requires not only high level commitment but changes in atti-

tude.

A major barrier in the U. S. and probably China and full enforcement of these anti-discriminatory legislation is attitude. Attitudes are a complex and difficult to understand but given their power to transcend time and generation there must be concerted efforts to counter misconceptions and myth. Education and constant attention by persons with disabilities, family and advocates do make a difference. China as indicated earlier has a head start with the CDPF. Knowing that it is difficult to maintain momentum as illustrated by the frustration of disability activists in the U. S. even now^[6], there is need to continue the campaign that brings to center stage a message that persons with disabilities can contribute to their society.

China will face some of what the U. S. and other western countries including Japan are facing at present. The population is growing older as the population lives longer and while disability doesn't equate directly with becoming older, it does place an individual to be at higher risk of acquiring a disability. Some would suggest China may have an even more difficult time with its one child policy with a population that is growing older experiencing disability but with a generation of children who have grown up somewhat pampered and self centered. How do attitudes regarding disability play in such a scenario? Traditional practice, religion and other values may have a lesser role as transition takes place. From an external observer's perspective, this becomes a very significant time to educate, provide opportunity and to publicize the importance that persons with disabilities can play in Chinese society.

I have come full circle in sharing what I think has influenced disability and rehabilitation from a Chinese American perspective. The traditions and values of the country of my parents' origin continues to have an effect today much greater than any one individual would have ever predicted. We stand at a threshold in which two major countries the U. S. and China will further influence how the world will or will not be fully inclusive for all members of our global world. We will need to work and think together if we are to fully utilize all who are a part of our countries whether or not they have disabilities. It would be a shame and a huge loss should this not occur either in China or the U. S.

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