

“Living a good life” from the perspectives of the Chinese migrants in Scotland

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Abstract

The 2011 Census shows 34,000 Chinese people living in Scotland, making Chinese the second largest minority group residing in Scotland. Among them, the asylum and refugee population continue to be largely invisible in the service delivery in Glasgow, which has been the only dispersal area in Scotland since 1999. Remarkably little research has been carried out on the UK Chinese migrant community in the literature, and this study proposed to fill the gap of finding out the wellbeing of this population. The researcher investigated the factors contributing to the wellbeing of twenty-five Chinese migrants, who are either asylum seekers or refugees in Glasgow as the first stage of a wellbeing study, adopting the concepts from the “Wellbeing in Developing Countries” framework (White, 2008). The Indicators of Integration (Strang & Ager 2008) and the Social Capital Theory (Putnam 1995) were used as reference points to explore the understanding of well-being and social connections. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out the core constructs of wellbeing from the Chinese people’s perspectives and thematic analysis was used in data analysis. The top five themes that emerged were children’s education, employment and financial independence, health care, freedom of speech and association, and support from own ethnic group.

Keywords: Chinese; asylum seekers; refugees; migrants; subjective well-being; social connection.

Introduction

According to the 2011 census, approximately 34,000 Chinese live in Scotland, forming one of the largest ethnic groups besides the people from Pakistan and India (Scotland’s Census, 2011). A report published by the Scottish Refugee Council showed that data on outstanding asylum claims in Scotland by nationality revealed that the largest number of claims from 2014 to 2015 has come from people from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Strang, Baillot, & Mignard, 2015). Nonetheless, only 6% of new refugees engaging with the holistic integration service (HIS) programme were from China in that year. Most research on the UK refugee integration has provided scant information on the Chinese population. Refugees and asylum seekers overall face a unique set of challenges, and there has been limited data available for researchers, policymakers or professionals working with this population. Refugees deal with varieties of challenges in pre and post-migration stages. Pre-migration trauma such as witnessing

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killings, being assaulted, and suffering torture and captivity aggravates transition in a host country (Quiroga & Jaranson, 2005).

Challenges faced in host country no doubt impact well-being as refugees face an unfamiliar environment and a new way of life. Refugees must learn to navigate an entirely new community, language, and cultural system, while simultaneously coping with the loss of homeland, family and way of life (Tran, Manolo & Nguyen, 2007). The social and physical environment in which one lives affects mental health outcome (Kawachi & Berkman 2001; Kawachi & Subramanian, 2007). Some scholars have found that Individuals who have experienced greater levels of trauma at pre-migration stage have a higher risk of developing psychological disorders long after resettlement (Steel, Silove, Phan & Bauman, 2002).

Asylum seekers and refugees' needs and concerns no doubt are far greater than immigrants, who chose to come to the UK with their financial assets and skills. Literature mainly focuses on Chinese migrant resettlement in host countries but has been scant on refugees or asylum seekers in the UK. Regardless of the legal status, people from the PRC share similar political, cultural and social background. A review of the perspectives of resettled migrants could, therefore, provide insights on the asylum and refugee population. Previous studies conducted with Chinese migrants in the UK show that this population is having difficulties with finding accommodation, learning English, finding adequate work and were likely to suffer from isolation. In general, Chinese migrants struggled with poor English language proficiency, feelings of loneliness, limited social support network and experience of some racial discrimination in their daily lives (Lam, Sales, D'Angelo, Lin & Montagna, 2009; Huang & Spurgeon, 2006; Lo & Chen, 2014). Furnham and Li (1993) found that there is a high prevalence of poor psychological adjustment and depression in the British Chinese immigrants. Overall, there is a lack of research on finding out the voice of the Chinese refugees and their perspectives.

The "Wellbeing in Developing Countries" (WeD) model, which focuses on a subjective well-being component with the material and relational aspects, was a reference point for this research. The dimension of social relationship is crucial to all well-being framework in understanding how people manage and cope with stressors in their daily lives. The WeD model focuses on "Doing Well*Feeling Good and Doing Good*Feeling Well" as the conceptualisation of wellbeing. It allows both the subjective dimension of personal perceptions and the collective dimension to subjective perceptions (White, 2008). The term 'a good life' was used in the interviews of this study instead of 'wellbeing' in the Chinese language to make the context easily understood by participants.



Drawing on Ager and Strang (2008) 'The Indicators of Integration' framework, which consists of ten domains grouped under four headings, this study examines the factors that are considered necessary for the Chinese asylum and refugee population to have a good life in Glasgow. This framework is widely used globally to gauge the integration milestone in a host country. The 'Means and markers' heading covers employment, housing, education and health domains. The 'Social connections' incorporates social bonds, bridges, and links. The 'Facilitators' covers language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability; while 'Foundation' looks into rights and citizenship.

Very little is known about the Chinese people as they rarely attract attention from politicians or researchers (Baxter & Raw, 1988). Agencies such as the Scottish Refugee Council and caseworkers working with Chinese migrants in Glasgow suggest that recent migrants in the past ten to fifteen years were mostly from the PRC. Interviews with caseworkers revealed that the Chinese people have applied for asylum due to various reasons such as political and religious persecution. They have left family behind, and it took an extended period of separation before their spouses and children joined them in the host country. Because of their isolation, this group may not be in contact with mainstream services or community organisations, and they are traditionally the most 'hard to reach' group. Research studies have suggested that social services allocated to this group are fewer than their numbers and needs appear to justify in comparison with other ethnic groups (Chau & Yu 2010). This research project was designed to explore the subjective well-being from the perspectives of the Chinese migrants, who self-identified as asylum seekers or refugees in the process.

Method

Members of the British Red Cross (BRC), the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and the Chinese Community Development Partnership (CCDP) were invited to form an advisory group for this research project. Key informants who have worked with the Chinese asylum seekers and refugees were interviewed. Snowball sampling was utilised to recruit participants, who are either asylum seekers or refugees in Glasgow. Since they were hard to reach and very suspicious of the intentions of strangers approaching them, it was a good idea for participants to introduce potential participants to the researcher.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-five participants, with twenty women and five men to explore the constructs of well-being. Participants' age ranged from sixteen to sixty years old, and



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their length of residency in Glasgow ranged from three to ten years. Data collection was carried over a period of six months. Interviews were conducted in either Cantonese or Mandarin, depending on the preference of the participants. The researcher started the interview with more structured questions pertaining to demographics and personal circumstances like reasons of coming to Scotland. It then proceeded to more open-ended questions such as what makes a good life and participants' dream life in 10 years.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised for data analysis. It involved searching for themes and clustering them into ideas that were related. Once the themes were identified, they were defined and named systematically. Finally, the relationship of the themes to each other was explored to help produce a fuller interpretation of the underlying meanings and themes that emerged in the process. The software of Nvivo was used to assist the process. Thematic analysis helped to capture the meanings of living a good life within the data and provide an interpretation of those meanings.

Findings

The top five constructs of well-being mentioned in the interviews were:

- Children's education
- Employment and financial independence
- Health care
- Freedom of expression and association
- Support from own ethnic group

The Indicators of Integration framework was used to illustrate the findings under the four headings namely 'means and markers', "social connection", "facilitators", and "foundation".

Means and Markers – Employment, housing, education and health

Chinese mothers put great focus on education, and many mentioned the importance of children attending good schools, having various learning opportunities such as tutorials after school and learning Chinese on Saturdays, and participating in extra-curricular activities. Most Chinese families see education as the only and most efficient way to get out of poverty and move up the social ladder for the next generation. Success in schools and having professionally secured jobs later in life are considered valuable social capital. They put the interest of their children before their



own. It was not uncommon to hear Chinese parents said that they would be happy if they have children who listen to the parents, study hard, graduate from a good university and secure a professional job. One female participant, whose children are two-year-old and eight-month-old, said in the interview,

"I have been trying to find a good nursery for my older child to give him a head start. I hope my children can receive the best education possible so that they can be more competitive when they grow up." (Female refugee, 25 years old)

In the employment domain, having a stable and good job was frequently mentioned as an important aspect of a good life. The women interviewed have expressed desire of finding a fulfilling job once the children are older.

"I hope to find a job in the hotel industry where I can meet different kinds of people rather than working in the Chinese take-away or grocery store." (Female refugee, 26 years old)

For their husbands, most women hoped that they kept their employment in catering places and restaurants, and saved up enough money to start a takeaway shop or small-scale restaurant. Some participants mentioned having their own house would improve their economic situation, and thus their family well-being. Participants reported that they often struggle to balance their income and expenses. They try to cut down transportation costs by going out less, get discounted grocery when they are almost expired, and minimize the heating bills in the winter months. CCDP, the grassroot Chinese agency, has been helping some Chinese families to apply for help with paying energy bills in the winter. Some participants mentioned that they were just surviving in Glasgow, and according to case workers and few participants, some borrowed an enormous amount of money from families or even worse, from "snakehead," organized gangs for illegal smuggling, to get them out of China. They have to work very hard to repay the loan.

For the health domain, most participants mentioned staying healthy as very important for family well-being. On the whole, the experiences of health care were positive and satisfactory. On the other hand, some discussed the challenges going to local General Practitioner (GP) due to language barrier, long wait, and unavailability of an interpreter. The communication problem between participants and the medical staff and professionals is one of the biggest obstacles to accessing health care, and it affects the perceived quality of health care by participants.



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"It is not easy to get an interpreter at the GP office, and I have no choice but ask my friend to take me since she can speak English. If my friend is busy, I have to take my teenager daughter to translate for me" (Female refugee, 33 years old)

"Nothing is more important than staying healthy; health is wealth in our Chinese saying." (Female refugee, 42 years old)

Social connections: bonds, bridges and links

Chinese families, who are from the same province such as Fujian, tend to stick together for support and social gathering. They share close bonding, speak the same dialect, and often, people who have mastered the English language well and have more social networks in the group serve as others' bridges and links. A few participants have mentioned the caution of asking or receiving help from its ethnic group due to the reciprocity of 'Guanxi', which means social relationship. One feels obligated to return the favour if he or she received help. One participant reported that making friends with other ethnic group gives her the equal footing.

"My friend is from Sudan, we are in the same boat, and they do not expect anything from me, unlike some Chinese friends. Also, it is sometimes easier to make friends from other countries other than the local Scottish people. I feel inferior to the local people, and don't know how they think of me and my way of doing things." (Female refugee, 28 years old)

Most female participants have mentioned having close Chinese friends for help and support, especially those who know English well to help with translation. People like to live close to their ethnic group so that they can reach out to each other for assistance and emotional support.

"Having Chinese friends nearby helps a lot. It is important for me to share my ups and downs, and our children can play together as well." (Female refugee, 30 years old)

"I talk to my Chinese friends on the phone often. We support each other and help one another in times of difficulties." (Female asylum seeker, 27 years old)

Facilitators: Language & cultural knowledge

Most participants claimed that they have tried to learn the English language but failed to master it. Two female participants wanted to look for



jobs in the hotel sector, but they have concerns over their English language skills. Overall, participants acknowledged the importance of the English language in their daily lives. Most mothers wish they know English well enough to understand the paperwork from school and the letters in the mail. They are not able to comprehend what is required of them as parents from school and the Scottish Government because of their limited English proficiency. Limited language skill is also the greatest barrier for them to make friends with the local people or get a desirable job. Some female participants have complained about the long waiting list at the English for the Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Some expressed difficulties of attending classes since they have a few small children. Consequently, participants rely on their Chinese friends who know English well or the caseworkers at CCDP to help with translating letters and making phone calls for an inquiry.

"I have been waiting to get enrolled in the ESOL class a couple of blocks from my home for two years, and they haven't contacted me yet." (Female refugee, 32 years old)

Foundation: Rights & citizenship

Some participants have mentioned being free to choose what they like to believe, to say and do, and pursue their interests as an important construct of living a good life. Two participants have said:

"I enjoy the freedom here, unlike China, you cannot say any critical comments about the government or you will be dead! Here, people treat you fairly, and you can openly express your view on the Scottish Government or any political parties." (Female refugee, 32 years old)

"Human rights are important; I am free to choose what I like to pursue here like I practice the spiritual exercise of the Falun Gong, which has been persecuted by the Chinese government. I am glad I can keep up with the exercise since it keeps me healthy and relaxed." (Female refugee, 58 years old)

The asylum phase is a tough period experienced by those who have obtained refugee status and those who are waiting in limbo. Male participants mentioned not being able to work legally as one of the greatest struggles financially and emotionally during the asylum phase. They were afraid of being caught working illegally at restaurants and takeaway but they need the money to support their families. As one male participant said,



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“I couldn’t sit at home and wait for the welfare money for my family. We have three kids and it makes me feel helpless and useless to sit at home all day and do nothing when I was seeking asylum. Now, I feel much better having a job, and provide for my family” (Male refugee, 36 years old).

The asylum period can be unpredictable, and a female participant said her family had filed for asylum for almost ten years and had not heard back from the Home Office. A Chinese cultural officer at one housing association also raised the concern as many Chinese asylum seekers ask for help to inquire into their pending cases with the Home Office. He told the researcher that it was very frustrating when people have their pending cases over a long time. Their lives are in limbo, and they do not know if they can get refugee status, not mention planning their future in the host country. They cannot go back to China to see their families without a valid passport.

Discussion

Collective Identity:

Children’s overall well-being is the most mentioned core construct of what makes a good life. Culturally, Chinese is considered as a collective group, and the emphasis is on collective identity. People identify themselves as Chinese, from a particular province, with a certain last name and within an extended family network. There is a parallel of what the WeD well-being model describes as the collective dimension to subjective perceptions (White, 2009). Family as one unit and family members are expected to work together to cope with life stressors. The Chinese family is extremely cohesive. Family members depend on each other for support, both emotional and in carrying out daily tasks (Hsu, 1985). From the interview data, older children serve the role of “bridges” for their parents from translating mail to making phone calls to local agencies and companies for enquiry or report a problem. Parents equate living a good life with having capable and responsible children, who help with family chores and study hard to achieve academic success. It brings pride to both the immediate and extended family.

Social Connections:

Despite numerous factors contributing to general well-being, people who match their cultural environment will experience better psychological well-being than people who do not (Fulmer et al., 2010). Participants tend to be isolated in the host country but surrounded by their own ethnic group.



Some participants illustrated a strong bonding within the Chinese ethnic networks. They received emotional and practical support from friends and acquaintances, but these were usually other Chinese, who share similar economic and social status as themselves. For some participants, the bonding capital is stronger and it can serve as bridging and linking capital at times. For example, a participant received a letter in the mail and called a Chinese friend for help. She translated the letter and recommended the participant to talk to a caseworker at CCDP, where she was linked with the immigration staff at the Home Office. Having strong bonds, access to information such as the CCDP is significant in providing social support, and it can serve as a bridge and link to help and services.

‘Quanxi’ - the Chinese term, which refers to a range of social relationships, can be used as close references to social connections of bonds, bridges, and links. It entails mutual benefits between two parties such as resources, information and concrete help. Ager and Strang (2008) draw attention to the bonding that can emerge from refugees having access to support from co-ethnic groups. It is evident that participants have strong bondings from the same ethnic group. On the other hand, some might hesitate to receive support if they know they are not in the place to return any favour in due course.

Mental Health:

Some women, who stay at home to look after their children, are extremely isolated in the host community. Their husbands are working long hours at catering businesses and some work far away from home and only return home once a week. Those mothers manage the whole household and their children all by themselves without support from relatives or family members. It is very common to see Chinese family with a few young children in Glasgow. Teachers at the Chinese school in Glasgow expressed concern about the increasing number of Chinese children with emotional and mental health issues. Caseworkers at CCDP raised the same concern about the risks of isolation as this population will not seek professional help due to ‘face’ or lack of information. A mother in the interview expressed great concern about her son’s emotional state when they first arrived Glasgow. He was very quiet all the time and refused to go to school. She did not know where to get help, or whom she should talk to regarding the issue. Besides, staffs at CCDP have noticed the extreme isolation of men in the area, but the agency has no resources and means to offer help. As a staff member reported,



“Men do not disclose their feelings to family members or others except with a few buddies when they are drunk.” (CCDP caseworker, female)

Conclusion

To sum up, this article serves as a starting point offering some insights on what makes a good life from the voices of the Chinese asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow. The findings were shared with the advisory group, and it is hoped that the information provided will be helpful for policy makers and service delivery agencies to come up with strategies to better understand the areas of concern and cater for the needs of this population.

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