

# The Chinese Diaspora: Overlapping Life Transitions, Barriers, and HCI

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Migration is a life-altering event in many ways. For example, when people move to a new country, they often spend considerable effort learning the host country's social norms, establishing new relationships, maintaining old ties, and understanding their role or roles within their new community.

In CHI and CSCW, previous work on life transitions has focused on the role of technology in facilitating people's major life events and transitions, documented different transitions including homelessness [21], changing health conditions [22], parenthood [3], serious illness [2], job changes [8], relationship breakups [13], pregnancy loss [1], the death of loved ones [7], gender transition [14] and disadvantaged college students' identity transition [23]. Although scholarship in migration studies has long considered migrating to a new country as a transition where migrants experience different phases of the settlement process [24, 29], few studies in social computing have taken the life transitions approach to examine immigrant's settlement experience.

In addition, people often face multiple life transitions simultaneously. However, prior work on life transitions tends to focus on one transition at a time [2, 3, 7, 8, 21, 22]. This work aims to move beyond studying life transitions in isolation; specifically, we use immigration as a baseline transition to study how it overlaps and impacts other life transitions. Moreover, Sabie et al. have identified that current research in CHI and social computing related to immigrants tend to focus on newcomers' immediate needs and often pay less attention to support their cultural identities [28]. We hope to continue this conversation by bringing a case study about Chinese diaspora's long-term needs and their diasporic identity.

Broadly speaking, the Chinese diaspora is globally dispersed Chinese (by origin and descent) living outside of the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau [25]. The US has been a main

destination for the Chinese diaspora since 1785 [20]. Chinese immigrants are also one of the fastest-growing populations in the US; in 2018, the US Census Bureau estimates that 5.5 million Chinese diaspora lived in the States <sup>1</sup>.

This workshop paper reports a subsection of our findings from a qualitative study with the Chinese diaspora community in Michigan. We found that participants experienced various overlapping transitions as migrants and being an immigrant complicates their other life transitions. Specifically, their life transitions are constraining and complicated, with limits imposed by their immigration status, the norms and conventions in the host country, their diasporic identity, geographical distance, and systemic injustice in the US. We structured our discussion around the broad theme of this workshop.

## 2 METHODS

We conducted an exploratory study using ethnographically-informed qualitative methods with members of the Chinese diaspora community in Michigan. To be eligible, participants needed to be at least 18 years old, self-identified as Chinese diaspora, and living/lived in Michigan. We recruited informants through multiple social media local online communities and snowball sampling.

We recruited 15 participants, 7 (46.7%) born in the Chinese mainland and 8 (53.3%) in Taiwan, all of whom later immigrated to the US. Three were men and 12 were women. Participants have been living in the US for between 3-49 years ( $sd=13.0$  years). They ranged in age from 29 to 71 years old, and the median age was 34 ( $mean=38.8$ ,  $sd=13.7$  years). Participants were highly educated: 14 participants completed at least a bachelor's degree (93.3%), and 9 earned an advanced academic degree (60.0%). Participants were diverse in occupation and immigration status. They held various of occupations including restaurant worker, homemaker, student, relater, engineer, analyst, consultant, doctor, among others. Participants were compensated with a \$30 Amazon gift card after completing the first interview as a token of appreciation.

Between October 2020 and January 2020, we conducted ethnographically-informed qualitative methods, which include interviews, participant observation, and online fieldwork. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were designed as life histories [30], where we asked participants about their lives, experiences living as Chinese diaspora in Michigan, and their use of ICTs in everyday life. Interviews lasted between 42 to 164 minutes and averaged approximately 97.5 minutes ( $sd=28.3$ ). In addition, we joined multiple local online groups on multiple platforms, including WeChat and Facebook, and conducted participant observations. We conducted interactive and inductive analyses of

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2019/demo/ChineseDiaspora.pdf>

**Table 1: Summary of overlapping life events participants experienced beyond migration**

Type of Transitions	Life Transitions Participants Experienced as immigrants
Death	death of extended family member, death of a loved one
Relationships	marriage, divorce
Education	started college started graduate school, graduated graduate school, left school
Career	started first job, started a new job career, started new business, voluntary job loss (e.g., quit)
Identity	came out as LGBTQ+
Relocation	move to a different state, move to a different country
Family relationships	became a parent, became a grandparent, new pet
Financial	home purchase
Societal	pandemic, natural disaster

the interview transcriptions and field notes using open coding and memoing informed by qualitative content analysis [6, 10]. All the codes were translated into English and discussed by the research team on a weekly basis. This study was approved by our university's ethics review board.

### 3 RESULTS

Prior work in migration studies has considered migrating to a new country as a transition where migrants experience different phases of the settlement process [24, 29]. This workshop paper focuses on challenges derived from overlapping transitions they experience. That is, how does transitioning as immigrants shape participants' other life transitions?

We first categorized major life transitions participants experienced beyond transitioning as immigrants (See Table 1), using Haimson and colleague's major life events taxonomy [15]. Through our analysis, we found that transitioning as an immigrant complicates the Chinese diaspora's other life transitions. The main factors impacting life transitions include immigration status, norms and conventions at the host country, diasporic identity, geographical distance, and systemic injustice in the United States.

#### 3.1 Immigration status

Most participants described how their immigration status complicated various life transitions they experienced after moving to the States. Those life transitions include but are not limited to job choice, career opportunities, relocation decisions, relationships, and education decisions. For example, P11, a data analyst, observed that the diaspora's immigration status could negatively impact their professional transitions.

*"Our immigration status can bring us disadvantages during job hunting. When you and another applicant are well-matched, if your competitor doesn't need immigration sponsorship from the company, then the job is much more likely to go to them."* - P11 (F, 44)

P11's observation revealed that immigration status could directly hinder Chinese diaspora's career transitions. Such impacts could also influence other life events such as relocation for some participants. P10, a stay-at-home mom, has moved among three States - Texas, Arizona, and Michigan - with her husband in recent years due to career instability.

Other participants described that acquiring stable immigration status through secure jobs after graduation could influence their education decisions, including program, location, and major choice. For instance, P14, a Ph.D. student from Taiwan, revealed that increasing the likelihood of getting a sponsorship after graduation was one of the major factors for her to pursue her doctoral degree. Prior work in migrant studies has shown that professional factors often act as strong incentives for international students to stay in the US [17].

As illustrated in the examples above, immigration status is one of the main factors that complicates, and makes more challenging, the Chinese diaspora's other life transitions.

#### 3.2 Social norms and conventions between the US and homeland

Participants also reported that norms and conventions in the host country could further complicate their transitions. Such norms and conventions could manifest through various contexts including academic, professional, and even family relationships. Before P10 gave birth to her first baby, she needed to get familiar with the hospital system, specifically the labor, delivery, and recovery room (LDR), as baby delivery practices are different in her home country. *"We don't know anything, I don't even have a baby before, even in Taiwan. In Taiwan, I just heard what my friends did, and then in the US, it's just like brand new, and I have to adapt to everything in the hospital."*

Participants also shared that professional and academic norms could complicate their life transitions. P13 disclosed that due to lack of relevant professional experience in the US, it took him three years to land a job after graduating from a US university. He described his failure of securing a local internship in graduate school as a "fatal injury". He explained:

*"Different societies have different rules. Lack of working experience wasn't a issue for me to secure a position after graduating from college in Taiwan; but here, I feel most companies expect you to have relevant working experience, especially local working experience to make the offer."* - P13 (M,35)

P13's experience illustrates that professional norms in the host country created obstacles for him to land a job successfully, which complicates his life transitions as an immigrant in the US.

#### 3.3 Distance between the US and homeland

The long distance between Chinese mainland/Taiwan and the US created additional challenges for participants. Participants described missing friends and family members' important life events back home. P8 disclosed that she wasn't notified when her high school friend became a parent, and P14 missed her sister's college graduation. *The most challenging part is, when something happened back in Taiwan, among your families, but you are far away from them, and*

*you can't really help or you can't really be with them,"* P14 added. P10 experienced the death of loved ones when she was away, and that tragic life event impacted her greatly.

Other than missing friends' and family's important life events, participants reported that being away from home directly limits the social support they could receive when other life transitions occur. After becoming a new father, P13 faced a tremendous challenge balancing work and childcare.

*"I had to learn new skills such as changing diapers. I also needed to get up every two hours to feed my child. The worse part is I have to be on time for work and sit in front of my computer from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. I was both mentally and physically exhausted....If I were in Taiwan, my family would help me go through this transition." - P13 (M,35)*

The examples above reveal that due to geographic distance, participants could miss close family members or friends' major life events, and their access to social support was limited, both of which make their diasporic life more challenging.

### 3.4 Diasporic identity

Participants also expressed sentiments such as feeling distanced from their homeland and lack of sense of belonging as they strive to adapt to the host country while staying connected with their homeland, which further complicated their transitions. For instance, both P2 and P4 expressed concerns that they are no longer familiar with the social environment and lifestyle in China. Participants such as P9, P11, P12, and P14 still felt they didn't belong in the States. P14 shared her experience of not feeling like she belonged at the beginning of the pandemic:

*I live on campus, and our school actually sent out an email saying they want everyone to leave...people were all panicked about that email. Because how about us? We don't have a family here and I can only live on campus like at [apartment name]. How can you just ask me to leave because of the pandemic? - P14 (F,27)*

The school later sent a follow-up email saying that they can stay with the condition of signing a Covid-19 liability waiver. Regardless, according to P14, the incident made her feel like she never belonged in the US. P8, a realtor from Taiwan elaborated this in-between feeling as a mother:

*"When I came back to Taiwan, I felt like I was a traveller in a place I was very familiar with. Now I am here, I feel like a foreigner, and I still can't envision myself as an American. I also feel my kids are different; despite their grandparents are still in Taiwan, they still think they are Americans. I am in an awkward position due to identity issues, but I have to live with it." - P8 (F,35)*

Prior work in diaspora studies often highlight how individuals in diaspora manage the push-pull of identity work [5, 16] and their "in-between" experience [12]. Participants' experiences reaffirm that their diasporic identity could create additional obstacles when they go through other life transitions.

### 3.5 Systemic injustice in the US

In addition, participants also raised systematic injustice, specifically, racism, xenophobia, and forced assimilation, which further complicates their life transitions. For instance, P1 shared her experience of housing discrimination when she was living in Missouri:

*"I was looking for a house to rent because I was getting married. I saw this sign for rent. I went there and knocked on the door. Oh, my goodness, the landlady was so scared. She opened the door just a tiny little bit because I'm Chinese. Landlady: 'Can I help you?' P1: 'I'm looking for a place to rent.' Landlady: 'Oh, I'm sorry, it's all rented.' P1: 'The sign is still out there.' Landlady: 'Oh, I forgot to bring it in.' I walked away. The next day I drove by and the sign was still out there.' - P1 (F, 71)*

P1 was denied access to housing while getting married due to her immigrant identity, which was blatant racism toward Chinese in the US. Racism and xenophobia against the Chinese community in the US have been documented since Mid-19th century [9, 18, 19]. The breakout of Covid-19 has fueled a new wave of racism against the Chinese and Asian communities. Between March and June last year, over 2,100 anti-Asian American hate incidents related to Covid-19 were reported across the US<sup>2</sup>. P13 was particularly worried about encountering discrimination and hate crime due to rhetoric like "Chinese virus." P8 recalled her uneasiness early last year *I was deeply concerned, especially after reading multiple news about anti-Chinese sentiment in California...A friend from Sichuan even bought a gun from the store. My family didn't buy guns, but we purchased pepper spray and kept our golf clubs handy for self-defense."*

Besides racism, participants also shared experience of forced assimilation instead of organic integration impacted by the lack of racial diversity in the US. For instance, P15, a new mother, lamented that the American mothering app she has been relying on kept recommending foods like pasta as baby food for her children. As a result, she had to specifically search Chinese baby food such as rice among Taiwan websites. She didn't attribute the issue to the app; instead, she sees it as a structural issue. P15 elaborated:

*"It's a problem in America where people just think that white experiences are the standard experiences. So that's why the app just follows those white experiences. 'These are the standards that you should do. You should give your kids mac and cheese because it's according to the American Pediatric Association's suggestion...Mac and cheese is a really common food in white families, so American Pediatric Association put it as a suggestion, and thinking that white families' experiences are the standard of the US. So I don't think that that's a problem of the app or the platform, it's a structural problem within the United States." - P15 (F,34)*

She added that living in the US as an immigrant requires her to be consciously aware that the standard and default experience are very likely to be the white experience. She disclosed that her family will "will eventually go back to Taiwan".

<sup>2</sup><https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-asian-american-hate-incidents-up-racism/>

In sum, participants experienced various overlapping transitions in the US, and being an immigrant complicated their subsequent life transitions. Specifically, their life transitions are complicated by factors including their immigration status, the norms and conventions in the host country, their diasporic identity, geographical distance, and systemic injustice in the US.

## 4 DISCUSSION

We structure the discussion section around the broad themes of this Migration and Mobility in HCI Workshop.

In CHI and social computing, scholars tend to study the Asian community monolithically [11, 27]. In the current US racial classification systems, Asian as a racial category has been woven into the fabric of Americans' everyday life, and thus has become a research norm despite the absence of scientific basis. The Chinese diaspora community in the US is overlooked among researchers as the community members are often identified as part of the larger category of "Asian." However, Asian as a heterogeneous racial category encompasses groups from over twenty national-origins. For the most part, the national origin groups subsumed under the category of Asian do not share cultural, religion, language, and historical backgrounds, and may even have long-standing conflicts over land and politics. Thus, in researching migration groups, it is critical to resist the norms of grouping many disparate populations within a large monolithic category, and instead acknowledge each migration group's diversity.

In our study, we utilized various social media sites to recruit participants and conduct participate observation. As more and more migrants gravitate into different social media spaces and different computer-mediated communication tools become deeply embedded in their everyday life, it will be important to move away from single platform studies [26] and adopt the "social media ecosystem" approach to learn how different platforms operate as legitimate spaces in people's everyday lives [4]. Meanwhile, we should be conscious of potential biases and the omitted voices on social media, and on particular platforms.

Finally, to achieve real-life impact, we encourage researchers to make both migrants' host country and homeland's social environments and geopolitical processes an active part of the research. In the case of the Chinese diaspora, the geopolitical tensions between US and China, the anti-Chinese racism exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and systemic injustice in the US all impacted every facet of diasporic life and participants' technology use/non-use. Instead of studying migrants' technology behavior in isolation, the broader sociopolitical contexts related to migration should be an important part of the scholarly inquiry.

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