

Living Arrangements and Lifestyle Satisfaction among the Elderly in Chinese Immigrant Families: A Preliminary Study

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Background: The aims of this preliminary study were to understand the relationship between the living arrangements and lifestyle satisfaction through investigating how choices of living arrangements impacted upon lifestyle satisfaction of elderly Chinese immigrants in London.

Methods: A qualitative research methodology with semi-structured, face-to-face and in-depth interviews was utilized with eight elderly couples of Chinese immigrant families from Vietnam and Hong Kong.

Results: The results indicated that the desirability of current lifestyle was associated with lifestyle satisfaction. Among 12 participants who desired their current lifestyles, nine reported this having a "positive effect" on their lifestyle satisfaction, and no negative effects were reported. In comparison, the negative effects on lifestyle satisfaction were found among four participants who did not desire their current independent residence from their adult children. The reasons the participants desired or not their current lifestyles and the effects on their lifestyle satisfaction were explored qualitatively. The participants might consider family situations (finance, health, age, and kin network) to some extent, but not see them as key determinants in making decisions about living arrangements. However, the Chinese cultural beliefs in living arrangement choices were highly visible in their reports.

Conclusion: The findings suggested that the elderly participants' desirability of their current lifestyles was positively associated with the level of lifestyle satisfaction. The issue of the living arrangements and lifestyle satisfaction of the elderly acquires new significance at a time when the population in Taiwan is aging, and the socio-economic and cultural changes are more radical than ever.

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Key words: living arrangement, lifestyle satisfaction, elderly, immigrant family.

Certain dimensions of decision making for people in the late stages of the life cycle may be very different from those associated with people in other stages of life.⁽¹⁾ One of the dimensions is the choice

of living arrangement which may dramatically alter the life course as well as impact the well-being of the elderly. Studies on this subject have become important since there are increasing numbers of elderly

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people living alone, and the decline of multi-generational households has been reported in both Western and Eastern cultures.⁽²⁻⁶⁾ Set against the norm of independence and autonomy, the co-residence of elderly people with their adult children is seen or considered only in exceptional circumstances, such as when the elderly have particular support needs and are unable to live independently. Such a conclusion was drawn from the studies in England and Wales,⁽⁷⁾ the US,⁽⁸⁾ and Canada.⁽⁹⁾ However, the extent to which the conclusions of these studies can be generalized to include other ethnic groups is doubtful.

Factors contributing to the elderly choice of living arrangements, co-residence or non co-residence with their adult children, have been examined and reported in the literature. According to a study by Thomas and Wister,⁽¹⁰⁾ the availability of adult children, followed closely by ethnicity, were the major determinants of co-residence of older women with children. In contrast, other social, demographic, and economic variables tended to be weaker predictors of the elderly household status. Their study also dealt with tastes, preferences, and the so-called cultural issues, through comparing residential behavior across diverse ethnic groups. The cultural issues reflected the important variations in normative beliefs and practices involved in the choice of living arrangements made by elderly people. Thus, the issue of elderly people in immigrant families, per se, should receive sufficient attention to explore the likely conflict between keeping traditional beliefs and the need for acculturation in the aspect of choices of living arrangements. A comparative study showed that the elderly Chinese and Japanese individuals in the US were more likely than elderly non-Hispanic White individuals to "live in extended family households, particularly in their married children's homes" and concluded that the cultural effects on the living arrangements of the elderly persisted longer than predicted by the models of modernization and acculturation.⁽¹¹⁾

Due to strong extended family ties, interdependent relationships, and a sense of obligation, elderly Chinese parents expect to be taken care of. They rarely experienced an "empty nest" period in their family life cycle.⁽¹²⁾ Interestingly, the elderly who stayed with their married children and grandchildren were much admired by their peers who lived alone. Such a multi-generational household was treated as

the greatest blessing in life. However, during recent years, socio-economic and educational changes, and western thoughts and modernization have, to some extent, shaken traditional Chinese family organization and values, in particular within the Chinese immigrant family. Immigration is a developmental process of adaptation. In this process, all family members, but particularly the elderly, may be affected differently.⁽¹³⁾ For the elderly Chinese immigrants, the stress is often the greatest when they are facing acculturation and new stages in the life cycle. Conflicts or emotional problems may appear because of the differences in needs, cultural values and beliefs that exist among family members and between the family and the environment. The discrepancies in acculturation occurring between elderly members and middle-generation family members, between husband and wife, and between parents and children, can have negative effects on the decision-making and functioning of a family.⁽¹⁴⁾

Two research questions are addressed in this study. The first is whether the desirability of the current lifestyle for the elderly Chinese British immigrant (whether co-residing, or not, with adult children) is associated with lifestyle satisfaction. The second is how their family situations (finance, health status, age, and kin network) and cultural values affect their choices of living arrangements.

METHODS

A qualitative research methodology with semi-structured, face-to-face and in-depth interviews was utilized with elderly couples of eight Chinese immigrant families from Vietnam and Hong Kong. The elderly were recruited at the Chinese community centers in London. Participant selection was limited to those aged over 60, without cognitive impairment or acute psychotic problems. Of the eight couples, four had co-resided with their adult children for at least 3 months, and the other four couples had not co-resided with their adult children for at least 3 months.

At the beginning of the interview, the elderly couples were asked to complete the socio-demographic details, and the Life Satisfaction Index. Then a semi-structured interview was conducted, and the elderly couples were interviewed separately. With individual permission, tape recording was used

throughout the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The participants were free to choose their preferred interview places, for example, three couples chose to be interviewed at the community center, but the other couples preferred to be interviewed at their homes.

The Life Satisfaction Index (LSI) (8-item)⁽¹⁵⁾ was chosen to determine the elderly couples' overall well-being since it has been commonly used in research into the well-being of subjects in the field of gerontology and "could be administered either as written questionnaires or within a structured interview".⁽¹⁶⁾ The LSI can be interpreted as measuring satisfaction with "achievement-fulfillment" in the past, and with "acceptance-contentment" in present life as a whole. For the present study, the Life Satisfaction Index was translated into Chinese and the Chinese version was back translated into English to ensure functional equivalence of the items.

In working with the qualitative data, the data preparation was considered critical. First, the 16 taped interviews were transcribed. Second, the texts were carefully categorized. Third, after categorization, the developed categories were integrated to identify the major and minor themes in order to relate the data to relevant concepts.

In terms of ethical consideration in this study, informed consent was obtained from the couples themselves, and the age-appropriate explanations of the study were provided for them using the Chinese language. It was recognized that the subjects to be explored in the family interview were of a sensitive nature, and the family members were told at the beginning of interview that they could stop the interview at any time. On data presentation, all participants were coded as A couple (A1 and A2) through H couple (H1 and H2), instead of being named. The ethics committee of Institute of Psychiatry, University of London, approved the research procedures before the interviews were carried out.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics and LSI of the participants

The mean age of the 16 participants was 73.5 ± 4.77 years. The number of children ranged from 3 to 8. Twelve participants were educated only to primary school level, or were illiterate. The total years of

residence in the UK, since immigration, ranged from 8 to 36 years. Three couples had come from Vietnam and five were from Hong Kong. After immigration, nearly half of the participants had had no employment, but one quarter had been cooks. Fourteen participants rated their health as "fair" or "good". Some variations in the types of housing were evident. Three of four couples co-residing with adult children had purchased their own house or flat, but three of four couples not co-residing with children were renting or living in council accommodation.

The mean scores and standard deviations of the LSI and its two sub-scales of the participants are presented in Table 1, together with the results of *t*-tests for the significance of the differences between the present study and the normal elderly group in the study by Gilleard et al in 1981. Significant differences existing on the LSI scale and its sub-scale of "contentment". In other words, higher "contentment" and overall life-satisfaction reflected the fairly stable traits of the participants' well-being.

Table 1. The Scores of Life Satisfaction Index of the Participants

Life Satisfaction Index		Group A	Group B	<i>p</i>
Total Score	Mean	12.38	10.68	.0001*
	SD	1.41	3.18	
Contentment	Mean	6.31	4.94	.0001*
	SD	0.70	2.43	
Fulfillment	Mean	6.06	5.73	.3315
	SD	1.12	1.90	

Group A: The study participants (N=16, mean age 73.5, sd. 4.77)

Group B: The normal elderly group (N=45, mean age 71.4, sd 7.1) in the study by Gilleard, et al. (1981)

*: *p*<0.05, statistically different with student *t*-test.

Living arrangement and lifestyle satisfaction

The participants (N = 8) who were co-residing with their adult children reported their desirability for their current lifestyle. However, among those who were not co-residing with their adult children, four desired their current lifestyle but four did not. The results (Table 2) indicated that the desirability of current lifestyle was associated with lifestyle satisfaction. Among the 12 participants who desired their current lifestyles, nine reported this having a "positive effect" on their lifestyle satisfaction, three viewed it having no effect at all, but no negative responses were reported. In comparison, one partici-

pant reported a negative effect on lifestyle satisfaction was found among the four participants who did not desire their current non co-residence with their adult children. The remaining three participants reported this had "no effect at all".

The reasons for the participants who desired their current co-residence with their adult children were mainly characterized by Chinese traditional values (Table 3), such as "In Chinese families, every parent expects to co-reside with adult children", and "it is a 'shame' if parents do not co-reside with their only son" (E1, E2, F2, G2). They also observed the

differences that their British neighbors lived independently from their children. Interestingly, for the participants who desired current non co-residence with their adult children, different reasons were given, such as holding contemporary values that elderly people lived independently (B2, C1), and preferred private living (B2, C1, C2, D2). The reasons, however, for the participants who were not co-residing but wanted to co-reside with their adult children, were including "expecting adult children's care and help" (A1, B1, D1) and "fear of loneliness" (A1, A2). Nevertheless, A2, B1, and D1 reported this had

Table 2. Relationship between Desirability of Current Lifestyles and Lifestyle Satisfaction

Effect on Lifestyle Satisfaction	Desirability of current lifestyles or not	
	Desirable (N = 12)	Not desirable (N = 4)
Positive effect	9 (75%)	0
No effect at all	3 (25%)	3 (75%)
Negative effect	0	1 (25%)

Table 3. Qualitative Summary: Desirability of Current Lifestyle and Its Effect on Lifestyle Satisfaction

Current Lifestyle	Reasons	Effect on lifestyle satisfaction
Desirability of current co-residence with adult children (E1, E2, F1, F2, G1, G2, H1, H2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on Chinese traditional values (E1, E2, F2, G2)-- "In Chinese families, every parent expects to co-reside with their adult children." / "It is a 'shame' if parents do not co-reside with their only son." / "British neighbors live independently from their adult children." Expecting to be taken care of by their adult children (F1, F2, G2, H1, H2)--practical supports when a parent is ill / emotional support. Affectionate (G1) 	<p>Very positive effect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling contented and happy (E1, E2, F2, G1, G2, H1, H2)-- co-residence with adult children is pleasant, even if it sacrificed parents' benefits / feeling pleased when seeing adult children / not feeling lonely. Taken care by adult children (F1, F2, H1, H2) -- emotional and practical supports.
Desirability of current non co-residence with adult children (B2, C1, C2, D2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With contemporary beliefs, elderly people live independently (B2, C1). Preferring private living (B2, C1, C2, D2) -- different living habits / avoiding further conflicts / enjoying an independent life. 	<p>Very positive effect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoying independent life (D2) -- more freedom and self-contentment <p>No effect at all:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoyment of independence without interference (B2, C1). Adult children's constant visitations (C2).
Not desiring for current non co-residence with adult children (A1, A2, B1, D1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expecting adult children's care and help (A1, B1, D1) -- fear of helplessness / fear of aging / but, adult children's reluctance to co-reside. Fear of loneliness (A1, A2) -- longing for companionship. Considering biological relationship (A1) -- parent-children relationship 	<p>No effect at all:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competence to take care of themselves (A2, B1, D1)-- adequate social security support. Companion with husband and Adult children's constant visitation (A2). <p>Some negative effect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of helplessness (A1) and Feeling unhappy.

no effect on their lifestyle satisfaction since they had adequate social security support, spouse's companion, or adult children's constant visits. However, participant A1 reported having a negative effect with the main reasons for the fear of helplessness and feeling unhappy.

Family situation and culture on living arrangement

The elderly participants might consider the family situation (finance, health, age, and kin network) to some extent, but they did not see them as key determinants in making decisions about living arrangements (Table 4). For this result, the qualitative exploration provided some explanation. The participants, not considering finance as a factor in decision-making regarding their living arrangement, reported that the social security support, pensions, and self-saving were adequate. Health was not that important for the participants to consider because

they believed that an adequate medical support was available, even if they were sick. Similarly, age was not considered as an important factor for the participants who perceived that aging was a natural process. Regarding kin network, the participants who did not consider it as an important factor because they had few relatives around.

However, the influence of the cultural values in making decisions about living arrangements was highly visible in their reports. From the qualitative data, seven essential characteristics were extracted and summarized (Table 5). Implicitly, the elderly parents believed that co-residence with adult children was a natural process without particular reasons. Explicitly, they emphasized multi-generation households, fulfillment of obligations and interdependence that indicated happiness and contentment in later life stages. Finally, a patriarchal family system led to the female's submissiveness to males' decisions on living arrangement.

Table 4. Family Situations Considered in the Process of Living Arrangement Choices

Degree of Consideration	Family Situations											
	Finance			Health			Age			Kin Network		
	CR (N=8)	N-CR (N=8)	%	CR (N=8)	N-CR (N=8)	%	CR (N=8)	N-CR (N=8)	%	CR (N=8)	N-CR (N=8)	%
Not at all	5	5	62.5	2	5	43.8	3	4	43.8	4	2	37.5
A little bit	3	2	31.2	1	1	12.5	1	1	12.5	2	4	37.5
Somewhat	0	1	6.3	4	2	37.5	2	3	31.3	2	1	18.8
Very much	0	0	0	1	0	6.3	2	0	12.5	0	1	6.3

Abbreviations: CR: co-residence with adult children (N=8); N-CR: non co-residence with adult children (N=8).

Table 5. Essential Cultural Values in Relations to Living Arrangement Choices among Elderly Chinese Immigrants

Essential Characteristics	Summary Descriptions from Participants
Implicit cultural preference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without reasons, not to co-reside with their adult children. (E1, E2) Traditionally, elderly Chinese parents used to co-reside with adult children (all participants).
Awareness of cultural shifts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "British culture differs from Chinese culture."(E1)/("British children leave home at the age of 18 years" (E2)/(British neighbors live independently from their adult children." (E2) /("People say that adult children and daughters-in-law are not obliged to co-reside with their elderly parents in the UK". (F1)
Multi-generation household implies happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling happy and content in a multi-generation household (E1, E2, F1, F2, G2).
Sense of obligation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The elderly parents are expected to take care of adult children until they get married (F1, F2, G2). Adult children are expected to take care of their elderly parents (A1).
Family life cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult children leaving home to get married (A1, E1, F2). Traditionally, parents seldom experienced "empty nest" in the later life stages. (all participants).
Interdependence and reciprocity in support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping children some domestic tasks; in turn, adult children provide emotional and practical supports (F1, F2, G1, G2, H1, H2).
Female submissiveness to male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Husband is the head of the family. (A2, C2, E2, G2).

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the desirability of current lifestyles (whether co-residing or not with adult children) is positively associated with the level of lifestyle satisfaction for elderly people. As Campbell and his colleagues pointed out, life satisfaction in particular domains (e.g. housing, neighborhood, work, leisure) was affected by a perceived discrepancy between one's aspirations and achievements.⁽¹⁷⁾ It has been suggested that most elderly participants whose desirability of current lifestyles was achieved, experienced greater lifestyle satisfaction. However, some explanation is needed for the elderly who achieved or did not achieve their desirability of lifestyles but reported "no effect at all" on their lifestyle satisfaction, and, surprisingly, the results of the LSI showed that they were satisfied with their life as a whole. Perceived satisfaction with a particular domain (e.g. living arrangements) might, but not absolutely, construct the main part of life satisfaction (Fig. 1). While their adult children visit regularly and they receive adequate social support, the desirability of co-residence with adult children might not be dominant in determining their life satisfaction.

While the results did not show that the elderly participants considered finance, health, age and kin network as decisive factors when they made decisions about living arrangements, the limited sample, sample selection, and ethnicity should be taken into account. However, the findings lend some support to the studies of Thomas and Wister (1984) and Wister and Burch (1987), arguing for the importance of cultural values governing residential behavior. For elderly people in the decision-making process, as certain scholars have observed,⁽¹⁸⁾ the importance of

cultural traditions increases as we age. The analysis of the desirability of co-residence with their adult children was a good example. Most of the participants in this study reported that co-residence with their adult children was considered "normative" idea in Chinese culture. The need of the acculturation and new environments after immigration challenge this "normative" idea. This study found that the elderly participants who were not co-residing with adult children developed their coping strategies and acquired a certain extent of life satisfaction from other sources. As the explorations of the risk factors causing elderly depression indicated,^(19,20) not "living alone" but "the sense of loneliness" or "perceived dissatisfaction" with respect to immediate family member has a profound association with the development of depression. More importantly, the elderly gained satisfaction when an effective supportive system was available to them and evaluated by them as fine. The latter may not be necessarily derived from the co-residence with their adult children.

In summary, the issue of elderly living arrangements and lifestyle satisfaction acquire new significance at a time when the population in Taiwan is aging, and the socio-economic and cultural changes are more radical than ever. Indeed, the expected rise in the aged population present a special problem to the health and welfare services. A longitudinal survey was conducted in Taiwan in 1989 and in 1993. It showed that life satisfaction among the elderly decreased as their ages increased beyond 65 years and that social demographic variables, income decline, living arrangements, and level of activity participation had a profound impact of their life satisfaction.⁽²¹⁾

The study has an implication for therapeutic

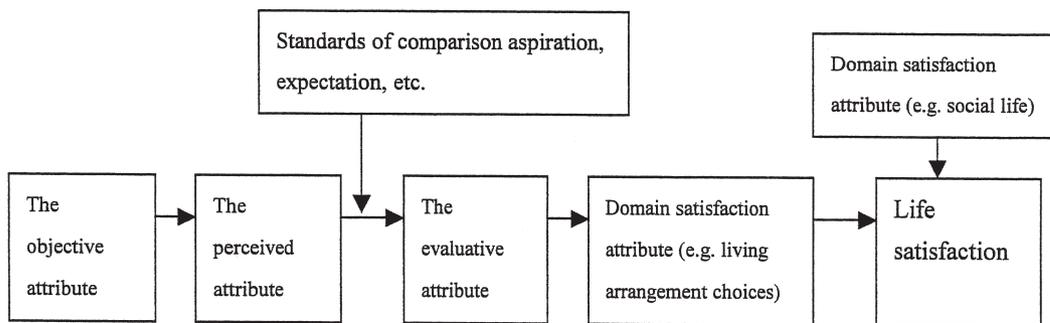


Fig. 1 Relationship between Domain Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction (adapted from Campbell et al., 1976)

practices. Therapists need to become aware of elderly depression. Emotional problems may develop because of relationship problems with their children, perceived poor emotional support from immediate family members, and discrepancy issues of filial piety obligation and expectation. The results of our study suggest that using a family intervention model to work with elderly Chinese may provide opportunities for their immediate family members to explore their needs, cultural values and beliefs, and improve their relationships in order to facilitate mutual support in the family system. For further research, from the systemic perspective, other family members should be invited to take part in this type of study, and conjoint interviews would be used to identify the critical factors that affect the elderly choices of living arrangements during the decision making process. In addition, cross-cultural studies need to be done with other ethnic groups to enhance understanding of the importance of cultural values and beliefs in the living arrangement choices among the elderly. As Eisler concludes,⁽²²⁾ in order to bridge the gap between clinical practice and research thinking, a range of new methods, drawing on the strengths of both, needs to be developed. Finally, this systemic family study may help policy makers gain a better understanding of the needs of elderly Chinese not only in their families but also in their communities.

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華人移民家庭中老人居住安排與生活方式滿意度關係研究： 初步報告

葉偉強

- 背景：**老人居住方式與其生活幸福之議題愈來愈受重視。本研究目的在於探討英國倫敦華人老人之居住安排選擇與其對他們生活方式滿意度的影響，並瞭解他們居住安排時所考量之家庭條件與文化因素。
- 方法：**採用質性研究法，以面對面的方式進行半結構與深度訪談，對象為來自越南及香港之華人移民家庭中的八對老年夫婦。
- 結果：**研究顯示老人對目前居住安排的喜愛與否與其生活方式滿意度有關連。在12位表示喜愛他們目前居住安排的受訪夫婦中，有9位認為這對他們生活方式滿意度有正面的影響；但無任何一位表示其有負面的影響。而相較之下，在4位不喜愛其目前居住方式（未與子女同住）的受訪者中，有1位認為這對其生活方式滿意度有負面影響。有關喜愛目前居住方式之理由及其對生活方式滿意度的影響亦提供質性的探究。另外，研究發現受訪者認為家庭條件（如財務、健康、年齡、及親屬網絡）對他們居住安排上並非為主要考量；然而，中國文化價值因素顯然地影響他們的居住選擇。
- 結論：**本研究發現老人對目前居住安排的喜愛與其生活方式滿意度有正面之關連。當台灣面臨人口老化與社會、經濟、文化的巨變的時候，老人居住安排與生活方式滿意度關係之議題顯得更為重要。
(長庚醫誌 2003;26:729-36)
- 關鍵字：**居住安排，生活方式滿意度，老人，移民家庭。

長庚紀念醫院 高雄院區 精神科

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