CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN NEW ORLEANS

FIRST-GENERATION WORKING-CLASS CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN NEW ORLEANS: INVESTIGATING STRESS, THE SOCIAL BUFFERING SYSTEM, AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

AN HONORS THESIS
SUBMITTED ON THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF MAY, 2020
TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
OF THE HONORS PROGRAM
TULANE UNIVERSITY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS
WITH HONORS IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

YINGHONG ZHAO

APPROVED:
Xiaojin Chen, Ph.D.
Director of Thesis
Katherine Johnson, Ph.D.
Second Reader
Adam McKeown, Ph.D.
Third Reader
ABSTRACT

Current academic research has not yet examined the experiences and struggles of the latest wave of Chinese immigrants in the 21st century. This exploratory study thus inquiries into the stressors encountered, the social buffer system utilized, and the subsequent health outcomes of first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans through the qualitative method of semi-constructed interviews. The results summarize nine common stressors, with financial stress being the most prevalent and exhausting. The findings also suggest that social support continues to serve as a protective buffer within the Chinese immigrant community, along with other cultural-specific coping methods. It is worth pointing out that forms of social support have adapted to technological development and expanded virtually to bring Chinese immigrants closer. Therefore, the adverse effects that result from the absence of an ethnic enclave (e.g., Chinatown) in New Orleans have become minimal. This preliminary research also indicates that despite the Chinese immigrants’ disproportionate exposure to stress, they continue to stand in good physical and mental health, and no negative coping behavior as found in prior literature is observed. Implications related to sample size and data measurement are examined at the end of the thesis, in addition to future research suggestions and policy proposals.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE  INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

## CHAPTER TWO  LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ............ 4

- Theory on Stress ................................................................................. 4
- Theories on Buffers of Stress ............................................................. 6
  - Social Support .................................................................................. 6
  - Neutralization Theory ....................................................................... 8
- Chinese Immigrants in the United States ............................................. 9
  - History of Chinese Immigrants in the U.S. ......................................... 9
  - Chinatown in New Orleans ............................................................... 13
  - External Stressors - toward the American Society .............................. 14
  - Internal Stressors - Within the Ethnic Enclave .................................. 15
- Attitude toward Mental Health in Asia/Chinese Culture ......................... 16

## CHAPTER THREE  RESEARCH METHOD, DESIGN, AND DATA COLLECTION ........ 19

## CHAPTER FOUR  ANALYSIS AND RESULTS .................................................. 23

- Characteristics of Participants ............................................................ 23
- Exposure to Stress ................................................................................ 25
  - Brief Overview of Stress Based on Demographics .............................. 25
  - Financial Stressor ........................................................................... 28
  - Self-doubt ........................................................................................ 29
  - Comparison with Others: Pride and Shame ....................................... 30
  - Hostile Working Environment .......................................................... 32
  - Limited Social Contact .................................................................... 35
  - Loss of Independence ....................................................................... 36
  - Status Stressors ............................................................................... 37
  - Legal Status Stressors ..................................................................... 38
  - Discrimination Stressors .................................................................. 39
HEALTH OUTCOMES ........................................................................................................... 40
SOCIAL BUFFERING SYSTEM ............................................................................................ 44
Social support................................................................................................................... 44
Neutralization Theory ...................................................................................................... 48
Frames of Mind ................................................................................................................ 49

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION .................................................................... 54

STRESS & SOCIAL BUFFERING SYSTEM ............................................................................ 54
HEALTH AND ITS RELEVANCE IN SOCIAL SUPPORT ..................................................... 58
THE IMPLICIT ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ...................................................................... 60

CHAPTER SIX LIMITATIONS ............................................................................................. 65

CHAPTER SEVEN IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .................................................. 68

REFERENCE ...................................................................................................................... 70
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The latest research on the immigrant community has mainly been focused on immigrants from Latin American countries because they are the latest wave of mass immigration and also make up the largest foreign-born sector of the American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). In contrast, research on Chinese immigrants peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, but Chinese immigrants were examined only in specific metropolitan settings such as New York City (Kinkead 1992; Zhou 1992a; Zhou 1992b; Kwong 1996). Additionally, current research related to Chinese immigration has primarily centered on acculturation, assimilation, and the development of Asian-American identities (Lieber et al. 2001; Lee & Kye 2016; Zhou & Bankston 2020). The experiences and struggles of new Chinese immigrants in the 21st-century have remained unknown. For instance, there are not yet answers to questions related to their patterns of residence/settlement and employment, the degree of similarity and differences of their experiences and challenges compared to earlier waves of Chinese immigrants’, and their physical and mental health.

New Orleans, therefore, presented itself as a wonderful opportunity to explore the contemporary Chinese community. The city, home to great food, vibrant music, and endless festivals, is the perfect destination vacation for many people around the world. However, the story is a little different for immigrants, in particular Chinese immigrants, who settled in New Orleans and face unique problems. Chinese individuals only account for 0.3% of New Orleans’ population, whereas in cities such as San Francisco, Chinese immigrants make up 20.3% of its total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). There is
no established ethnic enclave (e.g., Chinatown) in New Orleans that provides essential help to newcomers. Furthermore, neither the State of Louisiana nor the City of New Orleans has policies that address immigrant needs and facilitate their integration into society. As a result, life for first-generation Chinese immigrants can be extremely challenging and very different, even in today’s setting.

This research concentrates primarily on the experiences of the working-class population of first-generation Chinese immigrants, because as physical labor workers, their opportunities for success are, to a great extent, limited. The purpose of this study is to gain a general understanding of their daily life and struggles that are closely associated with their socioeconomic position. It also aims to fill the gap in understanding recent immigration and settlement of Chinese immigrants, which as of 2010, is the second-largest immigrant group in America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). It will not only reassess the social condition of first-generation Chinese immigrants in the modern era but also in New Orleans, where the settlement rate of the Chinese immigrant population is relatively low. The findings would help other researchers to gain a better understanding of the struggles the working-class population of an ethnic group face and the resources they utilize when they establish themselves in a new city. It will also shed light on how certain features of modern society, such as advanced technology, the increase in communication tools, and the convenience of transportation, alter the traditional way of social networking, relationships, and lifestyles among immigrant communities. The study designs to answer these questions through measuring and identifying the types of stressors they are exposed to, the social buffers that help them cope with the stress, and the effects of stressors on their physical and mental health. In addition, it will carefully
inquire into the roles of social support in a community where a tight ethnic network is yet to be established, and whether social support continues to serve as a buffer for their physical and mental health in the modern era.

The result of this study could also be used as a guidance for reforming existing federal, state, or local policies or lobbying for new ones that address the needs of the immigrant population, therefore, providing them with tools for a more effortless adjustment in this land of freedom and opportunities.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This first half of this chapter focuses on providing the essential theoretical framework. It starts by describing the stress and health model that this analysis is built upon. It also discusses how social support and the theory of neutralization are relevant in moderating the adverse effects of different stressors. The second half provides the cultural background of Chinese immigration in the U.S, as well as their migration to and development in New Orleans. In addition, it sheds light on the common stressors Chinese immigrants encounter and concludes with an overview of the public perception toward mental health within the Chinese community.

Theory on Stress

The sociological study of stress, compared to the psychological perspective, focuses on how stressors of social origin affect one’s health and well-being (Pearlin 1989; Aneshensel 2006). Pearlin (1989) outlines a comprehensive model of stress and health for researchers in the field to investigate further the relationships between stressors, moderators, and outcomes. He proposes the stress process framework, stating that stress is a long-term, ongoing process that interacts with other factors to exert various, unpredictable influences and that the process itself also evolves across time. This research paper is thus built upon the theoretical work constructed by Pearlin to investigate the stressors, buffers as well as the health outcomes of first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in the unique setting of New Orleans.
According to Pearlin (1989), there are two major types of stressors: eventful stressor, which is anything that takes place outside an ordinary person’s scheduled life events, such as divorce, job loss, and accident of sorts, etc., and chronic stressor, which pertains to strains of status, role, and context. First-generation working-class Chinese immigrants correspond to both stressors. A typical person would not include immigration as part of his or her life trajectory. Therefore, the pre-migration conditions and the actual immigration process weigh considerably in the discussion of eventful stressors. In addition to the typical post-migration stressors on acculturation, as members of the working-class, the Chinese immigrants inevitably face additional barriers. They undergo the struggles of competing for resources within the stratified social system, the hostility of being a minority and immigrants, as well as the confrontation of lack of skills and language proficiency, of all are forms of status strain. Furthermore, they are likely to suffer from the role strain of being a father and breadwinner or being a wife, mother, and daughter. Holding different social positions and tackling the constant conflicts that arise from each role may become extremely overwhelming. Contextual strain, such as the availability of leisure, the presence of culture-related events and community, the daily living and working environment, and access and quality of healthcare services, is also applicable to Chinese immigrants. Lastly, one has to pay close attention to the stress proliferation property of stressor, that stressor from one category often does not exist alone but tends to generate, evolve, and interact with other stressors to exacerbate the condition.

The middle passageway between stressor and outcome is what Pearlin calls *resources*, which includes methods of coping, social support, and mastery that people
utilize at times of hardship. These three resources can serve to moderate stressors through buffering and direct reduction. Pearlin also emphasizes the interconnectedness of the three resources, that similar to stressors, also often work interdependently with each other. However, their moderating role can be at the same time indirectly mediated or undermined by stressors. The final outcome of the stressors is usually evaluated through physical health, mental health, or well-being.

In short, this specific inquiry into the stress process of first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans aims to focus on their shared challenges and difficulties but yet unidentified stressors so that their different experiences of stress, moderating factors, and outcomes can be recognized, explored and shared.

**Theories on Buffers of Stress**

**Social Support**

Social support, as outlined by Pearlin (1989), serves as one of the coping methods toward different stressors. Caplan (1974) first described it as a “support system,” and he summarized it as physical and psychological forms of help from senders in maintaining the well-being of the recipient that arises from established social relationships. Nowadays, social support is more commonly categorized into four types: emotional (psychological help that provides love, empathy, and companionship), instrumental (physical, tangible help such as money), informational (physical, intangible resources such as social connections), and appraisal (psychological help that is in association with self-evaluation) (House 1981). Social support, therefore, is a broad term that can come from diverse origins and exerts different forms of benefits on individuals. Cassel (1976) and Cobb (1976) were one of the first-wave scholars who presented findings of a
correlation between social support and health and that such social relationships can mitigate the negative effects brought up by stress and other health conditions. The effects of social support in different social settings have also been intensively studied in recent years. For example, it protects several pathological conditions as well as promotes better healing and treatment outcomes (Cobb 1976). It holds direct effects on depression (Russel & Cutrona 1991). It improves one’s mental health condition (Kawachi & Berkman 2001). It lowers the risk of cardiovascular diseases, its related adverse outcomes and depressive symptoms, and it also assists in the recovering process (Holanhan 1995; Heather 2015; Berkman 2008). In particular, the buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills 1985) proposes that social support can provide buffering effects for stress, specifically through offering direct solutions to stress, moderating the perceived level of stress as well as fostering positive coping behaviors toward stressful events, to decrease the sense of helplessness. Along the line of the buffering hypothesis, social support has been found to alleviate the psychological distress and depression that comes from discrimination (Ajrouch et al. 2010; Chou 2012), and low levels of social support have the potential to trigger substance use among immigrant workers (Tsai & Thompson 2013). Stewart et al. (2010) present that social support and health have a mutually dependent relationship and that social support bestows positive outcomes on immigrants and refugees’ physical and mental health. In addition, for all forms of social support and sources of actors, support from family appears to be independent and most significant in maintaining and promoting the physical and mental health of Asian immigrants (Zhang & Ta 2009). Social support, especially in the form that promotes a sense of belonging, is most prevalent and plays a crucial role in coping among Chinese immigrants with psychosis (Cheng et al. 2016).
However, it remains hidden within close and tight social networks and is not easily examined from a community perspective.

**Neutralization Theory**

Neutralization theory originates from the field of criminology. It refers to the mechanism of justification delinquents often use to rationalize their behaviors as “right” or “acceptable” (Sykes & Matza 1957). The denial of responsibility plays an essential role in the neutralization process. The offenders place responsibility on others or some neutral forces. They perceive their acts as either accidents that lie outside their control or due to preceding hostile social structure or social relationships with others, such as parents, friends, and the environment where they grew up. More importantly, they emphasize their attribution of “helplessness” in these unlawful situations, that they have no choice but to submit. This neutralization technique allows them not to view themselves as the deviants of society but also to separate themselves from their actions, identifying the two as distinct entities. The theory of neutralization also has been applied to other social science disciplines and social actors to explain the cognitive dissonance, such as victims of abuse (Tomita 1990; Ferraro & Johnson 1983), online-customers and their unethical behavior (Harris & Dumas 2009) and Sunday shopping in a religious community (Dunford & Kunz 1973). As Shoenberger et al. (2012) assert, the neutralization technique should not be exclusively applied to negative deviance, but also positive deviance such as overachieving. In essence, it is a tool to explain how individuals defense their non-conforming behaviors within a dominant society that operates on explicit and implicit rules. Therefore, this technique could be adapted for coping, especially when a non-endorsed response toward stress (e.g., denial)
unexpectedly produces positive outcomes for individuals (e.g., decreasing the stress level), resulting in the justification and habituation of such practice to combat future stress.

**Chinese Immigrants in the United States**

*History of Chinese Immigrants in the U.S.*

Chinese immigration to the United States can be broken down into three time periods: before 1882, 1882-1965, and 1965 to present. Each took place under a unique historical and political setting that impacted the life and experiences of Chinese immigrants significantly.

The first wave of Chinese immigrants into the United States took place in the 1850s, famously known as the “the California Gold Rush.” It was estimated that there were 24,000 Chinese in the U.S. at the time (Ward 1997). Most of the Chinese viewed themselves as “sojourners,” whose main goal was to stay only for a short period, make a fortune in the U.S., and then go back to China to live a better life (Wong 2006). The Chinese immigrants were considered “cheap laborers” and thus were popular in the mining industry, farms, domestics, and on the transcontinental railroads. It was a win-win situation for both the Chinese workers who came here for economic prosperity and for the U.S. business corporations who paid little and earned lots for return. However, those good days ended when the U.S. economy went under due to depression. The Americans started to experience fears of racial integration and economic competition due to the increase in the number of Chinese (Lazzerini 1990). They started to blame the Chinese immigrants for taking over their jobs. They started to call Chinese “dangerous,” “deceitful and vicious,” “criminal,” “coward,” “inferior from the mental and moral point
of view,” “Yellow peril,” “Chinese menace,” and “indispensable enemy” (Zhou 2005, Wong 2006). Every Chinese who arrived in California had to pay $50 for what was called “head tax.” The California Senator at the time justified this action by claiming that the Chinese immigrants never adapted to the American way of life; they could not differentiate between right or wrong; they did not worship God; and that they did not hold the traditional American values. In 1882, the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning the entrance of any person of Chinese origin. In 1888, the Scott Act was passed, preventing any Chinese to come back to the United States after they leave. The National Origins Act of 1924 continued to prohibit the immigration of any Chinese origin. The Magnuson Act of 1943 was passed due to China allying with America in World War II, which permitted the immigration of Chinese into the U.S. and those who were in the U.S. to become naturalized citizens after sixty-one years of exclusion. However, it took away their rights to own any property or any business. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 opened up immigration from all countries but with a quota. Finally, the Immigration Act of 1965 lifted all restrictions on immigrants from China and restored the basic rights to Chinese immigrants who were already in the U.S. (Wong 2006). The door to America opened for two types of Chinese immigrants: the highly educated, well-skilled, and those seeking political and economic protections (Poston & Luo 2007). It also granted Chinese immigrants in the U.S. to bring their families from back home to reunite in the United States. The local Chinese immigrants also felt more secure and started to move around and explore different options.

These laws transformed the status of Chinese immigrants in the U.S., as well as the way they lived their life in the U.S. Since the first Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese
families were split. Some managed to find a way home, some were too poor to afford the trip home, and some were too ashamed to return home because they did not fulfill their promises to their families. None of the Chinese immigrants were able to hold any democratic rights at the time (Poston & Luo 2007). Due to laws and restrictions, they could no longer find working-class jobs available on the labor market, and they were forced to become self-employed in order to survive. They were also primarily segregated in major urban cities. Slowly, Chinatowns emerged. Its creation was largely forced under the harsh environment. It was a product of a collective of Chinese immigrants fighting to survive under exclusion and discrimination by mainstream American society. Chinese restaurants and laundry businesses slowly became the center of financial support for the whole community, providing jobs for the Chinese community. They offered a protected environment for the workers, a sense of belonging, and shielded them from the harm they could have been exposed to in the real society by not knowing any English and having a low education level. Small organizations also formed to help with employment, social support, and anyone who was starting his or her own business. Even though the working conditions were terrible, the hours were long, and the wage was low, the Chinese immigrants bonded with each other and formed a close-knit community through shared experiences and hardship. Another product that resulted from the adversity experienced by the Chinese immigrants at the time was the formation of fictive kinship, where two or more completely unrelated people view and treat each other as families (Li 1977; Kim 2009). The support from family and friends became one of the vital forces that kept Chinatown alive. Chinatown thus served as a comfortable first stop for Chinese immigrants, providing basic needs of work, housing, connections, and helping them with
a smoother transition into American society. However, the ones that came after 1965 changed what a typical Chinese immigrant life would be. The new immigrants were not only more skilled and more educated but also were from different parts of China and spoke different dialects (Lin 2005; Lin 2010). They wanted to live their version of the American dream. Most of them came to America through families that were already in the States, or through marriage. With open access to school, education, and the labor market, they were able to find better jobs and move to live outside of Chinatown. They climbed up the social ladder with distinguished careers as lawyers, doctors, and senators.

Another reason that also led to an increase in the number of immigrants from China was due to the Great Cultural Revolution that targeted middle-class Chinese citizens. The political environment was volatile, and prosecutions were taken place without fair trials. The majority of the Chinese were frustrated and angry. Some lost faith in the government and decided to start their life somewhere else where they had a better chance of supporting their families and living their economic prosperity. The Open Door Policy adopted under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s also increased the number of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. by allowing many Chinese students to come to the U.S. and later obtain visas as legal residents (Poston & Luo 2007). Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants relied heavily on their family connections as well as other ethnic social networks to overcome the challenges of being newcomers in the U.S. The mentality of Chinese immigrants has changed from “fallen leaves always return to their roots” (that they only intended to stay in America temporarily and would return home afterward) to “let fallen leaves establish roots wherever they land” (they want to stay permanently in the U.S.) (Zhou 1992a). Notwithstanding, they still chose to settle in metropolitan areas
or places that have easy access to their ethnic enclaves (Zhou 1992b). In conclusion, the recent wave of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. is extremely heterogeneous.

**Chinatown in New Orleans**

In the 1860s, plantation owners in the South hired many cheap Chinese workers from Cuba and the Philippines to replace the slaves that were no longer an option for labor (Lazzerini 1990). Not for long, the Chinese workers left the plantations in search of a better paying job. New Orleans, as a result, received many Chinese workers. They settled in the city and worked mainly as fishermen, railroads and laundry workers, cooks, and cigarette makers and sellers. A few Chinese businessmen from California started their small business companies in New Orleans as well. Due to the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, most of the Chinese men and women at the time chose to settle in the city and their surrounding communities through interracial marriages to avoid unnecessary attention (Lazzerini 1990). It is worth pointing out that the Chinese community in New Orleans was not very close compared to the Chinese communities in cities like New York City and San Francisco, mostly because the Chinese businesses and residential areas were not in close proximity to each other (Lazzerini 1990). Nevertheless, there was a small Chinatown that emerged near the 1100 block of Tulane Avenue. Although it was far from big and fancy as the Chinatowns in other metropolitan cities, it served its purpose. Small Chinese businesses provided the local Chinese community with fresh produce, exports and imports, authentic Chinese restaurants, and even held many social gathering events. The Chinatown thrived for almost sixty years, but the place and its surrounding neighborhood was torn down in 1937 by the Works Progress Administration after the Great Depression to bring new economic developments in the city of New Orleans. Some
Chinese businesses remained in the French Quarter, and a smaller second Chinatown was formed around the 1940s. However, it was soon abandoned because the local Chinese immigrants gradually moved up the social ladder and migrated to live in the suburbs (Campanella 2015).

*External Stressors - toward the American Society*

Legal status, which contributes from a structural perspective that pertains to all immigrants, is only one of the many social determinants that shape the lives and experiences of immigrants in America. The other crucial factor is ethnicity, which is only applicable to immigrants who are defined as minority groups in U.S. society. Immigrants who originate from European countries have an easier way of climbing up the social ladder due to better resources and societal acceptance toward anyone who is white (Smedley 2007). On the other hand, immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asian are automatically viewed as non-whites, standing at the intersection with identities of both immigrants and minorities.

Using Chinese immigrants as an example: even today, when Americans are so used to encountering Chinese immigrants in their daily life, Chinese immigrants still have to overcome hardship and stigmatization targeted towards their ethnicity. From first glance, they are still different from the majority of Americans simply because of their language and appearance. Through interaction, their heavy accents can be identified because English is not their first language, and some of them still do not know much English after years of settlement. Most importantly, they do not act or think like the Americans - they were born and raised in traditional Eastern cultures that contrast sharply with Western ideologies.
Internal Stressors - Within the Ethnic Enclave

For undocumented Chinese immigrant workers who originally came from a low socioeconomic background from China, life in Chinatown may be the major source of their stress. Since most of them do not speak English or hold legal documentation, they can only live and work within Chinatown. They do laborious work, such as restaurant work, and work twelve or more hours per day for seven days a week. They are not paid very well and can be potentially exploited by their bosses. Their social circle is extensively limited as well. Upward mobility is almost impossible. Even for documented immigrants, they still face the challenges of adapting to a new culture, learning English, facing the instability of employment, and limited social contacts with others (Lin 2005, Lee et al. 2007, Rovito & Masucci 2009, Lin 2010). This kind of stress will not be mediated by economic prosperity. Adding on other structural and cultural barriers they face as minority immigrants, they are in desperate need of coping methods and thus are at increased risks of developing risky behaviors to deal with the daily stress that arrives from work, family, and social life. The tension reduction hypothesis (Conger 1956) and the stress-coping theory (Wills & Shiffman 1985) suggest that people engage in drinking to manage stress. Stressful events can also trigger the onset of other addictive behaviors such as gambling (Coman et al. 1997) and smoking (Revell et al. 1985). In fact, drinking has been found to be an acceptable coping behavior among male restaurant workers (Chin et al. 1991). It is so typical that restaurant owners sometimes would even let the workers drink while they are at work. Gambling, similarly, provides both an outlet for suppressed emotions and higher self-esteem that results from winning, which is often unattainable in real life (Chantal et al. 1994; Wong & Tse 2003). A literature review that
examines problem gambling behaviors among Chinese in countries like Australia, England, Macau, and Hong Kong concludes that gambling is more common among Chinese communities than among native communities (Loo et al., 2008), indicating that gambling is a prevalent behavior in Chinese culture. Therefore, the fact that it becomes a preferred way for Chinese immigrants to cope with stress is not surprising. Lee et al. (2007) also examine the emergence of gambling behaviors as a result of immigration stress in Chinese immigrants in Canada. Oei and Raylu (2010) assert that Chinese immigrants may use gambling as a way to climb up the social ladder from a lower socioeconomic status. However, no research on gambling as a stress coping method for Chinese immigrants in the U.S. has been conducted. People who experience less acculturation stress tend to smoke less, indicating that with increased stress level comes with increased frequency of engaging in such behavior (Gotay et al. 2015). The execution of risky behaviors can also be seen as an alternative solution for male workers, especially to make up for their perceived loss of masculinity that comes from limited power and low status (Courtenay 2000). In the long run, the continuation of these behaviors results not only in Chinese immigrants jeopardizing their physical health but also preventing them from recognizing the root of the problems and pushing themselves further away from actually seeking help.

**Attitude toward Mental Health in Asia/Chinese Culture**

Culture shapes how one thinks, views, and acts in the world, and different cultural values lead to distinct traditions and social norms. One of the many differences between Western and Eastern traditions is that Eastern cultures see the body and mind as one (Chung 2002). Therefore, people from Asia do not often recognize the role of mental
health as separate from physical health. They also tend not to seek help from psychiatrists (Kuo 1994, Chung 2002, Kung 2003, Chen et al. 2009, Chung 2010). In addition, Asians rarely admit that they are troubled by their mental health because they view the stress and hardship they go through as part of everyday life (Kung 2003). Asians are also expected within their community to withstand different stressors that may lead to the development of mental problems. Mental health problems are often viewed as indicators of deficiency in one’s determination and will power (Chen et al. 2009), as well as the result of meaningless thoughts (Sue 1982, Tracey et al. 1986). They are often told to suppress their emotions and feelings. There is also the widely accepted belief that having mental problems is a Western-only issue (Leung et al. 2012). Even if people do share their concerns, they avoid discussing emotional issues to people outside of their family, because they hold the view that family businesses are better dealt with within the family (Chung 2002). Help received from family members often involves the repression of such feelings and thoughts (Kung 2003), and they seldom suggest professional services. Six factors are summarized by Wynaden et al. (2005) to explain why Asians are reluctant to seek help: “shame and stigma; causes of mental illness; family reputation; hiding up; seeking help; and lack of collaboration.” People with mental illness, regardless of the intensity and severity, are looked down upon in Asian societies. They are stigmatized against, being viewed as “crazy,” are often locked up, and are positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Chung 2002). The potential societal disapproval of having an unstable mentality further prevents people from discussing issues related to such topic, thus creating and perpetuating the ideology of having a mental illness as unfit due to ignorance and avoidance. Education and services related to mental health are left as the
forbidden topic. This deep-rooted conception is also present in Chinese immigrants who settled in the U.S. They, like their native Chinese counterparts, do not seek out mental health services. Chinese immigrants in the U.S. are often unintentionally perceived as the “model minority” because they rarely experience mental health problems (Sue 1982, Chen et al. 2009).
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHOD, DESIGN, AND DATA COLLECTION

The data for this research was conducted over a total period of four months, from September 2019 to December 2019. All data were gathered in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the responses were all anonymous. The population of interest was all first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans who are at least eighteen years old. First-generation Chinese immigrants are defined as any person who was born and raised in China but has immigrated to the U.S. during his or her life course. The research did not distinguish between first-generation Chinese immigrants whose first stop in the U.S. was New Orleans or other cities. Working-class Chinese immigrants were selected through the following criteria: 1) belonged to or currently a member of the working class; 2) does not hold any specific skills nor has gone through specific professional training, and 3) obtains an education level equals or below high school, or having a college degree but the credential is not recognized in the United States or require additional certification.

The primary method designed to recruit participants was through the use of flyers. These flyers were distributed by the research investigator to different Chinese restaurants, Asian grocery stores, Asian nail salons and massage businesses, as well as Chinese churches. However, the majority of the respondents were recruited through a secondary sampling method, snowball sampling. Because most Chinese immigrants are sensitive to words such as “working class,” “low skill,” or “low education attainment,” the flyer did not specify the socioeconomic status nor the education level required for the study.
Instead, the researcher welcomed all first-generation Chinese immigrants in New Orleans to tell their stories and then later selected those interviews that were considered “working class” based on the criteria above. The legal status of the participant, whether he or she was a U.S. citizen, Legal Resident Alien (Green Card Holder, for example), or illegal immigrant was not asked, however, subjects might reveal this information willingly and indirectly during the interview. All data were gathered through a semi-structured interview that included 22 guided questions asking about general demographic information, life when first arrived in New Orleans and life after adjusting, specifically in regard to family and friends, health and health experiences, and stress and coping methods. The interview was designed to last approximately 20-30 minutes, and it was conducted in Chinese so that the subjects could feel comfortable and express their feelings more openly. Not all questions were suitable for each participant’s unique situation, therefore, not every participant answered all 22 questions. The actual length of the interview averaged out to be 30 min with a range from 8 to 75 min. In addition, all participants were informed of the right to refuse to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable, as well as the right to take breaks from the interview. Once the participants agreed to be interviewed, they were able to choose the place and the time that worked best with their schedules. Before the start of each interview, the research investigator also sought permission to audio record the conversation. The participant had the right to refuse, and if so, handwriting notes would be taken as an alternative. No personally identifiable information would be recorded by any means, and neither the participants nor the investigator would be able to contact each after the interview was
completed. All audio recordings were transcribed by the primary investigator in full length and deleted within 48 hours of the interview.

The interview asked the respondents about the kind of support they have received since they arrived in New Orleans, their perception of the level of stress, stressors, their corresponding coping methods, and their current health and health experiences. The interview intended to assess the role of social support in the establishment of first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans, whether its presence alleviated perceived level of stress and improved one’s health, or it was insignificant in both aspects within this particular community. Since the interview was semi-structured, the researcher could ask follow-up questions to clarify, to provide additional information or experiences, and to resonant and connect with the participants. The goal was not to directly ask the specific kind of support the participants had received since their arrival in New Orleans, because it might reflect a sense of dependence and weakness of the interviewees and caused them to be reluctant to answer further questions and became less honest. Instead, the interview focused on the kind of hardship each participant had gone through and how they managed to overcome the difficult situations. It also asked about their basic living conditions, such as housing, commuting, and everyday meals, and how they arranged everything when moving to a city they had never been before. To assess their perceived level of stress, the participants were asked directly if they felt stressed and the types of stressors. The researcher often would ask the participants to give more specific examples of stressors, if they were emotionally stable to provide any. To smooth the conversation because it could be a hard topic to talk about, the participants were asked how they dealt with the stressors in order to remind them that they still had some
level of control over their life. The researcher would also inquire about the participants’ life back in China and how it compared to life currently, because people tended to evaluate their current situations based on past experiences or comparison with others. The conversation could be long and detailed if the participant were willing to share. To transition into their health and health experience, the participants were asked if any of the stress was caused by physical or mental health, if they had not already shared. The follow-up questions would ask them to rate their current health status and a comparison with their health status before they moved to New Orleans. Furthermore, the researcher would ask their access to healthcare services and their experiences with the health industry in America or New Orleans. To get the most sincere and honest response from the participants, the researcher would not only give positive responses and make eye contact with the participants but also share her own experiences in New Orleans. To obtain the most accurate data possible, the researcher would also rephrase her understanding of the responses and ask for confirmation if she interpreted correctly. When the stories became too specific, the researcher would come up with a generalized statement to see if the sentence described the situation of the respondent; when they became too general, the research would request specific examples or to illustrate scenarios and ask the participants to rate the level of similarities.
CHAPTER FOUR
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Characteristics of participants

The sample population included a total of 36 participants but only the data from 25 participants were used in analysis due to criteria restriction. All 36 participants interviewed were first-generation Chinese immigrants who have settled in New Orleans, Louisiana, however, the 11 participants who were excluded from the final analysis were either from lack of experience as a working class member or obtained a higher education background that was outside the scope of interest of the main population of Chinese immigrants this research is investigating. The final sample included 17 females and 8 males. One participant preferred note taking therefore no audiotape was recorded. One group interview was conducted among three participants due to time restrictions on the participants’ part. Every other interview was conducted individually and audio-recorded. The age of the majority of the participants ranged from 30s to 50s, and most of them were married with children. There were only three subjects who were in their twenties. Four participants had a Chinese college degree, and the other 21 had a high school diploma or lower. The 25 participants held nine different occupations. Specifically, there were two drivers, eight restaurant owners (all had prior experiences in or currently still belong to the working class), one desk clerk, two massage specialists, one factory worker, eight restaurant workers, one motel owner, one salesperson and one accountant. The longest time the participant has resided in New Orleans was thirty years, and the shortest time
was three months. Majority of the subjects had spouses or close relatives in the U.S., with the exception that two had spouses and children back in China and three were single at the time of the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Categories</th>
<th>Number (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>88.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Level of Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational High School</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant Worker</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant Owner</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desk Clerk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massage Specialist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The result of this research was obtained through two stages of coding: open coding, where the investigator highlighted everything she viewed to be important, such as patterns, attitudes and values, experiences and explanations, etc.; and focused coding, where the previous patterns and themes were categorized, and notes and interpretations were added to support a bigger claim related to the research topic of interest.

**Exposure to Stress**

The stressors identified by participants are evenly distributed among the three subcategories of chronic stress identified by Pearlin (1989). Financial stress appears to be most prominent. It not only was the direct causal factor for their pre-migration eventful stressor (that is, the immigration process) but also compounded their continued status strain in the U.S. and interacted with all other stressors. Other status strains arose from their immigration and working-class status, comparison with others, and discrimination. Common role strains are loss of independence and self-doubt. Lastly, limited social contact and hostile working environment make up the contextual strains.

**Brief Overview of Stress Based on Demographics**

For participants who were single at the time, they tended to be slightly more financially stable. They only had to work for themselves (in comparison with married immigrants who have to provide for the entire family) and had the freedom to take days off to do what they enjoy. They were less likely to settle down in a specific city, but
instead, they followed where their dreams took them or where they could make the most money. They were, however, most affected by the lack of presence of a Chinese community in New Orleans, and they complained about limited forms of entertainment. In contrast with married immigrants, single participants were more likely to fit in and make friends with non-Chinese as well as Americans, possibly due to being at a younger age and also faster at learning English and customs.

For male participants, they mentioned the burden of being the head of the family and not having time to themselves. Work-life had always been hard on them, both back when they first arrived in the U.S. and now. However, they all came to accept that this was the way of life, and they would continue working until they were no longer able to. Most of them were tired of their occupation as well, but due to lack of choices and the immediate need to provide for their family, they had to stick to what provided the most money. They spent little time with their kids and were always on the go. Surprisingly, regardless of how boring and demanding they perceived their jobs to be, all indicated that they preferred life in the U.S. much more than their past life in China. For female participants, their main role in the U.S. was to raise their kids and to take care of house-related chores. Different from the American perspective, that the children are independent on their own once they turn eighteen, in Chinese culture, the children are still considered “children” until they are married. Therefore, mothers will continue to take care of their children until that day comes. If the time allows, the wives will also help with providing extra income for the family, either through overseeing family business or finding a part-time job. A few female participants revealed that they no longer felt that they were themselves. They were wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law, however, they
had lost identities of themselves. Competition among workers was also brought up by female participants as a major source of stress as well as a reason to change jobs.

For participants who were at the time illegal immigrants in the U.S., they shared the burden of paying off the debt that they paid to come to the U.S., of the long and challenging process of going to the court and obtaining their refugee status, and of all the other social roles they had to take on, such as wife, husband, employee, daughter-in-law, and so on.

For first-generation Chinese immigrants who had settled in the U.S. for longer but also had failed to obtain their legal status, they experienced less stress financially but they were also unable to go back home to see their family. For first-generation Chinese immigrants who had just arrived in the States, it became harder and harder to get their refugee status proved, and they tended to lack the resources and skills to settle safely and to become financially stable.

From the data gathered, the length of stay in the U.S. surprisingly mattered less in regard to the perceived level of stress among first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants. Instead, it was one’s current working condition as well as family conditions (both back home and in the U.S.) that played more critical roles. Having a legal or illegal status also directly added weight to the conversation of stress. The majority of the participants disclosed that they were able to fulfill their “American Dream” that was impossible back in China, and they were satisfied with their life at the moment in spite of different types of hardship and stress.
Financial Stressor

As previously emphasized, the most common type of stress is associated with money. There are not many reasons that anyone will leave their homeland to start over in another country where nothing is familiar. As Mr. F summarizes,

Look at us who are in America, if we weren’t too poor to survive, then we were to run away from the debt in China. In a sense, none of us would’ve been here if we weren’t desperate.

For working-class Chinese immigrants, there are only a few ways to come to America: family visa through relative or marriage, human smuggling, and student or work visa. Most of the time, the newcomers have to pay a certain amount of money to whoever helps them to land in America. The price is usually pretty high. Ms. E disclosed that it cost her $60,000 to come to the U.S. on a student visa in 2004. From the data provided by CEIC, the annual Chinese household income per capita was $1,223 in 2004.

In addition to having nothing, Chinese immigrants have to be responsible for paying back people who helped them come to America. The first few years are the hardest, and once everything is paid in full, the working-class Chinese immigrants start to work on their personal goals. However, conditions can be worse for people who have no legal status. One participant, Ms. A, was in the midst of debt and fighting for citizenship at the time of the interview. She was scammed into marrying a U.S. veteran who promised her U.S. citizenship, but all he does every day is to ask her for money. She applied for refugee status, but the lawyer she hired was not very specific at instructing her with gathering evidence and material. She ended up getting more help from her friends and employers, but she still had to pay almost all her paychecks to the incompetent lawyer, as she described. She knew no English and had no specific skills. She had moved six times since the two years she had been in the U.S. She was poor in the beginning, and now she still
CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN NEW ORLEANS

had no stable job or skill. In addition, her first review was not passed after a year of court, and she had no money left to prepare for another court review. However, she had no choice but to move on: turning away from the review meant she would be sent directly back to China, and going into the review meant she would be in further debt than she already was. She had two kids at home who were still financially dependent on her for survival. Luckily, she met an employer through a job posting flyer who was kind enough to take her in and led her the way. Ms. A learned her amateur skills through both resources online and free lessons given by the employee. To her, the most stressful thing was not being in debt, but instead, to be incapable of anything:

*I feel like I am sinking deeper and deeper every day. Back home, I had nothing. No education, no money, but at least I was able to be independent, survive, and raise two kids on my own. Here, what am I capable of? For literally everything, I have to beg other people for help. I can’t. I feel like nothing now. I am so worthless that I don’t even know what to do with myself anymore.*

She was also the first one in her family to have immigrated to the U.S., so she had no relatives to turn to for help. She could not let her kids know that her life was falling apart in the U.S. She had to set the example so that they could be strong as well.

**Self-doubt**

Many other participants share this kind of stress that arises from economic deprivation but ends in self-doubt. Mr. C has been in the U.S. for twenty years now, however, he is still struggling to provide for his family, specifically in terms of buying a house nearby where all his relatives live. He was not young when he first arrived, a circumstance very similar to Ms. A. He tried lots of other jobs, but none of them suited him. He also had a huge debt to pay (including both the debt his family owned to others back home and the cost of coming over to the U.S.), which at the time it was too much even for him to think about. He started to question his decision, whether it was a good
idea to leave his family to come to America; then, he had doubts about himself, thinking he was the one who was unfit in this society. In his case, the only thing he could do was to put down his head and think about nothing but how to make more money:

You have to always know your goal: you risk your life to come to the U.S. so that you can make the life of the rest of your family back home a little less stressful. You are here to make money. You just accept your responsibility and work.

Comparison with Others: Pride and Shame

Many other stresses can also be related to money. Ms. V talked about how her husband had many relatives in America and they were all doing very well compared to him.

He has worked really hard for many many years but there’s no accomplishment to be seen. He has so many relatives and friends from the same village who have made a fortune in the U.S. But not my husband. Maybe he just has bad luck. Maybe he hasn’t met the right business partners. Maybe he invested in the wrong thing. After ten, twenty years of working his butt off, it seems like we still have nothing. No changes in our pocket. No savings in our bank account.

She said she had always been there for him, but every time they talked about progress and success, he would see himself as a failure compared to others.

You know how Chinese men always want to bring honor to their family and ancestors by accomplishing big things? My husband believes that he has to become someone so wealthy and prestigious before he can go back home. He hasn’t gone back once because of it. But I think our life is okay. It is not that bad. But to him, because his cousins and the rest of his family are very successful, he is determined to become one of them.

In Ms. V’s opinion, being able to have families in the U.S. to support her and her husband was a blessing. However, it also came with its downside. She and her husband had a standard that was set by other members of the family that they had to meet. They could not be their own version of success. The stress that comes from comparing oneself to others can significantly undermine morale and motivation.
Mr. J also mentioned how he viewed others as a competition and what appeared to be a good future turned into countless sleepless nights.

You can make $2,000 every month when you first get here, and you are very satisfied with it. You can even quit smoking. Then you get promoted and become a cook, and now you make $2,500 a month. You can save up to $30,000 a year and you think that after a few years you can go back home and reunite with your family. But when you start to make $2,500, you see others making $3,000, and you want that $3,000 as well. When you make $3,000, others start to make $3,500. You know you now want to make $4,000... it is an endless cycle.

What was good enough to him initially, after comparison, was no longer contentment.

Therefore, he had to work even harder and to make more money, so that he could stand on the same height with many other Chinese immigrants who came to American to make a living. He also shared that, “I don’t know if this is a good thing or not. The only thing that most of us, the Chinese immigrants, care about is money. We go where the money is. We think, know, and care nothing else.”

In Ms. A’s interview, she brought up a guy that used to work with her at a restaurant. He has come to America for four years but barely made any money. His ego did not allow him to go back. He just could not. To him, it was better to die on a random street in America than going back empty-handed. Ms. A recalled,

I had to keep talking to him out of seeking suicide because he thought he was a failure. I told him even if he wanted to die, at least go home first and see his family. He basically told me that it was not an option, that he had chosen to leave home and he would never be able to step back to that house again. See, everyone wants to save face. He has been in America for so long that he was still broke. But I told him if he did commit suicide, his mom would lose a son, his son would lose a dad, and his wife would lose a husband. Would it all be worth it? How could he be this irresponsible? He replied that if he would die in American then everyone else could just forget that he ever existed. He had nothing left to be responsible for. He could not hold on to life anymore so dying was the only option left. To be honest, I think he is in a worse situation than I am. Maybe to you or to whoever will be reading this, what I said all seems like a joke, but we are living in it. We are barely surviving.
Hostile Working Environment

In order to make more money, many participants had to spend most of their time working. The long working hours, which is the product of their working environment, nevertheless contributes to long-term financial stress. According to Mr. F, a typical worker at a Chinese restaurant would get up at 9 a.m., get to work at 10 a.m. and get off at 10 p.m. and go to sleep. Home, work, home, work… Life repeated itself for 365 days a year. When Ms. E first settled in New Orleans, she worked 72 to 74 hours a week, with only one day off:

I didn’t know how hard life was until I got time to reflect on it. Back then, you didn’t even have time to think. All you want at work is to make more money, and all you want after work is to take a shower and go to bed.

Mr. F shares similar experiences:

I wish I could grow another heart so that it can share some of the burdens from the current one. This one right now is overloaded with stress and it is beating way too fast.

Ms. K’s journey also falls under the same description:

The first half of the year was like hell. When it is light outside, you go to work. You work until the restaurant is closed, and then you go home and sleep. It’s all for the money. Name one person who can tolerate this, if it is not for the sake of money. You can’t.

Ms. T worked at a local coffee shop for a while. She said that working there was harder than working at a restaurant because they were too busy to have a break. People were constantly coming and going. There was always something coming up. “There are people who have worked there for their entire life. It is amazing to me. It wasn’t a very high paying job either. It was tedious and tiring, especially over the summer.”

Another source of work stress can arise from the relationship between coworkers as well as employees. Restaurant employees, especially those who have been there for a
very long time, tend to dislike newly hired employees. They often view the newcomers as a threat to their status. Sometimes, they dislike the newcomers because they have to take time out to teach the “newbies” who know nothing. Ms. E was innocent when she first arrived. Through small talk, she revealed to another worker that she had just come to the U.S., and she had never worked at a restaurant before. The worker immediately reported to the boss and claimed that Ms. E was being clumsy and making the customers unhappy. The owner started to keep an extra eye out for Ms. E and became very picky at what she was doing. Soon enough, Ms. E was fired because she was making the restaurant “lose customers.” Ms. K’s story was a little different. She was not the waitress but was responsible for carrying the dishes from the kitchen to the table. Two other women who had been there for a long time and were related to the owner would always stand in her way when she was at work. Sometimes they would even trip her. One time, they made Ms. K twisted her wrist so badly that she had to see a doctor. She did not want to lose the job, so she requested to work a different shift. However, the encounter with them was still inevitable and the same encounter kept recurring. Eventually, Ms. K had to quit her job and started somewhere else. She was too tired, nor did she have the support from other coworkers to fight back the two women who were there before her.

Ms. D, on the other hand, worked at a restaurant owned by her relative. However, the relative was not treating her and her family as if they were related. He was always dissatisfied at her work, although she was the most hardworking one out of all other employees. He viewed her less than a human and made her cry in front of others several times. On one occasion, she talked back to him when he was publicly belittling her and she said, “I am a human, too. I have feelings.” The owner became even more enraged,
“Why do I have to talk sweet to you and care about your feelings? For illiterates and barbarians like you, I can say anything I want!” After half a year of unfair treatment and support from her family, Ms. D quitted the job. She explained that she would have been okay with a ruthless and bitter owner because he did own the place, however, she could not stand how he was only cruel toward her and no one else. She was not lazy or making mistakes that deserved such treatment. It was clear that anything she did would trigger a castigation. After Ms. D quitted her job, she borrowed money from families back home and started a restaurant of her own. It was not easy, either. The old employees from the restaurant she just bought acted like they knew more than Ms. D (who, based on the rule described previously, was a “newbie” in the restaurant business) and treated her like a nobody. They yelled at her for being slow, for not knowing how to run a restaurant, for not knowing English, and for not knowing how to handle customers.

Ms. T, who was a saleswoman, also talked about her recent experience of being deceived by another coworker. She and another girl worked at a closing shift one night, and there came two guys who wanted to purchase two expensive pairs of brand-name sunglasses. Ms. T was there at the time, so she put the order under her name and was about to complete the transaction. The girl came over and told Ms. T to count the cash again. Ms. T went and did not think much. The next day, when Ms. T came to work, she overheard other coworkers congratulating the girl for her big sales last night. It was then that she realized that the girl switched the sale under her own name. Ms. T disclosed that things like this happen all the time. It was a very dirty move to increase one’s own sales performance. However, for a relatively new and foreign employee like her, she could only let it go.
Limited Social Contact

Limited social contact, which is closely associated with long working hours, is brought up as disturbing as well. Mr. Y talked about how he barely made any friends since he moved with his family to the U.S. in 2010.

*Your circle is getting smaller and smaller. Back home, I went out very often with my friends, especially on the weekends. But here, it rarely happens. I am not saying it’s the case for New Orleans only. It’s the case everywhere. It doesn’t matter if you live in the Chinatown of Los Angeles or New York City. You work most of the time. And if you have a family, you spend time with your family when you are off. If you don’t have a family, then you work overtime to make more money. There isn’t anything exciting to do here compared to China, either.*

To him, work was demanding, and life outside work was nothing like he used to experience. Some female participants also share a similar struggle but from the perspective of being a mother. Ms. G was a stay-at-home mom who sometimes helped out with her husband’s take-out business.

*I have two kids. Everything is about them. I am so blessed as a mother of two but sometimes I feel so exhausted. Neither of my husband or I can spend time together with our kids. It’s either him or me, never both. My life is at home and sometimes in the restaurant. To be honest, I don’t know who I am anymore. I want to go back to school but having two kids is making it impossible. I don’t want this to be it, to be what my life is like.*

It was also her husband's second time trying to operate a family business. The first time did not go well, so they decided to start over. This time, she said that everyone was trying harder. However, she felt that she was at a loss either way, “I can’t make up for the time that we have already lost with the kids, but we can’t stop working either. We had to provide for them. Maybe when they get older, life will get a little easier.” To her, being both a mother and a wife constrained herself, and it was draining. Ms. V, another mother of two kids, could say the same. She wanted to go back to school and learn something, but due to her family’s circumstances, she had to sacrifice her personal goals.
When we first opened up the business we have now, it wasn’t going very well, so I had to quit the thought of going to school and came to help out at the restaurant. We were also in debt because we borrowed lots of money for this new business. We could not afford to hire more employees either. It was just my husband and me, and his parents.

She was not too upset with the arrangement, because to her, family always came first. She was proud to be a wife and a mother, as well as a filial daughter who supported her parents back home. However, she admitted that she wished she had more fun in her life. She was tired of only having the option to be at work or home. This has been the way of life for twelve years now. She is still young. She wanted to live like she is young.

**Loss of Independence**

Losing independence can also be a stressor. The main reason for dependence on others comes from a lack of knowledge on how things work in America or lack of skills. This often accompanies the stress that is caused by financial insecurity. Ms. A’s case demonstrates her reluctant dependence on others for the two years that she has been in the U.S. No matter it was in a restaurant, a nail salon, or a massage place, she always had to ask for help. The instability of her working and living environment also added another layer of burden to her stress. Ms. Z also struggled with her independence. When Ms. Z first arrived, she had to depend on her husband who was American. She was lucky to marry someone who cared for her, however, the cultural gap made her feel like she was trapped. She wanted to start her own business because she did not want to forever be a housewife. The husband was very against the thought, saying that there was nothing wrong for a woman to stay at home and take care of the house. Ms. Z, who has been independent since she entered the workforce, refused to take what he offered (which was staying at home and being a housewife and he would take care of the rest). Therefore, he offered no help when she opened up her business. She drove every day to open a small
shop that was four-hour away. She left before sunrise for work and came home around midnight. She had no days off anymore. However, it was then that she finally felt like herself again, that she could be proud of what she was doing. She was no longer insecure nor felt that she could lose everything at any moment.

Status Stressors

Changing in social status appeared to be another source of stressor that participants often bring up. This applied to those who had a college education or held less-labor oriented jobs back in China. Ms. Z was a secretary before she came to America. When she finally decided to switch to the massage business, she questioned her decision for more than one time.

*I've never done anything like this in China. All of a sudden, I find myself doing all the physical work. When I first started learning how to massage, I was depressed. Back home, I was the one to enjoy this service, but now I am massaging the bottom of someone’s foot. I asked myself, when is the end of this?*

Ms. V worked as a customs broker in China. For the twelve years that she has been in America, she worked nowhere but at a restaurant. At first, it was just herself working. Later, when she was married, she started to help out her husband’s business. When asked how she viewed her life back and then, she answered,

*I could make a pretty decent living back home. Work was not hard at all. You only work for a few hours when the shipments are coming in, then you are off. You can go shopping, hanging out with your friends. It was wonderful. You don’t have to work ten, twelve hours like I do now.*

Mr. F talked about his low social status when he first arrived. At the time when he arrived in the U.S., new Chinese immigrants were viewed as abundant and easily replaceable by employers. They did not have to be treated right, nor valued much.

*When you first come, you know nothing. You have to learn the names of the food and everything within a very short period of time to make money. After two weeks, if you are still clumsy and know little about what is going on, you are fired. You*
start the same dilemma all over again, at another restaurant, or in a new city. You try to learn how to survive. Again and again.

He had to tell himself over and over again that he could do it. He could climb up the social ladder, maybe one day become a cook and then a restaurant owner. He was nobody at home, however, he revealed that in the first few years fight for a living in America, he did not know if he was even a human being. In order to survive, many participants had to accept the job that they did not like. They put their head down to dream that one day they would have their place in this world.

_I don’t like my job at all. But you need to live. No matter how much you hate it, you still have to do it._” (Ms. Q)

_“The first thing you have in mind is to survive. You do what it takes to survive. You take baby steps. You cry. You complain. You want to give up. But you cannot stop.”_ (Ms. I)

**Legal Status Stressors**

Not having a legal immigrant status, to no one’s surprise, serves as a major stressor for participants who belonged to this category. Ms. I had been in the states for eleven years, however, she still had not become a legal resident or citizen. She tried her case a few times, but her appeal was never passed. For eleven years, she never once saw her family. She even missed her daughter’s wedding, as well as the birth of her grandchildren. She said that she has adapted to life in America. Although there were nights that she cried to sleep, she had made it to where she was now one step at a time. _“If I would have known that getting a U.S. citizenship would be so hard, I would not come. I would not.”_ Ms. A, as illustrated above, was troubled with how to get her case approved. She got turned away by so many owners because she did not hold a working permit. She spent most of the money on hiring the lawyer. If she was not at work, then she was
preparing for the case review. She could not even recall the last time she had a full night of sleep. Mr. F shared some experiences of the people he knew.

Some of them have been here for thirty and forty years. They have worked in restaurants from their twenties to their sixties. Twelve hours a day. Nonstop. How can they stop? They have kids at home. The kids need the money to go to school, to attend a good college, to buy a house, and to marry someone. You know very well how expensive it is to buy a house in China.

**Discrimination Stressors**

Last but not least, as Chinese immigrants who physically appear different than the rest of the European population, they are likely to encounter racism and discrimination. Many participants admitted that they have gotten used to things like this, both in and outside work. They often felt some type of way, however, in order to survive, they had to tell themselves over and over again that it was of no importance compared to providing for their families. Ms. Z remembered that when she worked as a waitress, an older white lady ordered fried ice cream. Ms. Z did not know much English back then, and she did not know fried ice cream existed. She wanted to double-check, so she asked if the fried ice cream was what the lady wanted. The lady started to yell, “If you don’t know English, why the heck are you in America?” Mr. M mentioned that whenever his customers saw there were workers who were not good at understanding or speaking English, they would take advantage of that and started to complain and exaggerate normal things. Some customers would make things very ugly.

They tend to be more picky. They complain about this and that, trying to walk out the door without paying a dime just because they think I am Chinese, that I am unfamiliar with the business, and therefore I can be easily taken advantage of. One of many phrases I was told is ‘Go back to your country!’ when I fail to satisfy their demanding needs.
Health Outcomes

One unexpected finding is that none of the immigrants indicated that they engaged in risky behaviors such as smoking, gambling, and drinking as a way to cope with their stressful life conditions, as initially hypothesized. Only Ms. W brought up that after work, all the workers from the restaurant would gather in the dorm and play Mahjong:

Don’t mistake what we do with gambling. You don’t care if you are winning or losing. You just want to relax just a little. You get off work at eleven. You go take a quick shower and then go play for a few hours. This has been the way of life for many many years.

Regardless of the demanding working hours and stressful conditions of being working-class Chinese immigrants, the participants did not appear to struggle with their physical and mental health. When asked to rate their health, all participants rated fair to very well. None of them revealed that they suffered from depression or ever had suicidal thoughts due to how life was like in America, nor did they have or developed chronic health conditions that prevented them from doing their job. They appeared to be strong, both physically and mentally. Ms. W, who has been in New Orleans for 20 years, shared that she had never once been to the doctor. She admitted that she had been sick before, but they were nothing serious – just a sore throat or coughs that she would drink hot water and take some over-the-counter medicine for it to go away. “It’s hard to get sick here. The air is so nice. The food is pretty safe. You work for what you get. Everything is in balance. You don’t get sick.” Ms. W often compared her life in the U.S. with her old life back home. Back home, she was concerned with food safety, that how everything was chemically processed, that people had no idea what they were putting into their stomach, and that the food was dirty and no one could do anything about it. Here, in
America, things were better. Therefore, her Chi (In traditional Chinese medicine, the energy within one’s body that has to be balanced in order for one to be healthy) was in balance and it had helped her maintain her health. Ms. K, similarly, paid no visit to the doctor after living in New Orleans for six years. She said that she did not bother with going to the doctors with small sicknesses that would go away with time. She still preferred Chinese medicine and communicating with a doctor who spoke Chinese and understood Chinese culture over seeing a Western doctor.

It was not a single trend that Ms. W and Ms. K believed in Chinese medicine or preferred Chinese-speaking doctors more if they had to go see a doctor. It was fairly common among other participants who had been to the doctors as well. They would go to New York City for doctor visits and treatment if necessary, because the Chinese doctors would not require their patients to have insurance nor charge sky-high prices.

*If it (the sickness, illness) gets worse, I would fly to New York City. I can talk more and explain the symptoms and how I feel much better with a Chinese doctor, so to me it is worth the trip.* (Ms. H)

*The health insurance was useless. You not only will have a hard time communicating with the doctors, but you also have to wait for so long for every single visit. No one has the time to waste. You make an appointment. You go to New York. Everything is ready when you get there and you are out in a second. It is much more convenient to see a doctor in New York City.* (Ms. E)

*You are able to pay the doctor/clinic directly (in NYC), and they don’t charge much. You save a lot by not paying for insurance this way. I don’t want to buy insurance because it is expensive. It requires you to make an appointment. I can’t speak English very well, so if I ever need to go I have to ask other people for help. I don’t want to bother people. Flying to New York is much more direct and forthcoming.* (Mr. J)

*I still go to New York to see a doctor even after I become legal. You can do it on your own. Out here, no one has time to help you.* (Ms. E)

It is clear that the concern with not being able to communicate with doctors directly in English plays a significant role in the participants’ decisions to fly to New York City for
doctor visits, as well as one’s willingness toward doctor visits. However, because flying to New York City required both time and some amount of money, diagnosing and treating illness themselves was still the first option that came to mind when the participants’ conditions were not severe.

Some participants also pointed out that the hospitals in New Orleans nowadays were getting better at taking care of the minority population, one of which was to offer translators during doctor visits. Therefore, they have become less reluctant toward doctor visits, and communication between the patient and the doctor has become easier. However, not everyone was satisfied with their healthcare experiences. Ms. G almost cried when she talked about Obama Care. She said she and her family struggled to pay for the premium. In addition, even after the premium, they still had to pay $9,000 in deductible, which was not the money she had. She and her husband could only take over-the-counter medicine to get better if they were sick. However, she could not risk doing the same for her two newborns. She had to rely on Urgent Care as the primary health taker for her kids. Luckily, no one in her family had an illness that required regular doctor visits.

For the working-class population whose daily lives are occupied with labor work, the Chinese immigrants, to the contrary, care very little about their physical and mental health. Many of them did not have health insurance when they first arrived. Some, after years of being in America and becoming legal U.S. citizens, still lack health insurance coverage. There were also a few participants who never once had health insurance. When asked what happened if there was an emergency, they answered:

*Who thinks about an emergency? You gotta focus on making money, not on getting sick.* (Ms. I)
People my age don’t get sick, not to mention that I am still young and I don’t think it is a necessity to have. (Mr. R)

I think it’s a cultural thing. You check it out back home. Who talks about health or health insurance along with things like food and paycheck? All we do is go to work and go to sleep. It’s not something that we take our time to think about. I am young. I have good physical health. It is good enough for me. (Ms. V)

In addition to putting health insurance as a second or third priority, the majority of the participants (including the few who had insurance) did not perform annual medical exams, either. To them, if they had the time and money to do something, they would not waste it on an annual health exam. It is common in Chinese culture that people think as long as one can walk, talk, and go through the day, one is fine.

Ms. L, who had no preference for doctors, spoke from her personal experience and pointed out one aspect of the U.S. healthcare system that she truly appreciated: although the cost of the bill of her first hospital visit took one and half years to pay back in full,

At least they will treat you no matter if you’re poor or wealthy. You get to live. Back home, as soon as the doctors know you have no money to pay for anything, they kick you out. Here, they can treat you for free until you’re dead.

The health experiences of Chinese immigrants are mixed. For participants who travel out of state or country to see a doctor, they reported more positive reviews for Asian/Chinese doctors and more negative reviews for western doctors. However, for a few that had been to doctors in New Orleans, their reviews were the opposite. Ms. E shared that the Asian doctors in New Orleans were very authoritative and lacked sympathy for the patients compared to the ones in New York City. She blamed the reason for the lack of other good Asian doctors in the community, thus the lack of competition to improve their services. Ms. G was scammed by a Chinese dentist and paid twice more for a service that was without anesthesia (a typical treatment was half of the price she paid,
and it came with anesthesia). When she finally decided to check out a local western
dentist, she realized that she could pay much less for a painless experience. When she
went back to confront the Chinese dentist, he ignored her and told her that she must have
been mistaken.

**Social Buffering System**

As part of the larger society, first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants
actively utilized different social features to manage the negative effects of their long-term
exposure to stress, thus the term social buffering system. Social support, which is relying
on the assistance of other social participants to obtain both physical and mental resources,
appears as one method for the Chinese immigrants to manage and modulate various
stressors. Neutralization techniques, which under this context is the practice of denying
the presence of stress, is also another stress-buffering method adopted. It is considered
part of the social buffer system because of two reasons. First, the justification mechanism
is built upon external *social* forces, and second, the internal validation of denial requires
them to understand the *social* norms within which they operate (although such
understanding does not equal compliance to the norms). Not surprisingly, the participants
also employed cultural-specific ideologies to shift the focus of their stressful
circumstances, thus mitigating their perceived level of stress.

**Social support**

The data gathered from this study are in congruence with the stress-buffering
hypothesis in showing that different forms of social support have helped moderate
different kinds of life stress experienced by first-time working-class Chinese immigrants
in New Orleans.
Generally speaking, the types of social support received by the participants come from employers, family members, and relatives. Help from employers is usually through the instrumental form of providing living arrangements. For example, employers often provide housing and meals for their employees. Every week or so, they take the employees to the banks to deposit cash or send money home, as well as to the grocery store to stock up necessities. Sometimes, among small Chinese enterprises, the employer may develop a close relationship with the employees and help them with obtaining legal status in the U.S. and thus with the addition of informational support.

Help from family members is more intimate and is often given through both physical and social means. Husbands are viewed as the head of the family, so they usually come to the U.S. first, making sure that everything was settled before bringing their families over. After obtaining their citizenship or legal document, they apply to bring their family to the U.S. Husbands, therefore, serve as a bridge of communication between the rest of the family and the western world. They are there to be the main breadwinner; they are there to provide guidance for finding a job and new school; and they are there to listen when their wives and kids have a hard time adjusting. Some participants said that the only reason they made it to where they were today was because they had support from their husband/wife. Ms. K worded it like this, “Thank to my husband for being here. He did everything for me in the beginning. Back then, I didn’t know how to drive, nor to mention how to speak English.” Ms. H, who at the time never had been exposed to any types of restaurant work, teared up when she talked about how much her husband did for her in the beginning.

_I was often bullied by other workers and the manager when I first started working in restaurants. I didn’t want to tell my husband because I didn’t want him to_
worry for me, but he found out eventually because he is a cook and we worked in
the same place. So he went to confront the people and asked them to stop.
Eventually, we left even though we were making a decent amount of living at the
restaurant. My husband told me he could not stand the way those people were
treating me. [...] I got extremely nervous in the second place that we worked
because of what happened to me the first time. The owner saw me being so clumsy
and thought that my husband and I were not a legal-bound couple. You know, it is
a fairly common practice that before they bring their family from China over, lots
of guys who come to the U.S. find someone else so that they at least have a
company. He told my husband that he would raise his pay but he wanted my
husband to figure out a way to kick me out. My husband was so pissed. He said, ‘I
don’t want this job any more. How do you just expect me to just leave my wife like
this?’ [...] After a while, I realized that I couldn’t hold back my husband like this.
I wanted to find a job myself and learn some real skills to be helpful. I will never
forget that day. We were driving on I-5. I told him that it was okay that
I didn’t know any English but I believed that someone out there would hire me. He was a
little shocked, but he respected and was in full support of my decision. We called
several work agents, you know at the time that was the only way to find jobs for
people who were looking to work at restaurants. I was lucky and I found one that
was hiring. The owners were a married couple and they were so nice in
welcoming me who knew nothing.

For Ms. H, her husband serves as not only a strong shoulder for her to lean on but also a
model for her to look up to so that she could be strong. She was very appreciative of the
little things he did for her and the family. To her, it was her husband who made every
hardship they have encountered a memorable and worthy journey. Ms. G’s and her
husband own a take-out restaurant, and she shared their struggles with operating a
catering business. In fact, it was their second time opening a new restaurant. They were
hit hard when they had to close their first restaurant due to a long-term deficit in profit.
She disclosed that it was the continuous support of her husband and his family that
helped them overcome the difficult times.

Most of the time, the husband and the wife will bring their parents over as well.
The grandparents help with taking care of the grandkids while the parents work to
provide for the family. It is fairly common for a family to start a family business, usually
in the form of opening or taking over a restaurant. By doing so, they eliminate the costs
of hiring others and also the risk of having to change staff often. In fact, all restaurant owners from the study operated a family-owned business. Sometimes, the help from family can be long-distance. The parents may decide to send their kids back to China for the first few years so that they can better utilize their time to make money.

Help from relatives is even more diverse. Relatives can help apply for family visas or direct immigration process for the newcomers. They also have resources with housing and jobs, which are not limited by physical locations and can extend throughout America. They often help with settling and adjustment, then depending on what the newcomers’ goals are, they offer advice and send them off. It is not unique that relatives often play the role of matchmakers for newcomers who are single. However, although it is uncommon for first-time working-class Chinese immigrants to come to the U.S. and not to know anyone that they can ask for help from, most of the immigrants are independent on their own after a few weeks. For instance, one-third of the participants from the study indicated that they had no relatives in the U.S. to help them ease the transition when they first arrived.

In addition, social support from the community appears to help moderate the stress and hardship encountered as a working-class immigrant. For participants who were Christian, they indicated that they often prayed for things to get better. They would go to services a lot, socialize with other church members, and find support from within. Sometimes they meet people with similar experiences, and they would help and encourage each other.
**Neutralization Theory**

The parallel notion of neutralization as an internal belief system of justification also appears to be present among Chinese immigrant participants, and it is plausible that it can be used to explain their unique perspective of coping. When asked about how they deal with stress, some of them focused more on having different attitudes toward stress, rather than doing something to combat the stress actively. One of the prevalent attitudes was to deny the negative effects of stress and to claim that stress to them was a very normal part of everyday life. They view themselves powerless and helpless when facing hardship in life:

*You can't do anything about it. It is just the way things are.* (Mr. C)

*You can call it 'stress,' I guess. It wasn’t that bad. You just feel exhausted all the time. You work until you can’t anymore every day. It’s not the end of the world.* (Mr. S)

*You just have to force yourself to do things. You are on your own.* (Mr. B)

Similar to the view of delinquents, they view their stress as something that lies outside their control. It was due to them being minority immigrants in a different country. It was due to their essential needs to survive. It was due to financial difficulty from home. It was due to their lack of education and professional skills. However, regardless of the reasons, they were not the fundamental causes of stress. Therefore, they had no means of changing the current situation and encountering such stress became an ordinary, endurable part of life. In addition, none of them thought stress was something worth bringing up to others. They believed that everyone experienced difficulties in life, just in different forms, and that their experiences do not exist outside the normative range of stress. They might have a hard time getting through each day, however, they all claimed they never experienced any depression or mental instability. As Ms. K puts it,
Maybe you exaggerate a little, maybe you complain too much, but in the end, they help you feel better.

**Frames of Mind**

For subjects who have relatives in the U.S., they disclosed that they knew that life coming to the U.S. would be hard and they had already mentally and physically prepared for what was ahead before moving to the U.S. For subjects who admitted having struggled and encountered challenges with life goals in the U.S., they often viewed it as a meaningful sacrifice for the sake of their kids and the stress they were experiencing would be worth it in the long run. Furthermore, some participants emphasized that although the way of life in the U.S. was stressful, it was nothing compared to how life was like back in China. Although specific coping methods differed based on each individual’s background, most of the strategies were all linked with shifting or adjusting their mentality toward the inevitable stressors that they had to encounter as Chinese immigrants.

**Reference Group.** Although they all had their version of the American dream to accomplish, most of them still maintain traditional Chinese cultural ideas. Frequently, when asked about stress, they evaluated their level of stress not in comparison with Americans but with other Chinese immigrants, or Chinese relatives back home. In other words, when encountering stressful situations that might require a comparison with others, their reference group would be their Chinese counterparts. It is hypothesized that they choose to compare themselves with their Chinese counterparts not because they hold the firm belief that they are Chinese but because by doing so, they can justify their hardship as worthy and less insurmountable.
The majority of the participants also suggested that all sorts of stress were temporary, and with hard work, the stress would all subside. A few of them acknowledged that life was stressful as minority immigrants in America, however, they could use hard work like anyone else to earn everything. When compared to how things were in China, most of them pointed out that there was no unfair competition in America. Everything was more straightforward.

*You do your work and you will get paid. We can’t compare ourselves to the upper-class, but we are just like any other ordinary people. Rich people can have lobsters for dinner, we can do that as well. It is not like China, the poor only get salty pickled cabbages and steamed buns.* (Ms. W)

*You get paid every day. It is not a lot of money to Americans, but it is to us. It is impossible for people like me to make the same amount of money in China, so we are all pretty happy. At the end of the day, you get to have real money in your pocket. That’s enough.* (Ms. E)

*Life is simple, fewer dirty politic moves I would say. You wake up in the morning and go to work. You come home and go to sleep. There is not much entertainment around here either. When the end of the month comes, you pay all your bills. Then you repeat what you do. You don’t worry too much about the sophistication of interpersonal relationships (called “renqing” in Chinese). For instance, you need to be able to sense the cues given by your boss and co-workers in order to survive in China.* (Ms. K)

A few participants also suggested that there were more hopes and opportunities for them with the same qualification of educational and socioeconomic background in America.

*For us lower class who have no education, we can only use our physical labor in exchange for other things. We have a much better chance of fighting for it in America.* (Mr. J)

*Tell me how you provide for your family and expect that there is a future for all of you when food and other necessities take up 80% of your monthly salary?* (Ms. L)

*Do you think it is slightly possible to afford to buy a house as a small restaurant owner in China? Even as waiters and waitresses here, you can save up and buy a nice car. But you know it is unrealistic to think about it if you were a waiter/waitress in China. For this aspect, I am very grateful.* (Ms. W)
Put the same working-class man who is willing to put whatever work it takes to make money and improve his quality of life under the context of China and America: in America, you can make more money with the same amount of time and effort; for example, you get to buy a brand-new iPhone with only one-month worth of salary and still have some extra spending money. In China, it takes the same man three- or four-months worth of salary plus he would be left with no money for rent and food. Life is easier in America for us who have no skills. (Ms. D)

Although comparison with other Chinese immigrants often leads to additional stress experienced among participants, comparison with people who are still struggling back home serves to dilute their perceived level of stress and therefore as an endorsed method of coping.

_Living for the Future: Kids Overshadows Stress_. In accordance with having other Chinese or life back home as the reference for their stress level, some participants also employ one of the most important values in Chinese culture, that family comes first, as a way to perceive their everyday distress in life as commonplace. In particular, it is their kids that they put as their primary obligation to distract themselves from the burden of stress. Some participants said that they could endure everything so that their kids could have a better life than they did. None of them agreed that leaving home was easy. Life back in China was not easy either, but at least that was their root and their home. They all made the hard decision to come to America for something better. In the following cases, it was their sacrifice for their kids.

_You just think about your kids. They need to have a better life here. Everything you do is for them. You hold on to that thought when your boss treats you badly, when you have no idea how things work, and when you don’t understand a word of what people are saying._ (Ms. L)

_You’re asking me whether I think my life is stressful and hard? You tell me. But I am numb now. I don’t even have feelings anymore. You can slap me and I will tell you that I don’t feel a thing. But I still want to try. I want to work harder. It is less for me, but for my kids. I want to provide them with a better living environment, more choices in the future. So I have to keep working harder and harder._ (Mr. F)
I could have gone back home and had a better life myself in China, but I didn’t. I stayed here so that my kids can have more opportunities in America. (Ms. V)

We are the generation who sacrifice for our kids. They can blend in more easily than we could. (Ms. K)

**Prepared.** A few participants who have heard or known other Chinese in America said they were prepared for the worst before they came. Therefore, it was not as difficult.

Fuzhounese all know that life in America is not a fairy tale. We are happy enough that we get to come to America and settle here. We try our best to handle the hardship. (Ms. H)

I don’t think me and my family have given up that much. We weren’t people of fame back home anyway. Starting over is not that difficult compared to those who have already accomplished things in China. We know how to start from scratch. (Mr. Y)

We have researched enough about America before we came. We know that people value independence. Back in China, you rely on your relatives and friends. You won’t be able to do the same thing here in America. So you work hard, you learn, you work harder. We just want to follow the same path. (Ms. H)

**Positive Reframing.** Some participants thought the best way to deal with stress was to view it as a positive thing. Ms. Z was a strong advocate of it. She said that she struggled hard with herself when she first came.

You know the old saying in Chinese, ‘you should take things as they come’. After a while, I choose to face it, to accept it, to welcome the challenge. I’ve seen people who were in worse shoes than I was and they made it. So I told myself that nothing was a big deal. It was a journey where your mentality changes.

In her opinion, one could not conquer everything at once. That would do nothing but bear one down or even destroy the person. Lots of other participants seemed to share a similar attitude that things would work out eventually, if one worked hard enough to try.

You can’t take three steps, turn around and take a step back. You will never be able to move forward if you keep doing so. It is also painful. So you bite the bullet. You convince yourself that you are invincible. (Ms. Z)

You are in a completely new environment! You can’t live in the bubble of your old life. Look and pay attention to what’s ahead of you. Everyone can have choices. No one is doomed.” (Ms. N)
You need to start valuing yourself more than the material things. Money sometimes doesn’t make people happy. Once you change your attitude, you will see things clearly. You will handle your situation with love and kindness.” (Ms. D)

Clearly, in order to get through life, where one’s mind state sits determines the amount of stress, pain, and disease one perceives and experiences significantly.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Stress & Social Buffering System

Although examined within the unique setting of NOLA where the Chinese community is not yet developed, the participants share common types of stress with other Chinese immigrants studied: financial stress, self-doubt, loss of independence, competition, stressful working relationships, long working hours, status stressors, legal status stressors, and discrimination stressors. The financial stress remains to be the most pronounced stressor among first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans, as most of them came from near desperate financial situations back in China. Similar to earlier waves of Chinese immigrants who came to America to make a fortune, current working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans listed money as their primary goal. However, the road to prosperity in a completely new country is quite challenging. In order to find an occupation where money can come fast but also requires no specific skills or training, most of them settle in the service industry, such as restaurants, massage, and grocery businesses. Moreover, because unskilled labor work typically pays less, they have to compensate for the low hourly wage with long working hours, leading to an inflexible working schedule as well as little personal time to spare. Unskilled labor is usually highly repetitive as well. As a result, they lose interest in the job they perform and may even develop negative attitudes toward their occupation. Still, they have no alternatives that provide a better source of income. Their only hope is that one day they
will save up enough to either open a business of their own or to work fewer hours. Competition with other Chinese immigrants also plays a vital role in how hard they have to work and how much money they need to make, which adds to their overall stress level. Chinese immigrants often value their success based on others’ performances, and not performing as well as others means “losing their face.” “Having a face” (the term face is a Chinese expression that refers to dignity, self-respect, and one’s sense of pride) is considered a serious matter in Chinese culture. At times it even outweighs the importance of wealth and status. Sometimes finding a good employment can be troublesome as well. Because of an abundance of Chinese immigrant physical labor in recent years, it is not easy to find a job where one can tolerate the pay, the working hours, and the working environment. In addition, Chinese business owners now are less likely to hire undocumented immigrants due to increased regulation and penalty in the industry. Undocumented Chinese immigrants are already at the bottom of the immigrant hierarchy, and they tend to be most desperate with regard to surviving and making money. However, as undocumented immigrants, they bear the most substantial weight on their shoulders, which consists of the original and fundamental stressor of money, employment, and hiding from legal authorities while trying to obtain legal status. As first-generation immigrants who lack resources, they also are forced to rely on others for basic needs that they could be ashamed of (which relates to the “face” conversation). The transition and the differences in social relation with others thus become another source of stress. Chinese immigrants also struggle with balancing different social roles both within their families and within the society, and often than not, they have to sacrifice their personal needs and growth for their family as a whole. As previously discussed, family
comes first in Chinese culture. Lastly, as minority immigrants who stand out distinctly from the rest of American society, they are bound to face discrimination either at work or in their personal life. Weighing their primary goals of saving up money and climbing up the socioeconomic ladder, Chinese immigrants often choose to overlook such detrimental mental denotation and experiences.

It is also worth noting that some stressors identified by the participants are New-Orleans-specific, such as limited social contact with other Chinese counterparts. The participants emphasized their wishes for an after-work entertainment environment that is similar to the one back home. New Orleans appears to be festive and exuberant to many westerners, however, it remains to a certain degree dull and unexciting to working-class Chinese immigrants. The forms of entertainment New Orleans offers, which are concentrated in French Quarter and rely heavily on drinking and partying, stand in contrast with the Chinese notion of entertainment, which consists mostly of karaoke, eating, arcade, shopping, seeing a movie, and gathering and playing video/card/mahjong games at home. In addition, the lack of a Chinatown and other types of Chinese-owned businesses limits other forms of career advancement for first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans, which could further restrain financial growth and impede the development of independence. However, New-Orleans-specific stressors appear to be intertwined with the larger, more prominent stressor of financial stability and thus perceived as the lesser stressors among Chinese immigrants.

Nevertheless, first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants encounter stressors that arise from multiple dimensions. As Ms. A summarizes, “the stress of work, the stress of family, and the stress of surviving in this brutal world.”
While recognizing multiple stressors that arise from being a minority immigrant group, the first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans consistently view all the stressors as an ordinary part of life. Throughout the interviews, the participants did not seem to overly emphasize the obstacles in their life, nor did they complain much about their current standings. They all, to a certain degree, anticipated the difficulties of starting a new life in a new country before coming to the U.S. and had prepared themselves for it. That is not to say the Chinese immigrants do not utilize resources to help them cope with difficult situations. They rely actively on social support from employees, family members, relatives, and friends. In addition to being dependent on outside sources, they also employ internal justification strategies to alleviate the stress level, such as viewing stress as an external force that they exert no control over thus is normalized. They often compare their current lives with their old ones back home to find a sense of comfort. They focus their attention on the positive aspects of their lives to keep being motivated. One of the most frequently mentioned buffering methods is that they view the stress they are going through as a sacrifice for the better future of their children. They only have one goal in mind, that is one day they will no longer worry about money. As long as they are in close vicinity with the goal, they are satisfied and they can overlook everything else. Their hopes of living the American dreams, having the freedom to pursue their interests, and climbing to the top of the socioeconomic ladder are passed onto their children to fulfill. Because they are not asking for too much for themselves, they do not feel the stressors are overloaded nor have much to complain about. Chinese immigrants also tend to hold the “if-you-are-willing” type of mentality, that if one focuses primarily on working hard to provide for him/herself and the family, his or her
life should not be too hard and one should be able to succeed. Thus, lots of them believe that there will be light once they make it to the end of the tunnel, and that all the stressors are just co-products of darkness.

**Health and Its Relevance in Social Support**

It appears that social support has no direct influence over the health of first-generation lower-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans. Instead, their physical and mental health, to a certain degree, is more affected by their past experiences in China. That is to say, if they were healthy when they were back home, they tend to stay healthy regardless of working and living conditions. Lots of the participants indicated that although work often drains their energy, it was not any worse than what it was like back home.

Social support in regard to health comes into play only in the form of seeking help. For example, friends and family often accompany the participant to his/her first doctor visit, and sometimes they serve as translators or mediators between the doctor and the participant. In addition, they may also provide resources, such as recommendations for doctors or treatments.

Chinese immigrants also continue to hold traditional beliefs from Chinese culture. Older immigrants tend to rely more on Chinese doctors and Chinese medicine, while the newer immigrants, who have experienced the modern-day western medicine and hospital care, are neutral toward both. Most working-class Chinese immigrants do not view their health as one of their top priorities, although being healthy is the only way they can make money to realize their dreams. Furthermore, they do not have knowledge toward illnesses that are prevalent in Western culture. They think that being young equals being healthy,
and that they do not need to spend unnecessary money on healthcare services such as health insurance and annual medical examinations. Most of them are not aware of the symptoms of some common illnesses such as gastric problems, malnutrition, rhinitis, and headaches. When they feel ill, they attribute the reasons to lack of sleep and overworking. In addition, it is not common in Chinese culture for people to go to the doctors for small symptoms that will most likely heal over time. Doing so will be viewed by others as making a mountain out of a molehill. Most people also pay out of pocket when going to see a doctor in China, therefore the idea that one has to pay both the premium and the deductible before the insurance plan comes into effect puzzles the working-class immigrants. In their opinion, it is cheaper and more convenient to skip over the step of buying health insurance, which they most likely will never use.

The population of working-class Chinese immigrants tends to overlook the issues of mental health as well. It is a topic that is still forbidden in casual conversations. Words associated with mental health make people guard up and feel offended. It is not that people do not want to share their medical conditions with others in Chinese culture. It is more in the sense that Chinese people dislike others to prescribe symptoms or illness to themselves. To most of them, they know themselves the best and there is no way that others can see through the situation clearer than themselves. Chinese culture also does not believe in mental illness, for that everything is caused by the imbalance of one’s body, and there is no mental illness alone without the manifestation of physical illness. Therefore, although they can be affected severely by a depressed mood or lack of motivation (which are only psychological) that interferes with their day-to-day life and will undoubtedly raise the alarm in any western setting, they insist that it is not
depression and it is only temporary. Working-class Chinese immigrants hold relatively similar views. The default answer when others ask about their physical and mental health will always be good unless they are in a hospital bed with a breathing machine.

The tendency to overlook their physical health conditions, the reluctance to view any chronic distress as signs that may impact their mental health, as well as the possibility of only partially revealing their true health status complicate the initial finding that first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants appear to stand in good physical and mental health conditions despite having a more challenging life struggles and experiences.

The Implicit Role of Social Support

Despite the fact that social support is not the most common coping method among first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans, one cannot overlook the fundamental occupations preferred by the majority of the working-class Chinese immigrants. Unlike other minority working-class immigrants who branch out and find work in various settings, such as farming, maintenance, construction, and food production and service industries (U.S. Census of Bureau, 2010b), the data from the research shows that Chinese immigrants are largely concentrated in the food and service industry. They are also more inclined to work for employees of the same ethnicity and/or in an environment where they are in close contact with other Chinese immigrants. Inarguably, their arrangement is limited by their ability to speak and understand English as well as the unfamiliarity with U.S. society, however, many choose to remain in the same field (although they may encounter a change in geographic locations) and continue to live a life with limited contact with the American society. One hypothesis for this
unique trend is that first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants tend to have a
different goal than the rest of the first-generation minority immigrants. They do not
expect themselves to ever fit into American society, nor do they have a strong desire to
become part of it. Their ultimate goal is to provide a stable financial base for their
children so that their children can live their American dreams freely. Therefore, a stable
source of income and a sense of familiarity at work become their top priorities in
determining the direction of their occupations. Familiarity at work is often obtained
through working for a Chinese employee, which allows them to stay connected with their
Chinese roots, thus granting them the mental comfort of being present in both societies.
In addition, social support is more attainable from Chinese employees and coworkers.
From this perspective, the first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New
Orleans resemble the working-class Chinese immigrants at large.

When comparing the types of social support received by the current first-
generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans with earlier waves of
working-class Chinese immigrants, it is clear that the forms of social support have also
transformed throughout time, although both groups belong to the same socioeconomic
class. The presence of Chinatown in a given city is no longer a prominent factor in
determining where the immigrants settle and establish themselves, nor does it serve as the
necessary first-stop for Chinese immigrants (Chin et al. 2013). This does not imply,
however, that the presence of Chinatown has become insignificant. Instead, there is a
reconstruction in the notion of Chinatown in the present society. Rather than a physical
Chinatown that is surrounded by shop owners and residents, it is now a more abstract
Chinatown that is supported by the presence of both virtual communications and physical
social contacts. This transition is in accordance with the technological advancement seen in today’s society. Connections and other forms of social resources can be obtained through the use of online communication software (for example, WeChat, which is the current predominant messenger application for people from mainland China). People no longer need to be physically present to communicate with each other. In contrast with the past, where writing a letter was the essential method of communication, messages and feedback today can be delivered and received instantaneously through electronic forms. Different websites that aim to provide resources to help immigrants with finding jobs, housing, and meeting new people have also emerged. Interactions with other Chinese counterparts have become more convenient, and the immigrants’ social circles have expanded significantly as well. This advancement also allows Chinese immigrants to move to other parts of the country where financial success is more achievable without worrying about the presence of Chinatown. Moreover, first-generation Chinese immigrants who arrive in the U.S. in recent years often already have some sort of connections in the U.S., mostly by having relatives or friends who have arrived in the U.S. at an earlier time. The earlier settlers can easily provide assistance and support through various long-distance means, allowing newcomers to have more autonomy in choosing locations of settlement and types of occupation. As a result, the traditional fictive family as a form of social support has been phased out and lost its significance in the current first-generation working-class Chinese immigrant community in New Orleans.

One other trend that appears interesting is that when first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans need to seek out help from strangers, they tend
to be reluctant to find help outside of their ethnic group, even if they are fully aware that resources are available and can be beneficial. When asked about whether they had gone out of their social circle to obtain help (such as learning English/taking an English class, getting familiar with the American society, finding employment and education opportunities, and so on), most of the participants indicated that they would prefer to go to a Chinese church or organization to seek comfort and help, much rather than an western organization that specializes in helping immigrants from all over the world.

Reasons for such inclination remain unknown, however, it could be examined through the common cultural practices among Chinese people. They tend to stay with tradition. Going to other Chinese (although are still strangers) was the standard practice in the past for Chinese immigrants, thus, current immigrants continue to follow the same tradition because it still works. They may not have realized that trying to seek help outside their comfort zone could provide them with the same benefits. As newcomers who are already at a disadvantage because of their appearance, their English proficiency, and their socioeconomic class, it is frightening and less ideal to ask help from complete strangers who resemble nothing like themselves. Furthermore, few organizations in New Orleans specialize in helping Chinese immigrants in particular. Therefore, going to a Chinese church or organization would offer more practical and immediate solutions to their needs, in addition to the convenience in communication and a better understanding due to shared experiences.

Analyzing based only on the data obtained from this preliminary research, it is difficult to draw a solid connection between the immigrants’ perceived stress level and health as outlined by Pearlin (1989), as well as the degree that social support plays into
the equation. However, their exposure to stress does manifest itself through health, but in ways that may appear under chronic or non-threatening conditions that take longer for the first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants to see the connection. As most of the participants are preoccupied with work, their tendency to attribute their health conditions to age and accidents (but not to stress), and their lack of knowledge in how social factors can impact their health indirectly, a more focused research on the topic needs to be conducted to eliminate confounding variables and draw such conclusion with more certainty.
CHAPTER SIX
LIMITATIONS

Conclusions drawn from this study can only serve as an introductory purpose which helps to provide potential researching directions for investigators who are interested in finding out more about Chinese immigrants in New Orleans. There are numerous limitations and deficiencies in the study.

First of all, the research focused primarily on non-probability sampling methods and the sample size was relatively small, which included only twenty-five participants. There was also not enough variety in regard to participants’ gender and occupation. Females accounted for 68.0% of the sample. The majority of the participants were also previous or current restaurant employees, therefore, there is the possibility that this particular group has shaped the conclusion to become more applicable to their experiences. There was not too much heterogeneity in age, as 64.0% of the participants were in their 40s and 50s. Due to a cultural preference in Chinese tradition to not share personal experiences with people who are outside of the family and friend circle, it was difficult to recruit additional participants from various backgrounds, even with monetary compensation. Furthermore, the criteria for working-class are not clearly specified, and one can argue that there is ambiguity in the distinction of one working-class immigrant from another other who is not. Not all participants fit strictly as belonging to a working-class, either (but were included because they did have experience being working-class immigrants). It is also worth mentioning that this study recruited participants who self-
identified as Chinese, however, their experiences may differ based on their origins (e.g., mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan). Hence, the findings from the twenty-five participants are not highly representative of first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans.

Second, some of the questions could appear personal and sensitive to people of traditional Chinese background. Therefore, to minimize the discomfort in sharing their experiences with a stranger and also to maximize the authenticity of their answers, the researcher did not push to obtain specific answers from the participants under certain circumstances. For example, mental health is not something eagerly talked about in a casual Chinese conversation. Consequently, if participants revealed signs of reluctance to continue such a topic, the researcher would take the current answer and would not pressure to ask for more details. The questionnaire also relied heavily on self-reporting questions and the data could be biased by the participants’ personal experiences.

Third, the questionnaire was developed based only on an undergraduate education in sociology research. The measurement of stressors, the buffers of their stressors, social support as well as physical and mental health may not maintain high degrees of validity. Specifically, instead of asking the participants about their subjective physical and mental health conditions and outcomes (originally designed to be less formal to avoid participants skipping the questions), it can be measured indirectly and more objectively through a scale to capture the different effects of stress on their physical and mental health. The same adjustment applies to the measurement of stressors, coping methods, and social support as well to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants’ experiences. Additionally, due to the
qualitative nature of the research method, the findings could be interpreted differently by another researcher. A research method that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative measurements would be more reliable and valid at measuring the variables.
CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study concentrates both on exposure to stress and physical/mental health, the mediating role of social support, as well as other coping methods. Future research can limit its scope and focus on investigating only one set of relationships in order to obtain a more in-depth finding, ideally through quantitative and/or qualitative measurement. Bigger sample size and diversity within the sample population should also be encouraged and improved. In addition, two other factors can also be added to the investigation:

1) Are the stress and social buffering system different for first-generation Chinese immigrants from the working-class vs. middle/upper-middle class? If so, in what ways and why?
2) Could education level play a role in how people respond to a specific question? In other words, would people with a certain educational background be better at connecting their physical/mental health with both physiological conditions and social factors?

Similar research can be conducted in other cities in the U.S. where there is also the lack of Chinese community to examine the similarities and differences in first-generation Chinese immigrants’ stress, health, and social support in a more modern, twenty-first-century setting.

For policymakers, it is important to realize that the current first-generation working-class Chinese immigrants in New Orleans rely heavily on resources within the Chinese community. Therefore, when designing programs to help ease the transition process of Chinese immigrants or similar ethnic groups, resources should be allocated into the community. The finding also points to the need of native Chinese-speaking correspondents(s) who are familiar with Chinese and American cultural norms that can
serve as connections of the two worlds for first-generation Chinese immigrants. It is also equally critical to educate and provide working-class Chinese immigrants with more health-related information and services in a more accessible and cultural-based setting within the Chinese community, possibly through small community health clinics.
REFERENCE


Stewart, Miriam J., Edward Makwarimba, Morton Beiser, Anne Neufeld Rn, Laura Simich, and Denise Spitzer. n.d. “Social Support and Health: Immigrants’ and Refugees’ Perspectives.” *Diversity in Health and Care* 7:91–103.


