

# UNVEILING THE INVISIBLE LEARNING FROM UNPAID HOUSEHOLD WORK: CHINESE IMMIGRANTS' PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*This paper examines unpaid household work and the informal learning involved in it, with the focus on new Chinese immigrants in Canada. The data used in this paper are drawn from two sources: the 2004 Canadian Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning, and in-depth interviews with 20 new Chinese immigrants in Toronto, Canada. The survey section examines data on informal learning through housework and general interest-related activities, with a focus on the comparison of three groups of Canadians: Canadian-born, other immigrants, and Chinese immigrants. The survey data explore how gender, immigration, and ethnicity influence the informal learning involved in performing the unpaid household activities. The interview section explores the impact of cross-cultural immigration on household work among new Chinese immigrants and the knowledge and skills they acquired through such work. Through the analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data, the author argues that unpaid household work and the learning involved in it are not only gendered, but also classed, and that household work is constantly changing throughout one's lifetime; thus, informal learning involved in such work is lifelong as well as lifewide.*

## Résumé

*Cet article se penche sur le travail domestique non rémunéré et l'apprentissage informel qui s'y rattache, plus spécifiquement auprès d'immigrants chinois nouvellement arrivés au Canada. Les données utilisées proviennent de deux sources : un sondage pan-canadien mené en 2004 par le réseau Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) et des entrevues menées auprès de vingt immigrants chinois, nouvellement établis à Toronto, Canada. La section qui se rapporte au sondage de WALL examine des données relatives à l'apprentissage informel par le travail domestique, et des activités d'intérêt général, auprès de trois groupes différents : canadiens de souche, autres immigrants et immigrants chinois. Les données de WALL s'attardent à la façon dont le sexe, l'immigration et la race influencent l'apprentissage informel impliqué dans le travail domestique non rémunéré. La section qui se rapporte aux entrevues mesure l'impact de l'immigration interculturelle sur le travail domestique chez les nouveaux immigrants chinois; elle fait aussi état des connaissances et compétences acquises par l'entremise de*

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/  
La Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes  
20,2 December/décembre 2007 25-40*

ISSN 0835-4944 © Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/  
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

*ce travail. À travers l'analyse de données qualitatives et quantitatives, l'auteur argumente que le travail domestique non rémunéré et l'apprentissage informel qui s'y rattache ne sont non seulement liés au sexe, mais aussi à la classe sociale, et que le travail domestique est en constant changement tout au long de la vie. Par conséquent l'apprentissage informel qui s'y rattache se prolonge tout au long et dans toutes les facettes de la vie.*

### Introduction

For a long time, housework was viewed as women's work, a “labour of love” that had little economic value. As a result, what women did for their family and what they learned through such work were largely ignored and unvalued. In the past two decades, numerous studies have been done on lifelong learning and its impact on adult education (Edwards, 2000; Jarvis, 1999). However, most of the research on lifelong learning has focused on learning in formal educational institutions and, more recently, on paid workplace informal training (Livingstone, 1999), ignoring the homeplace as a learning site (Gouthro, 2005) and unpaid household work as a means to learn knowledge and skills that could be useful for both paid and unpaid work (Eichler, 2005).

This paper explores the informal learning involved in unpaid household work, with the focus on new Chinese immigrants in Toronto, Canada. As part of a project on The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL)<sup>1</sup> funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), this paper draws on data from two sources: a Canada-wide telephone Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning (2004) and semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 new Chinese immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada. The survey data section examines the informal learning of Canadians involved in doing housework, care work, and other unpaid activities, with a focus on the comparison of 3 groups of people: Canadian-born, other immigrants in Canada, and Chinese immigrants in Canada. The in-depth interviews expand on the WALL survey by further exploring the informal learning involved in household activities, with a focus on new Mainland Chinese immigrants in the GTA. The goal of the paper is to unveil the invisible learning involved in the usually invisible housework and care work. By comparing the participation rates of informal learning among the three different survey groups, and by examining in-depth some of the learning among the new Chinese immigrants, the paper demonstrates how gender, ethnicity, and immigration influence the types of housework people perform and the informal learning in which they engage. The paper concludes that household work is constantly changing throughout one's lifetime; thus, informal learning involved in such work is lifelong as well as lifewide.

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<sup>1</sup> The data reported on here were gathered as part of the research network on The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) from 2003 through 2007 as a Major Collaborative Research Initiative on the New Economy (Project No. 512-2002-1011). This network is composed of a large national survey and 12 case study projects. For further information about the WALL project, please see the network website: [www.wallnetwork.ca](http://www.wallnetwork.ca).

## Literature Review

### *Housework as “Women’s Work”*

For a long time, unpaid housework was not considered real work, but simply a “labour of love” (Luxton, 1980). This is because the traditional definition of “work” excludes unpaid work and work is measured only through paid activities linked to the market (Beneria, 1999). As a result, unpaid housework is often ignored and undervalued. Furthermore, the lack of social recognition of unpaid housework has led to the invisibility of the work itself and the people who perform it (DeVault, 1991).

Numerous studies have indicated that unpaid household work is a highly gendered activity, with women performing the bulk of unpaid household work despite their increasing participation in paid employment, whether full- or part-time (Baxter, 1997; McFarlane, Beaujot & Haddad 2000; John & Shelton, 1997). Recent studies on the gendered division of household tasks (Noonan, 2001) suggest that women not only continue to do more household labour, but are also more likely to be responsible for tasks that are frequent and not flexible (e.g., cooking, cleaning), while men are more likely to do tasks that are non-routine and less frequent (e.g., household maintenance) or seasonal in nature (e.g., gardening). This pattern of gendered household work has been observed in cross-household studies with people in different living arrangements (Baxter, 2005; Giddings, 1998; Ilig, 1999; South & Spitze, 1994). Similar trends have also been observed in cross-country research (Batalova & Cohen, 2002; Windebank, 2001; Wright, Shire, Hwang, Dolan, & Baxter, 1992) and in research on individual countries (Alvarez & Miles, 2003; Frederick, 1995; Zuo & Bian, 2001), as well as in research among different ethnic groups (Haddad & Lam, 1994; Kamo & Cohen, 1998; Orbuch & Eyster, 1997).

### *Homeplace—A Long-neglected Site of Lifelong Learning*

From the very beginning, research on lifelong learning has focused on government policies and their impact on formal education (see Collins, 2003; Edwards, 2000; Hart, 1992; Jarvis, 1999; Schuetze, 2000). Despite growing attention to informal forms of lifelong learning in recent years, the focus is on paid labour, ignoring the homeplace as a learning site (Gouthro, 2005) and unpaid household work as a means to learn knowledge and skills that are useful for both paid and unpaid work (Eichler, 2005).

So far, little research has been found on lifelong learning through household work in the homesetting. Past literature indicates that the home is a location of few opportunities for learning, as skills in housework and childcare are perceived as intuitive and natural rather

absence of homeplace from the dominant discourse on lifelong learning, which reflects how a masculine perception has largely defined research parameters in education. Building on previous feminist scholarship on housework and lifelong learning, Liu (2006) argues that the masculine, market-oriented discourse of lifelong learning not only makes unpaid household work invisible, but also renders its learners and their knowledge genderless, classless, and raceless, thus ignoring the impact of those factors on the content of learning, the process of learning, the ways and means of learning, and the purpose of learning.

### **Methodology**

This paper is divided into two sections based on data from two sources: a Canadian Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) (n=9,063) and interviews with new Chinese immigrants in Toronto (n=20), which were part of the WALL sub-project on Household Work and Lifelong Learning.<sup>2</sup> Given its limited space, this paper will not discuss or compare other in-depth interviews from the Household Work project.

#### ***Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning (2004)***

Conducted through telephone interviews in early 2004, the national Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning involved 9,063 Canadian adults over age 18, of whom 5,121 (57%) are women and 3,942 (43%) are men. Based on their self-report, the majority of the people surveyed are white (86%), while about a quarter are non-white (24%). Eighty percent of the respondents are Canadian-born and 20% are immigrants. There are 183 respondents of Chinese origin in the survey, making up 2% of the total participants (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006).

The Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning was the first in North America to examine informal learning extensively in relation to unpaid work, such as housework, volunteer work, and general interests. This paper focuses primarily on the learning involved in unpaid housework and general interest-related activities. In the WALL survey section, the author examines three groups of people: Canadian-born, other immigrants in Canada, and Chinese immigrants in Canada. The paper aims to examine how gender, ethnicity, and immigration produce an impact on the informal learning through unpaid housework and general interest-related activities.

#### ***Interviews***

Twenty new Chinese immigrants were interviewed at the end of 2004 through early 2005. Eight people (4 men and 4 women) were from the WALL survey, and 12 (10 women and 2 men) were from my own contact through snow-balling, due to the lack of qualified participants in the GTA from the original survey. The respondents were between the ages of 25 to 58 years old, had immigrated to Canada from Mainland China in the previous

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<sup>2</sup> The Household Work and Lifelong Learning Project is one of the 12 case studies in the WALL project, with Margrit Eichler as the principal investigator. The project consists of four phases: Phase 1, a mailed survey (n=254); Phase 2, focus groups (n=11, with 66 participants); Phase 3, interviews on unpaid household work (n=75); Phase 4, interviews on paid household work (n=20). My interviews with recent Chinese immigrants belong to Phase 3, which examined how major life transitions, such as immigration, disability, etc., change one's household work and the learning involved in it.

five years, and resided in the GTA at the time of the interviews. Most of my interviewees (90%) were married, with children between the ages of a few months to 29. The majority of the participants (90%) were professionals before immigration and had a university degree or above. However, at the time of the interviews, 65% of the respondents were doing non-professional or semi-skilled jobs. Twenty-five percent were re-schooling in a field completely different from their previous professions. Ten percent were unemployed. More women were chosen to be interviewed because literature indicates that women still do two-thirds of all household work despite their increased participation in the labour force.

The interviews were semi-structured, with each about one and a half to two hours long, and were conducted either in English or Mandarin. The interview questionnaire included all of the WALL survey questions on informal learning through unpaid housework, making it possible for comparative studies between the two. In addition, the interviews also examined the informal learning through unpaid care work, which is an equally important and inseparable part of household work. The goal of the interviews is to explore how cross-cultural immigration changed the housework and care work among the Chinese immigrants, and what learning was involved in order to adapt to those changes in their new homes in Canada.

This paper focuses on Chinese immigrants because they are the largest immigrant group in Canada in the past two decades, as well as the largest visible minority group in the WALL survey. New immigrants with five years of residence in Canada were chosen because literature on lifelong learning and immigration suggests that major life transitions, such as international migration, lead to significant learning for those involved in such transitions. Therefore, for new immigrants, the first five years of immigration is crucial in terms of learning to adjust to a new life in a physically as well as socio-culturally different environment. By examining both the quantitative data from the WALL survey and the qualitative data from the in-depth interviews, the paper intends to provide a more comprehensive view of the enormous, yet invisible, learning embedded in many of the household tasks and activities, which were largely ignored and undervalued in previous research on lifelong learning and on immigration.

## Research Findings

### *The WALL Survey: Informal Learning through Unpaid Household Work*

According to the final report of the 2004 WALL survey, nearly all Canadian women and men (97%) reported unpaid housework, with women devoting substantially more weekly time to housework (an average of 20 hours for women versus 12 hours for men). The vast majority of participants in housework (82%) also indicated that they engaged in some types of related informal learning, suggesting that household work-related informal learning is probably the most widespread type of unpaid work-related learning, although the least studied (Livingstone and Scholtz, 2006). The following tables examine the informal learning involved in various types of housework and general interest-related activities among three groups of people: Canadian-born, other immigrants, and Chinese immigrants.

Table 1. Participation rate (%) of housework-related informal learning by activity, gender, and immigration. All eligible participants\*.

Type of work	Canadian-born			Other immigrants			Chinese immigrants		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Cooking	50	45	55	48	45	52	43	33	53
Renovation/landscaping/ gardening	50	52	47	44	47	42	31	38	24
Home repair/maintenance	46	52	40	41	47	35	38	43	35
New equipment/appliances	44	48	40	48	52	45	46	49	42
Childcare	32	28	36	34	30	38	19	21	17
Elderly care	20	15	25	27	22	32	19	23	14
Interpersonal skills	42	40	43	45	42	47	51	53	48
Teamwork/problem solving	40	39	41	46	45	46	51	53	50
Budgeting/financial management	37	37	37	35	38	33	42	41	41
Organization/management skills	31	30	31	30	34	27	33	26	40
Total number	6852	3324	3528	1591	742	849	112	54	58

Sources: WALL Survey, 2004.

\* Only those who reported doing some housework-related informal learning were asked questions about the topics.

Table 1 indicates that informal learning is embedded in a variety of housework activities, from the most mundane, daily tasks such as cooking and childcare to the less frequent activities such as home repair or renovation, or less visible work such as organizing and budgeting. Of the native-born Canadians, half of the participants reported learning about cooking (50%) and home renovation/landscaping/gardening (50%), followed by learning about home repair/maintenance (46%) and new equipment and appliances (44%). In performing housework tasks, a large proportion of the Canadian-born also reported learning interpersonal skills (42%), teamwork/problem solving (40%), budgeting/financial management (37%), and organization/management skills (31%). About one third of the Canadian-born were involved in learning about childcare (32%), and one fifth in elderly care (20%). Compared with their Canadian-born counterparts, other immigrants followed the same pattern in their informal learning activities with little or no significant change in their participation rate: slightly lower in most mundane tasks such as cooking (48%), renovation/landscaping/gardening (44%), and home repair/maintenance (41%), but a little higher in elderly care (27%), new equipment/appliances (48%), and teamwork/problem

solving (46%). Compared with the other two groups, Chinese immigrants share similar trends in their housework-related informal learning, except for a higher rate of learning on interpersonal skills (51%) and teamwork/problem solving skills (51%). However, the Chinese group displayed a much lower rate for childcare (19%) and home renovation/landscaping/gardening (31%) than the rest of the participants.

Table 2. Participation rate (%) of general interest-related informal learning by activity, gender, and immigration. All eligible participants\*.

Type of work	Canadian-born			Other immigrants			Chinese immigrants		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Health/well-being	62	57	67	66	64	68	59	55	62
Leisure/hobby	53	54	52	52	53	51	50	54	48
Social/political/ environment' issues	48	49	47	50	51	49	47	48	46
Social skills/personal development	46	44	48	50	47	52	50	55	48
Computers	45	49	42	48	52	44	70	79	62
Finance	44	47	41	43	44	42	53	64	42
Sports/recreation	43	48	39	42	47	38	37	36	37
Traditions/customs	38	35	41	48	49	47	47	45	49
Religion/spirituality	36	30	40	50	47	52	42	29	54
Intimate relationships	33	34	31	34	36	32	36	39	34
Science/technology	31	39	24	34	41	27	46	54	39
Language	19	19	19	39	41	37	62	59	64
Total Number	7155	3414	3741	1690	780	910	115	56	59

Sources: WALL Survey, 2004.

\* Only those who reported doing some general interest-related informal learning were asked questions about the topics.

Table 2 indicates that, with respect to general interest-related activities, informal learning on health and well-being has the highest participation rate across all three groups: 63% for the Canadian-born, 66% for other immigrants, and 59% for Chinese immigrants, suggesting that the majority of Canadians are very concerned about their health and are very enthusiastic in pursuing a healthy style of living in their daily lives. High frequency of informal learning is also reported by Canadian-born in the following areas: leisure/hobby

(53%), social/political/environmental issues (48%), social skills/personal development (46%). In addition to similar participation rates in the above areas, other immigrants reported higher rates of informal learning about traditions/customs (48%), and religion/spirituality (50%). Chinese immigrants reported similarly high involvement in learning about traditions/customs (47%), but a higher rate in finance (53%) and the highest rates in computers (70%), language (62%), and science/technology (46%) among all three groups. The high participation rates of the Chinese in learning about computers and language partly reflects their educational background before immigration and their desire to improve their ability in one of the official languages in Canada.

Both Table 1 and Table 2 reveal that, just as housework is gendered, informal learning involved in such activities follows the same pattern. Overall, women indicated higher participation rates in learning related to traditionally "female" tasks such as cooking, childcare, and elderly care, which are less flexible and more time-consuming. Men across the three groups showed a higher frequency in learning about traditionally "male" work such as home maintenance and renovation/landscaping/gardening, which are less frequent and more seasonal in nature. Across all three groups, more men than women reported higher involvement in learning about computers and science/technology. More women than men, however, reported learning about traditions/customs, although men in the other immigrant group showed an equally high rate in this area. A high participation rate was also reported in learning about religion/spirituality among other immigrant women (52%) and men (47%), while the rate of learning about this area among the Chinese immigrants was more diverse (54% for women and 29% for men). Despite their equally low participation rates in childcare and elderly care, more men than women in the Chinese group reported learning in both areas. This finding is different from the other two groups, where the reverse is displayed. This is also inconsistent with the findings of my interviews with Chinese immigrants, which I will discuss in detail in the following section. However, it is worth noticing that due to the considerably small sample of Chinese immigrants in the survey, data on this group are more prone to sampling error than those on the other two groups.

### ***Interviews on Household Work and Learning: Chinese Immigrants' Perspective***

In my interviews with the new Chinese immigrants in Toronto, respondents were first asked to identify the major event/s in their lives in the previous five years, and what challenges and difficulties they encountered with respect to unpaid household work. Then the respondents were asked whether they engaged in any informal learning as a result of such change/s, and how they acquired the learning.

The majority of the respondents (85%) considered immigration as the most important event that affected their unpaid household work. In the few cases where immigration was not initially identified as the major event, it was singled out later in the interview as the major factor having a direct impact on unpaid housework and care work. Ninety-five percent of all respondents, both women and men, married or single, reported a dramatic increase of housework and care work as a result of immigration, even though many of them claimed that the overall time they spent on housework was not comparable to that on paid employment or academic study. Most of the reported increase in household work was in routine tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. An abrupt decline in



family income and lack of support from extended families were reported as responsible for this increase. Two thirds of the respondents (65%) reported English as a major barrier to accessing the mainstream culture, getting a professional job, helping children with their schoolwork, or making friends with the local people.

Learning abounds in all aspects of housework and care work. Most of the perceived learning, however, was related to routine chores such as cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping, and in childcare and child education. Nearly all respondents (95%) reported new learning about food and cooking. Many of the women reported learning in housecleaning, doing laundry, and grocery shopping. Many women, too, reported learning to manage and organize household activities differently. All immigrant parents reported new learning related to childrearing. Male parents, in particular, reported great challenges and enormous learning in adapting to the Canadian way of educating children. (This probably, in part, explains the higher participation rate in childcare-related informal learning among Chinese men than women in the survey; see Table 1). Many respondents reported learning to solve conflicts and to provide care and emotional support differently. Many respondents also reported acquiring new views about work and the meaning of life after immigration.

As highly educated professionals before immigration, all my respondents reported using the Internet as the most important means of learning and exchanging information. This finding is consistent with the high participation rate for learning about computers among the Chinese men and women in the survey (see Table 2). Other popular media that the new Chinese immigrants frequently resorted to were TV, newspapers, radio, and magazines. Many respondents also reported turning to friends, parents, or relatives for cooking recipes and information on childcare or child education. However, when asked about how they acquired the skills to perform some of the less visible household tasks—such as managing time and organizing and planning housework—many respondents simply said, “It happened naturally. You don’t have to learn, you just do it.” The following will discuss in detail the informal learning embedded in the various dimensions of household work.

### ***Learning new skills and new ways of doing household routines.***

Much of the informal learning that the new Chinese immigrants engaged in was closely related to their everyday lives—cooking, in particular. For example, nearly all participants, both women and men, talked about learning new foods, both Chinese and Western. Many respondents said that they learned to cook popular Chinese food and dishes (e.g., dumplings, steam bread, etc.) that they used to buy in China but had to cook by themselves in Canada because the foods were either not available or too expensive in the supermarkets. Several female respondents reported that they learned to make Western-style cookies and cakes, as well as Western foods such as salads, pizza, and sandwiches, either because the food was healthier (e.g., salads made of raw vegetables), or it was liked by their children (e.g., pizza), or it was easier to prepare and convenient to take for lunch (e.g., sandwiches). Nearly all of the respondents reported learning new ways of cooking, such as baking, when they found that the Chinese way of stir-frying produced too much smoke and that many of the kitchens were not equipped with powerful fans to remove the smoke. Many women respondents also reported new learning about housecleaning (e.g., learning different types

of detergents for cleaning the kitchen, bathroom, and windows; learning to clean the house by vacuuming instead of mopping, etc.) and different ways of doing laundry (e.g., using a public laundry machine instead of washing clothes by hand or by private washing machine). A few respondents spoke about learning to sort garbage, plant a garden, or paint the house. One woman claimed learning to cut her son's hair because it was expensive to get a haircut at the barbershop. "The first time I cut his hair," recalled Tian, "my son didn't like it. He screamed and protested, 'It's so ugly, just like a dog's bites. My classmates will laugh at me.' But now I think my skill has improved a lot [laughs]."

For some, increased housework also brought changed views of such work, especially among those who did not do much housework before immigration. Ling, a young woman who used to live with her parents before immigration but who lived by herself in Canada at the time of the interview, revealed to me her changed view about housework. "I didn't do much housework in China. I didn't know how time-consuming it was. Now I realize that I need to respect more the person who does that job. I am much more considerate than before because of the housework and care work I do." Yang, who had bought a townhouse a year before the interview, proudly told me that what he enjoyed most was doing housework. "Before immigration," Yang said, "I thought housework is women's work, like mopping the floor. There is not much you can do. Now I enjoy doing housework, like painting the house, planting the garden . . ." Obviously, Yang's likes and dislikes of housework were largely determined by what he perceived as "appropriate" housework for a man to do. In addition, Yang attributed his like of housework to the many tools available for such work in Canada.

### ***Learning to budget, manage time, and organize household work differently.***

Like many of the Canadians in the survey, the new Chinese immigrants in my interviews claimed learning knowledge and skills beyond cooking and cleaning. For example, the majority of the interviewees learned to budget for their daily expenses. No longer having the financial capacity to eat out or to buy ready-made food, many immigrants learned to save money by cooking every meal and making everything they eat from scratch (e.g., steam bread, noodles, etc.). Many respondents learned to cut their expenses by checking flyers for cheaper foods and other daily necessities and by shopping at different stores.

Many of the new immigrants said that they had to manage their time and organize their housework differently so that they had time for both their unpaid work at home and their paid employment or academic studies. One woman said she did most of the time-consuming cooking (e.g., steam bread, dumplings, fried fish, etc.) on weekends. Holding a full-time job as a general helper in a factory, Jung, a former engineer, said that he learned time-budgeting for cooking dinner during weekday evenings so that he had time for reading, job-searching on the Internet, and helping his daughter with her schoolwork. Unable to do grocery shopping everyday as they used to before immigration, several women claimed learning to make a shopping list for their weekly trip to the supermarkets, and planning their meals for the week ahead of time. Hong, a young mother of a 13-month child and a full-time student, learned to manage her time and her household by distributing housework among the family members; she took up most of the cooking and child care while her husband helped out with some of the housework, like playing with the child while she

prepared the meal, or like mopping the floor, which, according to Hong, was “a physical exercise that is good for his health.” Hong also told me, “Housework is endless. There is always so much to do. If you don’t manage it properly, you won’t be able to complete all the work. You won’t have time for school.”

### *Learning to provide emotional supports and solve conflicts differently.*

Many of the immigrants I interviewed stated doing more housework as a way of showing care for their partners. Hong said that she did all the cooking and much of the childcare as an emotional support for her husband so that he could concentrate on his work. Similarly, Fang, who used to be a college teacher but could not find any job in Canada, said that she took up all the housework such as cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping so that when her husband came home he could have his meal right away, leaving more time for him to rest and get refreshed for his work. Despite his own physically demanding job in a factory, Jung claimed taking up more housework as a way of showing emotional support for his wife after her exhausting day of work on the assembly line. Liang, a senior manager of a company before immigration but a student at the time of the interview, talked in detail about how he took care of his pregnant wife by cooking what she liked to eat and what he considered good for her and her baby.

Several women respondents expressed changes in their attitudes and their ways of handling family conflicts. For example, Mei admitted that she no longer yelled as she used to if she was unhappy with her husband, who rarely did any housework. Jie, a middle-aged woman, expressed a similar change in her attitude. “I used to shout when I didn’t feel happy. Here I just keep silent. . . . I think because there is more life pressure here than in China . . . I think I am more understanding of his [her husband’s] situation, his emotion.” Lina reported making a special effort to keep a good relationship with her husband. “Life is not easy here,” she said. “I want to make my family happy and harmonious, but I didn’t care much about that when we were in China.” Significant change was also observed in Yuan’s account about her newly acquired way of handling spousal conflicts:

When I was in China, I used to go to stay at my parents’ place if I had a fight with my husband. Now I don’t have a place to go. I have to stay home and face the problem. I am becoming more tolerant with him [her husband]. I show more respect for his self-esteem. Whenever there is a conflict between us, I would give in, just to save his face. I would say, ‘Okay. If you don’t change, then I will change.’

Many respondents reported learning new ways of providing care and support for their aged parents in China. Chinese culture emphasizes filial piety (*xiao*), which demands adult children, especially the male children, to support their parents when they get old. However, like most of the recent immigrants in Canada, all the Chinese respondents in my interviews came to Canada with their small families only. No longer able to visit their parents in person as they used to, many new immigrants reported providing “lip-service” support to their parents in China through the telephone and/or the Internet. Many reported learning about where to get cheaper phone cards and how to save money by combining different means of communication. For example, Shang, a young man who used to be a

software engineer but who had not been able to find any professional job since immigration, claimed to have contacted his parents in China by using the Internet to send text messages to his parents' cell phones every day without spending any money doing it. Kai, a PhD student at the time of the interview, reported checking on his widowed mother in Beijing every evening through phone calls, while his wife, Mei, talked in detail about how she managed three households on both sides of the Pacific: her own household in Canada, that of her widowed mother-in-law who lived alone in Beijing, and that of her widowed father with lung cancer in a city in South China. She would call several times a week to check their conditions and to give instructions to the nannies taking care of her father and mother-in-law as to what housework needed to be done for the week.

My interviews indicate that elderly care-related informal learning reported by the new Chinese immigrants is more related to *how* they do it from long-distance rather than *what* they actually do in person, because their care of or support for the elderly is more emotional than physical, and thus, less visible. This, in a way, probably explains why the Chinese immigrants in the survey reported an average lower rate for learning about elderly care than other immigrants and the native-born Canadians (see Table 1).

### ***Learning the Canadian way of life and Canadian way of educating children.***

In addition to the learning involved in household work, many respondents reported active learning about Canadian culture, such as its customs and traditions, and the Canadian way of doing things. For example, through their contact and communication with local people, several women claimed to have learned to carry a day planner around with them and to make an appointment before they went to see a doctor or visited friends, as they heard that unexpected visits are impolite and undesirable in Canadian culture. They also followed what most Canadians usually do when socializing: splitting bills when dining out with friends or bringing some food along when invited to a friend's place. Fang, a 58-year-old woman, told me that, through her contact with people in her church, she expanded her understanding of love, from the love of one's family to the universal love of mankind. Coming from a culture where sharing personal information is a sign of trust and an important step for building friendship, Juan learned in her own way about not sharing with strangers personal information such as age, marriage, income, etc.

Significant changes were also reported with respect to child education. All the respondents with children admitted a big transformation in their attitudes toward child education in the Canadian context. "Before, in China," said Juan, mother of a 15-year-old daughter, "I always ordered her [her daughter] to do this, to do that. Now I can no longer do it. I have to talk with her, discuss about it with her. Even with homework, if she doesn't like me to read it, I cannot do so. I have to ask her for permission." Yang, father of a 12-year-old son, revealed to me, "It is a big adjustment for me, trying to understand him. In China, you don't care whether they understand it or not. If you think it is good for them, you just do it and believe that they will understand you in the future." Lina, mother of a son in high school, said the following:

In China, if I asked my son to focus on his study, he always listened. But here he thinks he is independent. Whenever I urged him to study, he

would say, 'I am a grown-up now. I don't need you to tell me what to do.'  
So I changed. I may be wrong. I probably don't need to care that much.

My interviews with the Chinese immigrant parents revealed that both men and women were actively involved in learning about child education, which is greatly emphasized in Chinese culture and is regarded as an essential part of parenting. This finding contradicts the WALL survey in which Chinese immigrants reported an overall low participation in child care/parenting (see Table 1). This is likely due to two possibilities: first, many of the Chinese participants in the survey did not have children or their children were old enough that they did not require much physical care; second, the low rate might be the result of a narrow understanding of what housework and childcare are. Based on my interviews with the new Chinese immigrants, I suspect the second. This is because, when asked about their understanding of housework and care work, many of the respondents initially gave me a very narrow definition of cooking, cleaning, and feeding. It was after some explanation that they started to think beyond the routine chores.

### *Learning new views about family and the meaning of life.*

Nearly all respondents said that immigration changed their views about family and the meaning of life. Alone or with only their nuclear families here in Canada, and with fewer friends and reduced social lives, the new immigrants said that they spent more time with their families than before. More women than men expressed their delight and preference for this change. Several women also claimed that they cherished their family more than before. Although all respondents expressed varied degrees of economic concerns and worries for their future, many of them stated that they were learning to enjoy life more than their work and more than making money. Many respondents, both men and women, said that they became less ambitious and had lower expectations for life now than before. Juan, a college professor before immigration, claimed that she used to think more about her career, her position, and her professional title. Now what she wanted was just a stable job and a simple life. Yang, a man in his mid-40s, revealed his newly acquired views of work, himself, and the meaning of life:

Before immigration, I always thought that, if I try hard enough, there is nothing I cannot do and there is no goal I cannot achieve. Now I realize it's totally not like that. You need the opportunity, the patience. . . . In China, I believe that the value of my life is to work and I try to show my ability and my worth through my work. Now I'd say life is to understand yourself, what you are, who you are and what you want, and what you like. Life is learning. But before, I thought I had learned enough.

My interviews with the Chinese immigrants also offered some explanations for those changes. As is revealed in Yang's conversation, many of my respondents viewed work as the centre of their lives before immigration. Their social lives were work-oriented and they found the meaning of life and self-actualization through their paid work. However, when they came to Canada, particularly after they got more contacts with the local people, they gradually shifted the centre of their lives from the public sphere of work to the private sphere of home and family. This shift was partly due to their efforts to integrate into the

mainstream culture, and partly due to their inability to get a professional job in Canada. Many Chinese immigrants found that, despite the huge efforts they made in overcoming challenges in language and culture, there were certain barriers, such as job discrimination in the Canadian labour market, that were far beyond their control. Frustrated and powerless as they were, many respondents learned to change themselves and their view of life rather than what they considered "the impossible"—changing for a professional job.

### **Conclusion**

By examining data from the 2004 national Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL), and follow-up interviews with the new Chinese immigrants in the GTA, the paper reveals that informal learning abounds in household work, from the most mundane chores such as cooking and repairing to the less visible tasks of budgeting and organizing. However, just as housework is gendered, learning involved in such work follows the same pattern, with women involved more in learning about the daily routines such as cooking and child care, and men more in the less frequent or seasonal work such as home maintenance and gardening. The WALL survey shows that immigrants, especially Chinese immigrants, reported higher participation rates in informal learning about language, computer, and Canadian culture, yet lower rates in learning about home repair and home renovation and gardening when compared to the Canadian-born, who are mostly white. My in-depth interviews with Chinese immigrants provide some possible explanations for these differences: many immigrants are recent arrivals from developing countries and did not speak English or French before immigration. Therefore, it was necessary for them to learn the language and the culture of the host society. Meanwhile, like most of the new arrivals, many of the immigrants were still living in rented houses or apartments. Thus, it was not surprising that fewer immigrants in both the survey and the interviews reported participation in informal learning about house maintenance and renovation. This finding is consistent with other Canadian studies on immigration such as the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (see Schellenberg & Maheux, 2007). Both my research and the survey demonstrate that informal learning in household work is influenced by gender, ethnicity, and immigration. Furthermore, my interviews with Chinese immigrants suggest that declined economic resources and the lack of social support after immigration contributed directly to the increased amount of household work and the learning involved in it. Thus, it is safe to conclude that housework and care work do not remain the same, but are constantly changing, throughout a person's lifetime, and that informal learning involved in such work is lifelong as well as lifewide.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my special thanks to Doug Hart and Milosh Raykov for helping me generate data for the WALL survey. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees for their valuable comments on my paper. My thanks also go to all the participants in my interviews for their support of my research work.

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