

Chinese-born seniors share views on elder abuse

November 27 2019, by Blake Eligh



Associate Professor Weiguo Zhang of the Department of Sociology. Credit: Drew Lesiuczok

A new study from U of T Mississauga highlights an important information gap that may leave some seniors in Canada vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

Social demographer Weiguo Zhang has spent two decades studying aging seniors in China. In 2016, the assistant professor of sociology embarked on a new series of studies to assess how aging Chinese immigrants were faring in Canada. Zhang sought to understand what this demographic knew about abuse and neglect. "Our knowledge of this issue is limited partly because the voices of older adults are often overlooked by policy makers and researchers," Zhang says, adding voices of ethnic groups are

particularly underrepresented. "It's important to understand what shapes their definitions to develop effective strategies and interventions."

According to 2011 figures, nearly 138,000 adults in Canada aged 65 and above identify as Chinese, accounting for 10.5 percent of the total Chinese-Canadian population. Of that segment, just three percent were born in Canada—the other 97 percent are immigrants.

Zhang sought to understand how the process of migration and aging might influence knowledge of elder abuse and neglect. Partnering with a Chinese seniors' association in the Greater Toronto Area, the researcher collected data from one-on-one interviews, observations and focus groups comprised of association members who immigrated to Canada after the 1990s.

Participants discussed various abuse that might be experienced by older Chinese immigrants, including emotional, verbal, physical and financial abuse, as well as neglect and violation of rights. The study found that understanding of elder abuse intersected with Western definitions in some areas, but not in others. "Emotional abuse was the most frequently mentioned category, with participants identifying certain words, gestures or actions seen as disrespectful in the Chinese community," Zhang says. "Some felt the line between arguments and verbal abuse was unclear. People seldom linked yelling, ridicule, scorn and making fun of older people as abuse."

Culture appears to play a role in these views. Study participants did not view certain behaviors as abusive, even though they might be considered so in Canada. For example, failure to respect personal autonomy is considered abusive in the West, however study participants felt that it was not abusive for family members to stop seniors from participating in risky behavior, such as addictive gambling, if the consequences might negatively impact the senior's well-being.

On the other hand, the actions of adult children who failed in their filial duty to older parents were seen as abusive or neglectful. "Sending people to nursing homes was perceived as abuse or neglect," says Zhang. "I found that older adults simply wanted their children to meet the socially defined obligations of caring for their parents. When they failed to do so, the children were perceived as unfilial, abusive, or neglectful. This perception was particularly true when parents felt they had done a great deal for their children and were having difficulty adjusting to the new country."

Participants also reported that they felt their status as immigrants and as dependents on adult children left them isolated and vulnerable to potential abuse. They cited [language barriers](#), access to transportation and gaps in understanding Canadian culture, banking systems and laws as reasons they felt they had to be careful about their own words and actions. "They came from China as retired doctors, professors and managers and suddenly become dependents," Zhang says. "Except for caring for their grandchildren and contributing to household chores, they said they encountered difficulties living an independent life."

The study also found that perceptions could change through interactions with peers and non-peers in the host society. Some of the participants reported changes in their own understanding of elder abuse. "Discussing these issues with others made them more aware of problems," Zhang says. "Some of them realized that abuse could be more than physical abuse or abandonment."

The elder [abuse](#) study is the first release in a series of studies by Zhang to assess aging Chinese seniors in Canada. Further research about active aging and elder care are currently under review. The study appeared in the October 2019 issues of the *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, and was supported by UTM's Research and Scholarly Activity Fund.

More information: Weiguo Zhang. Perceptions of elder abuse and neglect by older Chinese immigrants in Canada, *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/08946566.2019.1652718](https://doi.org/10.1080/08946566.2019.1652718)

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