Delivering Information Services to Elderly Chinese Americans

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Introduction

This study examines the specific information needs of elderly Chinese Americans and proposals for improved information services with greater cultural sensitivity. To provide effective information services for elderly Chinese Americans, it is important to analyze their cultural characteristics and investigate the problems and issues they face (Conaway, 2). First, multiple interviews were conducted to evaluate the role in which culture and language played in how people perceived their information needs and their decisions about where to access it. Second, an analysis of the findings highlighted how characteristics of Chinese culture led to the reliance of their children as information gatekeepers as oppose to formal sources of information such as information service providers. Third, this study proposes the creation of a new information system in the form of an Information Center. The findings suggest the need for a localized facility that accommodates the unique information needs of this group in a culturally sensitive environment to encourage access. Lastly, a number of recommendations will be made about how to improve the framework to deliver relevant information with a cultural context by public services agencies. As the population grows more diverse, these agencies will be required to establish links within the community to understand how culture is uniquely a human characteristic that influences how people perceive, search, and use information in the world around them.

Pertinent background information on the user group

Most elderly Chinese Americans hold a common cultural background that depends on their family members to support them. However, they apparently prefer to live near their children instead of with them as long as they can maintain independent living arrangements (Cox 1993). A study conducted to determine the unmet needs of Asian American seniors found that up to
80% of Asian American elders live alone. (Chan and Zhan 2000). However, as a result, many Asian American elders also feel isolated and lonely.

In Chinese culture, the elderly are highly valued for their life experience, knowledge, authority, and status (Cheung 1988). However, these cultural factors have resulted in public service agencies failing to fulfill the information needs of this user group. Operating on a framework in which the elderly are expected to come get information from the providers when needed conflicts with a culture where the elderly feel they have no need to address their information needs themselves since they have children who can fulfill the role.

Studies show that elderly Chinese Americans prefer to live in areas that are immersed with Chinese culture. For example, many elderly Chinese Americans prefer staying in Chinatown where they can speak their native language, eat food of their culture, and consult with Chinese doctors for medical needs (Conaway, 3). This factor is largely attributed to their connection and familiarity with their culture. Elderly Chinese Americans also fear of engaging an unfamiliar environment. In a study of elderly Chinese immigrants that settled in the Los Angeles area, many of the immigrants reported an inability to speak or understand English as one of their primary problems (Wu 1975). This obstacle makes it difficult for elderly Chinese Americans to assimilate into the culture. Furthermore, limited access to transportation also makes Chinatown a more efficient location to live in as all their needs can be addressed in close proximity.

**Statement of the problem**

According to the 2000 U.S. Census report, Seattle’s Chinese American population ranks within the top 15 cities across the U.S. Currently, there are 23,793 Chinese Americans living in Seattle, which make up 4.12% of the city’s total population (Census, 2000). Over the past decade,
Chinese Americans have experienced a significant growth in population by 47.5%. However, the population’s lower birth rate and high life expectancies in comparison to other ethnic/racial groups have resulted in a dramatic shift in the number of elderly. Chinese Americans are quickly becoming a significant portion of Seattle’s senior citizen population. Public service agencies recognize the significance of this population shift but have failed to provide the necessary services and programs to address the information needs this group. Limited research has been conducted on the specific information needs of elderly Chinese American’s in Seattle which is required to resolve this problem. This study will address this problem by analyzing the specific information needs of this group of people.

**Purpose of our study**

This exploratory study seeks to examine the information needs of elderly Chinese Americans in Seattle. In conjunction to their needs, this study will assess how culture differences influence their accessing of information. Ultimately, the findings from this study will help contribute to the design of a new information system that is culturally sensitive to the information needs and its’ delivery within preferred channels of information seeking.

**Limitations or constraints in the study**

There were many challenges during the interview process. It was found that many of the interviewees had difficulty comprehending the main concept of the questions and providing sufficient answers. The Chinese American elders had trouble identifying and explaining their information needs. As a result, the interviewers were required to analyze and make inferences about the elders’ information needs based on the responses.

Also, due to time constraints, only three short interviews were conducted. The short length of the interviews restricted the amount of information that could be obtained. This limited
our ability to obtain a thorough understanding of the information-seeking behavior of elderly Chinese Americans. Thus, his small sample of interviews may not accurately represent the views of the targeted population.

Results of Interview

I. Profile of elderly Chinese Americans

In this study, three elderly Chinese Americans were interviewed. Two of them were interviewed in a park in Chinatown. The third one, who is a landlord, was interviewed at home.

Age and Gender

This study sets age for elderly Chinese Americans at age 65 or over, with no control for gender. Of our interviewees, all are above 70; two are male and one is female.

Migration Status and Interpersonal communication

All interviewees have lived in Seattle for over ten years. They all have family in Seattle. All three contact and communicate with family members by visiting and making phone calls. One of them also uses e-mail. Though they do not live with their children, the frequency of speaking to family members is usually at least once a week among the respondents. Two of interviewees talk with their friends every day.

Language proficiency

The interviews were conducted in Chinese rather than in English. There is no single “Chinese language”. Major dialects include Cantonese (most commonly used in American Chinatowns), Mandarin (spoken by most Chinese from mainland China and Taiwan), Toishanese, Chiuchow, Shanghaiinese, Taiwanese, Hokkien, and Hakka. Of our three interviews, one is conducted in Cantonese, one in Mandarin, and another in Hokkien. Reading, one aspect of literacy, is an important factor in the study of information-seeking behavior (Charles, 1993). Our
interviews indicate that the three respondents most often read in Chinese. They prefer to communicate in Chinese during social activities. These findings underscore the importance of language in the procedural execution and analysis components of studies in information-seeking behavior of elderly Chinese Americans (Charles, 1993).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate by Respondents</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukien</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education level**

Education can reflect how these interviewees seek information. The three respondents have no college degrees. For two of the interviewees, the highest level of education achieved was high school. The highest level of education for the third interviewee was only elementary school.

**Employment Status and Types of Work**

None of our interviewees are currently employed. By understanding what types of work respondents have done in the past, we can better recognize how job skills in the past might influence information-seeking behavior. Types of work the interviewees have completed include restaurateur, cashier, and dry cleaner.

**Organization Membership**

Elderly Chinese Americans form connections within their communities in a variety of ways. Although our three interviewees are not formal members of any social groups or activities, they regularly attend informal organizations. For example, two of the respondents go to a park in
Chinatown to play Chinese chess with others on a regular basis.

**Technology**

It was anticipated that all elderly Chinese Americans are not proficient and confident with using a computer or internet. There was only one respondent proficient in using the computer and internet. However, she is not willing to get information that she needs by using the internet. She would rather ask her daughter than find the information by using a computer.

**Profile summary**

The profile of elderly Chinese American suggests that they

- Are born outside the United States and immigrate to the United States;
- Show a high incidence of interpersonal communication with family and friends;
- Have not received much formal education;
- Have retired and have more leisure time;
- Speak at least two dialects;
- Participate in informal organizations;
- Are not confident with using the computer;

**II. Information Needs**

**News**

From our interviews, Chinese American elders are interested in all kinds of news, like social news, astrology, global conflicts, environmental issues, politics, etc. Although they are older, they still keep up-to-date with current events around the world. This allows the elders to keep track of issues that may still affect them as well as provide topics of conversation to discuss with their children.

**Training**
Based on our interviews, Chinese American elders still seem to be learning new skills they are interested in, such as how to use a computer. The female interviewee responds that she often learns from her young friends or her daughter or her grandsons. Now she knows how to send and receive email, chat with her friends online, and watch TV online. She really appreciates these new abilities.

**Shopping**

The government provides a benefit to senior citizens the opportunity to buy discount products every Thursday in some supermarkets. As a result, the interviewees were very interested in shopping information, such as when stores have discounts on grand opening days. This information is just what senior citizens desire to know.

**Education**

Although senior citizens tend not to learn new skills, they still care about the information about education. This results from their children, grandsons, and granddaughters. The female interviewee in our study is still helping to look after children for her sons and daughters. The education of the third generation of interviewees’ families plays an important role in their lives.

**Benefit and Welfare**

The seniors we interviewed no longer work. Social security and welfare are their only source of income. Thus, these topics are important to seniors. Any policy adjustment by the government may have an influence on their lives. However, since they have to communicate with staff in government agencies who primarily only speak English, they must rely on their children to take care of any social security or welfare issues.

**Medicine & Hospital**

As people age, their health deteriorates gradually. Thus, the frequency of medical visits
increases as individuals get older. As a result, basic medical knowledge and hospital information are very useful to senior citizens. However, in our interviews, the respondents just let their children take care of information about doctors and hospitals. Every time they have to go to the hospital, their children bring them. One of our interviewees described that he would like to know more about Chinese medicine and how to stay healthy.

**Transportation**
All of our interviewees can access the bus. One interviewee can drive by herself. Sometimes the respondents are provided transportation by family members. From our interview, the main form of transportation for elder Chinese Americans is the bus.

**III. Information-Seeking Behavior**
From our interviews, we find that these information sources are considered to be useful.

**Friends & Family**
This is the most important way for senior citizens to get information. It is not easy for our interviewees to get information from mass media because of the language barrier. Daily communication with friends and family helps exchange information amongst one another. One of the interviewees communicates with her friends every night, although she meets them during the day, too.

**Newspaper**
Our interviewees barely know how to use computers to access the internet. They are used to accessing information by reading printed materials. Newspaper is the most important media of all paper information sources. They read the newspaper, in Chinese, every day. In our interviews, males respond that they are interested in the military and war. Our female interviewee responded that she prefers to read gossip news, society news, and shopping discount information. Both
genders indicated that they would like to read local news and cooking information.

**Magazines & Books**

Compared with newspapers, magazines and books are not as popular. The woman we interviewed reads Chinese magazine, Reader. One of the men we interviewed reads books about Chinese chess.

**Advertising**

In advertisements, our interviewees find discount information, coupons, government benefit and welfare information, information on newly-opened stores, etc.

**Television**

Most Chinese families in America seem to buy Chinese channels because their parents cannot understand English well enough to watch English channels. All the interviewees confirmed this. As a traditional media, television still has an important role in the lives of elderly Chinese Americans, although they live in Seattle.

**IV. Summary of Findings**

After our interviews, we find several features shared by these interviewees, which might also be the main features that distinguish the elderly Chinese Americans as a special user group.

**Sharing common background**

Our interviewees share a common background, such as immigration and education. They are all over 65, retired, and from mainland China. They immigrated to America with their families. One of them found a job in Seattle and receives a pension from her former employer, while the other two have not worked in America. These people had been living in China for about 50 years. However, they did not receive much formal education. From the 1930s to 1940s, China was suffering from World War II and civil war. Even in the 1950s, though gradually
recovering from wars, the whole country was still in hard times. Few people who grew up in those times had the support to attain higher education. It is not surprising that high school is the highest education level among our interviewees.

**Facing a language barrier**

As aforementioned, our interviewees did not receive much formal education when they were young. Before they immigrated to America, they hardly knew any English. Moreover, for Asian-American families that live in ethnic communities that reflect and “mirror” their culture, community support systems usually provide a cushion against the stresses of migration (Evelyn Lee and Matthew R. Mock, 2005). In our interviews, we find Chinatown works as such a cushion. Two of our interviewees live in Chinatown. Therefore, even after living in Seattle for more than ten years, they still know little English and face the language barrier when they are not in Chinatown. Comparatively, the one living outside of Chinatown has learned some English, but still not much. As the language barrier exists, when they choose newspapers or TV channels, they will choose those in Chinese rather than English. They are also frightened of those government agencies where receptionists will only speak English and quickly, even if they need information about welfare and insurance.

**Having more free time**

Another common characteristic of our interviewees is that they have all retired and so have time on their hands. It seems that elderly Chinese Americans use their time somewhat passively. Take the 82-year-old man of our interviewees as an example: every day, he will go to a little park in Chinatown at about nine o’clock to play Chinese chess. If it rains, he just stays home watching Chinese channels on television. Though he is an older man, he is very healthy and has a lot of energy. However, he has not found many other activities, even though he has
time and various interests such as Chinese chess, cooking, and Chinese medicine.

**Knowing little about how to use the computer and internet**

Though the computer and the internet are more and more popular in daily life, it seems that elderly Chinese-American know little about them. In our interviews, only the interviewee who has retired from an American organization has bought a computer and installed internet at home, while the other two do not own computers and cannot get access to computers. However, despite computer access, the interviewee knows little about how to use her computer to look for information she needs. Thus, when looking for information, the interviewees much prefer to ask their children and friends, or read printed materials.

**Feeling lonely**

All of our three interviewees live independently from their children. They rarely have anyone to talk with when they are at home. During our interviews, we find that they are quite willing to communicate with us, as we can speak the same language. In the interviews, it is hard to keep our interviewees following the procedures and answering our questions. Instead, they would like to know more about us and ask us questions which are not related to the interviews.

**Influenced by Confucianism and Xiao**

As one of the core theories in Chinese culture, Confucianism has influenced China for more than 2,000 years. Another common characteristic of our interviewees is that they share the same cultural background, influenced by Confucianism. In the Analects, Confucius said, “At fifty, understand fate; at sixty, hear anything comfortably; at seventy, follow your heart-mind’s desires without overstepping what is right.” All of our interviewees are above 70 years old; they think that as they have gotten to this stage of life, they should not push themselves to study English, in which they feel little interest. They just want to do whatever they like, such as playing Chinese
chess and getting together with friends.

*Xiao* is a Confucian concept that encompasses a range of requisite behaviors expected of children in regards to parents, including respect, obedience, loyalty, material provision, and physical care (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Though *Xiao* is not obeyed as strictly as what Confucius originally emphasized, it is still a moral rule in Chinese culture. Hence, the life of elderly Chinese people is comparatively more dependent on children. In our interviews, we find that certain more common information needs of seniors, such as welfare and insurance, are not shared by Chinese-American elders. They just have their children take care of these complicated issues. When they need information, they also treat their children as their most useful information source. Therefore, children are actually playing the role of gatekeeper in the lives of their parents.

**Public Service Agencies**

Public service agencies are also important sources for senior citizens to get information. It contains all types of information that are important to elderly Chinese people, such as information on medicine, insurance, welfare, transportation, immigration policy, etc. Public service agencies are the most accurate source for them to consult all kinds of information. As most elderly Chinese Americans do not know how to access the internet, calling to public services plays an more important role in their lives.

**ECA (Elderly Chinese American) Information System**

**What does it mean to be human?**

Culture is unique to humans in that it is not innate. The sets of principles and traditions among various ethnic/racial groups we see in the world are created by humans. Culture provides the framework which influence our way of life how we behave and what we believe in. Our
culture is reflected in what we wear, what we eat, and how we spend time. Animals can learn how to behave from each other but they can’t create values and beliefs.

This understanding led to the design of an information system that is more culturally sensitive. In the case of elderly Chinese Americans a revision in how to address their information needs and how it was delivered to them was vital based on their habits and values. The “come and get it” approach employed by current public service agencies is no longer sufficient.

I. Goal of the CAS Information System

In order to provide better information services to Chinese-American seniors, we plan to design an information system based on the findings summarized above. In this system, we will provide information to meet the needs of our user group. At the same time, we will take the delivery methods of information into consideration.

II. Information Category Included In CAS Information System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>Mainly about local news and global interesting news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>Information about sales in shops and kinds of coupons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Provide hometown recipes or easy made dishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Self-study materials on Chinese Chess, Computer, Mahjong and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Information about elderly health, medicine, and hospitals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare and Insurance</td>
<td>Information about what kind of welfare and insurance are fit with Chinese-American seniors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. CAS - Information Delivery Methods

Information Center

Though internet develops fast and becomes more popular, it is not easy for elderly Chinese Americans to effectively find information they need. Since the interviewees in our study have much willingness to communicate with others, physical centers near bus stops providing face-to-face information services might best address their information needs. Information desks in the centers, providing service in Chinese, will also work as the new gatekeepers in the elders’ lives, instead of friends or family members. Since elders have a lot of free time on their hands, workshops on topics elders are interested in might also be very beneficial to their lives. The center may also have activity rooms where elders can play Chinese chess or mahjong together. Activity rooms can work as a kind of informal organization to attract more elders.

Information Letters and Newspapers

Information letter and newspaper in Chinese will also be an effective way to update information to elders. Our interviewees all have a habit to read newspapers. Two of them subscribe to newspapers and one interviewee just takes newspapers in front of the supermarket.
every time she go shopping.

**Information Website**

Since in Chinese culture, children should obey Xiao. Therefore, children are in fact gatekeepers of their parents. Therefore, we will design an information website on welfare or insurance specially for Chinese American elders. Chinese American’ gatekeepers, their children, will save time to get information for their parents in the website.

**Information TV program**

When at home, especially for seniors living separately from their children, elderly Chinese Americans feel more lonely. Television programs made by the information center may provide the elderly with some entertainment at home. The programs could cover topics such as cooking and health. Also, through watching the same TV programs made by the information center, they can not only have common topics to talk each other but also be congregated to form a similar hobby group so that they do not feel lonely.

**Recommendations**

There are already so many kinds of service centers available for senior citizens currently. However, these centers such as church communities and silver town communities which provide services free for the elderly, failed to understand deeply about what is really wanted by elderly.

Public service agencies must forge closer links with the community. Conducting an analysis of the elderly Chinese American will require a more personal touch and should be undertaken by someone that is familiar with the culture. In terms of analyzing physical information needs such as health, welfare, housing, public service agencies should not limit the scope of such findings and consider that they satisfy most of the user’s needs. A wider range of information needs must be considered, primarily mental types of information needs. These types
of needs are often not clearly expressed which is why a closer focus especially when interviewing the sample population is needed. Culture is also a vital component that must be incorporated throughout the analysis, design, and implementation of the information service. Agencies must have an understanding of the cultural characteristics in order to be able to address the unique needs brought on by culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we find that elderly Chinese Americans represent an important social group with challenging obstacles to overcome to fulfill their information needs. There are two major problems that prevent elderly Chinese Americans from accessing information. One problem is the language barrier. The language barrier limits their ability to read the newspapers, watch TV or utilize public services in Seattle, which are all useful sources of information. Another problem is the lack of computer skills. As time passes, more and more information and services are being provided through the internet. An adequate understanding of computers and the internet will allow novice computer users to a wealth of information.

To overcome these obstacles, a revision of the current framework which requires the elderly Chinese Americans to come get the information themselves must be made. Establishing a cultural context will be necessary in order to understand not just the information needs of the elderly but the unique needs that transpire from that of the Chinese culture. Having a cultural awareness of this user group will help clarify what their information needs are but also the format in which they prefer to have their information delivered in. Both of these factors as just as important to the other and is required to be successful in satisfying the information needs of the user.
Annotated bibliography


This article discusses methodological issues in cross-cultural studies of diverse communities, including language problems, data collection and analysis, sample size, and dissemination of findings. A study of the information-seeking behavior of ethnolinguistic gatekeepers in several communities in California is described. This was very helpful book for understanding gatekeeper study.


In this qualitative study the author examines the information seeking behavior of older adults and asks whether the information sources used by participants vary with the role they are performing; whether “young” seniors just entering retirement seek information differently than the “oldest” old; and whether seniors living independently seek information differently than those who live in an institutional setting. Findings related to computer use indicated that it is important when discussing older adults to distinguish between different stages of older age. This is good result related with our topic that shows the elderly’s behavior about computer use.


This exploratory and descriptive study examines the information needs of elderly Chinese immigrants, implications for improved information services, and the value of having baseline data on the topic. The information needs of elderly Chinese immigrants were diverse. News and
information about health issues, hobbies or interests, cultural or religious activities were the most often identified information needs. The most frequently used information sources were newspapers, television, and family or friends. This is consist of our interview schedule and result convinced.


This paper examines the elements of user studies and presents them as unified concepts within a model of information-seeking behavior. Definitions of information-seeking behavior, information needs, information gathering, information giving, and source preference are discussed. This is good basic reading for informant who needs to understand people’s information need and their behaviors.


The article attempts to examine the information needs of retired people and the implication it has for information providers. The author describes three main ideas. The first idea is hard to access the findings studies which have shown out on the information needs of retired people. The second idea is to think about what is known about ‘newly retired people’. Last is, on the basis of that knowledge, to consider the implications for information providers. This shows that what specific parts informant should focus on as elder’s need such as not only concentrated in limited by pension housing, or health care but also considered about their mind of loneliness.

This article reports that senior citizens are increasingly seeking answers to their medical questions. They are aware of Internet resources, but need assistance in locating authoritative and reliable electronic-based health information. The project which this study introduced commenced are very helpful to our information center idea since this paper emphasizes planning, acquiring funding, progress to date, and initial experiences in organizing and establishing a unique community-based library service. This is very useful for the future paper will cover the project outcomes and results.


This article examines that the service use for Asian/Chinese American senior is not uniformly low, and variations in need and use do occur within the Asian/Chinese senior population. Findings from this study suggest that research about service need and use by minority seniors may be helped through detailed analyses by sub-population, and through the use of perceptions of service availability and accessibility and service source preference. These results of the article help to understand of information need of senior Chinese and to reconsider present services’ weakness.


This study reported a qualitative analysis of health-seeking behaviors of community-dwelling elderly Chinese Americans on the influences of family network, cultural values, and immigrant experience in their use of health resources. Barriers to health care, pathway of health care, and adaptation of health care by use of self-treatment and Eastern and Western medicines
were also examined. Their residence in community senior housing and participation in the Chinatown Service Center’s programs showed that they were more successful in leading an independent life from their children than many of their peers and predecessors.

1.10 **2007 American Community Survey for Chinese census in Washington State.**

This is about American Census result including Chinese demographic in WA. This shows 2007 Census of Chinese in WA. This data makes motivation of this study and suggest why this Chinese senior study is important to consider presently.


Ethnicity & Family Therapy is focused on cross-culture research to give family therapists a greater understanding of the histories, values, and expectations of the diverse families and individuals. The overview of Asian families in this book gives a thorough cultural assessment of Asians. And it reminds us of the importance of the neighborhood immigrants are living in cross-culture studies.


This paper mainly explores the gendered familial caregiving in urban China within the context of economic reforms and the continued cultural influence of xiao (filial piety). And the paper gives a clear definition of xiao which is helpful in the culture influence research.