

CHAPTER 26

The Social and Cultural Context of Adaptive Aging by Southeast Asian Elders

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Southeast Asian elders evacuated during the fall of Saigon in 1975, or who waited years in refugee camps before being reunited with their families in America, experience aging in stark contrast to their lifelong anticipation and positive expectations for the “Golden Years.” These elderly Southeast Asians must cope with their rapidly acculturating younger family members, while taking on different roles and expectations in a confusing and often frightening culture that’s divergent from and foreign to Southeast Asian cultures.

The social and cultural context of adaptive aging illustrates how universal features of growing older are woven into the rich cultural heritages that are colored by the unique life experiences of the Southeast Asian elderly (i.e., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or the Hmong).

These various Southeast Asian groups differ dramatically by social class, Westernization, urbanization, and migration circumstances. Such differences among the ethnic groups that comprise the Southeast Asian population systematically influence adaptive aging. The Vietnamese population in the United States, for example, has been exposed to Westernization by the French and Catholicism (1857–1955) and then by Americans (during the Vietnam War). It appears that this Westernization was more readily adopted by the upper class and highly educated Vietnamese, as evidenced by their fluency with French and later English (Gold 1992). These Western cultural skills and willingness to adopt European and American culture makes the cultural transition to the United States less earth shattering (Portes and Rumbaut, 1990). Vietnamese evacuated prior to and during the fall of Saigon were more highly educated and Westernized than the Vietnamese who came in the late 1970s.

In mid-1975, the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge seized control of Cambodia. Out of a total population of 7 million people living in Cambodia, roughly 1 to 3 million died under the

Khmer Rouge regime. They were executed, starved or died of diseases (Algin and Hood 1987). The major issue for many Cambodian people living in America is the cultural shock between traditional Cambodian and American cultures, coupled with extreme family losses and guilt experienced by survivors of the Khmer Rouge holocaust (Mollica et al. 1992). Cambodians and lowland Laotians are diverse in their urbanization, yet are less Westernized than the Vietnamese, with one-third being illiterate in their native languages (Le 1993). The Cambodian or Khmer people have strong cultural ties to Buddhism and this influences their aging.

The Hmong are an horticultural and fishing people who live as migratory tribal clans in the highlands of Southeast Asia. Those who settled in the United States are largely from Laos and the majority practice animism or ancestor worship. Large groups adopted Christianity after being resettled in the United States by church-sponsored resettlement agencies (Le 1993). These Hmong came to America to escape the wrath of communist governments because they helped the CIA during the Vietnam War and feared retaliation. The Hmong are the least Westernized of Southeast Asian populations discussed here and appear to have the most difficult adjustment to urban America (i.e., highest unemployment rates, poverty rates, illiteracy, poorer school performance). The Hmong had the lowest level of formal education in the homeland followed by Cambodian and Lao peoples (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). These rates of literacy in the homeland are inversely related to level of English-speaking ability and Westernization.

A LIFE SPAN DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

A life span development approach helps us understand the complex tapestry of factors that contribute to coping and adaptation by Southeast Asian elders living in Western societies (Yee forthcoming a). From this perspective, knowledge of a culture's *age-related* or *normative expectations* provides information about the cultural context in which Southeast Asian elders must adapt.

Personal characteristics could be adaptive tools such as English abilities, or hindrances to positive adaptation in old age such as cultural values, beliefs and behaviors that oppose those that are considered normative in the United States. Lifecourse issues such as life stage, age at immigration and acculturation opportunities all contribute to adjustment and aging of these migrants. For instance, migrating to America in your thirties and growing older here for twenty years prior to being designated "old" by society will have significantly different outcomes compared to migrating when you're already considered old. The former circumstance allows the individual to slowly adapt to American age norms and culture, while the latter case instantaneously puts the elderly Southeast Asian in a foreign environment and sets him or her up for culture shock (Yee 1989; 1992).

Personal history, or life experiences, systematically impacts survival skills and adaptation to American life in predictable ways. For instance, the high prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among these refugees is related to the horrors of war experienced during the Cambodian holocaust, or the rapes of Vietnamese women during pirates' attacks as their families attempted to escape persecution in small, leaky vessels (Abe, Zane and Chun 1994; Chester and Holtan 1992). The effects of PTSD can occur immediately or years after the traumatic event. Depression, anger, psychological

and family conflict have been identified as major after-effects of PTSD among many Cambodians and other Southeast Asians exposed to extreme trauma (Mollica 1992; Westermeyer 1986). The current environmental context such as cultural and social supports, economic and social opportunities, as well as various stressors will have implications for adaptation and coping by Southeast Asian elders. All these factors contribute to a variety of adaptational and coping strategies adopted by them.

For Southeast Asian elderly, whose spheres of influence have shrunk after migrating to America, maintenance and reconstruction of the extended family is central to adaptive aging (Yee 1989). Cultural gaps between expectations and behaviors to carry out age, gender, work and family roles are the cause of much distress among Southeast Asian elders in this society.

A large majority of older Southeast Asian refugees migrated with their families or have joined their relatives through the family reunification program.¹ As a result; very few Southeast Asian elders have no relatives in the United States. However, the large extended family system that is normative in countries such as Vietnam has large holes in America as perceived by elderly in this country (Yee 1989, 1992). Family reunification is the major goal and focus of many Southeast Asian families, especially for family elders (Yee 1989; Gelfand and Yee 1992).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the cultural transformation of the Southeast Asian family as seen from the perspective of the elderly generation. This story is only beginning to be told, but the elderly identify family changes in age and gender roles and intergenerational relationships after migration to be most important. Four case studies will be used to illustrate a variety of coping and adaptational strategies. These four cases were collected as examples for mental health crisis intervention workshops conducted by the author over the last twenty years.

AGE ROLES

A consideration of age-related or normative life expectations, and their social roles, is critical to our understanding of coping and adaptation by Southeast Asian elders. Attaining cross-cultural competence may require that people reorient timing of the stages in the life cycle. Many middle-aged Southeast Asians are surprised to find that they are not considered elderly by American society. For example, among traditional Hmong, a young grandparent at the age of 35, whose children were capable of taking over economic responsibility for the family, could retire. In the United States, age 35 would generally not be an acceptable time of life to retire (Yee 1992).

A factor shaping such age-role dilemmas in this country, especially for the more traditional members of these Southeast Asian groups, is the strong influence of Confucianism (Liem and Kehmeier 1979). According to Confucius, the Cult of Ancestors is demonstrated by filial piety and respect for family elders. Age roles within society and the family were hierarchical with strict rules for social interaction. The child was to have total obedience to the father and to venerate him, as was a woman to her father and then her husband. However, a major psychological discrepancy for Southeast Asian families is between the traditional roles of elders in their homeland versus those available to them in the United States (Weinstein-Shr and Henkin 1991).

Weinstein-Shr and Henkin (1991) also found that elderly Southeast Asians lack English-language skills and adequate knowledge of American culture. This decreases their credibility when advising younger family members about important decisions because they find it difficult to deal with the outside, English-speaking world. As younger family members take on primary roles as family interpreters and gatekeepers to and from American institutions, such as the school or legal system, elders lose some of their leadership roles in the eyes of the family and larger American society (Yee forthcoming a). The Southeast Asian elder becomes increasingly dependent upon younger family members for dealing with society and accessing basic survival needs.

Weinstein-Shr and Henkin (1991) further recognize that while Southeast Asian elders try to maintain their role as transmitters of traditional values and customs, grandchildren often reject their cultural heritage in order to lessen their conflicts during acculturation to American ways. The majority of Southeast Asian families are still struggling to survive in work and educational arenas in order to support dependent family members (Le 1993). This translates into very little time left over to show respect toward family elders in the traditional or expected manner (Detzner 1992). The negative consequences of such factors are seen in the tragic case of Mrs. Song and her family.

Mrs. Song: A Case of Negative Adaptation and Elder Abuse

Mrs. Song came to this country at the age of 63, from a Cambodian refugee camp, to be with her only living adult son and his family. Her son, his wife and her grandchildren had been in this country almost fifteen years. One grandson had been born in Cambodia and the other grandchildren were born in this country. Mrs. Song survived the Killing Fields and refugee camps for about ten years and came to this country expecting the streets to be lined with gold. She clearly had unrealistic expectations about life in America. Upon arrival, Mrs. Song discovered that she would not be living with her son and grandchildren. Her son had not been able to find work, and the family was surviving on welfare and living in a two-bedroom apartment. Mrs. Song was sent to live in another apartment by herself. Heated family discussions occurred over expectations that she provide child care and household tasks for her son's family, but she was not welcome to live with them. Apparently, Mrs. Song's daughter-in-law did not accept Mrs. Song into her home because she had become accustomed to an independent lifestyle, free from the traditional Cambodian expectations of providing care to a live-in mother-in-law. Mrs. Song expected that her son would provide support until she died and was disturbed with her situation. Her depression and isolation deepened when she got into a fight with her 15-year-old, American-born granddaughter. The argument was over this girl's refusal to use respectful Cambodian terms with her elders and for not being obedient to her grandmother. Mrs. Song was upset with her son and his wife for not educating her grandchildren about filial piety and respect for their elders, and also not expressing their own filial piety by making arrangements so that she could live in their home. Mrs. Song contemplated suicide as the only solution to her situation. She was isolated in her apartment because there were no other persons who spoke Cambodian within walking distance and she feared leaving her residence due to the high crime in her area. Mrs. Song had a massive stroke, was hospitalized, but never recovered use of her entire right side and left leg. Her daughter-in-law, who was forced to care for Mrs. Song around the clock, deeply resented this caregiving responsibility. Mrs. Song was found dead with trauma to

her head, and authorities charged her daughter-in-law with elder abuse. Although the case of Mrs. Song ended tragically, the Southeast Asian elderly can draw upon strengths from the culture of origin and provide cultural continuity from the past to the future in the new country.

Elderly Southeast Asians may provide child care assistance and perform household duties for their families (Detzner 1992), although they no longer can offer financial support, land or other material goods as they would have in their homelands. The refugee process strips away these elders' resources that are a source of high status and inheritance in the family. More importantly, the sage role of family elders is seldom available. Southeast Asian elders can no longer provide advice and lend their wisdom because it is derived from traditional culture, tied to the homeland, and not perceived by younger family members to be relevant to life in America. Older refugees find that they are increasingly dependent upon their children and grandchildren for help rather than the reverse (Lew 1991; see review in Yee 1995). This role reversal between the elder and young generation in family authority and access to cultural knowledge or to mainstream institutions has created numerous family conflicts in the Southeast Asian family and communities (Yee forthcoming b).

Research, however, shows an increased interest and appreciation of cultural roots during the late adolescent or young adult period by later generations of Asian Americans (see review in Kitano and Daniels 1988; and Sue and Sue 1990). A quest for one's cultural roots typically occurs during critical periods of the life span when a search for and consolidation of one's identity takes place. During this phase, the family elders may be called upon to help younger family members explore, discover and appreciate their cultural heritage and family history (Lynch, Detzner and Eicher 1995).

Mr. Anh: A Case of Positive Adaptation and Community Treasure

Mr. Anh, a former businessman turned General during the Vietnam War came to the United States during the fall of Saigon at 61 years of age. He was relocated to Fort Chaffee and was resettled by Catholic charities in a southern city in 1975. After working in grocery stores owned by those who helped resettle him in America, he pooled his money with other Vietnamese refugees to start his own Vietnamese grocery store. He was quite successful in his grocery store business and worked to help resettle other Vietnamese refugees who came after him. He enlisted the help of the mental health agencies in the city, and started a Vietnamese mutual aid society² to provide crisis intervention, vocational training and English as a second language with cultural orientation courses. This mutual aid society provided such innovative services for Southeast Asian refugees that agencies in other states invited him to provide training in their areas.

Mr. Anh retired from directing the Vietnamese mutual aid society at age 73, and moved to another city so that he and his wife could live with his son's family. Mr. Anh currently lives with his wife, son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. In his retirement, Mr. Anh started a senior citizens' center with nutrition services; is editor of a Vietnamese-language newspaper; helps care for his grandchildren; and takes an active interest in the political activities in Vietnam. A major contributor to Mr. Anh's successful adaptation is his dedication to helping others cope with life in America. He believes this is best accomplished by maintaining some important aspects of Vietnamese culture, while

encouraging youth to cultivate the tools that they need to survive and be successful in America.

INTERGENERATIONAL ROLES

T. V. Tran (1991) found that elderly refugees who lived within the nuclear or extended family had a better sense of social adjustment than those living outside the family context. However, when these elderly were living with their families in overcrowded conditions or with children under the age of sixteen, there was a negative impact on their quality of life. Heightened intergenerational conflicts arose because, living under the same roof, the least-aculturated grandparents and very Americanized grandchildren found daily opportunities to express their vast cultural differences. The cultural schism grows as grandchildren approach early adolescence, a time in the life cycle when aspects of the self, such as individualism and identity, begin to be systematically explored and expressed. This growing acculturation gap leads to greater conflicts between the generations and reduces elderly satisfaction with their new life, since general life satisfaction for Southeast Asian refugee elders is closely tied to satisfaction with family relationships (Yee forthcoming b). Older Southeast Asians have been shown to have poorer adjustment than their younger counterparts because elders experience greater losses and fewer gains after migrating to America than younger family members (Yee and Thu 1987).

In a recent study, Rick and Forward (1992) examined the relationship between the level of acculturation and perceived intergenerational differences among high school students from Hmong refugee families. Not surprisingly, these authors found that students perceived themselves to be more acculturated than their parents. Higher acculturation was associated with higher perceived intergenerational differences. Rick and Forward examined three specific values and behaviors concerning the elderly: consulting the elderly on life issues, taking care of the elderly, and respecting the elderly. They found that basic values concerning relationships with family elders may be quite resistant to change, but how these younger Southeast Asians express those values may shift. For instance, how one takes care of and respects the elderly may mean providing financial support, but not total obedience. Changes in values concerning decisions about the timing of marriage, ideal family size, place of residence or appropriate dress appear to be more readily adopted. Values supporting filial piety are maintained over generations, but what may shift is how cultural values are expressed and translated into actual behaviors.

Mr. Vang: A Case of Negative Adaptation and Shame

Mr. Vang was a sixty-year-old Hmong father who reacted with extraordinary violence to cultural clashes often experienced by many Southeast Asian families transplanted in Western countries. He felt disgraced over his seventeen-year-old daughter's failed marriage plans when her fiancé rejected her because she was too Americanized. It was her parents' duty to socialize her to be a proper Hmong wife and this rejection publicly shamed the family. Mr. Vang was very depressed by his life in America. He was particularly upset by the lack of Hmong cultural training displayed by his own children, still economically dependent on him, and by the financial difficulties his unemployment

created for the household. As the elder male in the family, he was not able to fulfill his primary and most important role as breadwinner. He blamed his wife for not properly raising their children, who, like other young people in America, wanted to date and marry whomever they pleased rather than defer to their family's wishes. Mr. Vang hacked his fifty-four-year-old wife to death, sliced off another unmarried daughter's hand and then ended his misery. He committed suicide by plunging a knife into his own heart. In this case, cumulative stressors related to economic difficulties, cultural clashes over Hmong traditions regarding proper socialization of family members and the creation of public humiliation led to this tragic incident.

GENDER ROLES

Southeast Asian elders must cope with gender-role differences as practiced in the homeland versus the United States. Even before migration, traditional gender roles were changing in Southeast Asia as a result of the Vietnam War. Military-aged men were away fighting the war and their spouses were solely responsible for tasks normally divided along gender lines. Once they came to this country, changes in traditional gender roles sped up and became more dramatic. This was especially true for young adult and middle-aged Southeast Asian women, for whom there were more work opportunities. This was the case for these women because their employment expectations fit with the lower-status jobs that were among the few opportunities open to persons with little English skills or scant transferable educational credentials. Age bias against older men and women coupled with poor English skills created the situation in which few elders found gainful employment outside the home. Many middle-aged women and younger Southeast Asians of both genders became family breadwinners. This was a radical change from the traditional role of male elders as breadwinners of the family.

Mrs. Nguyen: A Positive Adaptation and Family Breadwinner

Mrs. Nguyen is a fifty-six-year-old Vietnamese female who came to the United States in 1976 at the age of 36. She was a former schoolteacher in Vietnam and was working as a legal secretary in America. Her husband worked as a volunteer and then obtained a job in a mutual aid society providing orientation classes. For about four years, Mrs. Nguyen was the sole breadwinner of her family, supporting her husband and two sons. She worked for about ten years in the office of a lawyer providing immigration and refugee legal services. While working as a legal secretary she became interested in going to law school and becoming a specialist in immigration law. Mrs. Nguyen and her husband supported both sons through undergraduate school and then law school. Once both sons were out of graduate school and established in their careers, Mrs. Nguyen went to law school at night. Eighteen years after coming from Vietnam, Mrs. Nguyen received her legal degree at the age of 54. She is currently practicing immigration law and assisting other refugees and immigrants. She looks back at her life and says that her success is attributable to her supportive family and especially her husband, who found ways to accommodate to her dreams. It appears that Mrs. Nguyen's successful adaptation to the second half of life was due to her determination to help others, an ability to successfully adapt to America by learning excellent English skills, and the support of her husband. He did not rigidly adhere to traditional Vietnamese spousal roles, but encouraged his wife to

fulfill her career goals and acquire skills to help insure survival and the success of their family. Mr. Nguyen gave total support to his wife when he realized that he was not going to recapture his former status as a university professor in Vietnam, and that his wife would be able to more successfully support the family.

The literature on adaptation by refugee populations suggests that there may be a gender (by age or generation) difference in short-versus long-term adaptation (see review in Yee 1989). As compared to males, short-term adaptation to this country—which may be as long as fifteen years after migration—can be more positive for middle-aged and elderly Southeast Asian women. Several investigators have attributed this gender difference to a continuity of females' roles from the homeland to America (Yee 1989; Detzner 1992; Berresi 1991). Female refugee elders perform important but not necessarily honorific roles in the family, such as household tasks and child care. However, male Southeast Asian elders, especially older men, have less clear functional or high-status roles in the family in the new country. This latter pattern is especially evident for Cambodian men (Detzner 1992).

The ability of elder Southeast Asians to perform work roles outside the family also shows a gender-by-generation pattern (see review in Yee forthcoming a). There is an expansion of work roles for both young adults and young middle aged women, and this generalization is especially true for the Vietnamese group. The challenge is that these refugees must also take on roles and responsibilities they had not anticipated for this time of the life cycle.

By contrast, there is a constriction of work and family roles for older Southeast Asian men, especially those who had high-status educational and occupational roles in their home countries. Many also experience significant downward mobility. Migration has frequently created the permanent loss of high-status work, family and community roles. Their job skills may not easily be transferred to the United States, employers may be unwilling to employ an older worker, or their lack of English skills can form an insurmountable barrier to passing American credentialing tests (Yee forthcoming b). After struggling for many years, these elderly refugees may resign themselves to putting all their hope in the younger generation, and give the responsibility to achieve their lifelong goals to their children.

An extreme example of failed expectations is the situation of elderly Vietnamese males previously incarcerated in Vietnam. These prison detainees may be predicted to be at high risk for problematic adaptation to aging in the United States. Such elderly males have lived as long as twenty years apart from their families in Vietnam, and were reunited as part of negotiations with the United States in 1989. While they have spent these many years in Vietnamese jails, their wives and children have rapidly acculturated to American ways, and they may have idealized their former and future lives with their families. The nightmare of these Vietnamese detainees' family reunification process is reported anecdotally by organizations helping former prison detainees.³

The pattern for long-term adaptation of Southeast Asian elders is yet to be determined empirically, but there are indications that the long-term adaptation of females may not be as rosy. Middle-aged and elderly Southeast Asian women are integrated within the family in the short term. These women provide household and child care services in order to free younger family members from these responsibilities so they can work one or two jobs and perhaps go to school to insure economic survival of the family. While these elderly

refugee women are assisting younger members of the family to succeed in America, they themselves are isolated at home and not learning new language skills or crucial knowledge about American society (Tran 1988). After the family has passed through the stage of meeting basic survival needs, these elderly women may find that they are strangers in their own families and their new country. In other words, elders frequently lack the opportunities to experience exposure to American life that their adult children and grandchildren acquired in school and work settings (J. Anderson et al. 1993; Dinh, Sarason and Sarason 1994). Nevertheless, a recent study has shown that given the opportunity, even quite traditional Southeast Asian elders would adopt more Western help-seeking behaviors and acquire the skills necessary to successfully cope with aging in this country (Chung, Lin and Lin 1994).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Elders have a place and role in the Southeast Asian family. Yet the exact nature of these roles is evolving, and determined in a unique manner by which the elderly person adapts to his or her social and cultural context. Life offers both danger and opportunity. The cases of Mr. Anh and Mrs. Nguyen demonstrate that refugee experiences in middle age and old age can be turned into opportunities for growth and development during the later years. As illustrated by these two examples and supported by many other elderly who have successfully adapted to America, acculturation during old age does not mean totally giving up one's traditional culture, values and behaviors. Rather, being adaptive in the later years requires the ability to learn new things, compromise and adopt features of a new culture to enable elderly persons and their families to succeed.

The cases of Mrs. Song and Mr. Vang highlight instances of poor adjustment and even tragic response to the refugee experience in the United States. Common features of nonadaptive aging among Southeast Asian elders are fewer personal and social resources, rigid adherence to an idealized ancestral culture and the lack of flexibility when faced with changing cultural demands.

There are indications that elderly Southeast Asian females may experience increasing difficulty as their families become highly acculturated, yet they, while performing family obligations, remain extremely isolated from mainstream America (Yee forthcoming b; Lynch, Detzner and Eicher 1995). The high suicide rate among elderly Asian women, especially those who came here from China, is particularly noteworthy and provides a glimpse of what may lay ahead for older Southeast Asian women (Yu 1992).

The interaction of ethnicity, culture and aging is a dynamic process (Baressi 1992). It is *not* unidirectional and uni-dimensional, but is bidirectional and multi-dimensional. The migrant from another culture is touched and transformed by American culture although its extent varies across individuals and life contexts. Something not as well recognized, but necessarily true, is that the American culture is forever changed by its association with these new Americans. Our great nation has derived its strength, creativity and vision from contributions made by new Americans; let us not forget and appreciate this diversity.

NOTES

1. The refugee family reunification section of the immigration law allowed parents, siblings and children to join their family members in the United States. The numbers of immigrants coming from Southeast Asian countries were excluded from the caps mandated by Congress from this area of the globe. This in effect pulled about 800,000 Southeast Asians to the United States as refugees and later as immigrants (Le 1993). Immigration law and migration flows significantly influence the fabric of aging in America (Gelfand and Yee 1992).

2. A voluntary organization of refugees or immigrant individuals who help their compatriots through goods, services or loans (Khoa and Bui 1985).

3. These issues were discussed during the Hogg Foundation Refugee Mental Health conference in Dallas, Texas, 1991. Discussion highlighted the extremely unrealistic expectations held by Vietnamese prison detainees regarding their rosy futures in America. These prison detainees had idealized memories of their family members from the time of their incarceration. Unfortunately, twenty years may have passed and their families had acculturated to American ways. Wives were no longer young, obedient and dependent upon their husbands. Children were very distant because they didn't know their fathers. Children had developed American ways and suddenly, their fathers appeared, wanting to go back in time twenty years, to a different place. Family conflicts abounded.