

Chinese Females in America and Taiwan Pondering Divorce: Counseling Methods

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Compared with other ancient cultures, Chinese civilization is the oldest still extant in the world today. Its unique ethos has affected the majority of other Asian countries, including Japan, Korea, Vietnam, etc. In addition, according to the most recent U.S Census statistics, Chinese-Americans are the largest Asian group residing in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). In this rapidly globalizing world, it is crucial for counselors to be both multicultural and culturally competent when working with female Chinese immigrants facing divorce.

The rising trend of divorce is a worldwide phenomenon. Throughout Western societies, due to the ubiquity of divorce, some scholars have suggested that divorce and remarriage be considered part of the normative family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). However, for the majority of Chinese, divorce, and separation are still viewed negatively. One primary reason is the influence of Confucianism.

Considered by many to be “the” philosopher in Asian civilization, Confucius’ ideas regarding human relationships still reign supreme for most Chinese. More specifically, Confucius defined the five basic human relationships in the classic, *Book of Rites*, and in descending order of importance are: ruler-minister, father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and friend-friend. Among these, three were based on family structure. Confucius repeatedly addressed the importance of family in order to maintain the social order (Chen, 1973).

In addition, in Chinese, the word “nation” consists of two main pictographs, which are “guo” and “jia.” They mean country and family, respectively. After reading Confucius, the argument could be made that society, at least one that is stable and productive, is built upon familial relationships; thus, family is the core of Chinese society (Chen, 1973). Anything capable of “destroying” the harmony and stability of family structure was to be avoided at all costs, especially divorce. In fact, for millennia, it was forbidden for wives to divorce and consequently, they remained with physically and emotionally abusive men. While societal change is slow, during the past few decades, both Taiwan and China have become more politically liberal. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of Interior (2005), for every two Chinese couples that marry, one will likely seek a divorce in the future; hence, the divorce rate has dramatically increased. The numbers tell the truth; divorce has doubled since the Ministry’s last report (1995).

In a society that has long placed great importance on family and marriage, Taiwan’s divorce rate has surprised a number of experts. In fact, Taiwan has the highest divorce rate for industrialized countries in Asia. Several reasons exist for this phenomenon, including extra-marital relationships, economic growth, marriage migrants, familial influence, and greater education.

Reasons for Increased Divorce

Rapid Economic Growth

As Taiwan’s economy grew during the 1970s, men and women emphasized their career over all else. This caused myriad problems for many married couples since their roles, as spouses, parents, and primary

providers, had been predetermined over 2,500 years earlier when Confucius penned his famous “Analects.” Furthermore, women became better educated, and began enjoying the same opportunities as men, in terms of career development. In addition, a great number of abused wives decided to leave their husbands, feeling that they no longer needed someone “strong” to watch over them.

Individualism

During the past two decades, Taiwan’s spectacular economic growth has allowed it to become one of the richest countries in Asia, with a standard of living index rivaling, and surpassing, many Western countries. As a result, Taiwan became more Americanized, and the once sacrosanct view of what a traditional, Chinese family should look like changed. Atwood & Conway (2004) stated that when Chinese individuals made important decisions concerning their lives (such as marriage), they tended to consider how their family would perceive it. Likewise, descriptive adjectives like “honor” “shame” and “save-face” are key terms used by Chinese when measuring their family’s opinion regarding any major decision. It is common for individuals to say, “I don’t want to lose my family’s face,” or “He/She did that to honor their family.”

The newer generation, however, sees things differently. After being exposed to Western culture for years, individualism is viewed as superior to the millennial, traditional family view; thus, the idea of individualism has replaced the importance of family. Today, many younger Chinese are less willing to sacrifice their personal desires for family---a situation completely at loggerheads with their parents and grandparents beliefs. Instead of ruminating upon how a decision could affect the family, younger Chinese focus on what is best for them, not their relatives.

Equal Rights for Women.

Recently, several laws were passed giving Taiwanese women more independence. For instance, women staying at home and taking care of the family could be classified as full time housekeepers, and had the right to receive wages from her husband. For many years, once a couple split-up, the husband gained custody of the children, regardless of the reasons for the divorce. During 2004, the Taiwanese legislature mandated that, unless just cause could be demonstrated, fathers would no longer automatically be given the children. Now that there is legal protection, women no longer need tolerate “unfair” or “difficult” situations within their family, and as a matter of equity, end the marriage. For decades, women tolerated

shabby treatment since they had no legal recourse, but now, due to the liberalizing of marriage, women can sue for divorce on a number of grounds.

Extra-Marital Relationships increasing

One rationale concerning the propensity for men to engage in extramarital affairs is due to the large number of Taiwanese employers and employees stationed in China for extended periods. While their husbands are in China, wives tend to stay in Taiwan, taking care of in-laws or children. Extra-marital relationships have increased dramatically and more and more women no longer tolerate unfaithful husbands.

Inter-ethnic Marriage increasing

Compared with other Asian countries, Taiwan has several economic advantages. This simple fact is one reason why many, uneducated Taiwanese men marry women from Southern Asian countries, such as The Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam has increased substantially. The majority of these foreign brides cannot speak Chinese or cannot speak it well-enough to communicate with others. When their marriage expectations are not met, divorce is inevitable.

Counseling Strategies

Counselors should be aware that Chinese women, as a rule, do not seek out professional help. One study (Wong, 1998) examined the adjustment of female migrants from Hong Kong to Toronto, and found that a psychotherapist would be consulted only if the person was in an acute crisis. Primarily, their reluctance was due to an ignorance regarding the Western concept of mental health, a lack of knowledge of English, cultural differences, user fees and accessibility of services.

In addition, irrespective of the nature of the problem, Chinese women often feel that their marital unhappiness or problems may be attributed to personal failure, and that to see a counselor would cause family shame. In a case where the husband had had an extra-marital affair, the wife not only questioned her own competence as a wife and mother, but also saw herself obliged to keep the matter secret to save her husband's face and for fear that her intolerance would threaten the marriage (1998). The effective counselor should understand that a Chinese woman that schedules an appointment has already taken a big step toward increased mental health.

Counseling approaches emphasize looking at a client's history to varying degrees, and the Chinese female considering divorce needs to be understood in relation to her background. For instance, the client's country of origin (there are Chinese in Mainland China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Macao, Malaysia, and countless other countries; just because a client was born in China does not mean he/she has the cultural norms as a Chinese born in Malaysia) and family background all directly shape one's worldview. The professional counselor should also realize that life experiences affect client expectations for treatment, the incidence of particular mental disorders, therapeutic approach, and diagnosis.

Research conducted during the 1970s showed that Asian American clients favor a logical, rational, and directive counseling style over a reflective, affective, and nondirective one, especially if the counselor is also an Asian. In addition, counselors seen as culturally sensitive are viewed as more credible and culturally competent than less sensitive counselors. Furthermore, Asians prefer counselors who use the consultant helping role when the presenting problem has an external etiology (e.g., racism,) and the role of the facilitator of indigenous support systems when the problem has an internal etiology.

To be effective, counselors should strive for an immediate resolution to a problem, rather than attempting to explore the problem's deeper nuances. When faced with a female Chinese, it might be efficacious for counselors to self-disclose about strategies that they used to resolve the kinds of problems reported by the clients. When the counselor does this, clients often perceive this as being helpful, especially if the disclosures are moderately intimate. In essence, the therapy should be cognitive behavioral and solution focused.

While it is not mandatory that counselor and client share the same values, therapy is aided when there is a match. For example, D. W. Sue and Sue (1999) noted that the match or mismatch among the client's cultural values, the counselor's cultural values, and the values inherent in the counseling interventions determines counseling process effectiveness. Likewise, Asian-American clients who had high adherence to Asian cultural values evaluated Asian American counselors to be more empathic and credible than did Asian American clients with low adherence to Asian values.

The professional helper should also investigate the clients' level of acculturation, since this is thought to be a valid predictor of mental health among all immigrant groups. Three patterns of acculturation among Asian Americans have been formulated that can serve as predictors of behavior, client expectations, and

some aspects of personality: traditionalist, marginal, and Asian-American (Sue and Sue, 1999). All three orientations are distinguished by how the identified client ethnically identifies herself, and are not necessarily indicative of birth country. The marginal label addresses the self-hatred a client might face because of experiencing the effects of racial prejudice. The traditionalist orientation, as indicated by its name, indicates a higher level of identification with Chinese culture. “Asian-American” denotes that an individual is at home in both worlds. Knowing the level of acculturation allows the therapist to decide the tone and pace of counseling, as well as whether it should be more individually or family based (more American acculturation usually means more individualistic).

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