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A cultural approach to  
understanding and working with  
Chinese migrants in New Zealand

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the degree of

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## Abstract

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When people migrate to a new country, they experience changes in many areas of life. Migrants are faced with the challenges of making sense of as well as dealing with these changes in life. This research is interested in understanding the experiences of Chinese migrants in New Zealand as well as exploring how to conduct ‘psychological intervention’ work with recent Chinese migrants to deal with the challenges associated with migration. This research consists of two parts. The first part is concerned with developing a better understanding of the way Chinese migrants make sense of their experiences after migrating to New Zealand. In this part, focus groups were held and a discursive approach was used to analyze participants’ accounts. Findings from this part show that negotiating meanings for “migration” and “fitting in” is the central process for Chinese migrants to make sense of their migratory experiences in New Zealand. In this meaning-making process, Chinese cultural meanings provide useful discursive resources for Chinese migrants to draw upon to better understand their experiences of migrating from China to New Zealand. Chinese sayings, such as “fish or bear’s paw”, “loss are accompanied by gain”, “life is about negotiating loss and gain”, are used by Chinese migrants in ways that allow them more flexibility in constructing their experiences in New Zealand. More importantly, adopting a dialectical sense-making embedded in traditional Chinese cultural knowledge is helpful for participants to transfer their discursive constructions from negative to positive aspects of their migration experiences. The second part of this research involves exploration and application of a culturally appropriate ‘psychological intervention’ with recent Chinese migrants in transition from living in China to living in New Zealand. This part draws upon the findings from the first part of the research. In the second part, two groups of participants were invited to attend a three-session group intervention. Useful discursive constructions around flexible meanings of “migration” and “fitting in” found in the first part of the research were introduced to participants. A discursive analytical approach was used to observe how participants take up these introduced meanings and to examine the discursive changes throughout the three group sessions. The second part of the research illustrates that participants took up the introduced meanings of “migration” and “fitting in” as a flexible process, and use these to further co-construct helpful meanings to negotiate their ‘problematic’ experiences. In all, this research articulates the importance of

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cultural meanings and cultural ways of making sense of migratory experiences by Chinese migrants. It also shows the importance of building a shared experience, making use of Chinese cultural meanings, and taking a social constructionist approach in psychological intervention work with Chinese migrants. The implications of this research are discussed in terms of further research on migrants' experiences and how to conduct 'psychological interventions' with Chinese migrants.

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## Thesis overview

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Migration is both an old and new phenomenon. Chinese people, among many groups of peoples in the world, have been migrating to western countries in an unprecedented large scale and rate in contemporary time, along with the rapid development in China and ever closer economic ties between China and the West. More and more Chinese people are moving to western countries for different reasons, whether it is economic, educational opportunity, or lifestyle choice. In this process of migration and intercultural communication, the old civilization and culture that once has been long isolated and mystified by the westerners are gradually coming forward, despite receiving mixed reactions from the West. In the meanwhile, for Chinese migrants, moving and living in a new country means they are faced with new ways of being and doing, which may be bewildering. How to live with culturally and socially different others has become an imminent task in making sense of their experiences in the new country.

In the field of psychology, research on migrants has been focused on better understanding migrants' experiences of living in the receiving country. Traditionally, the understandings have been dominantly derived from western cultural knowledge. Although the western cultural perspective provides an outlook for the migrants, other understandings are often subjugated and marginalized despite the increasing recognition that understandings are socially and culturally specific.

In the practice of psychological intervention, there is a growing demand for culturally effective practice for people from non-western cultural backgrounds. The traditional western psychotherapeutic approaches are increasingly under scrutiny with regards to appropriateness for working with people from non-western cultural backgrounds.

As a Chinese migrant to New Zealand, I have experienced struggles similar to many other Chinese migrants. While studying psychology at a postgraduate level in a western institute in the past few years, I have been interested in understanding and working with the population of Chinese migrants in a meaningful and positive way. Therefore, this research is my attempt to explore how to provide a cultural approach

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to understanding and working with Chinese migrants in New Zealand. In particular, my research aims are to address two questions:

- How Chinese migrants make sense of their experiences after migrating to New Zealand from China?
- How to conduct psychological intervention with recent Chinese migrants to help them in transition from living in China to living in New Zealand?

Accordingly, my thesis consists of two parts to explore these two topics. The first part provides a cultural perspective of making sense of Chinese migrants' experiences in New Zealand. The second part looks at how to conduct psychological intervention to offer meaningful and effective support for Chinese migrants in their transition from living in China to living in New Zealand. This thesis is made up of nine chapters. Chapter One to Four present the first part of my research, and chapter Five to Eight present the second part of my research. Chapter Nine is the conclusion of my thesis. The following gives an overview of each chapter of the thesis.

Chapter One is the contextualization of my research. In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the history of Chinese migration to the West and a brief introduction of the shared experiences of Chinese diasporas in western countries. I then investigate the socio-cultural and historical contexts of China which sheds light on the migration of Chinese to the West. Here I introduce the Chinese encounter of the West in modern history. Last, I locate Chinese migrants in the context of New Zealand, and explore Chinese migrants' experiences in relation to the discourses around how to deal with ethnic minority groups in New Zealand.

Chapter Two aims to provide an analysis of different cultural understandings of migrants' experiences. I start this chapter by presenting the existing studies on Chinese migrants' experiences in the West. Then I examine how non-western migrants' lived experiences are understood in the West. Following that, I introduce Chinese cultural perspectives from which Chinese migrants' experiences can be contextualized and understood.

Chapter Three elucidates the approaches to my research. I first provide the rationales for my research. Second, I articulate my theoretical approach. Third, I

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point to the aims of my research. Fourth, I provide details of the research process.

Chapter Four presents the findings and discussion for the first part of my research. Here, I discuss how Chinese migrants make sense of their experiences in relation to constructing meanings for the event of migration and “fitting in” New Zealand.

Chapter Five begins the second part of my research which explores the development and application of ‘psychological intervention’ work with recent Chinese migrants in New Zealand. This chapter provides an overview of Chinese people’s encounter of western psychotherapy. The focus is to review the research on western psychotherapy with Chinese migrants in western countries. First, I present an overview of how Chinese migrants’ use of psychotherapy is studied through their help-seeking behaviors in western countries. Then I review the major psychotherapeutic approaches to working with Chinese in western countries. Last, I give a background of Chinese people’s use of western psychotherapy in China’s recent history and contemporary time.

Chapter Six provides an analysis of understandings of psychotherapy which will bear on my approach to psychotherapy in this research. First I introduce a cultural perspective of psychotherapy. From this perspective, I review the traditional approaches to psychotherapy in western culture. Then, I move to focus on the postmodern movement in western culture and the implications of social constructionist approach to psychotherapy. Here, I look at the major therapeutic approaches to therapy largely informed by social constructionism. Last, I provide an overview of the understandings and practices of healings from a Chinese cultural perspective.

Chapter Seven introduces my research on the development and application of psychotherapeutic work with Chinese migrants in New Zealand. First, I provide research rationale. Second, I introduce my research aims. Third, I explain my research approach in terms of theoretical stance and methodology.

Chapter Eight presents the findings and discussions for the second part of my research. The focus of the findings is on examining how participants take up introduced cultural meanings and how they co-construct new meanings under

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facilitation in the group intervention.

Chapter Nine concludes with the key points driven from this research. It also gives the implications of this research for future research on migrants' experiences and discusses how the ideas developed here may be used by psychologists when intervening to assist Chinese migrants.