SOMETHING MISSING IN OUR MARRIAGE: EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO MARITAL CONFLICT IN CHINESE-AMERICAN COUPLES

By

Pikha Doobie Soo

RECOMMENDED:

Christin E. Cooper

Department Chair

Robert B. Carndale
Advisory Committee Chair

Chair, Department of Communication

APPROVED:

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Dean of the Graduate School

Date

April 5, 2005
SOMETHING MISSING IN OUR MARRIAGE: EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO MARITAL CONFLICT IN CHINESE-AMERICAN COUPLES

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Pikha Doobie Soo, B.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska May 2005
Abstract

There is significant literature regarding marital conflict for couples of the same cultural background, but few studies focus on Chinese-American couples, which are becoming increasingly common. The purpose of this research is twofold. The first goal is to begin to understand the lived experience of marital conflict for Chinese women married to American men. The second goal is to better understand these Chinese women’s responses to such conflicts, in particular their emotional responses, and their choices for dealing with these conflicts. Conversational interviewing and narratives analysis were employed in this qualitative research. Six Chinese women who were not raised in the US and who are married to American men participated in this study. Six primary themes emerged from the narratives. The Chinese women: 1) have unique, individual reasons for marrying American men; 2) do not experience language differences as a source of conflict in their intercultural marriages; 3) have difficulty accepting and adjusting to what they see as independence on the part of their American husbands; 4) experience qi liang (in Chinese 悽凉) in their intercultural marriages; 5) experience anger in their intercultural marriages; and 6) use emotion-linked strategies to elicit attention from their husbands. It would be interesting to study the perspective of the American men in these intercultural relationships, and to compare and contrast their perceptions of the sources of conflict. Future research should examine other Asian women, for there are significant numbers of women from Korea and Japan now marrying American men.
Table of Contents

Signature Page ................................................................. i
Title Page ................................................................................ ii
Abstract .................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents ........................................................................ iv
Acknowledgements ..................................................................... vi

Chapter 1: Literature Review .............................................. 1
  1.1 Statement of the Problem and Goals of the Research ........ 1
  1.2 Marriage ........................................................................... 2
  1.3 Interpersonal Conflicts and Marital Conflict ..................... 4
  1.4 Intercultural Marriage ...................................................... 5
  1.5 Emotion ............................................................................. 10
  1.6 Emotions in Marriage ...................................................... 12
  1.7 Emotion in Intercultural Marriage .................................... 14
  1.8 Summary ........................................................................... 16

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method ............................... 18
  2.1 Epistemology and Social Constructionism ....................... 18
  2.2 Conversational Interviewing ............................................ 18
  2.3 Analysis ............................................................................ 19
  2.4 Participants ....................................................................... 21
  2.5 Procedure .......................................................................... 21
  2.6 Researcher as Research Tool .......................................... 22

Chapter 3: Chinese Women’s Narratives ......................... 25
  3.1 Wei-kuen’s Interview ....................................................... 25
  3.2 Suk-chi’s Interview .......................................................... 30
  3.3 Man-ching’s Interview .................................................... 35
  3.4 Siu-man’s Interview ........................................................ 43
  3.5 Pui-ling’s Interview ........................................................ 49
  3.6 Sau-king’s Interview ....................................................... 55

Chapter 4: Analysis ................................................................. 60
  4.1 The Chinese Women have Unique, Individual Reasons for Marrying American Men ............................................. 61
  4.2 The Chinese Women Do Not Experience Language Differences as a Source of Conflict in their Intercultural Marriages 65
Acknowledgments

Undoubtedly the greatest measure of my gratitude goes to Dr. Robert Arundale who served as adviser in my graduate research. He presented me with tremendous opportunities to do the research I loved. The happiest part about graduating is that I know now that I will continue my higher education in future, and it is Dr. Arundale’s influence.

In addition, the two other members of my committee, Dr. Christine Cooper and Dr. Pamela McWherter read my thesis carefully and provided many useful comments. I thank them for their effort and for several very helpful conversations. All of the people in my committee were patient when I had to be shown everything twice and have always been there for me. Dr. Jin Brown gave me much help and encouragement when I was an unofficial student in this Department.

Many office mates and students have been there to help make graduate school more enjoyable. I thank every one of them, especially for those times when I shouted over the cubicle wall for help with my American English. I would like to thank Fran Pedersen for helping me over the painful parts of graduate school in my first semester. I want to thank Michelle Scaman and Dr. McWherter who have always been ready to give hugs to help deal with the stress.

Some friends in Hong Kong I need to thank are Doreen Lai and Eva Wong, they also made life easier through chatting over the Internet. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Scott, and all the members of my family for all of their constant support and encouragement. I could not have done this without you.
Chapter 1

Literature Review

1.1 Statement of the Problem and Goals of the Research

Many Chinese women move from their own country to marry American men. These changes lead them to face different people and patterns of language use, as well as a new marriage system, environment, and culture. As such, these women face an extra challenge during the transition from one life to another. The process of transition may and often does produce conflicts in their marriages that are not present in culturally similar relationships. I was raised in Hong Kong, growing up with both British and Chinese ways of living. Cantonese was my primary language and traditional Chinese rituals dominated in my family. In 2002 I moved to Fairbanks, Alaska to marry an American man. My husband’s way of living is very different from mine, including the language we speak (we speak English to each other, but the patterns of language use are different), eating habits and manners, and ways of interacting with our families and friends. Because my American husband and I come from different cultural backgrounds, we have different values and belief systems, which become a source of conflict in our marriage. This situation is an exemplar of an increasingly common relationship, requiring more research in the specific area of intercultural marriage.

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first goal is to begin to understand the lived experience of the unique marital conflicts of Chinese women married to American men. The second goal is to better understand these Chinese women’s responses to such conflicts, in particular their emotional responses, and their choices for managing and dealing with their conflicts. This chapter reviews the prior related
literature that serves as a foundation for this research.

1.2 Marriage

Marriage is not just a legal contract. When two persons choose to marry they form an exclusive relationship, sharing, committing to one another. As Harley (2002) says, “When a man and woman marry, they share high expectations. They commit themselves to meeting certain intense and intimate needs in each other on an exclusive basis” (p. 18). My own American husband often says, “You need more than I can give and you expect me to be a perfect husband.” I do not deny this statement because my husband is the closest person to me in the US. Since I am new to the US, I am not familiar with practices in many areas of this country and I have not yet built up a network of friends. Thus, my strong dependency on my husband seems to be my way to survive in this country and in this marriage.

Clark and Mills (1979) developed a theory of relational orientation that describes relational partners as being in a “communal relationship,” that is, a strong union in which benefits are provided on the assumption that the purpose of the coupling is to meet certain needs regarding each other’s welfare. Clark and Brissette (2000) define communal relationships as an individual “feeling a responsibility for the welfare of the other person and responding to that person’s needs accordingly” (p. 225). They believe it is one partner’s concern for her/his partner’s welfare that leads both to express their emotions freely. Though too simplistic a description, marriage does constitute a commitment by both partners to meet particular needs for each other. However, those needs are often not explicitly communicated, leading to different marital expectations.
Individuals enter into marriage with expectations about how their new life should or will be. Burgoon's (1978) Expectancy Violations Theory claims that people develop expectations and preferences about how their partners should behave. Married couples expect and feel a need for intimacy, love, and affection in their marriages, and they suffer negative outcomes if these expectancies are violated. Kelley and Burgoon (1991) found that failure of expectations about intimacy in a relationship is predictive of marital dissatisfaction.

Marriage is often considered as two individuals living together and forming a new family. Carter and McGoldrick (1989) describe marriage as two entire systems merged together in developing a third family system. Fitzpatrick (1988) categorizes five types of marriage. She calls couples that embrace verbal openness, togetherness, stability, and predictability in their marriage "traditionals." Couples who have a strong sense of their roles and identities are "independents." A couple in which one person feels connected with the other through a sense of bonding, as in meeting duties and obligations connected with the husband-wife relationship, but the other feels little personal closeness are "separates." A couple in which one emphasizes predictability and stability, while the other does not value companionship and sharing are "separate/traditionals." Unions in which one believes marriage should be stable and predictable, but the other values privacy and independence are "traditional/independents." Fitzpatrick concludes that different marriage patterns directly affect couples' communication behavior.

According to Breger and Hill (1998), a successful relationship should possess seven key elements: positivity, e.g., being upbeat, cheerful, polite to each other; openness, e.g., self-disclosure, discussion of private thoughts and feelings;
assurances, e.g., reassuring care, love, and commitment to one’s partner; networks, e.g., common friends and families; tasks, e.g., negotiation and shared responsibilities; conflict management, e.g., apologizing for mistakes, seeking compromise, listening to the other’s viewpoints; and advice, e.g., providing support. Breger and Hill suggest that a lack of any of these seven elements reduces satisfaction in the marriage.

1.3 Interpersonal Conflict and Marital Conflict

Because of individual differences among relational parties, conflicts are inevitable and an ongoing process in any relationship, whether it be friends, families, intimates, or married couples. Differences in terms of values, attitudes, power, and social factors all contribute to the creation of conflict. Littlejohn and Domenici (2001) state, “When difference gets in the way, conflict results” (p. 4). Hocker and Wilmot (1998) define interpersonal conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from others in achieving their goals” (p. 53). Marital conflict may ensue when partners perceive differences between them, but the perception of difference is not in itself conflict. Conflict is present only at the point that perceptions result in overt communication between marital partners regarding differences.

The nature and frequency of conflict within any marriage is specific to the partners. Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy’s (1984) study suggests marital conflicts center around issues of household responsibilities, spending money and leisure time, disciplining of children, criticisms of each other’s ideas and activities, dissatisfaction in inadequate affection or attention, and complains about not doing enough activities together. Although cultural differences can be a source of conflicts, Augsburger (1992) concludes, “Every human conflict is, in some respects, like all others, and like
no other. Conflicts are similar, culturally distinct, and individually unique—simultaneously, invariably, and intriguingly” (p. 17; quoted in Wilmot & Hocker, 1998, p. 25).

Conflict occurs due to a variety of reasons, but cultural differences play an important role in introducing new conflicts. This thesis focuses on conflict that arises in marriage due to cultural differences between the partners, also extends Sillars et al.’s (1984) work to emotional response to those conflicts. For example, in my relationship with my American husband, when we talk about giving money to charities, we hold different views on how to use our money. I am reluctant to give money to charity when there are needs existing within my own family. My husband, on the other hand, sees it as a duty to provide to charity regardless of our situation. This difference is very much rooted in culture. In Hong Kong, government takes a larger role in caring for people, and individuals do not feel a responsibility to give to charities. In American culture, the government does not provide for all those who need help. While my husband and I can both recognize the source of our differences, we both still have an emotional response – frustration and anger – to this particular conflict. In all our years together, we have not yet achieved a resolution in this particular area.

1.4 Intercultural Marriage

The number of intercultural marriages is increasing in the United States. Intercultural partners usually do not share the same first language and their cultural differences, including attitudes and beliefs in a number of areas, produce conflicts. The partner not from the host culture, in particular, may experience dissonance such as uncertainty, doubt, and discomfort because of entering into a new environment.
These negatives affect interpersonal communication between partners, may create emotional distress, and as a result, have important impact on the relationship.

As in virtually all cultures, processes whereby a man and a woman become husband and wife, or a set of cultural rules tie men and women together to create a family unit, are currently implemented in both China and America. Chinese families and social systems are patriarchal-dominated, while modern American society increasingly advocates equality of the spouses. Many Chinese women move from China to marry American men and stay in the U.S. These couples experience differences in values and needs over many aspects of their life, as suggested by Betcher and Macauley (1990). Differences lead to quarrels over issues such as gender, sex, loyalty, money, power, privacy, children, and family leadership. Romano (2001) points to possible conflict over basic values, food and drink, language, sex, gender roles, time, country of residence, politics, friends, finances, in-laws, ethnocentrism, raising bicultural children, and dealing with stress, illness, and suffering. All these aspects have the potential to create consequences for married couples who combine two different cultural backgrounds.

A more fundamental difference between Chinese women and American men lies in them quite different values and beliefs about the self. Most of Chinese women have been influenced by the teachings of Confucianism, in which the self is fundamentally different from the Western view, such in America. Scollon and Scollon draw Hsu (1985) in arguing that “the [W]esterner draws the boundary of his self basically at his skin, the East Asian includes his intimate society, such as his family, friends...” (p. 2). According to Stewart and Bennett (1991), in Chinese culture, “Identities of the people are inclined to form around the lineal family” (p. 131), such that for Asian reasons
"family members are themselves" (p. 132). As Westerners, Americans understand the self to be a monadic, physical person, distinct from all other selves in thoughts, beliefs, values, etc. Stewart and Bennett argue, in fact that the American understanding of the self actually "prevents Americans from fully comprehending that in other cultures people may not think that their own selves are much different from other selves" (p. 130). I, or Chinese women, then, see a married couple as not two separate selves somehow linked together, but in effect a single self, woven together without a seam separating husband and wife.

Framed somewhat differently, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggest that dialectical "contradictions are located in the relationship; dialogic interplay is inherent in all relating" (p.88). They view contradictions such as connectedness (or dependence) and autonomy (or independence) as continually present between any relational parties, and in ongoing negotiation between the parties. Given their cultural backgrounds, Chinese women understand their selves in terms of connection with others, whereas American men view their selves as autonomous and distinct from others. In other terms, Chinese women understand their husbands to be part of their own personal self, whereas American men view their wives as selves distinct from their own personal self.

I left Hong Kong to marry an American man. Culturally, I am different from my husband and that constitutes a basis for our different views on marriage. I was educated by my mother about the marriage concept in traditional Chinese society. She told me "when you marry a chicken, follow the chicken; marry a dog, follow the dog" (in Chinese 嫁雞隨雞, 嫁狗隨狗). That means I should listen to, obey, and be respectful to my husband. Also, it implicitly says that I should be loyal to my husband
until death. These attitudes are not nearly as strong in American culture where in recent decades marital equality and the sharing of roles has been more strongly promoted. My mother’s teaching deeply influences my attitude toward marriage and my relationship with my husband. For example, when my American husband and I have disagreements, even if we both have our own strong standpoints, I frequently give up my position and submit to my husband. In situations whereby my husband gives me a bad attitude without apparent reason, I sometimes have no understanding of his treatment toward me at that specific moment. In order to comply with my role as “a good wife,” I suppress my immediate emotional response to his attitude by “swallowing my words.” When I do this I feel like a “loser” and “victim.” This concept of loyalty to one’s husband in Chinese marriages provides limited options to Chinese women when there is conflict in marriage. It is not usual for Chinese women to share their thoughts and discomfort with their husbands, or to seek counseling. Loyalty certainly does not allow Chinese women to consider divorce. Although divorce does sometimes occur in China, it is usually a difficult option for women, and comes with long-term negative ramifications.

Samovar and Porter (2004) claim “Culture is shared learned behavior that is transmitted from one generation to another for purposes of promoting individual and social survival, adaptation, and growth and development” (p. 79). Two individuals from different cultures who come together require learning, and need to accept the other’s differences during the transition from two separate persons each living in their own culture to two related persons living in an environment of dual cultures. The process of transition may produce conflicts that reduce happiness in the marriage. In fact, intercultural marriages appear to have an immediate disadvantage relative to
other marriages because of the increased sources of conflict.

Intercultural married couples can be attracted by similarities and/or by complementarities (opposites attract). Rushton (1989) proposes Genetic Similarity Theory to explain intercultural affiliation based on individual similarity in various characteristics. He claims that people choose mates, friends, and married partners similar in race, attitudes, physical characteristics, and personality. According to Winch's (1958) Complementarity of Need Theory, a happy marriage is associated with couples who have complementary needs. For example, a woman who needs to dominate and a man who needs to be dominated may be attractive to each other. It is probable that complementarity of needs is the basis for some intercultural marriages. For example, there are American men who desire traditional or "old fashioned" wives because they need to dominate their wife and family. In this way they may be attracted to stereotypically submissive and conservative Chinese women. Because these stereotypes do not represent the reality, misconceptions may create relational issues in these marriages. It is also true that some individuals feel a need to learn about another culture and thus find intercultural marriage attractive. Such couples learn and strengthen their understanding of a culture other than their own. Differences then enable married couples to recognize and learn different worldviews. On the other hand, similarities in culture can help shape a solid base of shared values, which may lead to the formation of a supportive family.

Culturally different partners may also encounter difficulties in using the other's language in expressing shared meaning. Effective and open communication serve as an essential foundation for marital happiness and success. When a language barrier is present, miscommunication is an obstacle to a happy marriage may exist. According
to Fisher, Giblin, and Hoopes’s (1982) family functioning framework, and Noller and Fitzpatrick’s (1991) marital communication framework, persons in happy, stable, and satisfied marriages are more likely to employ active listening skills, agree, approve, assent, and use laughter and humor with their partners. These communication techniques may be utilized differently in different cultures, and those differences may again hinder communication and the pursuit of a happy marriage.

Conflict is a pervasive feature of marriage that can produce both beneficial and harmful effects depending on how couples perceive it, respond to it, and how effectively they cope with it. There are many possible causes for conflict with differences in opinion on decisions being an important one. Cultural differences, though a source of attraction between marriage partners, are also likely to enhance differences of opinion. This thesis focuses on human science understanding of conflict that occurs in intercultural marriage, specifically Chinese women with American husbands. In order to understand that conflict, the lived experiences of Chinese women in their marital conflicts with their American husbands will be explored.

1.5 Emotion

In addition to examining the lived experience of Chinese women who have married American men and have moved to the US, this thesis will focus on Chinese women’s emotional responses to the conflict that arises in their marriage. In considering the nature of emotional responses to marital conflict, it is useful to examine some common definitions of emotion and the role of emotion in marriage. Existing research on emotion in marriage is primarily focused on couples who share the same cultural background. A social construction view of emotion suggests that
intercultural married partners may experience emotions in their marriage quite differently.

Responses to conflict in marriage may be cognitive, behavioral, and emotional in nature. There is considerable evidence that these three responses are related. In a recent study of emotion, Planalp (1999) described “emotion as a process made up of several definable subparts or components that operate together to produce emotion,” including “(1) objects, causes, precipitating events, (2) appraisal, (3) physiological changes, (4) action tendencies/action/expression, and (5) regulation” (p. 11). This process theory of emotion indicates how one’s emotional response to conflict arises. For example, I get angry because my husband ignores me in a discussion (event). To produce this anger, I assess the event, in this case negatively (appraisal). I then show my husband a tired face (physiological change) and turn away from him (action). In the regulation stage, I may talk to my friends about my anger.

Emotion is manifested in different forms. Emotion can be expressed in verbal as well as non-verbal behavior such as yelling, facial expression, and gestures; behavioral such as kicking and slamming a door; and cognitive such as thinking and daydreaming. Expression of emotion is culture-specific. In one culture expression of anger may be appropriate and accepted, but in another culture not considered an acceptable act.

Arnold (1960) introduces an appraisal theory of emotion in which emotion is equated with “felt tendency toward anything intuitively appraised as good (beneficial), or away from anything intuitively appraised as bad (harmful)” (p. 171). Frijda (2000) explains, “Emotions can be viewed primarily as intrapersonal states, such as feelings, states of arousal, or activation of certain motor patterns. Emotions may also be
viewed as interactive states involving the subject and an object and their relationships" (pp. 61-62). Mceon quotes Aristotle, as saying, “Anger may be defined as a belief that we, or our friends, have been unfairly slighted, which causes in us both painful feelings and a desire or impulse for revenge” (cited in Lazarus, 1991, p. 5). Lazarus (1991) believes anger is, in fact, the result of particular thoughts. He conceptualized emotions as cognitive causation, which in turn, motivates aggressive actions (p. 5). For other cognitivists such as Marks (1982), emotions are described as sets of beliefs and desires. For example, one’s happiness in response to an event or people is simply the judgment of being pleased by that event or person.

1.6 Emotion in Marriage

What role does emotion play in marriage? Some individuals consider emotion as something negative (a reaction to conflict, e.g., getting angry). However, experiencing emotions may help married couples recognize their own needs, and can therefore provide a benefit of helping prevent further conflict. For example, if marriage partners get angry at each other, they may recognize they need more time to calm down before resuming their interaction so that they may communicate more effectively. Sadness may lead the relational partners to recognize something is missing in their relationship, or they need more fulfillment. Fear may be an indicator to a couple that their marriage needs to be more stable and secure. Happiness may lead romantic partners to see the need to celebrate.

Harley’s (2002) studies suggest ten emotional responses married couples need, including admiration, affection, conversation, domestic support, family commitment, financial support, honesty and openness, physical attractiveness, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment (pp. 18-19). A happy marriage for each of the
involved parties requires meeting the needs that are important to the other. Williams’s (1988) study shows that emotional support and interpersonal intimacy from a relational partner provide benefits in marriage. Mastekaasa (1994) claims that emotional intimacy is key to a successful marriage.

The emotional experiences of marital partners are interlinked, i.e., the emotions of one partner affect the emotions of the other. Married couples experience pleasantness and unpleasantness, and a range of emotions and responses to different circumstances. The sum of all these experiences influences the way individuals evaluate their life, their happiness, and their fulfillment. This evaluation is obviously quite subjective and personal. Diener et al. (1998) identify Subjective Well-Being (SWB) as basic to perceived satisfaction in marriage, and define it as a subjective comparison of the abundance of positive emotions relative to negative emotions. If partners do not feel they have achieved emotional well-being through or in their marriage, it is possible they may evaluate the marriage as unhealthy, or possibly even failing.

Gottman (2002) says people make bids for emotional connection in all relationships, and this connection aims to fulfill human emotional needs, such as to be included, to be liked, and to have a sense of control over their lives (p. 19). He adds that married couples build emotional connections through relational shared meaning. Gottman suggests that couples find common meaning through uncovering the ideals hidden within another’s position in a conflict; through expressing one’s goals or wishes to obtain support; and through engaging in regular meaningful activities such as an anniversary celebration. Emotional connection can be built and communication skills can be learned and improved. According to Gottman, “Learning how to
recognize and turn toward each other’s bids for emotional connection can help unhappily married couples,” and puts all couples “in a better spot to solve conflicts” (p. 22).

1.7 Emotion in Intercultural Marriage

The research on emotion focuses on couples who share a common cultural background (American) and are likely to experience emotional responses to conflict in their marriage in basically similar ways. That is, while the couple may experience different emotions in a given situation, when they both experience anger, for example, they are likely to construct that emotion in view of a set of shared cultural norms. A social constructionist view of emotion suggests that this may not be true for intercultural married couples. Social constructionists, for the most part, believe emotions are culturally local phenomena, and thus people in different cultures may have different emotions. Averill (1980) identifies emotions from a constructivist viewpoint: “there are an indefinite number of emotions. That is, societies can shape, mold, or construct as many different emotions as are functional within the social system” (p. 326). He defines emotions on the basis of internalized social norms and rules governing feelings, and he explains that emotions do have a physiological component, but how one identifies and labels bodily feelings is learned socially within a culture (1986, pp. 98-118). Littlejohn (1999) puts it this way, “Emotions are not just things in themselves. They are defined and handled according to what has been learned in social interaction with other people” (p. 182).

A widely admired study by Lutz (1988) employs a social constructionist approach to study Ifaluk emotions. In her study, “song” is an Ifaluk emotion similar to “anger” in Western society, but an Ifaluk feels “song” in response to a person
engaging in morally inappropriate behavior or when someone fails to meet his or her obligation. Lutz illustrates the unique emotional pattern in Ifaluk’s world which outsiders are not able to experience. For Chinese people, the concept of emotion is ambiguous. Affected by the teachings of Confucianism the Chinese have adopted a code for communicating their emotions. “Joy” and “anger” are not to be “read” by other people. Rather there is a specified etiquette for one person to respond or to express his or her feelings to another. This particular code of conduct comes from one of the principal ideas of Confucianism, the so-called “Middle Way.” According to Confucius, a virtuous person should avoid all extremes in his or her action or thought. As a consequence, one’s communication should be primarily verbal, and one’s speaking purposefully as emotion-free as possible. Facial expression and vocal tones are to be minimized.

Averill (1994) also finds that "anger as a specific emotion" is not "universal across all cultures" (p.143). For example, “happy” and “unhappy” are not natural categories of being that possess an ontological status. Rather, “happy” and “unhappy” are socially constructed or co-created intersubjectively. In other words, a social constructionist approach holds that “happy” and “unhappy” are socially consummated rather than innate, hence so-called “happy faces” and “unhappy faces” are products of discourse rather than discovered in the world. Shweder (1994) also claims that emotions are not objects or concepts, instead, “They are complex narrative structures that give shape and meaning to somatic and affective experiences” (p. 37). He maintains not only that there are no universal emotions, but also that there may well be some cultures in which there are no emotions at all. From a social constructionist perspective, then, culturally local beliefs, preferences, and values play a part in
people's emotional lives.

From the social constructionist viewpoint adopted here, emotions are not primarily viewed as individuals' experiences. Instead, the meaning and sense of emotions are constructed in specific social groups and different groups may not share the same meaning as others. This paradigm is critical to this thesis, which focuses on Chinese women's lived experiences when married to American men. It is not just that the cultural differences may produce conflict, which then elicits an emotional response in both of the marriage partners, but rather that the emotion and the interpretation of that emotion is likely to be different between the partners. For example, if anger is the result of a particular conflict, anger as manifested by the American husband may not appear to be anger from the perspective of the Chinese wife, and vice versa. This possibility needs to be examined in enlarging understanding of emotion in intercultural marriages, hence the second research question of this thesis: What are the Chinese women's emotional responses to conflicts in marriages to American men?

1.8 Summary

The literature concerning successful marriages provides a foundation for suggesting that culturally different couples have a number of challenges that are not present in culturally similar relationships, and hence have a greater likelihood of conflict. Emotional responses to such conflict may lead to reduction in a partner's emotional well-being, and can affect married partners' evaluation of their marriage to the point where they may regard their marriage as unsuccessful or unhealthy. Culture plays a major role in how people construct meaning of both conflict and emotions. Cultural differences therefore can affect the way couples construct emotional
responses to their conflict. This research focuses on understanding the lived experiences of these Chinese women in their unique marital conflicts, as well as their emotional responses to those conflicts.
Chapter 2

Methodology and Method

2.1 Epistemology and Social Constructionism

In this study, I employed a social constructionist perspective on human knowledge. According to Crotty (1998), social constructionism is an epistemological position, which claims that knowledge arises in social interaction. As Crotty says, “Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (pp. 8-9). Thus people, through social activities such as conflicts and communication, create meaning together. Epistemology addresses issues of “how we know what we know” (p. 8), and requires that research methodology and method be “concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (p. 8). Maxwell (1998) emphasizes that the key purpose of doing qualitative research is “understanding the meaning” (p. 75) of participants’ behaviors, events, and situations. In this study, I explore how Chinese women construct the meaning of marital conflicts and their emotional responses to those conflicts.

2.2 Conversational Interviewing

Conversational interviewing is a form of qualitative research; it aims to “describe and understand the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subject” (Kvale, 1996, p. 31). Conversational interview methods see “conversation as a mode of knowing” (p. 37), and as “a construction site for knowledge” (p. 14). According to Kvale, “the interviewer is the instrument” (p. 105), and the results of an interview depend on the interviewer’s knowledge, empathy, and sensitivity. This
qualitative research method is appropriate for the current thesis because it focuses on eliciting the essence of the lived experience of a particular group of people, leading to interpretation of those experiences with a focus on the meanings given to them. As Shotter (1993) notes, “conversation is not just one of our many activities in the world. On the contrary, we constitute both ourselves and our worlds in our conversational activity” (p. 6, in Kvale, 1996, p. 37). In this research, it was crucial that the meanings of marital conflict experiences be obtained from the perspective of the Chinese women who are married to American men. Conversational interviewing then is an appropriate and powerful tool for understanding the meanings these Chinese women have for their worlds. Kvale (1996) says, “human reality may be understood as persons in conversation” (p. 37). In other words, through the conversational interview, the researcher and the co-researchers co-create meanings through the conversations and achieve intersubjectivity, providing the researcher with access to the subjects’ experience.

Because the conversational interview establishes a researcher-participant relationship, it usually creates trust between the interactants. This trust is crucial because intimate details of the participants’ marriages are needed, and the participants will only be comfortable describing and sharing those details openly to someone they trust. For this reason, as well, conversational interviews are an appropriate method in this research for obtaining descriptions of the lived experiences of these Chinese women.

2.3 Analysis

Narratives involve a way of constructing our world and constitute a primary process that makes human experience meaningful. Polkinghorne (1988) explains:
Narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units...It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful. Thus, the study of human beings by the human sciences needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular. (p.11)

To better understand the meanings of the experiences of these Chinese women in their intercultural marriages, and to make sense of their emotional responses to their marital conflicts, the data obtained from the conversational interviews were analyzed by developing another form of narration. In explaining narrative analysis, Mishler (1991) argues that, “telling stories is one of the significant ways individuals construct and express meaning” (p. 67). For Kvale (1996), “A narrative analysis of what was said leads to a new story to be told, a story developing the themes of the original interview” (p. 199). This kind of narrative analysis is the researcher’s narrative about the interactants’ experiences. Beginning with the interviews themselves, and continuing as I transcribed the conversations, I brought the Chinese women’s own perspectives into the light as well as providing my understanding, as a researcher on the phenomena. I interpreted the women, their reactions, their verbalizations, and their nonverbal signs, conducted analysis, and wrote the results as a unified whole. Throughout the meaning-making process it was very important to me to use reflexivity to continuously evolve my understanding and new perspectives of the qualitative data. The main task, as a researcher, is to make meaningful and “visible” the experiences of the Chinese women’s realities.
The interviews were conducted in Cantonese for two main reasons. First, both the participants and I share the same language, which is essential in co-creating the meaning of their lived experiences. Second, although the Chinese women use English in their daily conversations with their American husbands, using English is not a comfortable and effective way for these women to achieve mutual understanding.

2.4 Participants

Taking into account available resources such as time, money, participants, the law of diminishing returns, and the nature of the study, Kvale (1996) notes that in current interview studies “the number of interviews tend to be around 15±10” (p. 102). That is, the optimal number of interviews, according to Kvale (1996), is between five and twenty-five. In this study, six Chinese women, who I know personally, who were not raised in the U.S., who are married to American men, who have experienced cultural differences in their marriages, and who are currently living in Fairbanks, Alaska, were asked to participate in this study.

2.5 Procedure

Meeting times which averaged two hours were scheduled with each of the participants. Before the interview began, each participant was given an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) describing the purpose, the procedures, and the participant’s rights with regard to participating in the study. All participation was voluntary. The participants were free to choose the interview location, date, time, and to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time. I asked questions of the Chinese women in order to begin a conversation directed at gaining knowledge about their lived experiences in and emotional responses to their marital conflicts. The questions were open-ended in order to encourage free narratives from
the women. This interview style allowed the participants to express their feelings, ideas, and opinions freely. Although as researcher I should not engage in argument or judgment during the interview process, I did take a vantage point of being their friend and I sometimes involved myself in the discussion. This occurred through self-disclosure to initiate authentic dialogues from the women. In order to keep the conversations focused on my research questions, I also used specific follow up questions to help the participants discuss their experiences, and their responses to their experiences.

The interviews were digitally audio recorded and I took notes immediately after each interview for the purpose of capturing interactional data and responses that could not be sufficiently recorded or interpreted via audio recording, such as nonverbal expressions. I translated the interviews and transcribed the audio recording in English as I continued the analysis. I used English to transcribe the interviews to a written format because English was the principal language in my education and workplace while I was living in Hong Kong. In addition, unlike Mandarin, which is an official language in Mainland China and is spoken as it appears in a written format, Cantonese is a colloquial language that is often not written the way it is spoken. Thus it was more valid for me as a researcher to immediately translate to English to maintain the meaning of the narratives as I interpreted them in conversing with the Chinese women.

2.6 Researcher as Research Tool

Methodologies grounded in social constructionism view the researcher as the principal research tool for conducting research. Maxwell (1998) incorporates other scholars' views (e.g., Berg & Smith, 1988; Jansen & Peshkin, 1992) that researchers'
background, identity, and own experience help support their research. He claims that “using this experience in your research can provide you with a major source of insights” (p.78). I drew on my own experience as a conceptual framework in understanding Chinese women’s lived experiences in their marital conflicts with their American husbands, as well as their emotional responses to those conflicts.

My American husband and I first met in the summer of 1991 while I was taking a 3-month vacation in the United States. After finishing that vacation, I returned to my birthplace, Hong Kong, to continue my education and to develop my career. Not until the summer of 1996 did my husband and I meet again in the US when I went with one of my best friends to visit her relatives in Los Angeles. My friend had to go back to Hong Kong to resume her work, while I had no school and no work at that time. I decided to visit my now husband where he was living in Colorado. We began a romantic relationship and have continued in a romantic relationship since then. I spent almost six months with him in 1996 before my travel visa expired.

During the 6 months of living together, we actually experienced a number of difficult times because of misunderstandings, many of which occurred as a result of our cultural differences. Some examples of our difficulties included differing opinions about which partner had responsibility for paying certain bills, whether both partners have equal responsibilities in all areas, as opposed to separate responsibilities, and different opinions about whether it is acceptable for one partner to have friendships with members of the opposite sex. In each case the differences in beliefs were a surprise to both of us. Our long-distance (almost 8000 miles) relationship continued until I moved to Fairbanks, Alaska, in October, 2002. During the six and a half year long-distance relationship, my now husband and I encountered many
misunderstandings because of our cultural differences, and we sometimes found ourselves in ambiguous situations due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. We were married in March 2003. The increased face-to-face interaction eliminated many of our misunderstandings, and as an exclusive relationship, we expressed ourselves emotionally in ways we had not done before.

Since we began living together (October, 2002), I find I desire much attention from my husband, who, unfortunately for me, is a workaholic. Even when we are on vacations, his computer and cell phone are our companions. I do not like or enjoy “business vacations” at all, and I often struggle between being supportive for his enthusiasm with his career and being upset about his lack of attention. I experience emotion-confusion, finding it very difficult for me to choose between presenting and hiding my emotional response to him about his attention deficit. By the time of this writing, my husband and I have been married for two years. We continue to learn, adjust, adapt, appreciate, and accept each other’s culture and emotions together day-by-day.

Based on my own experiences, I can appreciate these Chinese women’s worlds and their experiences expressed through intimate dialogues. I was very interested to know whether other Chinese women experienced similar conflict. What emotional responses might other Chinese women employ in intercultural marriage? How would these women cope with emotional responses? I used my experiences as a standpoint from which to inquire, observe, and seek to understand the emotional responses of these six Chinese women married to American men.
Chapter 3

Chinese Women’s Narratives

3.1 Wei-kuen’s Interview

Wei-kuen is in her mid twenties. She came from Mainland China, and has lived in Fairbanks for two years while pursuing her graduate program. Wei-kuen speaks Mandarin in her home country and learned to speak Cantonese while she was working in the Canton Province. I met Wei-kuen a year ago in the International Women’s Club at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She is currently a Master’s student at the university and will graduate in May this year. Wei-kuen can speak fluent English. She told me her American husband, Billy, has taught her a lot and that studying in a US university also has helped in her command of the language.

Wei-kuen laughed a lot during the interview. After I explained my research topic, she thought for a while and told me she could not name any conflicts between her and her husband. But then she said:

I’m not sure it is a conflict in our relationship, but he doesn’t like me to say he is fat. He gives me a long face. Maybe Americans don’t like this kind of joke. I just like making jokes, he doesn’t have any humor.

Wei-kuen did not have any contact with foreigners while she was living in China, until she began her graduate program at UAF. Wei-kuen enjoys describing the appearance of her husband, but she said her husband does not like her making fun of him in front of people. She kept laughing when she told me she made her husband angry, because she made fun of her husband in front of her friends, saying that he has a big nose.
I had some level of difficulty in leading Wei-kuen to tell me about her marital conflict because she repeated, "we don’t have any big arguments." She married her husband in December, 2004, after being together for three months. Wei-kuen said, "We seem happy together." I explained that marital conflict did not necessarily result in unhappiness, sharing with her that my husband and I have slight arguments such as who should drive to school, who should clean the dishes, etc., when we both are busy. I told her I experienced neither happiness nor unhappiness, even if the final decision led me to do something I did not want to do. Wei-kuen scratched her head and then related this story:

My husband does not like vegetables. I ‘force’ him to eat them even though I know he does not like them. It is funny that if I ask him to eat more vegetables, he doesn’t eat, and I get mad. And, if he doesn’t finish the vegetables on his plate, I get mad. I get mad at him because I spend a lot of time in the kitchen and he doesn’t eat. I feel like he doesn’t appreciate my cooking. And he doesn’t like me to put the vegetables on his plate. One day I cooked pig ears, and he didn’t like it. I felt disappointed because he didn’t like it. I spent time to cook and he didn’t appreciate it at all. And I took the food to the church. I go to church on Fridays because we have nothing to do.

The church in Fairbanks that Wei-kuen referred to was particularly well attended by Chinese people each Friday night. In trying to figure out why her husband did not like her to put food on his plate, she said that she thought American people were too independent and that they did not like being helped. She said, "But what’s wrong? I just show him I care about him. We Chinese do care about our husbands." When
Wei-kuen discussed her intercultural marriage, she had this perspective:

It is because we are from different cultures, we experience our partner’s world in ways that similar culture married couples may not experience. If you marry a person with the same culture as yours, you may think and see things in the same way. If you marry someone from a different culture, you will wonder what he thinks and why he thinks in a different way. It’s kind of curious.

In the middle of the interview, Wei-kuen asked me to turn off the recorder. I was surprised and concerned that the interview might be stressful for her. After honoring her request I waited a moment and then she told me she needed more time to think about her marital conflicts and her response to them. She explained she might need a while to think and did not want to waste recording time. I assured her not to worry because my recorder could record nine hours continuously. We both laughed. I laughed at Wei-kuen’s concern about the capacity of my recorder, and also because it was easy for me to list conflicts in my marriage, but not for her. While Wei-kuen was still laughing, she recalled another story:

We went to China recently to visit my family. Because he doesn’t know the language, I did everything for him. One of the things that bothered me was I felt annoyed to have to explain everything to him. He then felt frustrated because he didn’t know what was happening. I felt frustrated too because I needed to explain everything to him. I understood it was my job while he was in China, but I really felt tired to do so. Our trip lasted for four weeks, the third week I became tired of explaining this and that and most of the Chinese was difficult to explain.
Wei-kuen admitted that when she feels frustrated, her husband tends to respond with frustration, which then makes her feel even more frustrated and angry. In describing this emotional cycle, Wei-kuen said she then ignores her husband until he initiates conversation with her. Wei-kuen continued:

In one party, I didn’t understand what they were talking about [her husband and his American friends]. I just pretended I understood. Actually, it wouldn’t bother me because I didn’t understand. I tried to understand, but you just couldn’t keep asking about everything that you didn’t understand during the whole conversation. On the other hand, it bothered me because I really wanted to know what was going on.

Wei-kuen said her practice is to ask her husband afterward, when they are alone, for clarification. She thinks it is impolite to disturb people when they are having fun at the party. She said, “I would ruin the party and take away people’s joyfulness (in Chinese, 掃興 sāo xìng).” Wei-kuen did not elaborate on how her “questioning” would lead to ruining the party. But she noted:

Something like “can you repeat,” even if I ask five more times I still might not understand. Just forget it, I don’t want to ask anymore. In my own case, I always say, “I beg your pardon,” but even I…feel it is a problem.

Wei-kuen said she does not like bothering people when she has a language barrier, and added she does not want people to disturb her when she is working. She noted that she finds a way to avoid conversations, saying that “I hide myself. I lock the office door. I feel disturbed if I don’t understand what they say.” At this point, Wei-kuen’s smile disappeared and suddenly she elaborated on her feelings:
It is not pleasant...not pleasant to keep asking about what people said. I think I don’t want to bother others by asking them to repeat their questions. Like in the party, I didn’t want to let other people down. When they talked happily about something, I didn’t want to repeat asking something that I didn’t understand. I thought I was taking away other’s happiness. I didn’t want to do that.

Wei-kuen reiterated that she becomes upset and frustrated when in a situation that she does not understand the language. Then she changed the topic to raising children and began smiling again. Wei-kuen described herself as a well-planned person, and said she wants their children to learn Chinese and to go to a good university. She said her husband has no plan and does not want to discuss their future. She added, “When I talk about our future, our relationship. For example, after his graduation what will he do? [Her husband, is a PhD student in the same university] Says he doesn’t know and tells me we are fine.”

Wei-kuen confided that her husband does not pay too much attention to her. She then secretly revealed that she sometimes pretends to cry to draw her husband’s attention. She laughed and continued her story:

One time I asked him to get me some milk from the fridge...it’s just a trivial thing. He moved too slow (she laughed loud), so I pretended to cry. I guess I just want to draw his attention. And when I cry, he is not supposed to ask ‘why do you cry?’ That’s a dumb question, he’s a dummy!

Wei-kuen described her husband as an “unintelligent” person, who does not understand what affects her if she does not tell him verbally. She said even when her husband does understand that she is emotional, he does not understand why.
Wei-kuen then told me that they have a dog and that her husband pets him a lot and then didn’t wash his hands before touching her. She complained that she does not like the dog’s smell and that it makes the house dirty. Another complaint she reported was that her husband sometimes forgot to take off his shoes at home and said this made her angry, adding that her husband was an “inconsiderate” person. She reported yelling at her husband and “threatening” him if he did not take off his shoes. She laughed and told me she could not continue talking (because she was laughing too much). We took a break, had some tea, and both continued to laugh.

Before ending the interview, I asked Wei-kuen what she thinks is missing in her marriage? She said, “I can be happy by myself. But I am even happier with him. I wish we could communicate better and that he could communicate with my parents. We could understand each other better.” After I turned off the recorder, Wei-kuen said something, seemingly to herself, which I asked her to repeat. She responded, “His friends talk too fast.” We looked at each other and continued laughing.

3.2 Suk-chi’s Interview

Suk-chi and I become friends through Wei-kuen. When I asked Wei-kuen to participate in my study, she immediately referred me to Suk-chi. They are close friends and Wei-kuen was matchmaker for Suk-chi and her husband Edmond.

Suk-chi is a Master’s student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She plans to pursue her PhD after finishing her Master’s degree in May this year. Sui-chi is in her mid twenties. During the interview, she expressed her feelings openly in front of me, offering stories about her marriage without prompting. She displayed great interest in my research, and immediately began, “A lot, just too much! We have a lot of fights!” She said she and her husband had had many conflicts since they began living together.
Suk-chi compared her Chinese ex-boyfriends with her current American husband:

“My previous boyfriends, they gave me a lot of patience for a lot of little things. Edmond is not that type.” She gave me some examples about those “little things”:

When we went shopping to the grocery store and I carried a lot of stuff. They would come to me immediately and help me carry the groceries without my request. If I felt hot, they knew I need some soda or tomato juice and brought it to me.

Suk-chi told me in one episode, her husband accidentally hit her ankle with a grocery cart, and she was angry because he did not notice she was hurt and did not apologize. Suk-chi continued:

My reaction actually was to be silent. I didn’t talk to him, I just felt angry. I felt angrier because he didn’t ask me at all. I started thinking about why did he behave like that and it really drove me mad. After I calmed down, I asked him...He said, ‘First at all, it’s not a big deal, OK? Second, when you didn’t want to talk to me, I thought you just wanted to be alone, OK? And because you didn’t want to see me, I just left you alone until you wanted to talk to me. What’s wrong if I left you alone if you wanted to be alone?’ But when he really left me alone, it made me even angrier. Wow...I think it is a cultural difference.

Suk-chi recalled the way her Chinese ex-boyfriends treated her while she was living in China, compared with how her American husband treats her and became visibly upset and disappointed. She continued:

Every guy in China is such a gentleman. They open the door for you, help you carry groceries, and order food for you [in restaurants]. They
[Americans] just never understand that women require their man should love them tenderly. These kinds of acts are intimacy. They just don’t get it. Edmond didn’t do anything for me, he just said I needed to calm down and should not get mad at him.

In describing how she manages her anger, Suk-chi recalled that at the beginning of the relationship, she gave her husband the silent treatment, not talking to him for a couple of days. She added that she ran away from home in an attempt to scare her husband. When I teased her, “even in Alaska?” She said, “Why not? I just drove my car to a friend’s house and stayed there for some time. And I thought if I got mad at him, I would just run away.” She said she expected her husband looked for her and called her if she did so.

I tried to understand what made Suk-chi so angry with her husband and why she ran away. Suk-chi thought a while and said, “I can’t remember, we have so many fights.” She laughed and then remembered one episode in which she and her husband played on a volleyball team. She recalled that one of the female players fumbled and another team member tried to help her get the ball. Suk-chi’s husband was angry with the person who helped the woman, saying she would improve by herself if she were not treated as an incapable person. Suk-chi got mad at her husband because she thought there was nothing wrong with helping the team member. She said, “I was pretty shocked. We Chinese just do things like that,” adding she ran away after a long silence between her husband and herself after the volleyball game was finished. She reported staying at her friend’s home until midnight, then continued:

I finally needed to go back home. He was not willing to talk to me...not at all. I felt like no surprise and I had to apologize first, and I had to talk to
him first. I got really frustrated and wanted to give up. I wanted to finish the relationship. Actually I did move out.

After a couple of weeks, Suk-chi moved back home, noting that while they were separated, she and Edmond sent each other emails and talked over the phone. Suk-chi said, “It’s really difficult. I feel difficult and so does he. But, I have to move forward to maintain the relationship. It takes a lot of patience to work it out.”

Suk-chi sighed and said that now she opens conversation with her husband when she is mad at him. However, Su-chi indicated that she does not like to do so, and sometimes it bothers her when she initiates conversation. She said:

I think I am a girl always full of pride and now I feel I lose my dignity in front of him. It is hard to explain, I just feel like I lose my dignity if I talk to him first, and I lose my face.

Although Suk-chi does not like to initiate conversation with her husband when she is angry, she explained that when she speaks first in a “silent” situation, things seem to work out. And if things “work out,” she said she is encouraged. Suk-chi added, “May be I should use different methods to deal with this relationship.”

Suk-chi noted that she encounters many difficulties in her intercultural marriage. She described her views on intercultural relationships:

It is an interesting thing. I think Chinese women are more serious about intimacy relationship than Americans once involved in it. I think if I were an American woman and I have fights with my partner, I will consider breaking up the relationship. Then I will start another relationship with somebody else. For me, as long as I fall in love with somebody, I will try every method to save my relationship. Honestly, this is the hardest
relationship I’ve ever had in my whole life.

Before coming to the US, Suk-chi said she had never been away from her home and had always with her family. When Suk-chi came to Alaska, she said that she did not own a car and therefore could not go anywhere. She described her life as a newcomer to Alaska in this way:

I had no friends and I had no one to talk with. I felt lonely here. What I could think about was coldness and darkness. Before taking classes at UAF, I found nothing interesting me in my life. I was suffering from being separated from the world. I cried a lot. I felt really disappointed. I have no connection with people, no family, and no friends. I hadn’t built up friendships yet. I just wanted some relationships. I would stay at the office without saying a word. I didn’t like it. I hate to cry. I wanted to know someone and I believed a relationship might help me get rid of all of the unhappiness in my life.

Suk-chi said when she met Edmond, she treated the relationship seriously and said the relationship was very important to her. Because Suk-chi took the relationship so seriously, she said, “When we have problems, I just easily get mad and get real mad because I only focus on the relationship with him.” Sui-chi said that her husband said something to her when she “returned” home from running away that changed her views on their relationship. She recalled he said, “Well, if you don’t live happily yourself, you will not live happily with me.” Suk-chi said she appreciates her husband telling her that, and described those words as a “wake up call.” I remembered my husband’s similar words when I complained he was not “what I expected.” I told Suk-chi what my husband said: “Marriage is not the fairy tale as you expect. I try my
best to give you happiness. If you choose unhappiness, it is your choice.” Suk-chi nodded her head.

Suk-chi said that she knows her husband does love her, but she does not understand how she and her husband are living under the same roof, but thinking in two different worlds. She said she now realizes that:

They [Americans] have their own personal world. For husband-wife relationship, or boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, I combine two individual worlds into one. My complete life includes his life. But for him, he doesn’t see that way. He still wants his own space even though we have married.

Suk-chi believes that taking initiative in solving problems is a kind of self-improvement, as well as relationship-enhancement, and said she has learned from her husband that happiness is something inside herself, not given from somebody else. I asked her what was missing in her marriage and Suk-chi said gently, “I wish Edmond would pay more attention to little things. I wish he would remember to change socks.” She then laughed, and so did I.

3.3 Man-ching’s Interview

Man-ching came to Fairbanks in June, 2004, from Mainland China. She is in her early thirties, and divorced from her Chinese husband a year ago. Man-ching took the initiative to find a husband in the US, and met her current husband through her Chinese female friend’s American husband. Man-ching and her American husband, Richard, only spent half a month to get to know each other when he made a trip to China to see her. She brought her 13-year old son with her to the US. Man-ching told me she had two choices for documentary purposes in entering this country. One was a travel visa; the other was to be married to an American citizen. She explained:
I didn’t know what kind of guy he was. We only spent half a month together. A lot of things I didn’t understand. I had to give myself leeway. If I chose ‘travel,’ I could go back to China if I didn’t get along well with this guy. But, if I chose ‘married’ and I found I didn’t love this guy, I have to deal with a lot of complicated documents. What if he didn’t want to divorce? I couldn’t let him mess up my life.

Man-ching told me she decided to marry Richard after cohabitating for three months in Alaska. In considering this decision, she said, “I came here certainly for my son. I don’t take the relationship seriously and I don’t love him.” Although Man-ching repeated that she does not care about the relationship with her husband, she has expectations from him. She said:

I come here and I need somebody to take care of me. My husband is not that type. He won’t ask me *What do you want to buy?* or *Shall we go shopping today.* He just doesn’t know my inner world.

Man-ching told me her American husband is not an affectionate man and is not romantic with her. She continued, “Whenever I wanted him to buy me something, he would say it’s too expensive. He wouldn’t totally refuse, but said *later.* This makes me angry.” I asked her what she would do if she got mad at her husband. She said:

I ignore him. I could ignore him for several days. When I ignore him, he tries to talk to me, but I don’t answer. Like yesterday, we went shopping and I wanted to buy something. He didn’t want to buy it. I didn’t talk to him, didn’t smile, and rushed to work without a single word.

Man-ching told me she received flowers from her husband after giving him a few days of silent treatment, saying she suspects her son taught her husband to buy
her flowers. She said she was happy and began to talk to her husband after receiving the flowers. Man-ching laughed when she talked about her son and the way he taught her husband to make a romantic gesture.

In discussing marital conflicts, I asked Man-ching to describe specific conflicts in her relationship. She didn’t wait for me to finish the question, saying, “money, language, food, environment, too much to name.” I told her I wanted to understand her experience in all she had mentioned. When Man-ching talked about money, she said:

When I had just come here, everything was bothering me. I always called my friends in China, told them everything. I spent almost $400 on residential phone and more than $200 on my cell phone per month. My husband was stupid in not telling me I could use a phone card to save money. He just told me it’s cheap to use the home phone. I am a heavy user. I usually spend two hours in each call.

Man-ching learned from her Chinese friends who lived in Fairbanks that buying phone cards on the Internet was much cheaper. She continued, “He does not dare to say I call too much, but he will tell my son to ask me to call less because he pays too much on telephone bills.” I was interested in knowing how she could spend two hours on each phone call with friends, to which she responded immediately, “It was because of all the unhappy things when I just moved up here. Now I tell them [her friends in China] my work stuff. I’m working two jobs and I feel exhausted.”

Man-ching told me she was very disappointed when she first came to Fairbanks. She said, “My son and I were surprised…nothing, nothing here. We felt like we were arriving to an undeveloped land. I felt like we were going to live in a forest.”
Man-ching grew up in Guangzhou, China, a busy and noisy city with a variety of entertainment and many shopping malls, and said Fairbanks, Alaska was “out of my expectation.”

In an attempt to return the interview focus to marital conflict with her American husband, I asked if she and Richard experienced a language barrier. Man-ching told me she did not have conflicts with her husband regarding language, and said Richard encourages her to speak English. Man-ching was never educated in English; she only knows a few words before coming to the US and even now she said she has difficulties in daily conversation. She admitted feeling frustrated when she could not express what she intends to say. She sighed:

Even when I used my electronic English-Chinese dictionary, I still could not get him to understand what I was trying to say. Forget it, now I just don’t talk anymore, saves me trouble. I turn to the TV and he plays his computer games. My son now goes to school and he can manage English well with Richard. I ask my son if I don’t understand what my husband says, and my son makes the translation for me.

Man-ching said she does not feel badly when she does not understand what people say. She said she does not feel embarrassed because she is not involved in the conversations. However, Man-ching told me she avoids social activities if she knows no Chinese people will be present, adding she tells her husband she does not want to go to dinner with his American friends. Man-ching said she enjoys talking to her son. She said:

I would talk to my son if I am unhappy and when my husband made me mad, I would tell my son my feelings. I tell my son things that are buried in
my heart. He knows if I am unhappy and he will tell Richard what to do to
make me happy. He is a great kid.

Man-ching smiled whenever she talked about her son. She noted her son gives
her tremendous psychological support. Man-ching added that she was not happy here
before she began working. She recalled:

When I just arrived, no friends, no family, really lonely. Feelings of
isolation, helplessness, loneliness, emptiness, unhappiness, sadness…I cried.
I told my husband to buy me tickets. I want to leave right away. My
husband would do some trivial things to make me sad, but not so serious
that I would consider leaving him. He cried when I said I would leave him.
He slept in the living room that night. We are all human and we have
emotions. When I thought it over, I forgave him, for my son.

Man-ching noted she tries to learn to “take it easy” and see things positively,
which makes her happier. She has some friends who have been married to American
men for twenty years, and said they call each other quite often to comfort each other.
Man-ching said, “Talking to friends makes me view things differently.” She has
learned to comfort herself by telling herself “that’s the life, I can make it.” Man-ching
added, “Without friends and my son, I can’t imagine how I would survive. The life is
so different in the US and I feel like the day is longer than in China.” Man-ching
remembered having fun in her everyday life in China, saying she enjoyed having
morning-tea (Chinese custom and daily habit for friends and family gathering) and
playing mahjong (Chinese traditional game). She said she feels bored living in the
US.
In looking back at my own arrival in the US, I did not feel bored. Indeed, my American husband took me to different places in Alaska. He broadened my interests in exploring new things, such as planning the next vacation trip, making wood projects in our garage, etc. We love each other more than before I moved to Alaska. I asked Man-ching whether she and her husband do anything together in Alaska. She said, “He does not like traveling. We never do any since I moved up here. If he does not need to go to work, he watches TV and plays games on the computer. I watch TV. We have Chinese channels.” Because Man-ching reiterated that she does not take the marital relationship seriously and that she will not have true love with her husband, I asked her “Does he take the relationship seriously?” She did not answer the question directly, but she replied:

He’s good...especially to my son. He plays with my son everyday. I love my son and he loves my son. He is not like Shirley’s husband, he won’t inquire of me the reason for something. If I want to go out, he won’t ask me where I go and what time I will be home.

Man-ching met Shirley soon after she moved to Alaska. Shirley is our mutual Chinese friend who has also married an American man. Man-ching said Shirley’s husband likes to “keep track of her,” and added:

I don’t have big fights with him. I was angry when he scolded my son. I know sometimes he has emotions, but I got really mad. My ex-husband, he hit and scolded my son and I wouldn’t get too mad. But when I moved here, I saw my present husband scold my son and I got really mad. It is very different to me.
I asked Man-ching why she responded differently to her current husband than to her ex-husband when her son got scolded. She said, “Big difference! My ex-husband is my son’s biological father. My present husband is not.” She continued:

Do you understand...part of my son is belonging to my ex-husband. He scolded the son is natural. We [she and her son] moved all the way here, he shouldn’t and couldn’t scold my son. I was pretty angry. There was one time I heard he scolded at my son in a room. I ran after him and scolded at him. I have to protect my son. He needs to tolerate my son, just a kid, right?

Man-ching recalled Richard fearing her when she gave him a “sharp-look,” and reported he ran to the kitchen to clean up dishes when he heard her footsteps in the house. Man-ching recounted that she does not like dirty dishes in the sink and dirty clothes piling up on the floor. She described her husband as an “untidy and messy” person and said his messiness makes her mad frequently. She said she will yell at her husband when she comes home from work and see the house is messed up. She recalled that she yelled at him in this way: “You are 40 something, you should be disciplined.” Man-ching continued:

My tolerance was limited before I scolded him. It just made me angry when he said I will clean it tomorrow. Fine, I wouldn’t do it [the dishes] either because I was so mad. I can’t stand that he sits at home all day and not doing dishes. Now he learns and he will run to the kitchen and clean the dishes when he hears I turn off the [car] engine.

Again, Man-ching said she has no love for her husband and what keeps them together is because her husband treats her son well. She added, “I don’t worry about whether he loves me or not. The most important thing is living happily and having
freedom. I’m here with freedom. If not, I better die.” In describing the marital
relationship, Man-ching said, “We don’t have real love. I don’t love him and I don’t
see I will love him.” I wanted to know why she chose her current husband. She
repeated, “I heard that here [America] is good, good education for children.”
Man-ching said she was “encouraged” and “pushed” by her Chinese female friends in
the US. She said:

Even though I don’t like it here, I can earn some money here for several
years. My friend helped me seek several American guys. I didn’t have any
right guy at that time. I just took the one who gave me the fastest feedback.
I told myself ‘why not?’ Before Richard, a Canadian guy came to China to
see me, but I didn’t like him. I asked him to leave. It would be better if I
could go to Canada. I don’t love my husband.

Man-ching did not explain why she asked the Canadian “candidate” to leave and
what made her “regret” not choosing him. She was silent for a few moments, then
said:

If you love someone, you will have him in your heart, thinking of him. If
my husband doesn’t come back for a month, I won’t miss him. My feeling
to my husband is: I’m don’t completely hate him, or completely love him. I
won’t listen to him, but he will do the way I like. Anyway, I have already
married him. Let’s see. Get out of China and plan next. I don’t want to keep
waiting. You don’t know when there will be another chance.

As a friend of Man-ching, I do hope she finds happiness in her marriage.
Although I understand I should not express any opinion in the research interview, I
could not refrain from this suggestion: “He loves your son and listens to you, give it
some time, maybe you will fall in love with him. And…” Man-ching stopped me and said: “No, no way! I don’t have any feeling of love with him. Just like Shirley, I will never have true love with my husband. Do you understand?” She ended the interview with, “I hope my son is happy.”

3.4 Siu-man’s Interview

Siu-man and her American husband, Henry, met in China while Henry was traveling on a leisure trip. Siu-man is 42 and her husband is close to 60. Siu-man came to Fairbanks in February, 2002, and they married in March of the same year. Siu-man never learned formal English in China, but she practices English at home after she came to the US. I met Siu-man at UAF my second week in the US. At that time, I was searching for graduate programs and sport clubs. My husband was out of town and I played badminton with Siu-man and Henry at the Student Recreation Center. After a few encounters, I invited them to my home for dinner while my husband was still out of town. Later, my husband and Henry quickly became friends, and occasionally the four of us did things together, such as go snow-mobiling and have dinner.

Since I met Siu-man, although we have had many gatherings and chatting, she seldom discusses her feelings about marriage. Knowing my thesis topic, she began the research interview with this statement, “We don’t have problems. I’m fine here.” I realized immediately that this would be a difficult interview and I focused on how I could best elicit narratives from Siu-man regarding her marriage and emotional responses in marital conflict. I explained that the interviews with other Chinese women provided data with which to compare my own intercultural marriage experience. Further, I emphasized that the purpose of my thesis is to understand other
Chinese women's experiences with American husbands, and that she was one of the participants who had a similar marital background.

Siu-man began by telling me about some trivial things that led to marital arguments, such as what to buy at the grocery store, and where to put things in the house. She said, “Let him make choices, nothing is worth an argument. If I don’t like it [his decision-making] or I get mad, I stop talking and keep silent.” I asked what made her mad. She said Henry did not like when she spoke loudly, in particular with other Chinese people. I asked for further clarification though I have had the same experience. My husband too, criticizes when I speak loudly, as if it were yelling, and that bothers him. Siu-man and I both laughed for a while after sharing our mutual experience. When I asked her how she responded to the criticism of her voice she said, “I watched TV. I wanted to walk away from him but I wouldn’t. Where could I go? I have nowhere to go.” I then shared with her that I “ran away” when I was mad at my husband. Siu-man laughed and advised me, “Cry in the house is fine, don’t leave the house. It’s dangerous here [in US] and it is not worth it to do so.” She added, “You can break anything in the house.” She smiled and then invited me to come to her house to play table tennis when my husband made me angry. I shifted from Siu-man’s advice to asking about her marital conflicts in this new environment since she moved to the US. She said, “No, really no. But, I do have a temper. I just don’t talk. I don’t cry.”

Siu-man said that although she stops talking to her husband when she loses her temper, she gets over it very quickly. She pointed out that long silent treatments cannot improve conflict situations and can hurt the relationship. Siu-man described her husband as an “optimistic and happy” person. She said her husband influences her
attitude and behavior. Siu-man paused and stopped talking after a brief description of
her husband. I then began to share my inner world with Siu-man. I told her I had cried
a lot since I came to live with my husband in Alaska. I even told her “it’s a shame”
for me to see a counselor, and I feel like I am “a sick person” when I realize that I
need medication for depression. I related how I wish my husband could help me
instead of me having to see a counselor and take medication. Siu-man tried to comfort
me, but she told me she has no knowledge and did not understand how counseling
and medication work. She recalled feeling depressed and “very lonely right after I
moved here.” Ten days after her arrival, Siu-man and her husband went to Las Vegas
to get married, and then went to Mexico for a honeymoon. She told me her story:

It was very excited in the beginning, but it would slow down. I began
feeling lonely, very lonely. After getting back to Fairbanks, I spent two
month to clean and fix the house. I needed to find things to do to kill time. I
went to adult school taking English classes.

Siu-man tried to make new friends at the badminton club and adult language
class. She even went to church a few times, but said she did not want to go to church
and keep in touch with the people there because she said she would not call them
“friends.” She added, “I didn’t know anybody. Not everyone could you talk with. The
people in the church are complicated. I feel comfortable at home.” She said she needs
friends, but it is not easy to build friendships here, adding she does not care as much
about friendships here, but nothing that the language barrier does bother her. Siu-man
insisted, “Other than language, nothing bothers me.” Siu-man did not answer my
question about how making friends with Chinese people was a language problem.
Upon further probing Siu-man focused on functionality, fretting that she cannot
accomplish a task if she does not understand the language.

Though sharing my own stories during the interview encouraged her to speak, she continued to respond with only short answers. I told her I felt embarrassed in a dinner event with my husband’s American friends because I didn’t understand the jokes they made. I asked Siu-man her reaction to not understanding what people say and not being capable to express herself in English. She said she asked Henry to explain in a simple way if she did not understand the conversations with his friends. Similarly, she asks Henry to order food on restaurant menus when she cannot understand the words or type of food. Though she reported feeling no discomfort she added, “When I couldn’t speak in a way that let his friends understand what I said, I felt like I was an idiot, and losing face. But you can’t let people think you are an idiot.” Siu-man admitted that during dinners with Henry’s friends, she had a difficult time sitting there. But she said she overcame because Henry later explained to her.

Siu-man then added that she was treated as “invisible” from Henry’s friend during one dinner at her home. She said, “Only the two of them talked during the whole dinner. What should I do? I ignored them back, not being active and no involvement at all.” Siu-man said she whispered to her husband that she wanted to go upstairs to do some reading. However, she said Henry did not want her to leave, that he feared his friend might think he was not welcome. Siu-man sighed and continued, “Because he said so I stayed. I bit the bullet. I kept sitting at the dinner table and kept eating and eating.” It did not surprise me to hear Siu-man using American slang. Indeed, she has learned a lot from her husband and from the slang dictionary. She said it is so painful to “pretend enjoying the dinner” and feeling “invisible.” Although Siu-man does not like those feelings, she said she has to give Henry “face.” She
agrees with her husband that "it is not right" to leave his friend, saying that because she is his wife.

At this point, I felt I had not captured enough narrative data about Siu-man’s marriage. I asked her to make me some tea. While she was making tea, we talked about our mutual friends. When we returned to the “interview room” (dining room), I asked Siu-man about the process of adoption. Siu-man and her husband have wanted their own baby since they got married, but their physician told them the probability of giving birth was low. They have decided to adopt a baby in China. Siu-man was not willing to discuss this topic initially, but after a short pause, she indicated that the process took much time, money, energy, and many interviews and background checks. As yet, they have no idea when they will be allowed to go to China to adopt.

In talking about adopting child, Siu-man said she prefers an older one, perhaps ten or a bit older. But Henry prefers a newborn to three year-old. When submitting the documents, they specified the age range between newborn to three years old. Siu-man explained to me that because both she and her husband are older she is afraid that she will be “too old” when the child go to college. She added that it will be easier for them to take care of an older child than a baby. Siu-man did not elaborate on the discussion with her husband that led to their decision on the age-range of their future son or daughter.

During a quiet moment I shifted the topic to telling her about my recent conversations with my mother. I told Siu-man I does not like to call home and talk to my mother because I have no answer when she asked me when I will “come home.” Every time I told my mother “soon after my graduation,” and every time I said so I have tears in my eyes. I feel homesick even though it have been almost two and a half
years since I left my home in Hong Kong. Siu-man told me she also gets homesick.
She said, “I cried one time, not for him [her husband], but for my family.” She said
she loves her mother very much and she has not seen her mother for a long time. She
added, “When I think of her, I get tears in my eyes.” Siu-man and Henry plan to visit
her mother in China by the end of this year, she told me.

During the conversational interview with Siu-man, Henry and my husband were
in the living room watching TV. Siu-man asked me to go into the living room to look
at the figurine on top of the TV set. I did not understand at first, but she asked me to
pick up, the Chinese naked baby figurine. I showed it to my husband, and all of us
laughed. Siu-man touched the baby’s big butt and looked at her husband. She laughed
and said, “He has a white big butt as Henry’s,” adding as she turned to me, “We both
like to make fun of each other. We have a lot of jokes.”

It was almost 11 p.m. My husband gave me the “eye-signal” and I knew “time to
leave.” I told Siu-man I had one more question for her before we left. She told me to
“ignore them,” with a smile. I asked her if anything is missing in her marriage.
Siu-man’s smile disappeared. She said:

We are too old to have a baby, I don’t feel disappointed and I have no
complaint. My life is great. What should I complain for? All our arguments
are just trivial things. I told him, he changed my life and gives me a lot of
support and hope. He is very optimistic and that influences me. One of our
feet is in the grave. Why make your life so difficult? We all should enjoy
life.

Before ending the interview, Siu-man said no one has a perfect life, including in
marriage. She alleges Henry was the only man who ever sent her flowers and showed
her respect in all her years in China. She continued, "Children. We Chinese believe a complete family should have children." She said she believes the children will take care of her when she gets old and will give her happiness.

3.5 Pui-ling’s Interview

Pui-ling came from Hong Kong, and lived in New York City for almost three years. Before moving to Alaska, she lived in Oklahoma for three years where she met her American husband, Simon. After being together for two years they married in February, 2004, and moved to Alaska in May, 2004, when Simon was transferred to the local military base. Pui-ling said she basically has no problems in living in the US, but she said the weather, especially winters in Alaska, bother her. Pui-ling turned 27 years old last year, and gave birth to a baby boy, who will soon turn six months old. Pui-ling said marrying an American, living in Alaska, and having a baby have been tremendous adjustments for her.

I met Pui-ling at a party last summer. We have a mutual friend, Michelle, who also came from Hong Kong and who has been living in Fairbanks for twenty-three years. Michelle often tells Pui-ling and me, "You can come over for dinner and stay anytime you want," Because she knows both our husbands sometimes work out of town. Pui-ling and I treat her like a "mother" in Fairbanks. Pui-ling and I have become close friends after spending much time together in Michelle’s home.

Pui-ling suggested conducting the interview at our mutual friend, Sau-king’s office. Pui-ling brought her baby with her on day of the interview. She looked tired, saying she did not sleep well because the baby had cried all night and she had to feed the baby every couple of hours.
Pui-ling knew my thesis topic before she became a participant. She began with “let me tell you our conflicts,” and explained that most of her marital conflicts are about money. She added, “The way of using money is completely different between Chinese and American,” and recalled when Simon bought a truck without discussing the purchase with her. Pui-ling said, “It is a problem. You have to discuss with your wife or husband before you decide to buy a truck. He bought it without asking me. I was angry and didn’t talk to and look at him for several days.” I wondered why this action made her so angry that she could ignore her husband for so long. Pui-ling said, “He doesn’t get used to it, just doesn’t get used to it,” noting that she told her husband many times that she wants him to discuss with her before spending money, but he just “doesn’t listen.” She claimed that her husband knew she did not want him to buy the truck but did so anyway.

Pui-ling told me her husband immediately offered her the key to try out the new truck right away, but she totally ignored him because she was angry. She reiterated that their financial situation is always tight and that it was unnecessary to change to a new truck from the old one within six months, adding that Simon was not smart enough to know that the newer model would be available so soon. Pui-ling said whenever they talk about money, they annoy each other to the point that they stop talking to each other.

I have met Simon several times at parties and dinners. He seldom talked, and was very quiet in all situations. I was interested in knowing how he attracted Pui-ling. She said, “He basically is a good guy. But when I was angry, I would think why did I marry him? I think a lot, but I don’t know why? Probably a wrong decision.” I was surprised to hear this since they just have a baby, so prompted her to elaborate on
their relationship, to which she replied:

Since I moved up here I am so easy to get angry. I don’t know...It is probably because I have a lot of things ‘growing inside my heart’ and nobody to talk to. There was one time I was so upset. I told him I regretted marrying him. I really did have that feeling.

I felt empathy for Pui-ling and wished I could have known her earlier so that I could have helped her through her difficult time. Pui-ling added that she regretted marrying Simon because she did not know him well. I suggested that she “avoid negative thinking” by saying “you can get to know him better even after being married.” Pui-ling insisted, “After being married, I found it even worse. He has a lot of shortcomings.” I asked her to elaborate, to which she responded, “Wow! It’s not difficult, too many to tell.” Pui-ling complained that her husband does not have objectives in his life; that she does not like him working in the military because she does not want him to “run around;” she wants her husband to get more education so that he can get a better job and earn more money. Pui-ling described her husband as “not smart, not aggressive, not affectionate, and not romantic.” She said she is disappointed because “it is impossible for him to be affectionate. It is hopeless.”

I shared with Pui-ling that my husband and I have conflicts because we hold different views on some things, but at the same time we appreciate our differences. I asked Pui-ling to think about times that she appreciated what her husband did. She said, “I never think about that. Really.” She then continued to complain that her husband has no plan to save money to buy a house. Pui-ling and I are friends who can tease each other. I teased her, “welcome to the US, Mrs. American.” We both laughed. I teased her and laughed because I believe my American husband is similar to
Pui-ling's husband with regard to "saving money."

Pui-ling then recalled other conflicts in her relationship, for instance when Simon failed to call her when he did not get home by the time he had said he would. She said she worried about his safety and at the same time she was angry with him because he did not "report" to her. Pui-ling said she did not understand why it was so difficult for her husband to give her a call. She said her husband answered that he never did it before and why should he do it now. Pui-ling reasoned that her husband does not understand that she is concerned for his safety, and that this is the duty of good husband. She noted that giving her a call means "you care about me, you are concerned about me, and you love me." Pui-ling told me she is okay with the US environment during the first three years of living in New York City and the three years in Oklahoma. But when she was pregnant, she said she wanted to go back to Hong Kong. She recalled that during her pregnancy she experienced feeling:

Isolated, lonely, and helpless. Simon was always in the field and I felt bored. I was scared and always thinking something would happen. I kept thinking to go back to Hong Kong. At least dad and mom could help me. Further, he needed to be sent to the field at the time our baby was almost born. The fear was very strong. I need to go back to Hong Kong. I described myself as a lonely and isolated person here.

Pui-ling elaborated that she was afraid of contractions and how to take care of the baby because she had no experience in giving birth. She said she thought she wanted to go back to Hong Kong after the baby was born, and added that she wanted her parents see their grandson. I asked Pui-ling whether she discussed her feelings with her husband, and she responded that he knew because she cried. She added that
she did not have close friends in Oklahoma when she became pregnant, and said she was helpless and bored when she was home alone.

Although Pui-ling told her husband how she felt, she said she got no help from him. She acknowledged he did apologize for not being able to help at the time she was pregnant. She reiterated that she wants her husband to change jobs so that he will have more time to take care of her and the baby. Pui-ling disclosed that she still wants her husband to go to university and get a degree so that he can get a better job, and commented that he cannot do anything when he gets out of the military because he has no education and no other work experience. When Pui-ling said she hopes her husband can change jobs, she revealed she is very sad that her husband will be deployed to Iraq in August this year. She recounted that her father has offered them tickets to Hong Kong before Simon’s deployment; because she is worried about what can happen to him, she has asked him to go with her to see her family before leaving for Iraq. However, Pui-ling said her husband does not want to use her father’s money and told her he will go to Hong Kong after returning from Iraq. Pui-ling said she does not know what to do and hopes she can eventually convince her husband.

We were both quiet for a while at this point. I tried to make the atmosphere relaxed by disclosing to Pui-ling that one of the Chinese women I interviewed “forced” her husband to eat vegetables. Pui-ling smiled and recalled one situation in which she asked her husband to eat some fruits and vegetables. She said, “He didn’t listen to my words. But I didn’t get mad at him because I knew I couldn’t force him to eat something that he didn’t like. I cooked for myself.”

Attempting to clarify what Pui-ling had told me about conflict in her relationship, she quickly interrupted, informing me Simon watching TV made her angry. Pui-ling
described one episode:

After taking off his socks, the first thing he did was to watch TV. He sat on the couch and watched TV, or browsed Internet. They chatted (via Internet) till 3 a.m. He’s off for a week and all week he just spent time watching TV, browsing Internet, and chatting on the Internet. Why didn’t he spend the time with me? I felt like he ignored me. I was angry and he just said ‘sorry.’

Pui-ling said her husband does not know what she wants nor what she thinks. She said when she got upset or angry, her husband asked her, “are you OK?” She replied, “OK,” noting that her husband cannot tell when she is okay or when she is not ‘OK.” She said her husband does not know how to “read” her face, and offered this story:

While I was carrying the baby, I felt upset and unhappy all the time. I would let him know if I wanted to go out for a walk. He would say ‘OK.’ After a while, he would realize I was upset. When I was angry, I wouldn’t talk to him, but I would slam the door to let him know I was angry. It still took some time for him to figure out I was angry. He was kind of slow.

Pui-ling said she would wonder whether her husband knew she was angry even when she slammed the door. She said, “Probably he didn’t. He didn’t chase me.” Pui-ling said she will not quarrel and will not stay in the same room with her husband when she is angry, but instead exercises and give herself some private time. She added, “I put my anger inside. Sometimes I talk to friends, as a kind of release.” Pui-ling said she believes that talking to friends and being listened to are helpful because friends offer different perspectives, adding she is lucky to have Michelle and me. Pui-ling recalled that being very bored staying at home when she arrived in
Fairbanks. She told me her husband found a “Chinese church” in the yellow pages and encouraged her to meet new friends.

Before ending the interview, Pui-ling revealed, “I hope he will go to university to get a degree and hope he will form objectives in his life.”

3.6 Sau-king’s Interview

Sau-king has been living in Fairbanks for almost 32 years since she married and left Hong Kong. She is in her late fifties and has been running her own business for more than 15 years in Fairbanks. She met her American husband, Jonathan, in Hong Kong while he was performing military service. Sau-king was a lounge singer at the time and met Jonathan during “Happy Hour” when he and his colleagues were stationed in Hong Kong. Sau-king recalled the song she dedicated to Jonathan, “Let it be me.” She shared their history of Jonathan’s letters to her when he returned to the US, recounting when her younger brother died and Jonathan flew to Hong Kong to see her and attend the funeral. They were engaged and got married after another six months.

Sau-king described Jonathan as a “very detail-oriented and affectionate” person during their courtship. She said, “He was afraid I was too sad for my brother’s death and he came to see me immediately. He cared so much about me and I was moved.” Sau-king said she did not have a boyfriend at that time and had never considered a foreign husband as an option for marriage. She said that she was young and believed “love will grow and blossom” after marriage.

The interview took place in her office, and Sau-king began with “You can start questions, I’m ready. You want to know conflicts in my marriage, right?” Sau-king both asked and then answered herself, which made me laugh. She recounted, “Big
change and adaptation. When I was new here, I knew nobody, not even one. Nothing, nothing here. Most of the time, I closed the door and cried.” She remembered being homesick and lonely, in particular when she was pregnant, noting she was pregnant “immediately” after her arrival in Alaska. Sau-king recalled that while she was pregnant her husband was not home, saying he had just finished military service and had another job. She recalled he was very busy and most of the time arrived home late. She recounted, “changing to a better life” after having two children, saying felt less lonely and more supported. But when she cried, she said, “he was not there,” looking downward at the recollection. She then shifted to another topic, saying Fairbanks has no authentic Chinese restaurant and that she “missed that a lot.” Sau-king had a habit of morning-tea (in Chinese 飲早茶 yin zao cha) while she was living in Hong Kong (most Hong Kong people go morning tea everyday). In addition, she said the food in America does not fit her “appetite,” such as hamburgers. Most of the time she cooks for herself something that she likes. Nowadays, she said she will go to Anchorage for “morning-tea” to cheer her up.

I did not need to encourage Sau-king in the interview. She remembered that “everything was not going well” in the beginning. She told of the difficulties she encountered in the first few years in Fairbanks, saying she had no idea that the temperature went to 50 below zero, adding “I was freezing and shocked...[and found Fairbanks]....too dark.” Sau-king recalled, “I wanted to leave. I just wanted to go back to Hong Kong.”

Sau-king said she was upset and got angry easily in the first few years of her marriage, for “everything not going her way.” Sau-king said that once she began working she knows more things and makes friends, noting “I have more
conversations with Jonathan. We are more close and intimate.” Sau-king smiled when she mentioned her husband. I teased her and called her “old-husband-old-wife (in Chinese 老夫老妻 lao fu lao qi).” We both laughed. I dared to ask her a direct question: “Did he do something that made you mad?” She laughed and said, “I get really mad when he teases my English.” Sau-king said even nowadays her husband teases her about her English at times. She continued, “He picks on me when I don’t say something right. He teases me and I feel embarrassed, especially when he makes fun of me in front of his friends.” Sau-king added, “He knows I am so mad. People laugh at me and he still thinks it is funny. Even if I tell him I don’t like it, he still does it.” She said she now will ask her husband how to pronounce and use a word if she does not know it, but reiterated that she does not like her husband’s teasing.

When broaching the subject of what she did not like about her husband, she said, “Gambling. There is nothing wrong with gambling, but he doesn’t like it and doesn’t like for me to gamble.” Sau-king explained that gambling is a fun activity which can share. She also said mahjong (in Chinese “打牌” da pai or “打麻將” da ma jiang, one form of Chinese gambling) trains people’s brain and hands to work well. Sau-king recalled one incident in which both she and her husband became angry with each other. She said, “I wanted to go to Las Vegas, but he didn’t want to go and told me he didn’t like me gambling. I was pretty mad.” She indicated that she refuses to give up gambling, even though Jonathan perceives gambling as “wrong.”

At this point, I thought Sau-king was still mad when talking about the different views with her husband on gambling. I didn’t dare to ask “what else?” But Sau-king continued, saying she understands and that her husband has a “reason” not to like some of her interests, but added that she is not angry if her husband does not like to
join in activities that she engages in with her Chinese friends. She said, “We all speak Chinese. If he is there, he will be knocked-out,” noting empathy for her husband in this situation and adding she will not “force” him to join her and her friends.

Sau-king cleared her throat, got a drink of water, and then gave an account of the differing views she and her husband have regarding:

We used to argue a lot about money. I’m talking about the ownership of money. It took us ten years to compromise on how to manage our money. Now I take care of my own bills in my own business, and he takes care of household stuff and the car. If I need money I will ask him and he will openly ask me if he needs money. He changed my concept of ‘my money is mine, mine is mine.’

Sau-king admitted that she has to learn sharing, recounting how she used to do things her way, but now has learned everything should be shared and trusted in a marital relationship. Although Sau-king and her husband view gambling differently, Sau-king said her husband will go with her to Las Vegas, and he accepts gambling as her interest, while she accepts him “not being involved.” She added, “At least, he will stand behind me and watch me gamble.”

Sau-king remarked that Jonathan does not like her going out without letting him know when she will be home, saying that her husband declares her a “liar” because she never comes home when she plans. She pointed out it is difficult to pinpoint a specific time to return home when attending gatherings, in particular when playing games with friends. Sau-king said her husband makes her mad when he calls her a “liar,” so she ignores him.
Sau-king has a large friendship network, and said “knowing people” is important to her. She continued, “You need friends to talk to when you want somebody to listen.” Sau-king acknowledged that when she wants to talk to her husband and he does not listen to her, she will become quiet and ignore him. She added, “When I gave my husband the silent treatment, he would ask me to hit him. But I wouldn’t…and I would not allow him to touch me.” Sau-king admitted sometimes she really would like to hit her husband when she is angry with him. But, she continued, “We hold hands until both of us calm down.”

When describing adjusting to her life with a new husband in a foreign country, she admitted, “Changes are necessary.” She offered this advice:

Do not “hibernate” yourself. Find something to do and occupy yourself.

There are a lot of things you can explore, discover your interests. A good marriage requires tolerance, patience, acceptance, and giving.

Sau-king emphasized that she would not allow herself to think about divorce. She said when she was angry, she would ignore her husband for a few days, but is careful not to say things that cannot be taken back. Before I ended the interview, I asked Sau-king after 32 years of marriage, if anything is missing in her marriage. She repeated my question and said, “Nothing, nothing that is really important now.”
Chapter 4

Analysis

The previous chapter provides narrative descriptions of the six co-researchers’ lived experience in their intercultural marriages. Narrative inquiry involves entering into a relationship with other human beings, and inquiring into the experiences and interpretations of the participants. In conversational interviews, the researcher and the participants create dialogue that enables one to understand the participants’ meanings. Analyzing these dialogues is a reflexive activity between my inner dialogue and the dialogue with these women that generates a rich source of knowledge. According to Polkinghorne (1988), studying narrative meaning aims to “make explicit the operations that produce its particular kind of meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence” (p. 6). Narrative analysis, as described by Mishler (1991), “requires close attentiveness to what interviewers and respondents say to each other, and how they say it” (p. 76).

This research used narratives to inquire into: 1) The Chinese women’s experience of conflict in their intercultural marriage, and 2) their emotional responses to that conflict. Narrative inquiry involves developing central themes from key concepts in the dialogue. I draw narrative meanings from the women’s stories based on my understanding as the researcher. The six primary themes apparent from the narratives are: 1) The Chinese women have unique, individual reasons for marrying American men; 2) The Chinese women do not experience language differences as a source of conflict in their intercultural marriages; 3) The Chinese women have difficulty accepting and adjusting to what they see as independence on the part of their American husbands; 4) The Chinese women experience qi liang (in Chinese
4.1 The Chinese Women have Unique, Individual Reasons for Marrying American Men

The six Chinese women participating in this research experience different meanings in their intercultural marriages. They did not marry their American husbands for one particular common reason. Among the six Chinese women, only Man-ching had a specific preference for choosing a foreign husband. She was influenced by her Chinese female friends who had also married American husbands, and the friends encouraged her to “try.” For Man-ching, the role of husband is not important in her marriage; all that matters is her son. She said that she does not experience a feeling of love with her husband. She insisted that she will not love him. She married her American husband for the sake of her son. She said, “I came here certainly for my son. I don’t take the relationship seriously.” Marrying an American husband, Man-ching believes, will ensure her son a better education and better life than he would have in China. Man-ching actually does not care “who” her husband is. She regrets she did not choose the Canadian man she once knew, believing he might have given her a better life than her current husband. Man-ching seeks a man, instead of a husband, and is satisfied as long as “the man” loves her son and shows “care” by buying her things to keep her satisfied.

Siu-man and Sau-king said they do not see “foreign” husbands as an issue in their marriages selection criteria. For Siu-man, her husband’s tender affection and his display of respect are things she had never experienced in China, and those qualities
attracted her to him. Siu-man said her husband was the only man who ever sent her flowers and respected her, and this romantic display makes him a "good" husband. She treasures the relationship with her husband and knows how to "manage" her husband by letting him make decisions. Siu-man also perceives she is a lucky woman compared with other women from Mainland China who have married American men. She does not allow trivial things to start arguments with her husband and sees marriage as both give and take.

For Sau-king, her husband's caring for her is important in her marriage and she believes, "love grows and blossoms." She understands that a happy marriage requires learning, understanding, sharing, and accepting by the two relationship parties. Although Sau-king cannot change the way her husband fails to see gambling as her way of promoting friendships in the Fairbanks Chinese community, she appreciates that her husband comes with her and watches her play, and believes his presence shows respect for her. Sau-king has learned independence in this country, she runs her own business, she has her own interests, and most important to her, she has many friends. Because she knows she cannot solely rely on and focus on her husband, she has made changes for herself, creating activities that interest her. Also, because Sau-king works and has her own interests and friends, she perceives her independence creates more relational conversations and activities, resulting in a closer relationship with her husband.

Pui-ling wants security in her marriage. She interprets a secure marriage as one where her husband has plans for the future. She believes that if her husband would attend university and get a degree, he would get a better job and earn more money for the family. Pui-ling does not like it that her husband is too "American" in doing
things independently. She hopes her husband will “involve” her more in the relationship, such as discussing with her before making decisions, and spending more time together. Most important for her is that her husband go to Hong Kong with her so that her parents can see their newborn baby. For Pui-ling, it is her obligation to take their baby to meet the grandparents, but she knows her husband does not perceive the obligation in this way. Pui-ling worries about her husband if he does not call to inform her when he will arrive home if he needs to work later than scheduled. I could easily see the worry she is experiencing when she said she “worried about his safety.”

Pui-ling said she might be have made a wrong decision about marrying her husband when she was saying that so many things were “growing inside my heart” that she obtained no support from no one, especially her husband. And that led her to thinking she regretted to the marriage. She also mentioned that she was “so easy to get angry” since she moved to Alaska. I have the same experience as Pui-ling with regard to “anger.” I cannot explain why I get angry more easily than while I was living in Hong Kong, but I believe I formed different expectations when I moved to Alaska, in particular with regard to how my husband treats me. I assume that a husband should always be understanding in all situations with his wife. I especially feel like I sacrificed something in leaving my home country for my husband. I sometimes said things like “Alaska does not belong to me, you do not belong to me, and I want to go back to Hong Kong” to my husband when I was angry with him for not being supportive and loving. Based on my experience, I think Pui-ling might have been influenced by the transition from one environment to another environment, and that that affected her emotional condition. This may explain Pui-ling saying some
“hurtful” words while she was stressed-out by uncertainty after moving to Alaska, and having a baby at the same time. After the interview, Pui-ling told me her husband began using his off-duty hours to work another job to support the family since the baby was born. The same day, she sent me an email asking me “Am I too bossy?” Pui-ling knows marrying an American husband requires a tremendous adjustment, and that adjustment is important to her marriage.

Suk-chi compares her Chinese ex-boyfriend with her American husband, saying her husband is not an affectionate person and does not give her enough love. Her experience in the relationship with a Chinese ex-boyfriend informs her that a Chinese partner is better than an American. Her “husband model” frames a husband as one who should pay attention to every detail, and should treat her like a “princess,” as her Chinese ex-boyfriend treated her.

Suk-chi believes that she and her husband are one unit, while her husband sees them as two individuals. For her, her husband is very important to her and a center that she focuses on. Because she focuses heavily on the relationship, she expects her husband to provide everything she wants. Although Suk-chi feels she is losing face and dignity by initiating conversation with her husband when conflict arises, she is willing to make a sacrifice in her intercultural marriage and she will try every possible method to save the relationship because she takes it very seriously. It is also consistent with the marriage concept in traditional Chinese society that once a woman marries a man, she should listen to, obey, and be respectful to her husband. Intercultural marriage is an extra challenge to Suk-chi because she believes she needs to learn, accept, and change the way she deals with her relationship.
Wei-kuen has a different view of her intercultural marriage. For her, it is new and full of curiosity. Wei-kuen treats her marriage as an “adventure” with much to explore and learn. She finds similar-culture couples less interesting. For Wei-kuen, the most difficult thing to deal with in her intercultural marriage is the language barrier. She hopes that she can speak better English so that she can communicate better with her husband. Wei-kuen also believes that if her husband knew more about her culture, they would have better understanding of each other.

4.2 The Chinese Women Do Not Experience Language Differences as a Source of Conflict in their Intercultural Marriages

Some of the women in this study encounter the language barrier in being unable to express what they intend to say, and in not understanding what their husbands or their husbands’ friends say. Similarly, when my husband does not understand what I am trying to tell him, I expect that he should be patient and help me improve my English. For instance, he should listen and make suggestions about wording so that I can be better able to communicate with him. However, my husband sometimes responds with “what did you say?” and walks away. At other times, when he talks to his family over the phone, he likes me to join in the conversation. My husband knows I do not like it because I have difficulty in communicating with his family in English. When we talk about this issue, I blame him for not being understanding, and he argues in return that I do not have any problem speaking English. Besides, my husband wants me to take care of more phone calls such as arranging air tickets with travel agents and clarifying bills with billing companies, etc. I argue with him that he can do a better job than I will do and that his not doing it upsets me. He says I need to learn to do this in order to be more independent. My own experience leads me to
believe that language differences are likely to be a source of marital conflict.

Interestingly, only one of the six women in this study experiences the language barrier as a source of conflict. Sau-king does not like her husband teasing her English speaking, in particular in front of people. She told her husband that she does not like it and feels embarrassed when he imitates the way she speaks, but her husband still likes making fun of the way she speaks.

The language barrier disturbs the other women, but it does not constitute a source of conflict in their marriages. For example, Siu-man and Wei-kuen ask their husbands to explain things said by others after the conversation is over, and that is not a problem to them. However, the language barrier bothers Siu-man in that she cannot accomplish a task if she does not understand the language. Although Siu-man admitted that she feels embarrassed and does not like that people may think she is an "idiot" when she does not understand the conversation, the language barrier has not become a source of conflict in her marriage. She found ways to not be active in the interaction, such as "bite the bullet," and pretended to enjoy the dinner by continuing to eat. She sometimes tries to "escape the scene" by telling her husband she wants to read (as in one situation where her husband and his friend treated her as "invisible"). Unlike Siu-man who will go with her husband to all events, my husband knows I am uncomfortable with my English in front of his American friends. Sometimes he shows an unpleasant attitude if I do not go with him for activities. Although I go with him to American parties every now and then, we often argue while on the way to the party.

In the same situation, Wei-kuen pretended she understood the conversation. However, on the other hand, what she did not understand did bother her because she desired to know what was going on in the conversation when she was one of the
interactants. Wei-kuen might be in a state of ambivalence in this situation, but language difference is not a source of conflict in her marriage. Like Siu-man, Wei-kuen tried to avoid any verbal interaction by locking herself in the office so that she could eliminate the bother of having to ask people to repeat what they say.

Man-ching believes no one will understand her English speaking, except her husband. Indeed, her husband encourages her to speak as much as she can so that she can improve her English speaking. Although Man-ching feels frustrated when she tries to express what she intends to say, she gives up by saying “forget it,” “just don’t talk anymore,” and shifted to doing other things such as watching TV, instead of letting the language barrier bother her. Man-ching told her husband she didn’t want to join the dinner or any social activities with his friends to avoid speaking English. When she needs to attend his husband’s social gatherings, she is not involved in the conversation. Now because her son goes to school, Man-ching will ask her son to translate for her and that works well.

This research indicates that these Chinese women do not experience language differences as a source of conflict in their intercultural marriages. The results are not consistent with Littlejohn and Domenici’s (2001) statement that “When difference gets in the way, conflict results” (p.4). Apparently, the women are able to find their own ways to deal with the language difference without overt conflicts in their marriages. This finding is significant, and contrary to my expectation when I began this research. Although the language difference bothers the women, they choose to internalize this disturbance, rather than expressing it to their husbands hence it does not constitute marital conflict, in that, according to Hocker and Wilmot (1998), interpersonal conflict is “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent
parties" (p. 53).

4.3 **The Chinese Women have Difficulty Accepting and Adjusting to What They See as Independence on the Part of their American Husbands**

For the women in this study, marital conflict arises when they experience dissatisfaction regarding spending money, household responsibilities such as house cleaning, activities such as watching TV, and emotional needs such as attention, care, and love. The range of sources of conflict is broad, but there is one significant common theme underlying many of these sources of conflict. In one way or another, the independence of the American husband presents issues for the Chinese women. This independence is a source of conflict because it affects the level of attention and intimacy the husbands provide, as well as affecting the financial relationship and decision-making of the couples.

Regarding the need for attention, Wei-kuen feels her husband does not care much about what happens to her, and does not even like her to care about him. In China, preparing food for others and eating it with them are central cultural expressions of caring and camaraderie. Wei-kuen showed her care for her husband by giving him healthy food such as vegetables, and putting the vegetables on his plate. Her husband refused to eat them and did not like to be forced to do so. In my own experience, my American husband responds similarly if I put vegetables on his plate. He will say, "I don’t like them" without realizing or considering that my act was my way of caring for him. In most situations, when I am ready to eat, I ask my husband "do you want some?" or I go ahead and prepare food for him, but only rarely does my husband reciprocate. My understanding is that this is because he lived alone for a long time and grew very accustomed to doing these things independently, in his own
way. In my culture, my family and friends always “ask” and “prepare” in an eating environment to show caring. As Wei-kuen says, “American people are too independent and that they do not like being helped.”

In this study, Wei-kuen, Suk-chi, and Man-ching’s husbands do not like tidying the house, such as stacking dishes in the sink, taking off shoes, etc. Man-ching does not like her husband to leave dishes unattended. She hates to see the house looking messy. Although traditionally Chinese wives have been viewed as homemakers and Chinese husbands as breadwinners, Chinese husbands are not only responsible for earning money to support their families, but also responsible for helping their wives do housework, including laundry and cleaning dishes. I similarly do not like my husband spreading dirty clothes over the floor. But he insists this was his way long before I moved in. The husbands’ habits and their refusal to change their ways demonstrate their independence: “I am what I am.” Regarding spending money, Pui-ling does not like it that her husband spends money without discussing it with her first, in particular for an expensive item such as a new truck. Not only because her husband does not discuss it with her, but also because of their financial situation. Pui-ling thinks such a purchase is a major burden. Pui-ling complains that her husband spends money without planning, and that bothers her. Traditionally, China is a patriarchal society in which husbands are decision makers; however, husbands also show their love and respect to their wives and acknowledge their concern for their wives by involving them in decision-making regarding the family.

Man-ching complains that her husband does not buy her things that she wants or “delays” the purchase. Her husband also does not like her to spend too much money on telephone calls. Interestingly, Man-ching and her husband do not have direct
arguments about these topics, while Sau-king and her husband experienced a lot of arguments about spending money and the ownership of money early in their marriages. Sau-king did not let her husband use her money, even if her husband was in need. She did not trust her husband to return it to her. Her husband did not spend his own money for her gambling. Sau-king and her husband took ten years to understand and trust each other. Although now they share money when they are in need, they still keep separate bank accounts because Sau-king is influenced by the independence of her American husband and being an “American.”

The Chinese women express concern about how their husbands spend their time, and relate their choices to their character and their love for their wives. For Man-ching and Pui-ling, their husbands’ sitting all day watching TV, playing computer games, and browsing the Internet are not productive and are wasting time. Man-ching perceives her husband as lazy. Pui-ling perceives these activities as her husband preferring to spend time on other unimportant things, rather than spending time with her. Since Man-ching needs more togetherness from her husband, including decision-making and spending time together, she has a difficult time accepting and adjusting to her husband doing things on his own. Suk-chi has a strong sense of commitment in her marital relationship. Her husband became the center in her life after she married him. She believes that two people should be combined into one entity and should be living in one world. Suk-chi is learning to give her husband more privacy even though they are living under one roof.

Each of the women feels the need for their husbands to give them attention and tender affection, to represent their love for them. However, when the women express their love to their husbands and their husbands do not reciprocate in an expected way,
the women feel dissatisfaction and disappointment. They express that while they see marriage as the joining of two people into one, their husbands merely see two people living together. The ways of living and the experience of connectedness and autonomy in the marriage relationship are very different between the Chinese women and their American husbands.

Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) relational-dialectics perspective emphasizes that all relationship parties experience both connectedness and autonomy simultaneously, and that the tension between connectedness and autonomy within the couple does not have an ultimate resolution. A healthy relationship is “one in which the parties manage to satisfy both oppositional demands” (p. 6), which requires an ongoing negotiation between the parties. Although it holds true that both connectedness and autonomy are important, the present study shows that the understanding of connectedness and autonomy and the emphasis placed on each is very different between Chinese wives and American husbands. The Chinese wives prioritize connection over autonomy, even though autonomy is and must be addressed in Chinese culture. When the Chinese women come together with American men in intercultural marriages, the American husbands seek a high level of independence while the Chinese women seek connection. This leads the women to find their marriages as lacking something.

4.4 The Chinese Women Experience Qi Liang in their Intercultural Marriages

Given their cultural expectations regarding the nature of the self, the Chinese women had the initial expectation that when they got married, the two people would become one in the sense that there would be no boundary between their personal self
and the self of their husbands. This expectation led Suk-chi to strongly express her thoughts that an intimate relationship should have a commitment between the two relational parties, and individual self should become less important. The women were all surprised to find out that their American husbands did not see marriage this way. The men rather saw marriage as two separate and independent selves living together and sharing many things. This expectation is consistent with the American perception of the singular, monadic self. Americans perceive “self as a center,” as in Stewart and Bennett (1991), “Americans naturally assume that each person is not only a separate biological entity, but also a unique psychological being and a singular member of the social order” (p. 129).

The Chinese women report that they have a strong feeling of *qi liang*, which includes loneliness, helplessness, isolation, sadness, and emptiness. This occurs both because they do not have a support network from friends, family, work, and interest groups, and because they do not get their expected level of emotional support from their husbands. When the women are feeling *qi liang*, they cry and isolate themselves from their husbands.

For example, Suk-chi felt *qi liang* when she was suffering from “being separated from the world.” She has an expectation of her American husband and believes that an intimate relationship will give her happiness in the US. Siu-man feels homesick because she misses her mother in China. She felt very lonely when she began her life in the US. When she feels lonely she does things to occupy herself such as cleaning and fixing the house, and playing badminton with friends. Sau-king and Pui-ling also experienced *qi liang* in the beginning of their lives in Alaska because they did not have friends and family. During their pregnancies they felt isolated, lonely, and
helpless. Sau-king cried and locked herself in a room when her husband was not there while she was pregnant. Pui-ling felt extremely *qi liang*, especially when her husband was serving in the field. She felt uncertainty about being a mother and uncertainty about their baby. She cried to let her husband know how lonely and helpless she was, and that she expected he would spend more time at home with her. Now that the baby is born, Pui-ling hopes that her husband will go with the baby and her to Hong Kong to see her parents. Man-ching feels *qi liang* has nothing to do with her American husband. She chooses not to give him an opportunity to love her, but she has the experience of *qi liang* because in comparison with her husband, her son, her friends, and her family are more important. When she began her life in the US, she was overwhelmed by the “feelings of isolation, helplessness, loneliness, emptiness, unhappiness, and sadness.” She cried and she wanted to leave this country immediately.

Although Wei-kuen never describes herself as a “lonely” person, she felt isolated when in a situation that she did not understand what other people were saying. She chose to be “lonely” because if she kept asking questions, she thought she would “take away people’s joyfulness.” She also locked herself in her office and kept away from the people to avoid the chance of not understanding other people’s conversations. If she were working or studying in China, where she shared the same cultural background and language as most others, she would not feel *qi liang*. Similarly, I describe myself as a quiet person, but I never describe myself as “*qi liang*” until I moved to Alaska. Even nowadays, when I sometimes feel homesick, that I lack friends and my husband’s support, and that no one understands me, I feel isolated, lonely, and helpless (in Chinese 孤獨無助 *gu du wu zu*).
The women in this study feel *qi liang* in one way or another. Unlike anger, loneliness is not associated with physiological manifestations, at least not in an obvious way. Even though the women cried when they felt *qi liang*, they provided no clue for their husbands that they were lonely, empty, or feeling helpless. The loneliness feelings in the Chinese women likely occurred in their culturally different relationships because the wives could not quickly find new friends, because they were living in a region they perceived to be remote, and probably more importantly because they expected a level of intimacy in their relationships with their husbands that they did not obtain.

To understand loneliness from the social constructionist viewpoint, as suggested by Wood (1986), it is important to consider how the different groups “construct their own experience” (p. 199). American husbands construct their experience of loneliness in a way far different from the Chinese women. The women in this research described the loneliness as “lonely, isolated, empty, sad, helplessness, lack of supports, etc.,” based on their current experiences: no friends, no family, no interests, and no support from their husbands. Because their previous experiences in their home country provided friends, family, and interests, the lack of these in America led them to construct “loneliness.” Of all the factors, the lack of intimacy may be the primary basis for how they construct loneliness. The American husbands, apparently more independent, may not construct loneliness in the same way, but rather may construct loneliness simply because they do not have a wife.

4.5 The Chinese Women Experience Anger in their Intercultural Marriages

All the women in this research have experienced anger, in particular in beginning of their new life in the US. The emotions of anger are responses not only to
the women's marital conflict, but also to an environment they are not familiar with, and to the tremendous adjustments they have faced.

Vegetables are common dishes in Chinese society. The way Chinese people cook vegetables is very different from Americans. Traditionally, Chinese people like vegetables cooked, even lettuce and tomato. Unlike in American, vegetable salad (uncooked vegetables) is not common to Chinese people. Wei-kuen believes vegetables are good for her husband and she would like him to eat more. When she spends time cooking and her husband does not eat, she gets mad because she thinks he does not appreciate her work. She does not consider that her husband dislikes the vegetables. Wei-kuen gets mad when her husband refuses to eat the food that she puts on his plate. She feels her care for her husband is not recognized and respected. My husband does not like cooked vegetables and he thinks Chinese are “strange” because they cook lettuce. When I put some food on his plate that he does not like he gives me a face, and that makes me mad. I have the same feeling as Wei-kuen. In one trip to China with her husband, Wei-kuen also felt angry because of the frustration of doing too much translation and because of her husband’s frustration about her frustration.

Suk-chi believes Chinese men are more affectionate and loving than American men. She gets angry when her expectation of her husband’s behavior is violated, such as when he is impatient about “little things” and does not “read her mind correctly.” I have several experiences of being angry with my husband when he turns on the TV when I expect a romantic quiet dinner. Pui-ling expects her husband to spend more time with her instead of watching too much TV or spending too much time browsing the Internet, both of which make her mad. This situation happens even in married couples with the same cultural background. The difference is that the Chinese wives
prioritize connectedness over separateness and that makes the wives angry.

4.6 The Chinese Women Use Emotion-linked Strategies to Elicit Attention from their Husbands

Sau-king, Pui-ling, and I experienced that it was “so easy to get angry” after we moved from Hong Kong to US. Although Pui-ling did not really know the reason why she behaved like that, she surmised that she had a lot of things “growing inside her heart” that she found nobody to talk to about. She needed attention, in particular from her husband. If Pui-ling had found someone to talk to in the beginning of her new life in Fairbanks, she might have been able to control her anger, or at least find it less easy to get angry. Sau-king felt upset and angry when everything was not going her way in her early years in the US. After 32 years in Fairbanks, she has her own business, friends, and interests to occupy her. I got angry easily at every little thing in my early daily life in the US, but now with the same thing, the same situation, and the same person, I can hold the anger or may not feel angry at all.

As Planalp (1999) notes, the communicating of emotions is different from emotional expression itself, because it “is separable from the feelings themselves, happens if we intend it to happen, and is sensitive to audiences and situations,” in addition to being “goal-oriented and strategic” (p. 71). The Chinese women in this study, in one way or another, they use emotion-linked strategies to elicit attention from their American husbands. As in Chapter 1 (p. 11), emotion can be communicated to others in different forms, including verbal and non-verbal behavior. Interestingly, the women in this study generally chose non-verbal behavior to show their anger: the silent treatment, running away, and pretending to cry.
4.6.1 The Silent Treatment

All the women in this study have a common way of communicating the anger they feel toward their husbands. They give their husbands the silent treatment for as long as several days. When the women become angry, they treat their husbands as "invisible," ignoring him by not talking to him, not listening to him, not answering him, not looking at him, not allowing him to touch them, or running away from him. Although the women give their husbands the silent treatment, their goal with this behavior is to draw their husbands' attention and let them know they are angry. The source of the conflict is in many cases a lack of attention from their husbands. By their strategy of providing no attention to their husbands, the women hope to increase attention from them.

Wei-kuen will get mad and feel disappointed if her husband does not appreciate her cooking and the time she spends in the kitchen. In one episode, she took the food to the church because her husband did not eat it. Wei-kuen shared the food with her friends to make her feel someone appreciated her work. Her behavior was also a "sign" letting her husband know she was mad. In another situation, Wei-kuen felt angry because of her frustration in explaining and translating everything to her husband in one China trip. When she was frustrated and angry, she ignored her husband until her husband initiated conversations with her. Ignoring her husband served to gain her husband's attention and show him that she was angry.

In one episode, Suk-chi was angry with her husband for being less attentive when he accidentally hit her ankle and did not apologize immediately. She gave him the silent treatment by not talking to him. That her husband left her alone when she was angry made her even angrier because she found that her husband was incapable
of “reading” her mind. Also, in leaving her alone, Suk-chi felt her husband did not care about and love her. Other than giving her husband the silent treatment by not talking to him, Suk-chi ran away from home trying to scare her husband, and she expected her husband would bring her back home. Unfortunately, the use of this strategy is not always successful for Suk-chi. Although she and her husband were in contact by email and phone during their short separation, Suk-chi wanted to give up the relationship because she felt she lost face and dignity initiating conversations and apologies. Nevertheless, she felt she had “nowhere to go” if she did not return to her husband.

Siu-man does not use “angry” to describe her emotions. She suggested to me that I not run away if I was angry with my husband because she thinks this country is dangerous. She also advised me to “play table tennis,” “break anything in the house,” and that to “cry in the house is fine.” Although Siu-man believes the silent treatment does not help improve the “angry” situation and will hurt the relationship, she admitted that she would stop talking to her husband when she was losing temper. In one episode, Siu-man was being treated as “invisible” from her husband’s friend. She responded to them by ignoring them back, but in this case not as a means of gaining more attention to her.

Man-ching ignored her husband for several days when she was angry with him, not giving him even a single word. The difference between Man-ching and other women is that her son becomes one of her “tools” in helping her to gain her husband’s attention. For example, her son taught his stepfather to buy flowers to “fix” his mother’s anger. Man-ching knows very well how to use her anger to draw her husband’s attention. She tells her son all her feelings and her son “transmits her
message" to her husband. She also knows her husband will check with her son regarding what he can do to make her happy. Interestingly, Man-ching sometimes changes her strategy from ignoring her husband to fighting back with him. For example, she scolds her husband if he scolds her son. This is understandable because she is trying to protect her son from being hurt. When her husband makes the house look messy, Man-ching gets angry and yells at him when he responds that he will “clean it tomorrow.” I assume she believes that a 40-year-old man should be capable of disciplining himself in taking good care of the house.

When Pui-ling was angry with her husband, she ignored him for a few days, even through her husband immediately gave her the new truck key the day he drove it home. She completely ignored her husband for being “nice” to her because she was concerned about their financial situation. At other times, Pui-ling slammed the door to let her husband know she was angry. Sau-king used to be an angry person, but now she becomes angry only when her husband makes fun of her English in front of people and she feels embarrassed and loses face. As do the other women in this study, she will ignore her husband when she is angry, in some cases for a few days. She will give her husband the silent treatment and not allow him to touch her. In her experience, this strategy gains her husband’s attention because he cannot stand her long silence. He asks her to hit him as hard as she can. Sau-king usually continues to ignore him, even though her husband tries to put off her anger. Her husband will then hold her hands tight until she calms down.

4.6.2 Running Away

Suk-chi uses running away from home as a strategy to scare her husband. She stays in her friend’s home for some time and hopes that her husband will look for her
and call her. She expects her husband to take action to bring her back home. Although she chooses running away to draw her husband’s attention and to “test” him to see whether he loves her, she does not feel comfortable because she had never been away from her home while she was living in China. She hates “being separated from the world.” I also had experience in running away when I was mad at my husband because we had a plan for dinner, but he missed the dinner because he was helping his friends move. When I was angry I did not want to see him and I rode my bike away from him. Unlike Suk-chi’s choice to run away from her husband, Pui-ling uses a similar, but less over reactive approach to showing anger to her husband. She will “go out for a walk” and “not stay in the same room” as strategies to draw his attention. When she failed in doing so, in one episode, she “ran away” by slamming the door.

4.6.3 Pretending to Cry

Wei-kuen complains that her husband does not pay enough attention to her, and that he is not an “intelligent” person in understanding her needs for more attention. In order to draw her husband’s attention, she pretends to cry because he does not respond to her needs quickly enough. Although this strategy successfully gains her husband’s attention and some expression of caring by asking her why she is crying, she is not satisfied because she thinks her husband is asking her a dumb question: “Why do you cry?” while she was crying.

The Chinese women in this research use emotion-linked strategies to elicit attention from their husbands. Interestingly, in one episode, Wei-kuen “pretended to cry” to draw her husband’s attention. She was not engaging in a “real” emotion. There was no anger on that occasion. Perhaps she perceived that her husband did not “pay enough attention” to her. She just wanted her husband to fulfill her emotional
need—more attention. However, her “fake” emotion did “convince” her husband to believe she did “cry.” Planalp (1999) explains this behavior as “manipulating our emotional communication for other purposes” (p. 72). In most cases the women use these three emotion-linked strategies, intentionally, rather than spontaneously. Wei-kuen, Suk-chi, Man-ching, and Pui-ling use the silent treatment consciously: slamming the door, using the son as a “tool,” waiting for the husband to initiate conversations and apologies. One woman uses running away intentionally hoping that it will scare her husband and get his attention. One woman consciously pretends to cry.

I can relate to the behavior of the women. I also use strategies to manipulate my husband to do what I want. An example of my strategizing occurred when my husband and I had an agreement that he did not want to come with me to Siu-man’s interview at her home. He preferred to use the time working. I “lied” to him saying that the interview would not take more than one hour, although I knew the interview would not be finished within two hours. I just wanted to see my husband for as much time as possible. In my own case, however, I experience crying when I feel angry and lonely, I do not experience “pretending to cry.” I do not see the silent treatment and running away as strategies. Rather, they came naturally and without purpose. Most women in this study experienced crying when they felt lonely and helpless, but not as a strategy, rather as their true feeling and their way to release their loneliness. For me, the silent treatment, running away, and crying are all emotional responses to anger and loneliness, not planned strategies. My husband, on the other hand, believes very strongly that these emotional responses are purposeful and planned as a way to manipulate him.
As mentioned in Chapter 1, expression of emotion is culture-specific. In one culture expression of anger may be appropriate and accepted, but in another culture it may not be considered an acceptable act. I believe the women in this study chose the silent treatment, for example, because they are affected by Confucianism. The women choose the silent treatment when anger arises because it is consistent with the “Middle Way” (to avoid all extremes in one’s action or thought). However, the silent treatment for the American husbands is an extreme action. As my husband says, “silent treatment is a punishment.” He prefers that I yell at him and hit him rather than “punish” him. The principal ideas of Confucianism in dealing with emotions contradict American patterns of communication.

From the social construction perspective, emotions such as anger and loneliness are not “objects or concepts” (Shewder, 1994, p. 37) that can be generalized. According to Shweder, emotions are “complex narrative structures that give shape and meaning to somatic and affective experience,” and culturally local beliefs, preferences, and values play an important part in people’s emotional lives. Accordingly, if anger is the result of a particular conflict, the anger manifested by the American husbands may not appear to be anger from the perspective of the Chinese wife, and vice versa.
5.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first goal is to begin to understand the lived experience of the unique marital conflicts of Chinese women who are married to American men. The second goal is to better understand these Chinese women’s responses to such conflicts, in particular their emotional responses, and their choices for managing and dealing with their conflicts. In this research, despite cultural differences, many of the same causes for marital conflicts that Sillars, et al. (1984) describe are present (examples include dissatisfaction in inadequate affection or attention, spending money, complaining about not doing enough activities together, etc., see Chapter 1). This work provides an understanding of the experience of such conflicts in culturally different marriages.

I interviewed six women who are married to American men and have experienced cultural differences in their marriages. Conversational interviewing emphasizes reflexivity, rapport building, and relationship. As the researcher in this study, I was able to “get into” the world of the participants because we shared the same language and marriage background, and because I share some level of friendship with each. My own experience helped me better understand these Chinese women’s lived experience, and to provide an environment in which the women felt comfortable discussing their experiences.

In analyzing the interviews, I found six themes. The first is that the Chinese women have unique, individual reasons for marrying American men based on their expectations or preferences for their husband. The second theme is that the Chinese
women do not experience language difference as a source of conflict in their intercultural marriages. The women find their own ways to deal with language barriers, and while they acknowledge these barriers as challenges, they do not seem to be a source of conflict. The third theme is that the Chinese women have difficulty accepting and adjusting to what they see as independence on the part of their American husbands. The women expected that once they were married, the couple would become one unit instead of two individuals. Their husbands, on the other hand, saw marriage as a commitment between two individuals that joined together, but did not give up their individuality. The resulting violation of expectations is a source of conflict. The fourth theme is that the Chinese women experience *qi liang* in their intercultural marriages. This is because they do not have friends and family in the US, and in particular, because they do not obtain adequate support from their husbands. The fifth theme is that the Chinese women experience anger in their intercultural marriages. The emotion of anger arises in response not only to their marital conflict, but also to a new environment, and to the tremendous adjustments in their culturally different marriages. The final theme is that the Chinese women use emotion-linked strategies to elicit attention from their husbands. The women hope to increase the attention they receive by communicating anger and refusing to speak to their husbands. The women wait for their husbands to try to break the silence and to apologize. From the perspectives of the women, they maintain “face” through this process and gain the desired attention.

In conducting this research, I have come to understand what these Chinese women and I find missing in our intercultural marriages. At the point of the interviews, we all had a dream that our husbands could cover up the deficiencies of
our marriages. Wei-kuen wishes her husband would be more understanding and be able to better communicate with her parents. Although Suk-chi tries to be funny, saying that she wishes her husband would remember to change socks, all she wishes is that her husband would pay more attention to little things and be affectionate. For Man-ching, her son is all that matters in her marriage, and she hopes her marriage will give her son happiness. Pui-ling hopes that her husband will form career objectives, ensuring the family a better economic life. Siu-man sees that a perfect marriage should have children and she continues hoping she and her husband will have their own children. After 32 years marriage, all that matters to Sau-king are stability and security in her marriage. For me, I demand too much from my husband. Coffee looks, smells, and tastes good, but I just want some cream in my coffee.

As I conclude this research, I am able to recognize the reflexivity involved in my efforts at bracketing my own personal experience and interpretation. I was expecting that one significant theme would be that the Chinese women would experience language differences as a source of conflict in their intercultural marriages. Contrary to that expectation, what I actually found was that the Chinese women do not experience language differences as a source of conflict. My expectation reflected my own experience and belief. Considering it now and what I have learned, I reflect on how I interact in my own relationship. My American husband and I do experience language differences as a source of conflict in our marriage. But perhaps it is not really the language itself that is the issue. My husband certainly believes that is the case, but I interpret some of his actions as being the result of my own perceived English abilities. Perhaps the issue is that I am too sensitive about my English and so when I see a reaction in my husband, I immediately blame language. This idea is
valuable and one that my husband and I will explore as a result of this thesis.

Narrative inquiry involves being in a relationship with human beings, which requires accountability and responsibility. Cottle (2002) sees narratives and the sense of self-and-otherness as tied together, that storytelling is a way to construe self, and that interpersonal relationships are the affirmation each of us offers to the other. In this study, I was emotionally involved with the Chinese women I researched, not only because I share similar background and experience with them, but also because I carry multiple roles in conducting this research, including the role of friend and the role of researcher. I found myself willing to take responsibility for my participants. That affirmation of and assumption of obligation for other people remains the most ethical human action in narrative inquiry.

5.2 Implications for Future Research

This research brought new insight into the conflicts which arise in marriages between Chinese women and American men. The themes derived here should be pursued in more detail, particularly the finding that Chinese women view American men as too independent, and that this is a source of conflict in marriage. In studying further the expectations and expectation violations that cause these conflicts, it may be possible to help couples who face these issues. It would clearly be very interesting to study the perspective of the men in these relationships, and to compare and contrast their perceptions of the sources of marital conflict, as well as how they cope with that conflict, with the women’s perspectives. The present study focused on Chinese wives and American husbands. Future research should examine other intercultural couples, such as Korean-American or Japanese-American, for there are significant numbers of women from Korea and Japan marrying American men. It would be interesting to
compare conflicts in those marriages with the conflicts described here.
References


Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Something missing in our marriage: Understanding the lived experience of Chinese women in and their response to conflicts with their American husbands

IRB# __________ Date Approved __________

You are being asked to take part in a study about the responses to conflict of Chinese women who are married American males. The goal of this study is to understand the lived experience and responses of women who have experienced cultural differences in their marriages. You are being asked to take part in this study because you are involved in an intercultural marriage. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will be interviewed in an initial session of 1-2 hours. If appropriate and needed, an additional session will be arranged. The interview date and location will be your choice so that you feel most comfortable. The interviews will be audio recorded and kept in my own personal computer for the purpose of transcribing, analysis, and reporting for this study. My thesis advisor, Dr. Robert B. Arundale and I will be the only persons allowed to access to the information. All information will be kept in secure files. Your name will not be used and you will not be asked to give your names on any form. You are assured that all your responses in this study will be anonymous.

Your decision to take part in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time without any penalty to you. If you have questions now, feel free to ask me. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 347-0587 or via email at ftphs@uaf.edu; or my thesis advisor, Dr. Robert B. Arundale at 474-6799 or via email at ffrba@uaf.edu.
Statement of Consent:

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

Print Name

Print Name

Signature of Research Participant & Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Date
Appendix A  
(Chinese Version)

同意書

研究題目：失落的婚姻: 中國女性與美國丈夫衝突及其反應之生活體驗
機關評論委員會編號 ______________  核准日期 ______________

閣下被邀請參與有關中國女性與美國丈夫衝突及其反應之生活體驗研究。本研究目的是了解中國女性在文化差異婚姻中之生活體驗及其反應。閣下被邀請參與此研究是因爲您的婚姻是在不同文化間所產生。請在同意參與此研究前細讀此同意書及提出任何問題。

若閣下決定參與，您將會被訪問一節大約一至二小時。如需要及適當，另加訪問節數會再作安排。訪問日期及地點將由閣下選擇至最方便及舒適情況下進行。訪問會以錄音並記錄至本研究員之個人電腦作爲抄寫，分析及報告此研究之用。所有資料只可由本論文指導師 Robert B. Arundale 博士及本研究員取得，並儲於保護存檔內。在此保證閣下之姓名不會被引用及不會被用作任何用途，閣下在這硏究提供之一切資料及反應只會以匿名作硏究報告之用。

閣下之決定參與此研究為自願性，閣下有自由選擇不參與或在任何時間停止參與此研究而無須付任何責任。若閣下現有問題，請隨便發問，若其後如有問題，請與本研究員聯絡，電話號碼: 347-0587 或電郵: ftphs@uaf.edu; 或聯絡本研究員之指導師 Robert B. Arundale 博士，電話號碼: 474-6799 或電郵: ffrba@uaf.edu.

同意聲明：
本人明白以上描述之程序，本人對研究員之解釋滿意及同意參與此研究，並獲得此同意書副本。

姓名(請用正寫)  姓名(請用正寫)

參與研究者簽署及日期  獲取同意者簽署及日期