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Rebecca Diane Lee  
Chinese American College  
Graduates in the Great Recession:  
An Exploratory Study

### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the ways in which the Great Recession has affected Chinese American, recent college graduates in their career development. The person-in-environment perspective of clinical social work was the foundation for this study: it was expected that the negative economic effects of the Great Recession have changed the occupational landscape for Chinese American recent college graduates, which has had an effect on their mental health and personal relationships. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, and 12 individuals were interviewed regarding their career-related experiences after graduation. All participants identified as Chinese American and graduated with an undergraduate bachelor's level degree (B.A., B.S., etc) from a U.S. college or university in 2010, 2011, 2012, or 2013.

The findings of this research showed that respondents faced numerous obstacles to employment and graduate school admission, including long periods of unemployment and highly competitive graduate school pools. They coped with discouragement and frustration by accessing family and peer support. Results indicated that the collectivist orientation was significant among the respondents. Furthermore, the underuse of mental health resources was common. Implications of this study include the need for further exploration of the collectivist orientation among Chinese American young adults and the ongoing need to address the underutilization of mental health resources among Chinese Americans.

**CHINESE AMERICAN COLLEGE GRADUATES IN THE GREAT RECESSION:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to my research adviser, Mariko Ono, for her guidance and support throughout the research advising process. Mod, I always appreciated your lucid insights, attentive edits, and encouraging words. The advising relationship that we have had over the past few months has added considerably to my graduate school experience.

To my parents, thank you for the encouragement and love that you have provided to me throughout my life, but especially the support that you've offered to me over the last two years. Without you, I would not be where I am today. Thank you for celebrating each little milestone with me and loving me unconditionally.

I owe my deepest gratitude to Patrick, my best friend and fiancé. Words cannot describe how much your support and love have meant to me throughout this project, the past two years, and always. Without your support and encouragement, this thesis would not have been possible. I love you!

Finally, this thesis is lovingly and gratefully dedicated to my grandparents.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION .....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
III METHODOLOGY .....	27
IV FINDINGS .....	35
V DISCUSSION .....	55
REFERENCES .....	70
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: HSR Approval Letter. ....	76
Appendix B: Recruitment Email .....	77
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer .....	78
Appendix D: Participant Screening Questionnaire .....	79
Appendix E: Interview Guide .....	80
Appendix F: Informed Consent Letter .....	81
Appendix G: Referral Sources .....	84

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Amy admits that before she went to college, she was the *bad egg* in the family. She rebelled against her parents' controlling rules and resented that her older brother had more freedom than she to stay out late. But when she arrived at college, she changed. She discovered that she wanted to be a doctor, so she studied hard, earned excellent grades, participated in internship opportunities, and studied for the MCAT. However, when admissions decisions came back in May and June of her senior year of college, she found that she had not been accepted to medical school. While most of her friends had been searching for a job since the beginning of the semester, Amy was left scrambling for a job in June.

I felt like there weren't that many job opportunities: I was very limited. And sometimes I felt like a lot of the positions that I was applying for were... internship-level. In a sense, I felt like I was overqualified. But at the same time, a lot of those jobs wouldn't have made ends meet financially. It was one of the biggest struggles. (personal communication, November 24, 2013)

Amy knew that her parents were disappointed. When her parents' friends asked what she was doing, they resented saying that she was home doing *nothing*. After two months of searching unsuccessfully for a permanent job, Amy's mother signed her up for a resume-writing workshop, which was filled with unemployed, middle-aged adults. Discouraged and frustrated, she wondered if the time and money that she had invested in a college degree had been worth it.

The Great Recession, generally agreed on as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, lasted from December 2007 to, officially, June 2009 (Fogg & Harrington, 2011). Yet as Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, admitted in early November 2013, “The larger reality is that most Americans are still living in the Great Recession” (Reich, 2013). Since 2007, there has been a great deal of literature on the economic causes and effects of the Great Recession (Godofsky, Zudin, & Van Horn, 2011; Roksa & Arum, 2012; Stone, Van Horn, & Zudin, 2012). Scholars, led by Reich, argue that the extreme levels of inequality and huge imbalances in the distribution of wealth unseen since 1929 helped to produce the conditions that led to the Great Recession (Reich, 2010). Furthermore, literature suggest that lack of Congressional regulation of banks also contributed to the current economic downturn.

The existing body of knowledge about the Great Recession is almost exclusively economic-related, and it fails to capture the lasting interpersonal, intra-psychic, and emotional effects that the Great Recession has made on individuals. In the above example, Amy’s case is not unique. For young adults in particular, who are graduating from college into one of the most anemic economies in history, the Great Recession has directly defined the first few years of their adult lives. Through lack of opportunities, difficulty finding jobs, and pressure to go to graduate school, current economic conditions have affected young adults’ relationships, mental health, and career trajectories.

As social workers, it is critical that we understand how the Great Recession has affected and is affecting the populations with which we work. The person-in-environment perspective, which differentiates our discipline from other mental health fields, requires social workers to account for the essential and tangible ways in which *the economy is part of the environment*. For many people affected directly and indirectly by the Great Recession through unemployment,

underemployment, layoffs, and loss of assets, this historic economic event has also been a personal one affecting individuals, families, and communities at large.

As a grandchild and great-grandchild of Chinese immigrants, I chose to specifically examine the transition from college to career among Chinese American young adults because I understand firsthand the complexities of being a person of color in the United States, feeling the expectation to justify my grandparents' sacrifices by my own success, and the realistic challenges of graduating from college in this economy. In this study, I examined the transition from graduating from college to establishing a career of Chinese American recent college and university graduates. Chinese American recent graduates were defined as individuals with at least one grandparent of Chinese descent, who received a bachelor's level degree from a U.S. accredited 4-year college or university in 2010, 2011, 2012, or 2013. Both male and female respondents were included in the study, and the sample was not restricted to a particular generation status. The research question was the following: To what extent do cultural norms, societal judgments, and economic realities of the recent Great Recession affect Chinese American college graduates in their professional growth?

It was the intent of this study to contribute to the knowledge base about how young, Chinese American adults are coping with the economic conditions of the Great Recession. In particular, this study was intended to explore how recent graduates have negotiated the reality of limited career opportunities, Chinese and Asian cultural expectations, and personal interests when making career-related decisions. I hope that the findings of this study will help college counselors, parents, and recent graduates to prepare for the transition out of college in light of these challenging economic times. In the next chapter, I will review the literature discussing the Great Recession, Chinese American ethnic and racial identity, and the post-college transition.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to examine the post-undergraduate transition for Chinese American young adults in the aftermath of the Great Recession and to investigate any potential mental health issues related to this transition in the target population. The research question is: To what extent do cultural norms, societal judgments, and economic realities of the recent Great Recession affect Chinese American college graduates in their professional growth? In this literature review, I will review relevant theories and studies to situate this study in context.

After outlining the relevant empirical literature, I will discuss their implications and justify the need for this study. While the following studies reveal much of what is known about career development, they do not account for the ways in which the Great Recession has affected the career development of young Chinese American graduates. The Recession has dramatically changed the economic climate for college graduates, and this population in general has had to make career choices in direct response to an economic slump and chronic, elevated unemployment (Godofsky et al., 2011). For Chinese American graduates, these difficult decisions have also been moderated by cultural obligations (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012; Wong & Mock, 1997). The literature has little to offer in response to this phenomenon, and this study proposes to fill that gap.

## **The Great Recession and College Graduates**

The Great Recession refers to the “longest, and by most measures, worst economic recession since the Great Depression” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013). It lasted from December 2007 to June 2009 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013). According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Great Recession was characterized by unprecedented job losses and high, long-term unemployment. Given the field of social work’s emphasis on the person-in-environment perspective, the immediate and long-term personal effects of the Great Recession are a critical factor when examining the vocational and mental health experiences of recent Chinese American college graduates.

The literature demonstrates that only about half of college graduates had a full-time job when surveyed two years after graduation (Godofsky et al., 2011; Roksa & Arum, 2012; Stone et al., 2012), and graduates of color were more likely to be unemployed than white graduates (Roksa & Arum, 2012). College graduates are struggling to pay student loans (Godofsky et al., 2011; Roksa & Arum, 2012; Stone et al., 2012) and credit card debt (Roksa & Arum, 2012). A quarter to a third of recent graduates accepted a job that was less than ideal, either in salary or relevance to one’s college major (Godofsky et al., 2011; Stone et al., 2012). Reliance on family for financial support after college has become the norm: 75% of graduates reported receiving financial support from family in the last twelve months (Roksa & Arum, 2012), and *more than* 25% live with parents (Stone et al., 2012). About half of recent college graduates believe that they will be worse off financially than their parents’ generation (Godofsky et al., 2011; Stone et al., 2012).

All of the studies cited above utilize a survey research design (Godofsky et al., 2011; Roksa & Arum, 2012; Stone et al., 2012). This allows researchers to systematically collect a

large amount of data from samples, increase generalizability, and maximize research efficiency. In fact, two of the studies provided the exact dates during which data collection took place, and each study took only two to three weeks to conduct (Godofsky et al., 2011; Stone et al., 2012).

These findings indicate that in the wake of the Great Recession, the post-undergraduate experience has been characterized by debt and dependence. According to The Project on Student Debt, in 2008 67% of college graduates had student loan debt (2010). Forbes reports that student loan debt now makes up 6% of the national debt: over 1.2 trillion dollars (Denhart, 2013). Considering the low employment rate of recent college graduates, these debts may seem even more daunting to a recent graduate (Godofsky et al., 2011; Roksa & Arum, 2012; Stone et al., 2012). Dependence and the return to a parent or parents' home is also a characteristic of the recent post-undergraduate experience. In the past, the obligations of young adulthood were marked by independence: the beginning of one's own family through marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2004). Research indicates that instead of initiating one's own nuclear family, recent college graduates are returning to their families of origin (Stone et al., 2012). These facts raise the following questions: Why is this happening? What effect is this having on recent graduates' mental health and identity?

Finally, research on the Great Recession seems to imply that college graduates have fewer career opportunities due to the economic decline, which has led to a general sense of pessimism and lack of purpose. Godofsky et al. (2011) and Stone et al. (2012) report that about half of recent graduates expect to be worse off than their parents. Clearly the Great Recession, due to lack of opportunities and chronic unemployment or underemployment, has affected the attitudes, expectations, and mental health of recent graduates. While the Great Recession was a

large-scale historic economic event, findings suggest that it was also a significant phenomenon that personally affected and changed a generation of young people.

Biases evident in these studies include the invisibility of the experiences of people of racial and ethnic minorities (Godofsky et al., 2011; Stone et al., 2012), and insensitivity to what it means to belong to different categories of racial or gender identity (Roksa & Arum, 2012). None of these studies address how graduates of color experience the Great Recession differently from White graduates. This study will attempt to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on the post-undergraduate experience of Chinese Americans.

### **Asian American Racial Identity Development**

The United States has a long and complex history of race and race relations. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the extensive history of race in the United States, it is valuable to examine the definition of race and the ways in which race marks both assumed identity and ascribed identity. According to Omi and Winant (1986), race is a “sociohistorical” concept, which is “given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded” (p. 60). As such, racial meaning varies depending on the social and historical context in which a person is situated. Furthermore, as a socially constructed reality, racial formation is a process: it is a learned way of “comprehending, explaining and acting in the world” (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 62). Although scholars agree that race is not rooted in any biological or genetic reality, the social, legal, historical, and political consequences of race are concrete (Omi & Winant, 1986; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012).

Ethnicity, however, is a category of identity distinct from race. It can refer to the “culture, traditions, and customs of a group of people” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012, p. 139). In the Asian American community, this often refers to a person’s country of origin: Chinese,

Vietnamese, Korean, etc. However, as Uba (2002) incisively points out, “Linking an undifferentiated sense of peoplehood with common origin in Asia is, for many U.S.-born Asian Americans, phenomenologically a fiction akin to feeling a common origin with Adam and Eve” (p. 117). For instance, it is false to assume that all Chinese-origin, American-born individuals experience a sense of unity and connection. Uba (2002) recommends instead conceptualizing ethnicity as a “constructed [sense] of connection” (p. 117). Thus, when speaking to individuals about ethnicity, it is important for them to define their ethnicity and with whom they feel a sense of connection and collective identity.

When examining race and ethnicity, it is important to note that racial identity and ethnic identity are related concepts but not synonymous. Depending on a person’s social environment, such as geographic location, peer group, or historical moment, race, ethnicity, or another category of identity (such as gender or sexual orientation) may be more salient.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Chinese American young adults experience the post-college transition. Although Chinese Americans are most often thought of as an *ethnic* group, their Asian American *racial* identity is also a significant factor in identity development. As Omi and Winant (1986) argue, “At the micro-level, race is a matter of individuality, of the formation of *identity*. The ways in which we understand ourselves and interact with others, the structuring of our practical activity—in work and family, as citizens and as thinkers...—these are all shaped by racial meanings and racial awareness” (p. 66-67). As Wijeyesinghe and Jackson (2012) also point out, Asian Americans tend to have an external, group orientation, which leads them to be even more sensitive to the expectations and beliefs about their group in the social environment. Thus, perhaps even more than other groups, Asian Americans come to understand themselves and their position in society through their understanding of racism towards them. In

other words, “Racism is a major aspect that affects identity” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, it is critical to turn to the literature on Asian American racial identity formation if one hopes to understand the experience, obligations, and stressors of Chinese American young adults.

One of the most common racial stereotypes about Asian Americans, which is influential in racial identity development, is that they are a *model minority* (Kibria, 1999; Park, 2008; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012; Wong & Mock, 1997; Woo, 2005). The model minority myth “portrays Asian Americans as exemplary models for other minorities based (usually) upon measures of income, education, and public benefit utilization rates” (Park, 2008, p. 135). The myth says, “Asian Americans have overcome all these obstacles and have succeeded in finding a place for themselves in the American dream through hard work, perseverance, and quiet suffering” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012, p. 143). Simply, the myth is that “Asians have no societal problems” (Masaki & Wong, 1997, p. 442). While this may seem like a positive reputation, these assumptions about Asian Americans essentialize a socioeconomically, culturally, linguistically, and politically heterogeneous group, and minimize the struggle of being a subordinate, minority group in a White-dominated, American society. The model minority myth is a well-researched concept in the social sciences, and social work scholars have examined some of the less-apparent purposes, incorrect assumptions, and disadvantageous effects of the model minority myth on a person’s mental health and self-identity (Kibria, 1999; Park, 2008; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012; Wong & Mock, 1997; Woo, 2005).

Inherent in the model minority myth is the assumption that Asian ethnic groups have enough in common that they can be treated as a single group. Many of these assumptions are magnified on college campuses, where students live, work, and engage in co-curricular

organizations together. Kibria (1999) suggests that on contemporary university campuses, the image of the typical, academically successful Asian American student is pervasive. Moreover, “These images are an important part of the context within which negotiations of identity take place” (Kibria, 1999, p. 32). Wijeyesinghe and Jackson (2012) corroborate this assertion. They argue, “The development of individual identity is largely influenced by messages that are external to Asian Americans” (p. 142). Kibria (1999) also found that among Asian American college students, identity development and interpersonal relationships were moderated by external messages from the model minority myth. Most students either identified as Asian American, or rejected this racial identity in favor of an ethnic identity. This decision strongly determined whom participants selected as friends (Kibria, 1999). The significance of these findings cannot be understated, as they suggest that a generation of Asian Americans have come to understand their identity and friendships in response to the model minority myth.

The model minority myth can also be understood as a form of social control. Park (2008) explains, “The notion of a model minority does not imply full citizenship rights but, rather, a secondary one reserved for particular minorities who ‘behave’ appropriately and stay in their designated secondary space without complaint” (p. 135). By this argument, the myth of the model minority is used by the dominant group to illegitimate Asian Americans’ status in society and to maintain control over a subordinate racial group. The myth forces Asian Americans to question whether they belong in White society and requires them to constantly justify their social status. Uba (2002) elaborates on this thinking: “People of color have the status of guest, which implies a not-fully and never-fully integrated status. Those regarded as guests must be on their best behavior... or they are not welcome” (p. 96). Thus, the model minority myth is used as a tool for social control. Through it, Asian Americans are maintained at arms length as guest

status: the Other, separated from White American society, never fully belonging. The model minority myth also helps to maintain tension between Asian Americans and other subordinate racial groups, which further cements the power held by the dominant group (Park, 2008; Woo, 2005).

The literature suggest that as a young adult develops his or her Asian American identity, his or her identity is formed in relation to the model minority myth. The myth dictates expectations that Asian Americans have for themselves and one another (Kibria, 1999) and what Asian Americans expect from the social order (Park, 2008). Given that the model minority myth is an externally imposed construct, it is important to wonder what it means for second-generation Asian Americans to have their identities inescapably and pervasively shaped by external forces.

Both of these studies used qualitative methods to collect empirical data, and each used intensive interviews as a data collection method (Kibria, 1999; Park, 2008). Sample sizes ranged from 64 to 88 participants (Kibria, 1999; Park, 2008). Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Kibria, 1999) and through a connection to a larger study (Park, 2008). While Park (2008) only interviewed participants who were high school and college-age and Kibria (1999) included a wider range of participants (21 to 40 years old), both samples are similar in demographics to the target population of this study. Kibria (1999) and Park (2008) both included Chinese American and Korean American participants, which may have affected the findings of the studies. It is unclear why Chinese and Korean Americans were selected, as the groups' histories of immigration and experience of exclusion in the U.S. vary widely. Finally, Kibria (1999) and Park (2008) interviewed both males and females, which reduces the chance that their findings can be attributed to gender differences, rather than a distinctly racial experience.



The model minority myth seems positive at first glance, but the literature demonstrates that the myth is a form of social control that negatively affects Asian American identity development. During young adulthood, when Asian American racial identity development is forming, the model minority myth is at the fore. As would be expected, the literature suggest that Asian American identity development occurs at least partly in response to the model minority myth. These findings are relevant to the proposed study because this study's participants are at a transitional age when ethnic identity development is paramount. Furthermore, it is relevant to ask how career-related decisions are influenced by ethnic identity development and externally imposed expectations, such as those of the model minority myth.

### **Underutilization**

It is well documented in social work literature that Asian American populations use mental health services at a lower rate than the general population (Akutsu, Tsuru, & Chu, 2004; Lin & Cheung, 1999; Sue, Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012; Uba, 1994; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Wong & Mock, 1997). Underutilization is the documented pattern of Asian Americans “not [using] mental health services as much as would be expected based on the size of the Asian American population” (Uba, 1994, p. 196). Underutilization is also connected to Asian Americans' tendency to present with high severity of symptoms, “suggesting that they delay using services until problems become very serious” (Sue et al., 2012, p. 533). Furthermore, because they delay seeking services, Asian Americans' in-patient psychiatric hospitalizations tend to last more days than those of other groups (Uba, 1994).

The literature suggest that Asian Americans' absence of help-seeking behavior and underuse of mental health resources has been attributed to fear of *loss of face* (Leong, Kim, & Gupta, 2011), which is related to cultural stigma and shame (Leong et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2012;

Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997), cultural conceptions of mental health that depart from Western notions of health (Herrick & Brown, 1998; Leong et al., 2011; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997), suspicion of mental health providers (Uba, 1994), and lack of financial and geographic access to culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services (Herrick & Brown, 1998; Leong et al., 2011; Lin & Cheung, 1999; Uba, 1994). Moreover, the perception that Asian Americans have a lower prevalence of mental illness is often perpetuated by the model minority myth, which suggests that Asian Americans are more successful, healthier, and in less need of mental health services (Herrick & Brown, 1998; Leong et al., 2011; Wong & Mock, 1997). However, research suggests that “the over-all prevalence of mental health problems and disorders among Asian American/ Pacific Islanders does not significantly differ from prevalence rates for other Americans,” but that they simply use mental health resources less frequently (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 121).

Existing research investigates the factors contributing to Asian American underuse of mental health services (Herrick & Brown, 1998; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997; Uba, 1994) and what strategic clinical actions can be taken to improve cultural competence among those that offer mental health services to Asian Americans (Herrick & Brown, 1998; Sue et al., 2012; Uba, 1994; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997). Among these studies, research methods included theoretical approaches (Herrick & Brown, 1998; Yamashiro and Matsuoka, 1997), a meta-analysis (Sue et al., 2012), and an empirical, quantitative survey of 134 Asian American college students (Leong et al., 2011).

Wong and Mock (1997) suggest that among Asian American young adults, underutilization of mental health resources is just as prevalent as it is among more mature populations, and that they do not seek professional help until their problems become untenable.

“When Asian American young adults encounter difficulties that might cause them to seek professional intervention, they still hesitate to do so for fear of betraying or shaming their family” (Wong & Mock, 1997, p. 204). Stigma associated with mental health problems and counseling seems to be transmitted across generations, and patterns of underutilization are common among young Asian Americans, even those that were born in the United States (Wong & Mock, 1997). As part of a community that is traditionally more group-oriented, Asian Americans are sensitive to the long-term consequences of having a mental health problem or simply being in need, including shame, disgrace, and loss of family reputation (Uba, 1994; Wong & Mock, 1997). Before seeking professional help, Uba (1994) suggests, Asian Americans usually turn to “friends, family, physicians, and clergy” (p. 202). More often, however, Asian Americans attempt to solve psychological problems in private and through individual willpower. Based on cultural beliefs that one should not dwell on unhappy thoughts or complain about suffering, Asian Americans often “[try] not to think too much about problems” or “accept and endure [their] problems” rather than seek professional help (Uba, 1994, p. 205).

Current research seems much aligned in asserting that “AA/PIs have the lowest rates of utilization of mental health services among ethnic populations,” despite similar prevalence of mental illness compared to White Americans (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 121). These findings are relevant to the proposed study, as it highlights patterns of help-seeking behavior among Asian Americans. That is, Asian Americans do not seek mental health resources and counseling services when they are needed. The findings of these studies raise the question of how Asian American graduates cope with the transition out of college. If not through mental health professionals or counselors, what resources do Asian Americans access? How does this affect their mental health?

## **Acculturation**

Acculturation is defined as “a process by which an individual’s behaviors and a group’s cultural knowledge, identity, and behavior styles change in the direction of those of the dominant group” (Uba, 2002, p 95). More succinctly, it is “the adoption of American cultural patterns” (Uba, 1994, p. 13). Traditionally, Asian cultural values are thought to be rooted in Confucianism and Buddhism, and include “maintaining harmony in relationships... the precedence of group interests over individual interests... the precedence of duties over rights, and the importance of fulfilling obligations” (Uba, 1994, p. 15). On the other hand, American values traditionally emphasize individuality, freedom, independence, and self-interest. Conceptually, as an Asian person or Asian American person becomes more acculturated, he or she will relinquish the values traditionally ascribed to Asian cultures, such as a group orientation and harmony in relationships and assume more American values, like individualism.

As a long-held American value, individualism is not only foundational to the U.S.’s national self-identity, but it is also a marker of adulthood and maturity in American society. American adulthood is typically characterized by increasing individualism and independence, as a young person separates from his or her family and begins taking increasing responsibility for his or herself (Arnett, 2001). To remain with one’s family, or even being too emotionally close with one’s family of origin is considered pathological. In Western psychology, such emotional behavior even has a term: enmeshment.

Based on the more group-centered values of many Asian families, however, young adulthood may look different for Asian Americans whose families value interdependence over independence. “Unlike Western cultures, in which young adulthood may be synonymous with separation and individuation, Asians tend to remain closely tied to their families” (Wong &

Mock, 1997, p. 196). Even if young adults physically leave home to attend college, the feelings of obligation to the family are real and persistent (Wong & Mock, 1997). Young Asian Americans must balance the obligations of being Asian, and the expectations that they have as an American adult. This compromise is a large part of acculturation.

Among many factors that influence how a person negotiates acculturation is generation status (Uba, 1994; Wong & Mock, 1997). Generation status refers to how many generations of a family have lived in the United States. The immigrant generation is considered the first generation, children of immigrants are considered the second generation, etc. Each generation's level of acculturation varies, and acculturation also varies by "age at arrival and socioeconomic status" (Ying, 1997, p. 254). For instance, the child of immigrants may speak both English and the language spoken in her parents' country of origin, and she may act as a cultural broker and translator for her parents (Uba, 1994; Wong & Mock, 1997). Differences in acculturation often lead to conflict between parents and young adults, due to disparities between parents' taken-for-granted expectations and American-born children's experience of living in and negotiating multiple cultures (Bahrassa, Juan, & Lee, 2013; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Uba, 1994; Ying, 1997). Often, "First generation immigrants tend to espouse more traditional values" (Ying, 1997, p. 254). If parents who are less acculturated have expectations that clash with their American-born children's norms and values, then trans-generational tension, known as dissonant acculturation, may arise (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Thus, the resolution of trans-generational conflict based on differences in acculturation is a "developmental task specific to Asian American and other culturally different adolescents" (Huang, 1997, p. 178). At the beginning of one's career, the resolution of dissonant acculturation is critical.

## **Emerging Adulthood and the Post-College Transition**

Young adulthood has changed significantly in the last 60 years. In 1950, the obligations of young adulthood centered on marriage, parenthood, and establishing a household independent from one's family of origin (Arnett, 2004; Jay, 2012; Shanahan, 2000). After the Great Depression and World War II, American men and women were eager to settle down and achieve some sense of stability. The average American man married at age 22, and the average American woman married at age 20 (Arnett, 2004; Cohn, 2011). Most women did not work because a single income was sufficient to support a growing family (Jay, 2012). In contrast, by 2000 the median age of marriage was 27 and 25 years for men and women, respectively (Arnett, 2004; Cohn, 2011). Simultaneously, the proportion of young men and women attending college and university is at an all-time high: now, two out of three high school graduates go on to pursue higher education (Arnett, 2004). Thus, in the span of one generation, the experience of young adulthood has changed dramatically (Amato & Kane, 2011). In the current historical moment, young people have time, educational resources, and freedom that were unavailable to many who came of age a generation ago. Furthermore, contemporary young adults have the freedom to select a partner of another race or of the same gender: options that were not culturally and legally available to earlier generations. During this period, emerging adults "have an exceptionally wide scope for making their own decisions" (Arnett, 2004, p. 16). However, such unprecedented opportunity can also lead to frustration, stress, instability, and an extended period of transitioning to adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Jay, 2012).

Arnett (2004) refers to this period of growth, exploration, transition, confusion, and instability as "emerging adulthood" (p. 7). He defines emerging adulthood by the following five features: "the age of *identity explorations*," "the age of *instability*," "the most *self-focused* age of

life,” “*feeling in-between*, in transition,” and “the age of *possibilities*, when hopes flourish” (Arnett, 2004, p. 8). During emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) argues, young adults are focused on exploring their identities and attempting to develop the foundation on which a meaningful adult life can be built. In reality, instability and exploration that characterize this period often take the form of frequent relocations for school, work, or love, transient romantic relationships, or short-term, temporary educational and work opportunities (Arnett, 2004). In truth, Arnett (2004) admits, “Many of the identity explorations of the emerging adult years are simply for fun, a kind of play, part of gaining a broad range of life experiences before ‘settling down’ and taking on the responsibilities of adult life” (p. 10). The opportunities and possibilities for an emerging adult to explore his or her identity, travel, try novel experiences, and gradually take on the traditional responsibilities of adulthood together contribute to a prolonged transition to adulthood.

Fox (2011) describes the same phenomenon and population using the term “transitioning adults” (p. 112). In her grounded theory analysis of the post-college transition, Fox (2011) describes the experience of transitioning adulthood in five categories: “managing loss, establishing place, focusing on self, searching for purpose, and negotiating support systems” (p. 114). Through 13 intensive interviews of recent male and female college graduates in a qualitative study, she found that students within three years of college graduation experience a period of actively “figuring it out,” during which all five aspects of the “transitioning adult” experience take place simultaneously (Fox, 2011, p. 114). During this period, recent graduates go through a process of grieving and coping with the loss of college life and relationships to establishing a new place, purpose, and support network. For example, recent graduates experienced “isolation and loneliness while facing unanticipated and unexpected challenges,”

loss of identity and sense of belonging, and loss social relationships after college graduation (Fox, 2011, p. 123). For many of Fox's (2011) participants, this phase was the "first time life was filled with uncertainty, the first time they were unsure of what was next, and the first time the future was unknown" (p. 200). As much as this life stage is about opportunity, it is also about instability, uncertainty, and lack of a sense of belonging.

Both Fox (2011) and Arnett (2004) found that individuals in their early 20s experience a period of uncertainty, opportunity, and exploration. Even after college graduation, these emerging adults do not yet believe that they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Fox, 2011). Instead, they understand themselves to be in a stage of transition. Jay (2012) describes the 20's as a "betwixt-and-between time," when young adults "[wake] up every day somewhere between their childhood homes and their own mortgages" (p. xvii). Thus, both Arnett's (2004) term, "emerging adulthood," and Fox's (2011) term, "transitioning adulthood," serve the same purpose of capturing the ambiguity, instability, and fluidity of this newly emerging transitional period.

The implication of these findings is that this in-between period of emerging or transitioning adulthood is a *new* social phenomenon. That is, previous generations of adults did not pass through this life stage. As a result of a convergence of several social, economic, and historical events, a new life stage now exists that has only emerged in the last generation. There is a dearth of literature on the experience of emerging adulthood because it is a novel phenomenon. The purpose of this study is to investigate this life stage in more detail. In this current study, Arnett's (2004) term, emerging adulthood, will be used to refer to this changing and unstable phase of the life course.



## **Chinese American Career Development**

Parallel to the changing experience of emerging adulthood, the process of career development and career decision-making is also shifting. Due to the instability of the economy and the labor force, “notions of career and work are dramatically shifting from viewing career as a choice made early in life to viewing career as a series of choices or forced transitions that individuals make over a life span” (Fouad, 2007, p. 544). Existing literature investigates the process of career development for men and women and the challenges of developing a meaningful professional life despite great instability in the economic and social environment (Fouad, 2007; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Shanahan, 2000).

A database search of “career decision making” and “vocational psychology” reveals numerous studies on how students in the general population make career choices at the high school and college level (Fouad, 2007; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Zimmerman & Kontosh, 2007). These studies emphasize the roles that social barriers play (Fouad, 2007) and the how the distribution of “unequal resources” affects career selection (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 29). Scholars identify socioeconomic status (Fouad, 2007), gender (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Zimmerman & Kontosh, 2007), and race (Fouad, 2007) as factors that can limit an individual’s career choices through restrictions on available opportunities (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005). Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) claimed that race and ethnicity do not affect career dreams, however, Fouad’s (2007) findings contradicted her previous claim. She found that socio-cultural factors do, in fact, influence career aspirations. “Career dreams appear to be related to perceptions of opportunities and the reality of racism in the marketplace” (Fouad, 2007, p. 552). Succinctly, previous studies are aligned in their findings that “the occupational landscape is not equal for men and women or racial/ethnic minorities and whites” (Fouad, 2007, p. 552). Based

on an individual's social location at the intersection of various socio-cultural factors, an individual's career aspirations and opportunities may be limited or enhanced.

It is therefore not surprising that race and racism, acculturation, gender, and other culturally specific factors affect the career development of Asian American and Chinese American young adults (Ma & Yeh, 2005; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). A significant number of studies have been conducted on Chinese Americans' career development (Ma & Yeh, 2005; Obuko, Yeh, Lin, Fujita, & Shea, 2007; Tang et al., 1999; Sue & Frank, 1973) and the career development of Asian American students in general (Qin, 2010). The findings of previous studies suggest that in Asian families, the emphasis on family interdependence and the model minority myth affect career choices in a way that encourages certain traditional careers and discourages the pursuit of less prestigious fields.

In many Asian American families, certain career choices and professional fields, such as the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), are more respected than other fields of study (Obuko et al., 2007; Tang et al., 1999). Sue and Frank (1973) argue that historically, Asian parents encouraged their children to enter fields where they were most likely to survive and quietly fit in; that is, fields where they were less likely to encounter racism and workplace discrimination. These fields included those of science, technology, and engineering, where Asians could work independently with minimal interpersonal interaction (Sue & Frank, 1973). While this was intended to protect Asian children from discrimination, this reinforced the model minority myth of the silent, long-suffering Asian worker. The contemporary "occupational segregation" of Asian Americans, which describes the disproportionate number of Asian Americans in STEM fields, is well documented in social work literature and the work of vocational psychologists (Leung, Ivey, Suzuki, 1994; Qin, 2010; Sue & Frank, 1973; Tang et al.,

1999). Scholars (Leung et al., 1994; Qin, 2010) argue that such occupational segregation is the result of Asian Americans' career choices being influenced by family obligations, intergenerational conflicts, and acculturation.

Qin (2010) found that among Asian American college students, trans-generational conflict due to disparities in acculturation was negatively correlated with occupation-interest congruence. Thus, the more conflict that a participant had with his parents about his choice of undergraduate major choice, the more likely he was to select a major that did not interest him. Furthermore, Qin (2010) discovered that students in majors that are typically associated with Asian Americans, such as the STEM majors, were found to have lower than average occupation-interest congruence. The implication of these findings is that more Asian Americans pursue STEM fields than would be expected, and do so because they are motivated by family conflict or some other external factor.

Obuko et al. (2007) sought to understand how biculturalism affects the career development of Chinese American youth. Similarly, Ma and Yeh (2005) investigated how trans-generational conflict between immigrant parents and American-born children affects the career development of second-generation Chinese Americans. Complementing the Qin (2010) study, both Obuko et al. (2007) and Ma and Yeh (2005) found that Chinese American students' career development is affected by intergenerational conflict, as well as by explicitly and implicitly communicated parental expectations. Chinese American students in Obuko et al.'s (2007) study reported that their parents had high expectations for their careers and pressured them to pursue certain highly-regarded professions, such as "doctor, teacher, or engineer" (p. 446). Corroborating Qin's (2010) findings of low occupation-interest congruence among Chinese Americans in certain fields, Obuko et al. (2007) also found a discrepancy between what

participants dreamed of doing and what they planned on doing. This suggests that trans-generational conflict and parental pressure influence Chinese American youth to disproportionately select prestigious careers even when they may be more interested in another field.

Previous findings support Wong and Mock's (1997) argument that in Chinese American families, which tend to be more group-oriented and interdependent, college major and career selection is a family decision. "An Asian young adult's educational opportunity is viewed as a vehicle for familial economic and status enhancement... Often, the obligation to parents supersedes the individual's preferred choice of career pursuit" (Wong & Mock, 1997, p. 198). Ma and Yeh (2005) also suggest, "Career decision is often considered a family matter in Asian culture," where the "interdependent view of self is prevalent" (p. 339). Chinese American emerging adults must therefore make sense of career decisions under conflicting circumstances: parental expectations and family obligations, personal interests, and environmental opportunities that may be limited by the state of the economy or structural and overt racism. The purpose of the current study is to understand how these overlapping factors affect the career development and mental health of Chinese American emerging adults.

Finally, career counseling is not an adequate resource to help emerging adults to navigate this confusing transition. Career counseling has been found to be less effective with racial and ethnic minorities, such as Chinese Americans, than with the general population (Cook et al., 2002; Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005). Cook et al. (2002) argue that traditional career counseling is based on assumptions, values, and opportunities about work that often do not hold true for people of color. These assumptions include a merit-based system, equality in pay structure, and the primacy of paid work (assuming that workers have no unpaid labor responsibilities at home)

(Cook et al., 2002). Cook et al. (2002) claim that these assumptions inherent in traditional career counseling do not hold true for individuals that face structural racism and historic, pervasive barriers to equal opportunity. This, along with a general bias against professional mental health services, minimizes the potential benefits of career counseling for Asian Americans.

Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) also acknowledge that clients seeking help from career counselors come from diverse backgrounds. They argue, “To be effective, career counselors must change their traditional, individualistic approaches to counseling and incorporate culture-specific variables” (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005, p. 225). Similarly, Cook et al. (2002) propose that counselors implement interventions that change the environment to improve the person-environment fit for their clients. “Behavior does not occur in a vacuum,” they claim (Cook et al., 2002, p. 303). Cook et al. (2002) and Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) would agree that clinicians working in career counseling must be especially attuned to the particular needs of Chinese Americans. The burden of delivering culturally attuned career counseling services to Asian American emerging adults lies on clinicians themselves, but given that 85% of licensed clinical social workers identify as White and less than 1.5% identify as Asian, the challenge is great (Center for Health Workforce Studies and NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006).

The research design methods of previous studies included theoretical methods (Cook et al., 2002; Fouad, 2007), a meta-analysis (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005), survey methods (Ma & Yeh, 2005), and qualitative interviews (Obuko et al., 2007). In the empirical studies, sample sizes ranged from 8 to 129 people (Obuko et al., 2007; Ma & Yeh, 2005). Limitations of these studies included a lack of generalizability due to convenience sampling methods (Ma & Yeh, 2005; Obuko et al., 2007). However despite limited generalizability, these studies offer a useful

starting point for the current study by raising questions that this study will pursue in greater detail.

In sum, the results of previous studies are much aligned in their findings that Chinese American families influence the career development of emerging adults through trans-generational conflict, expectations, and an interdependent conception of a person's life choices. The literature also suggest that career counseling is an inadequate resource for individuals in this population. There is a dearth of literature on how Chinese American emerging adults cope with these challenges, and this is the focus of the current study.

### **Synopsis and Implications**

This literature review offers insight into the effects of the Great Recession, Asian American racial identity development, underutilization of mental health services by Asian and Chinese Americans, acculturation, the new phenomenon of emerging adulthood, and Chinese American career development. However, there is a dearth of literature on how these issues intersect. How do Chinese American emerging adults and college graduates make career-related decisions in the midst of cultural obligations and in the wake of the Great Recession? How do these adults cope and create resources for themselves in a community that traditionally underutilizes outside professional support? Due to how recently the Great Recession occurred, social work scholars have yet to investigate how the Great Recession has affected individuals on a subjective interpersonal, personal, and intra-psychic level. Yet the person-in-environment perspective, which is at the core of clinical social work practice, calls for examination of the personal and interpersonal effects of this historic event.

The purpose of the current study is to explore the ways in which Chinese American recent college graduates make career-related decisions in the wake of the Great Recession. Over

42 percent of Asian American adults have a bachelor's degree (Le, 2012); yet Asian Americans continue to face structural and overt racism, discrimination, and stereotypes such as the model minority myth and other barriers to occupational parity (Le, 2012; Ma & Yeh, 2005). As Fouad (2007) argues, the occupational landscape is unequal for Chinese Americans because they are an ethnic minority. The recent economic downturn adds one more factor for Chinese American emerging adults to consider in their career development. This study will examine how members of this population are coping with these challenges.

The state of the economy, employment and chronic unemployment, rising student debt, and institutional racism are prominent environmental issues that clinical social workers must understand in order to provide effective and sensitive services to recent college graduates. The findings from this study aim to help college counselors, school social workers, and other clinicians working in a community or private practice setting with young adults, especially communities of color, to acknowledge and accept differences on what it means to be *successful* from earlier familial generations. In the following Methodology chapter, I will describe how I will conduct this study utilizing intensive interviews to garner detailed, subjective data from participants.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The research question for this study was the following: To what extent do cultural norms, societal judgments, and economic realities of the recent Great Recession affect Chinese American college graduates in their professional growth? The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study was to examine the post-undergraduate transition of Chinese American young adults in the aftermath of the Great Recession and to investigate any potential mental health issues related to this transition in the target population.

The research design was conducted through intensive interviews with male and female adult participants. While efficient in collecting qualitative data in participants' own words, interviews are also quite effective in capturing the complex nature of unique life experiences that cannot be captured in quantitative studies. This study enabled participants to provide opinions, anecdotal evidence, and examples from personal experience of what the transition out of college was like, as well as to reflect on the psychological impact of the Great Recession in this phase of their nascent adulthood.

### **Sample Selection**

Given that the focus of this study was on the qualitative experiences of Chinese American recent college graduates after the Great Recession, the sample was selected in large part on how individuals could speak about this particular experience and moment in time. The goal was to interview 12-15 participants about this phenomenon. To be eligible for the study, participants



needed to identify as Chinese-American, which I defined as having at least one parent or grandparent who emigrated from Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. In addition, the individual needed to have graduated from an accredited, 4-year American college or university with an undergraduate bachelor's degree (B.S., B.A., etc) in 2010, 2011, 2012, and/or 2013. This would ensure that he or she was a recent college graduate. Participants who were beyond a three-year window of graduation from a bachelor's program were excluded from participation. Finally, no participant was personally known by the researcher at the initiation of the study in order to prevent personal bias and other confidentiality issues that may have arisen.

Recruitment was primarily based in the San Francisco Bay Area region; however, given the time constraints of the MSW thesis, the realistic challenges of recruiting, and the geographic transience of many people in this stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2001), some participants were recruited from outside the San Francisco Bay Area. These regions included Southern California, the Mid-West, Hawaii, and the Northeastern states.

**Sampling technique.** Recruitment was carried out via snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, participants are asked to identify others in the population who meet the eligibility requirements for the study and provide the researcher with those individuals' contact information (Engel & Schutt, 2013). However, this procedure can compromise participant privacy if the researcher contacts a person who is not interested in the participating or does not want to be known as a member of this population. In this study, I asked participants to send information about the study to others in the population, and requested that potential participants contact me directly. This modified procedure helped to ensure the protection and privacy of potential participants.

I selected snowball sampling as the sampling technique for the current study because it was the most effective method for acquiring a diverse sample of participants that met the eligibility requirements. As Engel and Schutt (2013) describe, snowball sampling is an effective technique when participants are interconnected, but lack a sampling frame. This was true in the current study. Often, recent college graduates kept in touch with one another through informal methods such as social networking, phone contact, or text messaging after they left the institutional setting of a university. This absence of sampling frame made snowball sampling the most convenient and effective technique to access the target population.

While a convenient method for sample recruitment, this non-probability sampling technique had its limitations. The sample is not representative of all Chinese American college graduates; therefore the findings from this study cannot be generalized. Similarly, the possibility for biases in the findings cannot be ruled out. Due to the nature of snowball sampling, there is a strong likelihood that participants were similar to one another in certain ways, and in these ways, unrepresentative of the general population. Despite its limitations, the findings from studies based on snowball samples can be a useful starting point when exploring a new phenomenon. Snowball sampling was the most appropriate choice of recruitment technique given the characteristics of the target population, the time limitations of the MSW thesis, and the exploratory nature of the current study.

**Recruitment Procedure.** Recruitment took place between mid-October 2013 and early February 2014. First, friends, family members, and former classmates of the researcher were contacted by email to inform them of the current study (See Appendix B). An electronic recruitment flyer was attached to this personal email, and the researcher's personal friends and contacts were asked to forward the flyer to potential participants (See Appendix C). The flyer

contained the details of the study, inclusion and exclusion requirements, and the researcher's contact information. In the flyer, potential participants were asked to contact the researcher by phone or email to indicate interest in participation. Once potential participants contacted the researcher and indicated interest in participating in the study, an initial screening conversation was scheduled. Participants were asked to identify others that may be eligible for the study, and they were asked to forward the recruitment flyer to these individuals.

**Sample.** In total, 12 participants responded to recruitment emails and participated in the study. Recruitment was relatively straightforward and successfully met within a short timeframe. By mid-November six participants had expressed interest in participation, and by the beginning of December, four interviews had been completed. The remainder of the participants, six in total, was acquired by the beginning of February 2014.

The final sample size was 12 participants. Six participants lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, two lived in the mid-West, two lived in southern California, one lived in Hawaii, and one lived in the mid-Atlantic region. All of the participants that lived in the San Francisco Bay Area (n=6) were interviewed in person, while the other participants (n=6) participated in a phone interview. Seven participants self identified as Chinese American or Chinese, and five participants self identified as either "mixed," "biracial," or "half Asian". Ten participants were female, and two participants were male. The maximum age of participants was 25, the minimum age was 22, and the average age was 24. The maximum generation status was 4.5 generations since the immigrant generation, the minimum was one generation, and the average was 2.4 generations.

Per the eligibility requirements of this study, all of the participants (n=12) held bachelor's degrees from an accredited, four-year, American college or university. Six participants held

degrees from a University of California or California State University campus, one participant graduated from a large, public university in the Northwest, and five participants held degrees from a small or medium-sized private university. The average number of years since college graduation was 1.9 years, with a maximum of three years and a minimum of one year.

Finally, participants reported that they were engaged in a range of career-related activities. Four participants were currently enrolled in graduate school, and two were in the process of applying to graduate or professional school. Of the two that were waiting for an admissions response from graduate school, one was currently working in the fitness industry, and one was working in the shipping industry. The remaining participants were engaged in the following activities: Two participants were employed in positions related to social services, one was working in business, one was working in graphic design, one was working in the food industry, and one was unemployed.

## **Data Collection**

**Phase 1: Screening.** After potential participants contacted the researcher, they were screened on the phone to ensure that they met the requirements for participation. During this screening interview, the researcher collected demographic information (name, age, ethnicity, generation status, college and year of graduation, college degree, current occupation, and current city of residence), provided further information on the study, and answered all questions that participants had at this phase of their involvement. This preliminary phone conversation lasted between 5 and 15 minutes. If the participant was interested in participating in the study and met eligibility requirements, then the researcher and participant agreed on a time to meet in person or by telephone for the complete interview. If the participant lived outside of the San Francisco

Bay Area, then a self-addressed envelope and informed consent letter were mailed to the participant at this time.

**Phase 2: Interviews.** Once screening was completed, interviews were scheduled by email or phone. Six participants opted for an in-person interview. These interviews took place in the San Francisco Bay Area in quiet and comfortable locations including: a frozen yogurt shop, coffee shops, and a hotel lobby. Six participants opted for a telephone interview, due to geographical distance from the San Francisco Bay Area. Interviews lasted from 20 to 35 minutes depending on the length of participant responses. Each participant was provided with a copy of the informed consent letter before or at the time of the interview, with ample opportunity to ask questions (See Appendix F). The participant and the researcher then signed the consent. In addition, all participants were provided with a list of professional, supportive mental health referral services in case the interview caused them to feel uncomfortable in any way.

During each interview, the participant was asked to respond to a series of unstructured, open-ended questions. Participants were encouraged to only answer questions that felt comfortable to them, and to refuse to answer all or part of any question that felt distressing. The following questions are a sample from the full interview guide:

- How would you define a career? How did you come to know or believe this definition?
- What career-related decisions did you make after graduating from college? What factors affected your career-related decisions?
- Do you believe that the state of the economy at that time affected your career-related decisions? If yes, how?
- How would your parents define a career? How do/did they communicate these expectations to you?

- What helped you cope with the post-undergraduate transition?

(Please see Appendix E for the full interview guide.)

Throughout the interview, the researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify the participant's original intention and to elicit more detailed responses. Each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder. The researcher also took notes to supplement the audio recording.

### **Data Analysis and Management**

The researcher transcribed each interview within a day after each interview, which served to maximize consistency between interviews and to increase the quality of data analysis. Demographic data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, which helped to define the sample. The qualitative data produced in interviews and transcriptions was coded and analyzed thematically.

During the data collection and analysis process, confidentiality was assured through the following measures. Each respondent was assigned a unique identifying number. The file containing information connecting each respondent to his or her identifying number was password protected and stored separately from the data. In presentations and publications, including this thesis, data was described as an aggregate and quotes and vignettes were modified to eliminate the possibility of identification. The research advisor had access to data after identifying information had been removed. As required by federal regulations, the researcher has stored data in a secure place in an encrypted format and will maintain the data as such for at least three years or until no longer needed. At that time, the researcher will securely destroy all data.

## **Role of the Researcher and Conclusion**

While every effort was made to minimize biases and catch omissions, potential biases persist. One of the potential sources of bias in the design and perspective of the current study is the researcher's personal bias. As a Chinese American recent college graduate (who would have met eligibility requirements for participating in the study), the researcher's views, personal experiences, and questions strongly influenced the way that this study was framed, the wording of interview questions, and the way that data was interpreted and analyzed. Furthermore, the researcher's friends and family directly referred each of the participants to this study. In these ways, this researcher uniquely biased and influenced each aspect this study, from the design of the study to the demographics of the participants. This bias limits the extent to which this study can be generalized or used to answer questions about the general population. However, this bias also reflects the extent to which the development and implementation of this research study was a personal experience, which allowed me to satisfy my curiosity as a researcher and a social worker about questions that were based on personal experiences. In the following chapter, I will report on the findings of the data.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

The primary goal of this study was to investigate the extent to which cultural factors and economic challenges have affected the professional development of Chinese American recent college graduates. First, it was expected that the slow job market created by the Great Recession would affect young graduates' careers and long-term employment optimism. Second, it was also expected that participants would feel certain family obligations or expectations related to being Chinese American. The major findings of this study were somewhat consistent with these hypotheses. In short, parents' expectations strongly affected the career choices of recent graduates, but financial stability and personal interests were also strong motivators for participants. The Great Recession affected graduates by limiting employment opportunities and making graduate education seem necessary—and subsequently, admission, more competitive. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that Chinese American graduates are influenced by certain obligations and expectations of their families, and that they also relied on their parents for emotional support and encouragement.

### **Data Demographics**

This chapter reviews the responses of twelve total participants. Each individual was recruited by snowball sampling, met criteria to be enrolled in the study, and participated in a single, in-person or phone interview. Recruitment was based in the San Francisco Bay Area, but participants were recruited from around the country. To briefly review the relevant



characteristics of the sample, the maximum age of a participant was 25 years old, the minimum age was 22 years old, and the average age was 24 years old. The average length of time since college graduation was 1.9 years. Demographic information was also collected on the participants' generation status, that is, the number of generations born in the United States since the family's immigration from China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. The average generation status was 2.4 generations, while the maximum was 4.5 generations (4<sup>th</sup> generation on one parent's side and 5<sup>th</sup> generation on the other parent's side). The minimum number of generations since immigration was 1 generation, when the participant herself was born in China. Ten participants in this study were female, and two participants were male. Next, I will present the findings of the study.

### **Theme One: Significant Factors Affecting Decisions**

Many factors affected graduates' career-related decisions after college graduation, but three factors stand out: first, money and financial stability; second, personal interests; and third, location. For some graduates (n=4), a single one of these factors took precedence over the others: One participant prioritized finances, one prioritized personal interests, and two, location. In these four cases, the primary factor was maintained at the expense of the other factors. For example, the following two quotes are from participants for whom location was the primary factor affecting career-related decisions after college. The first participant stated, "For a lot of programs I couldn't move home... My main goal was to move home to be with my family, so I think that was the main driving factor in choosing this post-baccalaureate program" (personal communication, December 13, 2013). Another participant agreed,

I think it was more about where I wanted to be than what I was doing. So like, maybe when I graduated college I could've gotten a job in some other city, but I kind of wanted to be here and I made that a priority. (personal communication, January 18, 2014)

Both of these graduates decided that living close to their families was a priority and gave up other opportunities to move closer to home. Although both of these individuals' families were pleased with the decision to return home, they each chose independently to move back to their families of origins after college graduation.

For another graduate, financial stability was the primary factor affecting career-related choices. The following quote is from a participant who selected a career because of the financial opportunities it offered, but she sacrificed her personal interests in accepting this position:

It's more practical to go into accounting because I know it's a stable job to have... I think I made the decision kind of prematurely just because it is a stable job. Like, I know I can do it, but I don't feel like I have a strong passion for it, and I think that's a little important when you're trying to choose what you want to do for the rest of your life. (personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Financial stability was the single, primary factor in this participant's career-related decision, yet she expressed some doubt about her decision to take the accounting position. Several years after graduation, this participant wonders if she should have chosen a career that fit better with her personal interests.

While some graduates made career decisions based on a single, primary factor, most of the recent graduates in this study made a multi-factorial decision based on a balance between the three poles of financial stability, personal interests, and location. Based on their priorities and their concrete opportunities, graduates found that it was imperative to negotiate these three

factors. Graduates used different strategies to balance these factors, and they often made decisions based on two or three factors. For example, one participant decided to take a position in her second-choice location because she had more networking opportunities in that area and was able to secure her ideal position. Still, she hopes to return to her preferred location once she has more work experience:

I was looking for jobs in the Bay Area because that's where I would have preferred to be. But just in general, there seemed to be more opportunities for me in Chicago just because I was already here, and I had a network here... But I was thinking originally of going back to San Francisco because that's where my family is. (personal communication, January 6, 2014)

Another participant applied to medical school, but because of stiff competition in the applicant pool, he was unable to secure admission to a U.S. medical school within two application cycles. He was, however, admitted to a medical school in Australia. The participant faced a decision to leave his family and go to Australia, or give up his dream of becoming a doctor:

I really wanted to go to medical school. But, basically I had to go to Australia for medical school or give that up and go to pharmacy school or something instead. I decided medical school was something I really wanted to do and I wasn't willing to sacrifice or give up on it, so I accepted it. (personal communication, December 18, 2013)

This participant stated that he often feels homesick, and he regrets that plane tickets between school and home are so expensive. However, he is very satisfied with his career decision and he is very excited for the opportunity to study medicine. He asserts that the sacrifice that he made with location has been worth his dream of becoming a doctor.

In sum, the three major factors that affected graduates' career-related decisions after college graduation were the following: money, which includes salary and financial stability, personal interests and dreams, and location. Some graduates prioritized one factor and made decisions based on this factor. However, most graduates found that they needed to find a balance between these three factors.

### **Theme Two: The Great Recession**

With regards to the Great Recession, all of the participants (n=12) in this study were able to identify that the economy was bad at the time they graduated from college. All participants (n=12) experienced and defined the economy as "bad" based on their own and their peers' abilities to find jobs. For instance, most graduates made a statement such as, "I think it was hard for people to find jobs when I graduated" (personal communication, December 15, 2013), or, "In general, I know people are having trouble finding jobs" (personal communication, February 2, 2014). Another participant agreed that paid jobs were uncommon, and that unpaid internships or short-term contracts were much more common.

The economy was pretty bad. There weren't a lot of jobs in my field, and the jobs that were out there were mostly short-term contract things, or unpaid internships. I got the job at the restaurant pretty quickly, but I had friends that, at the same time, couldn't find anything- even jobs that you wouldn't need a degree for. It was rough. (personal communication, January 18, 2014)

While all participants identified the job market as evidence of the Great Recession, one participant also included the housing market in his assessment of the economy because he was helping his sister to buy a house. He stated,

I know that the economy, when I left, was pretty bad. I know a lot of people didn't have jobs. Just basing it off the housing market- because my sister is trying to buy a house and I was helping her to look at homes and prices- there were a lot of for sale signs and prices weren't so bad. Now she's having a lot of trouble finding a house. (personal communication, December 18, 2013)

Eight participants (66%) reported that the state of the economy affected their career-related decisions. The Recession motivated some participants (n=2) to postpone entering the workforce by pursuing international travel or alternative programs such as the Peace Corps. For instance, the following are statements from recent college graduates who took the depressed job market as an opportunity to explore opportunities abroad:

The economy definitely wasn't good. I did have some thoughts about applying to the Peace Corps. I had a bunch of loans left, so I thought the Peace Corps would let me postpone that, and let me get some experience before I went into the real industry. (personal communication, January 13, 2014)

Another participant responded,

A month after graduation I moved back home to try to find a job in the Bay Area, unsuccessfully. I tried for a few months, at which point I decided to move to Australia... The economy was doing better there, and they had a really easy visa program. So I worked at a restaurant for 5 months, saved up money, moved out there, lived there for a year, and then I came back. (personal communication, January 18, 2014)

For these participants, international travel was an opportunity made possible by a necessity to do something with their time when work was not available. No participant who took advantage of international travel opportunities after graduation expressed regret. In fact, the participants that

engaged in non-career related experiences or travelled after college expressed a profound appreciation for the variety of experiences that they were able to have. For instance, the respondent who lived in Australia for a year after college described her very positive feelings about her experience, agreeing, “I think if I had gotten hired right out of school, I wouldn’t have lived abroad and that was a huge thing in my life. I think it worked out for the better for me personally” (personal communication, January 18, 2014).

Many of the graduates who did not travel abroad after college still took part in activities and opportunities that were not directly related to their career. Sometimes this meant exploring other career opportunities, gaining experience by working in a research lab before applying to medical school, or pursuing post-baccalaureate studies. These graduates also found this time of exploration to be worthwhile:

I think the journey was worth it. I did take three years off because I didn’t go straight into medical school. But at least I was doing something those three years. But I think experience made it so much more satisfying now after seeing different aspects of what’s out there. (personal communication, December 3, 2013)

Although this participant claims that she took three years “off,” her statement also suggests that “off” does not adequately describe the satisfying journey that she experienced en route to reaching her long-term career goals. In fact, one participant who began a high-paying, prestigious career immediately after college graduation regretted not taking more time to explore the world and consider various career options before signing on with her current employer. She is now considering leaving her job in order to travel to China and teach English:

I know that I’ll be able to get a job pretty much anywhere because I have this on my resume. But I’m dissatisfied because I don’t even know if this is what I want to do... I

have this somewhat crazy plan to go to China and teach English there for a year. That's what I wanted to go after college, but then I got this job and I couldn't push my offer back for a year. (personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Some graduates (n=7) reported that the Great Recession affected their career development because it took them so many months to find a job after college. The extended periods of unemployment and underemployment decreased graduates' morale, confidence, and challenged their sense of financial security:

When I first graduated, it was pretty hard to find a job. It took me about four and a half months just to find any job. And they weren't even good jobs- they were pretty low paying- it was about \$9 at Macy's and \$11 at the bank. So I guess that shows that the economy was pretty bad... I've realized that I can't base my decisions [on my career] based only on what I want to do... Now that I've been working for a year I realize how bad the economy it is and how hard it is to make ends meet. (personal communication, January 5, 2014)

Some graduates (n=4) were also affected by the economy because of the increased competition among graduate school applicants. They found that they needed to apply to graduate school more than once in order to be offered admission to the school or program of their choice.

The participants (n=4) who stated that the state of the economy did not affect their career related decisions either went directly into graduate school, moved back into their parents' home, or were offered career jobs right after college. For one of these graduates, medical school had been a lifelong dream, and her pursuit of graduate medical education was unaffected by economic factors. She explained,

I didn't really think about the economy in making my decisions... because medicine has kind of been a lifetime goal of mine and I didn't really think about how the factors of the economy would help me with it. I'm not really sure. (personal communication, December 13, 2013)

This young graduate applied to and was admitted to medical school. She reported that the economy did not play a role in her career decision, and contrary to what other medical school applicants stated, she did not believe that the economy increased graduate school competition.

While all of the participants in this study acknowledged the reality of the Recession, two did not feel personally affected by the economy because they were not planning to enter the workforce right after graduation. One participant responded,

I know that it was difficult for people to find jobs, but it wasn't really a concern for me. I never expected to just start working, because I expected to go back to school. And I knew I wouldn't have to worry about that because I had my parents. I'm really lucky because they never pushed me. (personal communication, February 2, 2014)

Finally, out of the four participants who stated that the economy did not affect their career-related decisions, two reported that the economy played no role in their career-related choices because they successfully found jobs after graduation:

I guess I hear it every so often in conversations when people will say, "It's so hard for college graduates to find a job right now. There are too many people, not enough jobs and people aren't hiring. People are getting laid off." I don't think it really affected me at all, and I don't think I really thought about it at all, to be honest. (personal communication, November 23, 2013)



Among the college graduates who entered the workforce immediately after graduation, several (n=3) expressed strong feelings of gratitude for having been offered a job in tough times. For instance, the following graduate stated that it took him three months to find a job after his medical school applications were rejected. He planned to reapply the following year, but needed something to do in the meantime. He stated, “I was just really grateful that I had a job. It felt like times were really tough” (personal communication, November 21, 2013). Another graduate agreed, “For the most part, I was just very grateful to be doing what I was doing, and I think that made the transition a lot easier” (personal communication, November 23, 2013).

Similarly, one graduate reported that she accepted the first job that she was offered because she did not expect another employment opportunity to present itself. “I was so ecstatic to get a job that I accepted the first job I was offered... The economy was so bad, and it was nice to have something to go to after college” (personal communication, January 13, 2014).

In conclusion, all graduates agreed that the Great Recession happened, but it affected each graduate uniquely based on his or her post-graduation opportunities and plans. Those that experienced long periods of unemployment or multiple rejections from graduate school claimed to have been more affected by the economy and more grateful when they were offered opportunities. Some took the opportunity of unemployment to explore various experiences or travel. As would be expected, the graduates that were offered jobs immediately after college reported that they were less affected by the economic Recession.

### **Theme Three: A Bachelor’s Degree is “Not Enough”**

A common theme among the participants interviewed for this study was that a bachelor’s degree is *not enough*. A majority of graduates (n=9) either stated that graduate education was necessary for career advancement, or were already enrolled in a graduate program, such as

medical school, a Master's program, or a post-baccalaureate pre-medical program, at the time of the interview. Participants reported that their parents expect them to pursue professional training or a graduate degree after or within a few years of graduating from college. Graduates also reported that their parents believe a bachelor's degree is insufficient, when previously a B.A. made someone qualified for a high paying, career-long, stable job. For instance, one participant reported,

My dad said that as long as I get a Master's, that he's satisfied- like, he's done his job as a parent. When I get my Master's that's all he'll want from me, so I think for him, success is really educational and financial. I think he does want me to be happy, but to him that means me getting my Master's and me being financially successful. (personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Another participant reiterated these expectations, confirming that her parents also expect her to pursue graduate education:

My parents are really supportive of whatever I choose, but they've always really wanted us to grow up and go to professional school, in whatever profession that was going to be... They definitely wanted us to do something further than just get an undergraduate degree. Like, they wanted us to go to pharmacy school or dental school, or engineering school. Something further, I guess, like a specific career, professional path. (personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Graduates largely agreed with their parents, and they echoed the sentiment that an undergraduate degree is not enough education to qualify a graduate to compete in today's job market, reporting, "People will say, 'Oh you have a degree from the University of Chicago. You shouldn't have a problem finding a job.' But it kind of feels like that isn't really enough

anymore” (personal communication, January 6, 2014). Another participant agreed that when she was searching for a job, her B.A. did not qualify her for the jobs she wanted. “Pretty much every job that I thought would be interesting or would be something that I would want to learn about- they wanted someone with more experience and at least a Master’s” (personal communication, February 2, 2014).

Specifically, participants reported that a bachelor’s degree is not enough education to prepare one for a specialized professional career. Participants stated that a bachelor’s degree is too general to prepare one for the job market, and too ubiquitous among the population of job candidates. Specialized post-graduate training is now a necessity to set one apart from the competition, where a bachelor’s degree is the bare minimum. For instance,

From what I’ve seen, not just through myself but friends, too, everyone’s struggling to find a job- not just a job, but a career job... A lot of people can’t find jobs with just a bachelor’s degree. It’s kind of a struggle... I noticed that my friends never really have a specific type of job that they apply for unless they go for their Master’s or PhD. (personal communication, November 24, 2013)

This graduate stated that a bachelor’s degree does not prepare a job applicant for a “specific type of job,” but that those who have a Master’s or a PhD are qualified for more specific, specialized positions. Those with only a bachelor’s degree struggle to find career jobs due to lack of training and lack of opportunity. One graduate explained, “I never planned to go to graduate school... It’s more that things didn’t work out, so I’m going back now” (personal communication, January 5, 2014). She hopes that with more education, she will be a more competitive job applicant and have more opportunities than are currently available to her.

Both parents of recent college graduates and their children agree that graduate school or professional training is necessary to prepare one for a career job. In the past, a bachelor's degree was sufficient, but parents and graduates agree that something has changed in higher education and more education is necessary.

#### **Theme Four: Chinese Cultural Effects**

The purpose of this study was to examine not only the effect of the Great Recession on recent college graduates in general, but also to explore the cultural effects of being a Chinese American college graduate. The following findings relate to participants' experience of being Chinese American.

**Reciprocal family support.** The vast majority (n=9) of participants in this study described their parents as being "supportive" of their career choices. Parents provided advice, financial support, and rent-free housing for their children after college graduation, when graduates were unemployed, underemployed, or undecided on a career trajectory. Graduates reported feeling surprised at how patient, understanding, and flexible their parents were during this time of transition. They also identified their parents as a primary source of emotional support after college graduation. For example,

I would tell my parents everything that happened at work- everything that was making me unhappy or happy, and they were really supportive and had advice. You know, they're adults who have been through this before and they would tell me, yes, these things happen and then you learn. I don't think I would've gotten through as well if it hadn't been for family. (personal communication, December 3, 2013)

This graduate was working at a medical lab and was in the process of applying to medical school. Her parents were also physicians, and they were able to provide insightful emotional

support because they had similar experiences. Furthermore, this graduate appreciated that her parents had similar work experience and she benefitted from the advice that they were able to provide about working with employers and applying to medical school.

Another graduate describes the support that her parents offered when she was having trouble finding a job after graduation. Her parents were well informed about current events and knew that the job market was especially tight. They normalized her struggle and provided extra patience with her in her job search:

My parents have always been clear communicators, like telling me to do what I love, or that the economy was why I wasn't getting a job. I think my parents are pretty in tune with what's happening... they are very understanding and supportive. (personal communication, January 18, 2014)

While the graduate from the previous quote reported that her parents have always been supportive, another graduate found her parents' patience and understanding to be somewhat unexpected. "My parents surprise me sometimes in terms of how much they let me do" (personal communication, November 23, 2013). This participant did not explain what was surprising about her parents' response, but she was grateful for their openness and patience.

Graduates found parent support, both emotional and financial, to be somewhat surprising but exceedingly helpful during the transition from college to career. In fact, nine participants moved back into their parents' home for some amount of time after college graduation, and no graduates' parent charged him or her rent. Many graduates (n=7) struggled with the transition back to living "at home" due to parental rules and more restricted freedom. However, all benefitted from the safety net of home.

Moreover, two participants discussed the responsibility that they feel to provide financial support to their parents and extended families. These graduates expect and hope that they will, in turn, be capable of financially helping their immediate and extended families. One graduate attributed her values to being Chinese and coming from an Asian culture. She explained, “In Asian cultures, you help extended family. You help cousins, you help Aunties... You know how Asians are. They like to help other people because their extended family is one big family” (personal communication, December 13, 2013). The other participant explained that her family has limited financial resources, and that one of her goals is to be able to support herself and help her mother financially:

Our financial situation is not the greatest, so that’s why in the back of my mind I know I have to take care of myself. I think that influences my decisions because I need to take care of myself and my mom. (personal communication, January 5, 2014)

In all, family support was bi-directional. Graduates reported that their parents provided emotional and financial support when possible, and graduates hope to be able to provide financial support to parents and extended family.

**Parental expectations.** The majority of graduates interviewed for this study (n=8) reports that their parents expected them to be *successful* in their career. When prompted, they defined success as having financial stability and/or earning a high income (n=6) and being happy (n=8). For instance, two participants explained that their parents are pleased that they have found a career that they enjoy, or that they support the graduate in finding such a career. “My parents have always been super supportive of finding something that you love and pursuing it—something that makes you happy” (personal communication, January 18, 2014). Another graduate agreed, “I think now they’re very happy with what I’m doing and they see that I’m

happy with what I'm doing for the most part... I think [my mom is] just happy that I'm happy with it right now" (personal communication, November 23, 2013).

Financial stability was a significant parental expectation for recent graduates, and a large part of how parents define career success. Participants reported that their parents hope that they will have more financial opportunities than they did. The follow is a quote from a graduate whose immigrant mother is concerned about the graduate needing to worry about money in the future:

I really think my parents would define success by financial success, like not worrying when I'm older. She says that a lot- that she doesn't want me to have to worry about bills or worry about not having food on the table. I think that was a reality for her when she was growing up. (personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Graduates report that their parents also expect them to date and get married (n=3), work hard and take advantage of every opportunity that arises (n=3), pursue and succeed at higher education (n=5), and become independent (n=1).

One participant reported that the sacrifices and struggles her parents had experienced in relation to their emigration from China were closely related to their expectations for her career. This participant felt pressure to justify her parents' sacrifices by becoming financially stable and making the most out of the opportunities that she had been offered. She explains that the choices she made diverged from the ones she might have made if her parents' expectations had been different or less apparent:

She told me, "I moved all the way here from China and went through all these struggles so that you could be successful. I think now that you have all these resources, it doesn't really make sense to be an ESL teacher because you won't make a lot of money"... The

only reason why they're here is so that I can be successful, so I feel like it would be a waste if I weren't hard working. (personal communication, December 15, 2013)

Later, this participant reported that she is not fully satisfied with the decisions that she has made since college graduation, and she wonders if she should have chosen a career path that fits more closely with her personal interests.

Participants (n=4) reported that parental expectations were often related to the comparisons that they made between the participants and the participants' siblings, cousins, or similar-aged family friends. Participants state that such comparison or competition among cousins or mom's friend's children is common. And, although they take it for granted as something that just happens in Chinese American families, one participant reported that he feels pressure to avoid embarrassing his mother in front of her friends:

In Chinese American families, parents are always talking about their children. My mom has more friends than my dad... and she feels a lot of pressure whenever people ask her about me to respond in a positive manner. When they ask, "What's your son doing?" She doesn't want to say that I'm just at home. I feel like there's that expectation... this outside pressure. (personal communication, November 21, 2013)

Another participant explains that she also feels this pressure to succeed in comparison with her cousins, but that this pressure motivates her to work harder and do better. "My parents always compared me with my cousins... The comparison- it kind of makes me want to do better, I guess" (personal communication, November 24, 2013).

In sum, the college graduates interviewed for this study report that it is common for their parents to compare their career trajectories, salaries, and graduate school to their peers, and they



attribute their parents' behavior to their Chinese American culture. Graduates experience this comparison as a pressure, but some use the pressure as motivation to excel.

**Limited parental education.** Some (n=3) graduates explained that their parents' limited education level or negligible firsthand experience in the graduate's field restricted the extent to which they could provide career-related consultation. This made it more difficult for graduates to navigate the post-college transition because they were unable to build on their parents' experience or benefit from their guidance:

[My parents] never went away to college, so they didn't really know the college atmosphere, or what you should do. They didn't give me much guidance, so it was harder to figure out what I wanted. I think it would've helped to talk it out... I think I would've gotten here faster. (personal communication, January 13, 2014)

When graduates' parents did not have college degrees, graduates reported having more difficulty choosing a college major and determining a career. Of the three participants who reported that their parents were limited in their ability to provide college and career guidance, two were second-generation immigrants, had immigrant parents, and were the first in their family to graduate from college. These graduates felt that they had a disadvantage, and it took longer for them to make college- and career- related decisions. For instance, one graduate reported, "I'm first generation- well, technically 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, but I feel like our family's not really capable of educating us about other career opportunities... I had to find all that stuff out myself, which was a little discouraging" (personal communication, November 24, 2013).

Many of the graduates interviewed in this study had college-educated parents, but not all benefitted from this privilege. Those participants who were the first individual or who were in the first generation in the family to graduate from college reported that they struggled more in

making career-related decisions. They reported that it took more time for them to find a career path because they had less parental guidance.

### **Theme Five: Mental Health Resources**

Consistent with the research discussed in Chapter Two, this study found that out of twelve participants, only one person sought support from a therapist, counselor, or mental health professional. Although participants acknowledged the stress and anxiety that accompanied the transition from college to career, the vast majority of the graduates in this study (n=11) did not consider seeking therapy or any type of mental health support. Instead of seeking professional help, graduates reached out to friends and family to provide stress relief, emotional support, help coping with the transition out of college, and validation. One graduate stated, “I guess some of my friends help me. They’ve supported me as I complain to them. They’re like my therapists, especially around exams when I get so stressed out” (personal communication, December 18, 2013).

Most participants had not considered professional therapy or counseling as an option for additional support. One participant responded, “Yeah, I never really considered seeing a counselor about it, but now that you say that, that would’ve been a good idea” (personal communication, January 13, 2014). Another participant was similarly surprised at the suggestion stating, “Therapist? No I never did that... Well, I don’t really know anyone who goes to those places. I mean, I know they have them- but I never thought of going there- just- because” (personal communication, January 5, 2014).

Even the graduate whose father is a mental health professional did not consider seeking therapy for emotional support after college graduation:

My dad is a psychologist, so we would talk about it- but not in any different way than you would just talk to your dad... I usually feel pretty good, but when I start to not feel good, I reach out to my friends. (personal communication, January 18, 2014)

There was only one graduate who reported seeking therapy after graduation. She reported that she saw a therapist during college at her school's student health and counseling center, and that she had a very positive experience with that person. After graduation, she sought counseling from a therapist in the community for additional psychological support. She reports that her parents encouraged her to go to counseling as long as it was helpful, but that they hoped her treatment would not be unduly lengthy: out of pocket cost was a concern. This participant reported that therapy in the community felt different from her experience with therapy at school due to the transactional nature of the interaction and the necessity of negotiating fees. Although the participant acknowledged that her therapist at school was being paid, the college therapist was paid through the school and not directly by the participant. The participant felt less comfortable with her therapist from the community and ended treatment within a few months.

### **Summary**

This chapter summarized the findings from in-person and phone interviews with twelve Chinese American respondents who graduated from college in 2010, 2011, 2012, or 2013. Participants were asked eleven scripted questions, as well as follow up questions regarding their career development after college graduation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to begin to explore the ways in which Chinese American graduates are experiencing career development within the context of the Great Recession. In the subsequent chapter, Discussion, I will discuss the implications of these findings for social work practice and future research in detail, examine this study's relationship to previous work, and identify the limitations of the current study.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to achieve the following: (1) To examine the post-undergraduate transition for Chinese American young adults in the aftermath of the Great Recession; and (2) To investigate any potential mental health issues related to this transition in the target population. With a few exceptions, the key findings of this current study affirmed the findings from previous literature. In this chapter, I will summarize the major findings of the present study and place this study in context by discussing its relationship to previous, related scholarly work. Then, I will indicate the strengths and limitations of this study based on its methodology. Finally, I will address the implications of this study to social work practice and policy, and make recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of Major Findings**

In sum, the current study found that most recent graduates made career-related decisions based on the following three factors: money, location, and/or type of job. Graduates had preferences about how much money they would like to earn, type of job they were in, or where they were living, but many individuals found that they were unable to find positions or opportunities that met all of their criteria. Instead, graduates prioritized their needs and often sacrificed one or both of the other factors due to limited opportunities.

The present study found that unemployment, long job searches, and competitive graduate school applications were common obstacles among recent graduates who participated in this

study. Graduates experienced the Great Recession largely through personal unemployment and underemployment, as well as through their friends' struggles to find a job. College graduates affirmed that a bachelor's degree from even the most prestigious university was *not enough*, and that a graduate education was essential to being competitive in the job market. However, admission to graduate programs was equally competitive, and finding a job while reapplying to graduate school was both time-consuming and discouraging.

The findings of the current study also suggest that Chinese American, recent college graduates remain emotionally close with their families of origin. Family support was found to be reflexive, as graduates reported receiving significant emotional support from their families, and also feeling a desire to provide financial support back to their families. Parents of recent graduates expected them to be *successful*: this meant working hard, being financially stable, and taking advantage of all opportunities that arose. Graduates also reported that their parents expected and desired for them to be happy with their career choices. Immigration status and the education level of their parents were relevant factors for recent graduates in terms of their career development, as participants who were the first generation in the family to graduate from college reported that it took more time for them to make career choices. They found that their parents' inexperience with regards to professional development was a disadvantage because they had less overall guidance.

Finally, this study found that few participants sought or even considered seeking emotional support from a mental health professional. Out of twelve participants, only one received services from a counselor or therapist. This finding supports decades of previous research (Akutsu, Tsuru, & Chu, 2004; Lin & Cheung, 1999; Sue, Cheng, Saad, & Chu, 2012) documenting the underutilization of mental health counseling and psychological resources by

Asian Americans. However, this finding suggests that the next generation of Chinese American young adults may underutilize mental health resources at a similar rate as previous generations of Asian Americans.

### **Effects of the Great Recession**

The Great Recession, which began in 2007, has been called the “worst economic recession since the Great Depression” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013). Previous qualitative literature on the effects of the Great Recession is limited due to the brief amount of time since the start of the Recession and the time-consuming nature of scholarly research. However, quantitative, survey-based research suggests that recent college graduates experienced high rates of unemployment and underemployment after the Recession (Godofsky et al., 2011). Similarly, quantitative research affirms that college graduates depended heavily on family support after graduation, and that over 25% of recent college graduates moved back in with their family of origin after college graduation (Stone et al., 2012). The results of the current study are very consistent with the literature. Participants reported months of searching for jobs, and *over half*, seven out of twelve, of the participants moved *back* into their parents’ home (or one of their parent’s homes, in the case of parental divorce or separation) *for some length of time* after college graduation.

While Stone et al. (2012) report that graduates are moving home at rates of over 25%, the present study found the same phenomenon occurring at an exaggerated rate of almost 60%. These exaggerated results may be related to the small sample size and the non-randomized recruitment method. On the other hand, this phenomenon might also be related to Chinese American cultural values and filial obligations. The Chinese American community is known to be more group-oriented, so perhaps returning to one’s family of origin after college graduation is

more common because it is more acceptable in Chinese families than in the general population. This finding raises the following questions, which warrant further research: Do Chinese American recent college graduates move back into their parents' homes at a higher rate than recent graduates in the general population? If so, what about being Chinese American or Chinese causes these graduates to be disproportionately more likely to return to their parents' home?

Another major finding of this study is that recent college graduates believe that a professional or graduate level degree is essential to reaching one's career goals and being a competitive job applicant. This theme might be related to Godofsky et al. (2011) and Stone et al.'s (2012) findings of a general sense of pessimism among the current generation's expectations for their job market prospects. Stone et al. (2012) report that about half of recent graduates expect to be worse off than their parents: Perhaps current graduates have found that their parents were successful with only a bachelor's degree, but expect that they won't be. This hypothesis also warrants further research.

The present study found that recent college graduates can articulate that *something* has changed in the last few years, which has made graduate education a necessity: for instance, participants cited that their cousins or friends who are eight or ten years older than them have succeeded without a graduate level degree. Notably, they were unable to identify *what* has changed in the past ten or twelve years. The hypothesis of this study is that the Great Recession is the catalyst that has changed the professional environment for recent college graduates. A question for future research would be: What prevents Chinese American recent college graduates from identifying the Great Recession as a major event?

One could speculate that the myth of the model minority is a major factor preventing Chinese American graduates from being able to place their professional struggles in the current

economic context. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Chinese Americans, as the model minority, have been told that they “have succeeded in finding a place for themselves in the American dream through hard work, perseverance, and quiet suffering” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012, p. 143). Participants in this study affirmed that their parents expect them to work hard and be successful. The implication is that if graduates are not successful, then they should have tried harder. It would be incompatible with the model minority myth for a Chinese American, recent college graduate to suggest that her success or failure in her career was related to the Great Recession, because it would appear as a relinquishment of responsibility and would bring shame to the family by suggesting that the individual did not try hard enough to succeed. Furthermore, Uba (2002) suggests that the model minority myth forces Asian Americans to continually justify their presence in the U.S. through their economic success. This assertion supports the current study’s finding of the belief among Chinese American graduates that they need to try harder, do more, and get more education in order to be financially and economically successful.

### **Filial Obligation**

This study found that family support was reciprocal: Graduates received financial, housing, and emotional support from their parents, *and* they also hoped to provide financial support for their families. These findings affirm Uba (1994) and Wong & Mock’s (1997) assertion that the Asian American community is more group-oriented than other racial and ethnic groups. They assert that as a group-oriented community, individual success or failure is considered a group success or failure. Likewise, an individual’s identity is shaped as much by the community and the family’s expectations, hopes, and dreams, as by her own aspirations. Dependence is not something to be ashamed of, but rather, a way to *be a part of the community*—knowing that one day, it will be one’s own privilege and responsibility to also give



back to past and future generations. In this way, the cultural value of interdependence gets handed down from one generation to the next. Thus, people in the Chinese American community tend to be open to interdependence, and they are more willing to provide and accept financial, emotional, and other kinds of support throughout a person's lifespan.

This study found that many participants benefitted substantially from the financial and emotional safety net offered by their families during the unstable period of time after college graduation. The economic environment was unforgiving during the Great Recession, and extra family support in the form of housing, advice, and finances was frequently needed. The positive, stabilizing effect of family support was significant among Chinese American graduates. In general, graduates reported that the support they received from their families was helpful, and they did not report feeling shame or embarrassment about receiving such support. These findings are aligned with past literature, which affirm that the group-oriented nature of the Chinese American community does not stigmatize interdependence into adulthood.

This study also found that recent graduates hoped to be capable of providing financial support to their immediate and extended families. This finding also supports Uba (1994) and Wong & Mock's (1997) finding that Chinese American and Asian American families are more group-oriented. This collectivist orientation is distinct from traditional Western values, which glorify individual independence and separateness in adulthood. These findings suggest that Chinese American graduates, many who were born and raised in the United States, maintain some of the collectivist values based in Chinese culture. This finding is surprising because one would anticipate that over time, Chinese Americans would become more acculturated. Acculturation is the "the adoption of American cultural patterns" and values over time and generations (Uba, 1994, p. 13). Theoretically, as Chinese American immigrants and their

descendants become acculturated, they relinquish the values traditionally attributed to Chinese culture, such as collectivism, and assume Western values, such as independence (Arnett, 2001; Uba, 1994; Uba, 2002). Findings of this study suggest that perhaps this is not always the case, and lead us to wonder: why and in what cases do Chinese Americans maintain traditional group-based values? This speculation warrants further research, as the scope of this study was limited in its exploration of this topic. A qualitative study on acculturation among Chinese American emerging adults would be beneficial because it would provide insight into the lives, values, and cultural identities of members of this population.

Another issue that was beyond the scope of this study, but is worth examination, is regarding family support in non-Asian families: When families subscribe to the Western value of independence, rather than the Asian value of interdependence, is it less acceptable to provide or accept family support after an individual has entered adulthood? Arnett (2001) asserts that American adulthood is defined by increasing independence and separation from one's family of origin. American values emphasize freedom, self-interest, and the ability to stand on one's own two feet *without* assistance. Based on the literature, I would suspect that giving and receiving family support after college graduation is less acceptable in non-Asian families. Further research could explore the acceptability of giving and receiving emotional and financial support from families in non-Asian communities. Furthermore, it is important to note that White Americans are the dominant racial and cultural group in the United States, who set the standard by which other groups are measured. This raises the question of whether Chinese American young adults feel shame, guilt, or embarrassment for accepting support from their families in comparison to their White peers. A qualitative or theoretical study on guilt in Chinese American graduates

might provide insight into the extent of internalized racism and possible rejection of Chinese cultural values among members of this population.

Another issue related to the concept of the collectivist orientation in the Chinese American community is parental comparison of recent graduates to their peers in the community. The present study found that most commonly, a participant's parents compared him or her to their friends' similarly aged adult children, or to the participant's cousins and siblings. Comparison was used as a tool for parents to communicate what they wanted of their children, including their desires for their children to succeed in comparison to others. This finding is supported by previous literature, which emphasizes the group- and family-oriented nature of the Asian American community and more specifically, of career selection and professional development by Asian American emerging adults (Ma & Yeh, 2005; Wong & Mock, 1997). Research demonstrates that for many Chinese families, a child's career success or failure is regarded as a direct correlation to family success or failure (Tang et al., 1999; Sue & Frank, 1973). Given the motivating role that shame and fear of loss of face (Leong et al., 2011) play in this community, it is not surprising that parents would have expectations for their children *in relation to others in the community*.

The current study found that recent graduates who were the first person in their family (or among the first generation in the family) to earn a bachelor's degree had more difficulty selecting a career, and that these graduates took longer to reach their career goals. These findings support previous literature, which demonstrate that socio-cultural factors including race, socioeconomic status, and gender can affect an individual's career choices and professional opportunities (Fouad, 2007; Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). As research would lead us to expect, cultural capital and educational capital were privileges enjoyed

by those graduates whose parents had also pursued graduate level education. Graduates with this advantage had an easier time selecting a career due to the added guidance and experience of the previous generation. In addition to affirming previous research on socio-cultural factors in career development, these findings also challenge the notion of the model minority. As discussed in Chapter Two, the model minority myth essentializes all Asian ethnic groups and asserts that they are problem-free, well educated, and successful. As the findings of this study and previous literature maintain (Kibria, 1999; Park, 2008; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012; Wong & Mock, 1997; Woo, 2005), this myth minimizes the experiences of Asian and Chinese Americans who do not benefit from such advantages. Qualitative studies like this one are beneficial because they offer a rare opportunity to hear how the myth of the model minority is both internalized *and* challenged by Asian Americans.

### **Underuse of Mental Health Resources**

The underutilization of mental health resources by Asian American populations is well documented in social work literature (Akutsu et al., 2004; Lin & Cheung, 1999; Sue et al., 2012; Uba, 1994). Underutilization is defined as Asian Americans not accessing mental health resources at a rate consistent with their proportion occurring in the general population. Underutilization is perpetuated by fear of loss of face (Leong et al., 2011), cultural stigma and shame (Leong et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2012; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997), and lack of financial access to appropriate mental health services (Herrick & Brown, 1998). The results of the current study largely affirm the existing literature: Only one out of twelve participants in this study reported accessing mental health resources for emotional support during his or her transition from college to career, despite the stress and anxiety that all graduates experienced during this transition. The participant who participated in counseling stated that she initiated therapy while

she in college, when counseling services were nearby and had a low out-of-pocket cost. She decided to restart therapy after college, but she terminated treatment after three months due to the financial difficulty of weekly therapy.

The findings of this study supports Uba's (1994) assertion, which is that Asian Americans find psychological and emotional support in family and friends rather than through the services of professional therapists. Graduates reported, "I usually feel pretty good, but when I start to not feel good, I reach out to my friends" (personal communication, January 18, 2014). Another participant even referred to his friends as therapists: "They're like my therapists, especially around exams when I get so stressed out" (personal communication, December 18, 2013).

However, contrary to previous studies, which suggest that Asians and Asian Americans eschew counseling due to cultural stigma and shame (Leong et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2012; Yamashiro & Matsuoka, 1997), the current study did not find stigma or shame to be a significant barrier to service. Instead, it seemed that it simply did not occur to Chinese American recent graduates to seek counseling or mental health services. One question that this finding raises is: why does the option to seek counseling not occur to Chinese American young, as well as emerging adults? This issue is worth further investigation. On one hand, perhaps this finding highlights an entry point at which mental health care providers can begin to narrow the gap in utilization rates between Asian Americans and the general population. By introducing counseling and mental health services as an option, perhaps on college campuses or other community centers, service providers can begin to outreach to a largely underserved population. On the other hand, the collectivist culture is a powerful vehicle for normalizing certain experiences and excluding others, and cultural barriers to accessing mental health services still exist. Future

studies could examine the insidious ways in which stigma against mental illness silence dialogue about mental health to the extent that young people do not even consider it as a resource.

In sum, the results of this study support the literature, which has decades of research documenting the underutilization of mental health resources by Asian Americans. While mental health support may now carry fewer stigmas among young, Chinese Americans, it is not a resource that is frequently accessed: it simply does not come to mind as an option. As clinical social workers, this may be an area where it is necessary to use creativity to reach out to an underserved population. The results of this study suggest that Chinese American college graduates are coping with stress by talking with friends and family. One of the implications of this study for clinical social work is the potential for this underserved population to be reached through family and friends. For instance, could clinical social workers educate parents and other community members about mental health resources, in order to more effectively reach the younger generation? What other possibilities do these findings uncover with regard to the mental health needs of Chinese American young adults? Future studies could address this finding in greater detail in order to understand how the collectivist culture could be utilized as a tool in itself for reaching this population.

### **Strengths and Limitations of this Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the following research question: To what extent do cultural norms, societal judgments, and economic realities of the recent Great Recession affect Chinese American college graduates in their professional growth? Through a total of twelve interactive in-person and telephone interviews, I heard anecdotes about the transition from college to career and witnessed stories about parental expectations and long, discouraging periods of unemployment. As a qualitative researcher, I had the opportunity to ask follow up

questions and make clarifying statements, which are impossible or impractical for other research methods. However, the advantages of this research method were also potential pitfalls: This research was subject to the researcher's personal bias and peer status, as well as participant reactivity. As a third-generation, Chinese American and recent college graduate, my perspective on this study, my reactions to participants' responses, and my relationship to the data were biased by my own career-related experiences and professional development after graduation from the University of California, Berkeley in 2011. Additionally, participants were recruited and selected from my own personal and professional network, which is shaped by my socio-cultural location and education.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, even data analysis was a subjective process. As the researcher, I brought my own bias to the data in coding, analysis, and discussion. Admittedly, another researcher could have asked different questions of the participants, interpreted responses in another way, and drawn distinct conclusions from the transcriptions. In Chapter Four, I identified common threads and highlighted themes in the data; yet, even this step was not exempt from personal bias: my own experiences, socioeconomic status, educational capital, and social location as a Chinese American woman affected this analysis.

The results of this study are not, and were not intended to be generalizable. Both the relatively small sample size (n=12) and the snowball sampling recruitment method ensure that the sample was not representative of the general population. However, the purpose of the study was to obtain a general sense of the experience of graduating from college and establishing a professional career during the Great Recession, from the perspective of Chinese American recent graduates. The research design and sample recruiting methods were adequate and appropriate to meet the goal of exploring this specific, time-sensitive phenomenon.

Time was another limitation of this study. In other disciplines, it is not uncommon for researchers to spend years, if not decades, conducting and producing their research. A longer study would have made prolonged engagement possible (perhaps multiple interviews with each participant over time), and this strategy may have helped to increase the validity of this qualitative method. Alternatively, member checking, that is validating study conclusions with participants to confirm the themes and results that I identified, would also have reduced bias and increased the validity of this study. Finally, a longer length of time would have made it possible to conduct a longitudinal study, where participants could have been followed over a certain length of time. One of the benefits of longitudinal studies is the ability to observe changes more accurately, rather than relying on participant self-report.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Within the limited scope of this study, I focused on the multi-dimensional, relational and emotional effects of the Great Recession, as well as examined the cultural pressures and expectations that Chinese American graduates experience during this life phase. While intended to fill a gap in the knowledge of Chinese American graduates' professional development after college, this study is limited in scope and further research is needed to expand on the results and limitations of this study.

First, I included the responses of males and females in the results of this study; therefore the findings of the present study are unable to capture the differences in parental expectations and real experiences that may be attributed to gender. As clinical social workers, we are trained to be sensitive to issues related to social justice and we are expected to be agents for change when these issues affect our clients or their communities. Gender privilege and its counterpart, discrimination, are social justice issues relevant to social work practice, policy, and theory.



Discrimination in the workplace, the glass ceiling, and the penalty of motherhood are real and powerful forces that affect the career opportunities and expectations of females. Furthermore, in the Chinese American community, where there is a history of gender discrimination and male preference, it would be useful to examine how contemporary young females are experiencing career development in comparison to males. Future research might explore the divergent ways in which Chinese American male and female college graduates have experienced the Great Recession and career development. For instance, have Chinese American females been encouraged or discouraged to pursue certain career paths because of the economic pressures caused by the Great Recession? Have certain, traditionally male-dominated career paths become more acceptable for Chinese American females due to changes in the economic environment? These issues are worth further exploration by future studies.

Similarly, the current study does not examine the gradual changes in feelings of obligation and internalized values as a family assimilates over several generations. Participants were included in the present study without regard to generational status. Given that assimilation takes place over time and generations, it would be helpful to know if and how assimilation and generational immigration status affect the professional development of Chinese American college graduates. I would hypothesize that a first generation Chinese American immigrant experienced the Great Recession differently than a graduate who is three or four generations removed from immigration, due to pressure to become more “American,” as well as differences between the historical moments in which various generations emigrated.

Another issue worth further investigation, especially due to its relevance to clinical social work, is the underutilization of mental health resources by Chinese American young adults. The findings of the current study suggest that cultural stigma and shame around the use of mental

health services is beginning to evaporate, but further research could be done to explore in greater depth the role and influence of stigma in this population. If, as the results of this study imply, the current generation of Chinese American young adults are less discouraged by stigma and shame, then it would be worth exploring at what entry points clinical social workers can best reach these graduates. How can providers of mental health services introduce therapy and counseling services as an option for emotional and psychological support to Asian American young adults and begin to breach the barriers to service? Social workers are bound to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, which urges those in our profession to “Help people in need and address social problems” (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). It is our responsibility, as clinical social workers, to discover what prevents people in need, including Chinese American recent college graduates, from accessing mental health services, and to do what we can to provide needed services in an accessible location, at a manageable cost.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study explored the professional development of Chinese American recent college graduates in the context of the Great Recession. Social work’s person-in-environment perspective was the foundation for this study, which was based on the hypothesis that the economic environment would affect the personal and professional lives of Chinese American, recent college graduates. In this chapter, I summarized the major findings of this study and contextualized the current study by comparing and contrasting the results of this study with literature that was cited in Chapter Two. Although the Great Recession officially ended in 2009, this study suggests that the economic effects of the Recession continue to affect Chinese American graduates’ professional development and attitudes toward graduate education.

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Appendix A: HSR Approval Letter



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

October 24, 2013

Rebecca Lee

Dear Rebecca,

You did a very nice job on your application. **Your project required no necessary revisions and is approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.**

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). **This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.**

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

**Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.**  
**Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee**

**CC: Mariko Ono, Research Advisor**

## Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Subject: MSW Thesis Recruitment

Dear Friends and Family,

As many of you know, I am now in the final year of my Master's in Social Work graduate degree program at Smith College in Northampton, MA. One of the requirements for my degree is that I complete a master's thesis related to clinical social work. Over the next two to three months, I will be interviewing Chinese American recent (undergraduate) college graduates about their experience transitioning out of college. I am interested in examining the ways in which cultural and family expectations, acculturation, and a recessed economy have interacted in shaping young adults' lives.

While I personally know people who fit the eligibility requirements for my study, it is not ethical for me to interview my own friends and family. As a result, I need your help recruiting potential participants for my study! I'm looking for people who meet the following requirements:

1. Identifies as Chinese American. (Has at least one parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent who is Chinese)
2. Graduated from a U.S. accredited 4-year college or university in 2010, 2011, 2012, or 2013.
3. Don't know me personally (yet).

If you know friends, friends' children, coworkers, coworkers' children, former classmates, cousins, siblings, etc who meet these requirements, would you please forward them the attached flyer?

Thank you very much for your help! If you or your contact(s) have questions, I can be contacted by email at [rdlee@smith.edu](mailto:rdlee@smith.edu) or by phone at (XXX) XXX-XXX xXXXX.



## **Volunteers needed for research study**

### **Chinese American College Graduates in the Great Recession: An Exploratory Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the ways in which Chinese American recent college graduates are coping with the transition from undergraduate graduation to careers, conducted by Rebecca Lee, Master's in Social Work graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. This research project is a requirement for the completion of the MSW degree.

#### **Am I eligible to participate in the study?**

1. You are eligible if you identify as Chinese American. (You have at least one parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent who is or was Chinese.)
2. AND, you graduated from a U.S. accredited undergraduate 4-year college or university in 2010, 2011, 2012, or 2013.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

- First, we will speak on the phone for one 10-15 minute conversation so that I can confirm your eligibility and collect demographic information.
- Then, you will be asked to verbally respond to a series of open-ended questions about factors that affected your career-related decisions after college graduation. This single conversation will take place in a public, mutually convenient location in the San Francisco Bay Area or on the phone, and it will last between 10 and 40 minutes.

**You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.**

**If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact the researcher, Rebecca Lee, at**

## **Appendix D: Participant Screening Questionnaire**

Name:

Phone:

Email:

Age:

Undergraduate College/ University:

Degree:

Year of graduation:

Current occupation:

Current city of residence:

Race:

Ethnicity:

Generation status:

Notes:

## **Appendix E: Interview Guide**

1. What career-related decisions did you make after graduating from college?
2. What factors affected your career-related decisions?
3. How did you feel about your decisions after you had committed to them? To what extent were you satisfied or dissatisfied with these decisions?
4. How would you describe the state of the economy when you graduated from college?
5. Do you believe that the state of the economy at that time affected your career-related decisions? If yes, how?
6. What are your parents' values and expectations for you regarding your career? How do/did they communicate these values to you?
7. Do you feel that you have adopted these values for yourself? Why or why not?
8. Do you think these values affected your career-related decisions? If so, how?
9. Do you think your parents' expectations would have been different if you had been male/female (opposite sex)? How?
10. What helped you cope with the post-undergraduate transition?
11. Did you ever seek or consider seeking professional counsel (career counselor, therapist, mentor, etc) regarding your career-related decisions? If yes, what kind of professional(s) and how was/were your experience(s)?
12. Is there anything you'd like to add?

## Appendix F: Informed Consent Letter

.....

**Title of Study:** Chinese American College Graduates in the Great Recession: An Exploratory Study

**Investigator(s):** Rebecca D. Lee, School for Social Work, (XXX) XXX-XXXX xXXXX

.....

Dear Participant,

My name is Rebecca Lee, and I am a Master's in Social Work (MSW) student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. You are being asked to be in a research study on Chinese Americans' career-related decisions after undergraduate college graduation. I am particularly interested in exploring how the Great Recession has affected Chinese American graduates' career decision-making, coping, and mental health during the post-college transition. You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as Chinese American, were a traditional-aged college student (you started college immediately after high school), and graduated from an accredited 4-year, U.S. college or university between 2010-2013. I ask that you please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The purpose of the study is to get a sense of how Chinese American college graduates are reacting to the economic and employment challenges of the Great Recession during their transition out of college. The transition from school to career can be challenging in any economic period, and the Recession has added another dimension to this transition. As a clinical social work student, my purpose in conducting this study is to explore how graduates are coping with the challenges associated with these factors. This study is being conducted as a requirement for my Master's in Social Work (MSW) degree. The data that I collect in this study will be used for my MSW thesis and may ultimately be used for professional publications, conferences, or presentations.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to verbally respond to a series of open-ended questions about factors that affected your career-related decisions after college graduation. I will also ask follow-up questions to clarify your responses. The interview will be recorded with a digital voice recorder, and I will personally transcribe the interview for coding and analysis. I expect the interview to take between 15-40 minutes.

The study has the following risk. Participation in this study may bring up difficult feelings or emotional discomfort. Please feel free to opt-out of any question if it feels too distressing. I have provided a list of referrals to local, low-cost, psychological services in case you would like follow-up support.

If you choose to participate in the study, I hope that you will benefit from the opportunity to share your unique experiences and to reflect on your personal, familial, and cultural value system. Additionally, I hope that after thoughtfully reviewing recent career-related decisions, you will feel an increased sense of clarity, insight, and resilience. The benefits of your participation to social work and society are increased knowledge about the vocational choices of Chinese Americans, and the effects of those choices on Chinese Americans' mental health and interpersonal relationships. In addition, because the Great Recession is a recent event whose subjective, interpersonal effects have yet to be studied in depth, your participation in this study will help clinical social workers and other mental health professionals to better understand the vocational and relational effects of the Great Recession on young adults.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. All personal identifying information will be removed from your responses, and the data you provide will be assigned a unique identifying number. The document connecting your identifying number with your research records will be secured, password-protected, and stored separately. I, alone, will have access to the audio recording of this interview, and I will personally transcribe it. My research advisor will have access to the data, but only after all identifying information has been removed. Furthermore, if this research is used in any publication, presentation, or report, no information will be included that might make it possible to identify you. For example, data will be presented as an aggregate and any vignettes or quotes will be carefully disguised. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose to participate in the study, you may refuse to answer any question, follow-up question, or part of a question by saying that you do not wish to answer. You have the right to withdraw from the study altogether at any point during the interview or after the interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study after the interview, you must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone before the end of the business day (Pacific time) on February 1, 2014. After that date, your information will be permanently included in the thesis. If you choose to withdraw before the deadline, I will not use any of your information in the study.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during, or after the study. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact me, Rebecca Lee, at rdlee@smith.edu or by telephone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX xXXX. If you would like to view a summary of the results of the study, please contact me by phone or email at the above address or number, and I would be more than happy to provide it. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you are encouraged to contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher. You will also be given a list of referrals in case you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ Participant \_\_\_\_\_ (print): \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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**[If using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]**

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix G: Referral Sources

- 1. Richmond Area Multi-Services Inc. | 3626 Balboa Street, San Francisco, CA 94121 | Intake Office: (415) 668-5955 | <http://www.ramsinc.org/>**

*The Outpatient Clinic offers individual, group, and family counseling, case management, consultation, psychiatric evaluation and medication management, and psycho-education on a sliding scale to residents of San Francisco. In addition, RAMS offers culturally-focused coordinated services that are provided by our clinical team specifically targeted for the Asian & Pacific Islander American and Russian-speaking communities.*

- 2. The Tang Center, Counseling & Psychological Services | 2222 Bancroft Way #4300, Berkeley, CA 94720 | Phone: (510) 642-9494 | <http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu/students/counseling/cps.shtml>**

*We provide brief counseling to students with personal, academic and career concerns. All undergraduate and graduate students are eligible for CPS services, regardless of their insurance coverage. CPS offers short-term counseling for individuals and groups. The number of sessions is determined by you and your counselor based on your treatment plan and counseling needs. The first 5 sessions are at no cost and there is a maximum of 8 sessions per year.*

- 3. The Wright Institute Community Clinics | 2728 Durant Ave, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Addison St. Clinic Phone: (510) 548-9716 | Parker St. Clinic Phone: (510) 486-8998 | <http://www.wi.edu/clinics>**

*These training clinics, staffed by Wright Institute students under the supervision of our faculty, provide low-fee therapy to members of the public. One clinic, located on Addison Street in Berkeley, focuses on long-term psychodynamic treatment. The other clinic, located on Parker Street in Berkeley, focuses on long-term and brief cognitive-behavioral treatment.*

- 4. California School of Professional Psychology, Psychological Services Center Oakland | 1440 Broadway Suite 610, Oakland, CA 94612 | Info & appointments: (510) 628-9065 | <http://www.alliant.edu/cspp/comm-services-placement/san-francisco-community-services/oakland-psc.php>**

*We are an outpatient community mental health clinic providing services in downtown Oakland with a generous sliding fee scale. The PSC runs programs for adults, children and families, with different approaches depending on client needs. All treatment modalities foster sensitivity to ethnicity, class, race, gender and sexual orientation. In addition, all therapists are doctoral level and every trainee is supervised by a licensed psychologist. Appointments are required and available Monday-Thursday from 9am-8pm and Friday from 9am-4pm.*