

Chinese Seniors' Vulnerability in Food Lines: An Ethnographic Report

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SECTION 1: Project Introduction

Introduction

The University of British Columbia Urban Ethnographic Field School (UBC UVEFS or Field School) program aims to provide opportunities for students to link theoretical knowledge to practical application. This program focuses on the qualitative method of ethnography where students are encouraged to look at urban Vancouver from the perspectives of people in their everyday experiences. Three students, Leanne Huang, Liana Chan, and Pei Fang Goh from UBC UVEFS were assigned to a volunteer placement with the British Columbia Community Response Network (BCCRN) as part of the Field School. BCCRN initiated a collaborative project in light of Chinese seniors' vulnerability in the food lines. In this particular partnership with the Field School, the students work with BCCRN, UBC Learning Exchange, and three community organizations - First United Church, Salvation Army, and Union Gospel Mission. Through learning the perspectives of food line users (particularly the Chinese seniors) and their experiences in meal programs at the three aforementioned organizations, this project aims to make the meal programs a safer and more welcoming space for the seniors.

Objectives

- A) Participate in food lines at three community organizations (First United Church, Salvation Army, and Union Gospel Mission) at various meal times and engage in conversation with their users, with a focus on Chinese seniors. Develop rapport and inquire about their experiences and opinions of using food lines through interactions.
- B) Work with all involved parties to decide on key concerns pertaining to the issue of senior vulnerability in food lines.
- C) Facilitate a focus group with Chinese seniors to hold a richer and more in-depth conversation on their food line experience and additional topics.
- D) Create a report as an effort to move the conversation forward on bettering the experiences of Chinese seniors in food lines and encouraging intercultural understanding between all parties (staff, volunteers and food line users) involved with food security programs.

The report is divided threefold:

- (1) Street-level Portraits:** These are purely descriptive pieces taken from the field notes produced by the students as a result of participant observation and interactions at the sites. This is to paint a more localized image of the individuals who access the food line.
- (2) Focus Group Data Summary:** Using translated quotes as supporting evidence, this section is a preliminary analysis of the key dialogues expressed by the participants.
- (3) Thematic Discussion:** This is an integration of all data from previous sections to formulate a final analysis and address all key issues. This also includes suggestions for further improvement on the food security programs.

Methods

Data collection was completed through the following ways:

(1) Ethnography and Participant Observation

We (the UBC UVEFS students) participated in the food line and drop-in programs at three organizations during their breakfasts and lunches. We engaged in conversation and interaction primarily with the Chinese seniors at all times of their food line experience. For instance, we stood in line with them and sat down with them at the tables. In addition, we also observed food lines to gain an overall understanding of how food line ups are implemented at each site. Field notes were made after leaving the sites and were later compiled and analyzed in the report.

(2) Focus Group

A focus group was held at UBC Learning Exchange in order to provide a neutral space for the participants to comfortably voice their concerns and experiences at the food lines. We advertised the focus group through handing out flyers at food lines and drop-ins and successfully recruited 8 female Chinese seniors who speak Cantonese. We facilitated the discussions based on an interview guide we created in collaboration with the organizations (see appendix).

(3) Interview

Similarly, at UBC Learning Exchange, an in-depth interview was conducted with a male Chinese senior who speaks Mandarin. This interview focused on his thoughts on the stereotypes about the Chinese people as well as the issues related to the tension between different users of the food programs.

Ethics

We received approval from UBC Research Ethics Board as part of our course requirement prior to beginning our work on this project. When participating in the food lines and drop-ins, we disclosed ourselves as UBC students who were here to volunteer and learn about experiences of meal programs users and ways to improve the programs. In the focus groups and interview, we emphasized that participation will not result in hindrance of their access to resources or services and that they remain welcomed to use them. To maintain confidentiality, we replaced names with pseudonyms and erased any identifying information. Focus group and interview were audio recorded with the consent of all participants and the recordings were destroyed upon completion of analysis.

Please Note:

The data in the report is gathered and interpreted by three students of the UBC Urban Vancouver Ethnographic Field School Students. The conclusions in this report are not generalizable across all food line users. Specifically, we want to note that our findings do not represent all Chinese people accessing the community services. The data gathered may not apply to all community organizations. However, this report can still serve as valuable information for everyone.

SECTION 2 - Street-level Portrait

Introduction

From waking up at 5am to accumulating a plastic bag of half-eaten muffins and oranges, our immersion into the food line experience has given us the chance to collect personal stories from people and especially Chinese people. Our initial anxiety about having them to open up to complete strangers was diminished when we were able to gain insights into their lives. Key themes that resulted from the dialogues and observations we engaged are:

1. Tensions between Chinese People and Non-Chinese People
2. Tensions between Chinese People
3. Access Food Lines
4. Positive Interactions
5. Personal Backgrounds
6. Routines and Hobbies
7. Views on Canada

“Tensions between Chinese people and Non-Chinese people”

One of the primary concerns we were informed by the community partners was about the racial tensions between Chinese people and other ethnicities. From our observations, these take place mainly between Chinese people and Caucasian males. Below are some excerpts from our experiences:

A group of 4 to 5 Chinese female, who appear to be in their late 70s, are putting away their trays to the designated area as they are heading toward the door. While remain seated, a guy with dark skin tone, wearing spectacles and a hat, suddenly extends his leg out. The Chinese elder trips and I quickly go up to help her from falling. Fortunately, she does not fall to the ground and says “that guy did it on purpose” in a surprisingly calm but hopeless tone. Standing near to me is a chef, who is chatting with me about my work here; we both witness the whole event unfolded. She doesn’t look nor yell back at the guy, she thanks me for trying to help her and leaves the place with her female companions.

The Chinese senior jumps into a story about something that happened to her a couple weeks ago. She was at a food line where she found a \$5 bill on the ground. She bent down to pick it when a group of males sitting at a table close by beginning to make sounds of shock and disbelief. Thinking that the money may have been dropped by one of these men, she presents it to them. They began to laugh and her. Feeling confused and not wanting to cause any trouble, she places the money on the table and walks away.

As I walk pass a table located beside the line up, I hear a white, middle-aged male who is on a wheelchair saying, “You have to clean up your shit... have to be less disrespectful.” to a short haired, middle-aged looking Chinese lady, who is about to leave without taking her tray to the

trolley. She remains silent and looks slightly upset; she soon takes the empty tray and puts it on the pile of dirty dishes. After the Chinese lady leaves, I approach the man and share with him my roles or chatting with Chinese seniors who come here. When I ask, "Have you been seeing many Chinese seniors around here?" to which he replies "Oh yeah! They are everywhere – they got more time than everybody else".

"Today they are better, you should come to see them during the Sunday lunch!" said by a middle-aged, white male as I am approaching the table he is sitting at. He is referring to the behaviour of a Chinese female elder who is putting away her tray. He eagerly tells me that he once caught some 70s-year-old Chinese ladies, whom according to him, claimed them as not understanding English. He says, "When they speak English, they sound like graduates from Oxford (laugh)." He claims the Chinese seniors are "vicious and aggressive" when they are grabbing food. When I probe to ask who these persons he is talking about, he says they are some "young Chinese ladies", which I then point out his previous saying that they are 70 years old. He went on to murmur some speech that I couldn't make out with.

I stand next to her in the line to get breakfast. She is small Chinese female senior, about 5 feet in height. Standing behind us is a Caucasian man, approximately 5'3 in height. When she and I got to the food table, I hear the man behind us mumbling, "Why are you taking that, you don't even eat it."

Walking over to a table with her, there are two vacant seats at a table. In front of one of the vacant seats is a tray with some dishes and cutlery. "Is there still somebody sitting there?" I asked her? "No, he left" she replies, and sits down. Next to that seat is a Caucasian man who tries to indicate to her that there is still someone using that seat, but she doesn't listen and sits down anyways. The man scrunches his eyebrows and looks somewhat annoyed. After about ten minutes there is no sign of anyone returning to claim the seat where she sits.

Tensions between Chinese people

From our observations, we notice that there is also dissatisfaction between Chinese seniors themselves. Below are some excerpts from our experiences:

A Chinese lady who seems to be younger and slightly "well-dressed" than the other Chinese seniors walks in. A Chinese elder, whom I have been talking for about half an hour, says that these woman whom she claims are from Hong Kong, always appear in a snobbish manner that she dislikes. She also talks about a group of older, Cantonese-speaking Chinese women who go to different organizations and take food is making the Chinese people "look bad". She also shares with me some of the discrimination she personally experiences in the place and witnesses in the Oppenheimer Park. I try to probe for more clarification but her voices shows reluctance. She gladly receives a loaf of Chinese bread from a staff and said "Thank you" in a soft, accented tone. She told me that her stomach is bad and she will pass the bread to her poor neighbour. Taking food back for those in need in her neighbourhood seems to be a routine for her. I leave to visit another site while she was still sitting there by herself.

Walking down the breakfast line up, I stand next to her, chatting with her. "Do you usually come here?" She says yes and I immediately follow up with another question - "What time do you come?" "I come really early to stand in line. Some Chinese people don't stand in line and that makes the rest of us look bad," she replies. "Why do you come so early?" I ask. "I come line up earlier so I can get the food faster."

When I ask if he has heard anything about problems Chinese people face due to the lack of English skills at food lines, he says 'I am not ashamed to say this because it is the truth. Chinese people are just like that. That is the way they are. When they do it [cutting in line] they cause people to discriminate not only to that person but ALL Chinese people. That is why I try to make a good example of myself.'

He places his tray on the table and takes out two yogurt containers from his black bag. One has a mix of rice, veggies and fish that he got from another food line. Another is a vegetable soup he made at home. He has been in Canada for over 40 years and I can tell he has a good grasp of English when I unconsciously slip in English words in our conversation and he understands everything. Having lost his job and still having bills to pay, he explains that in order to save on his expenses, he visits the food lines.

Accessing food lines

While the general conception of accessing food lines is for the purpose of sustaining themselves, we learned there can be additional reasons as we learn from Chinese people. Below are excerpts from our experiences:

Two female Chinese seniors are fast-walking in my direction, swaying their arms left to right in a synchronized manner. I approach them and exclaim how I admire them for being so active on a chilly morning. They smile and one of the seniors says that given their old age, sitting at home staring at the little box is not good for their health and it's boring. She explains that she might as well come out, get some fresh air (which is something they love about Canada compared to China), get in some exercise and meet with friends.

"The government has it [meal programs] here for us, we should use it."

"You get two eggs, an orange, and a muffin. I really like it. I'm unable to make it on my own."

"The food is too oily!", "I want to wash off the sauce on top of the fish because I don't like it.", "The food is not cooked enough, I need to re-cook it at home", "I am not hungry, I just had breakfast; I usually had lunch at 2pm", "I am taking it back for my husband because he has difficulty to come here." All these are the scattered reasons I gather here and there by conversing with the old, Cantonese-speaking female seniors while they are busying packing up

the food in an efficient manner. A big group of them want to take the food to the Women Centre because they can chit-chat there while eating. Those who line up multiple times are a different group of individuals, who come by themselves or with one companion maximum. I observe there are a few individuals who is lining up the second time but they lied to me when I asked "Did you just arrive?" by saying "Yes, I just did and what are the food today?" They don't appear as talkative and willing to chat with me as the older, Cantonese-speaking women are.

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Three of the Chinese seniors receive their tray and make their way back to their table. Immediately, two unzip their backpacks to take out plastic containers. Swiftly and efficiently, one pushes her fish fillet onto the plate of her friend while her friend scrapes her veggies in hers. The third lady scoops both her fish and veggies to her friends' plates, leaving the bun on her tray untouched. She then offers her soy drink to us. With her plate empty, I ask her 'You're not eating at all?' She looks up at me with a smile and says, 'it's hard to eat these with my teeth and I don't eat fried foods anyway.'

"Positive interactions"

"Can I marry you?" asked a Caucasian man appearing to be in his sixties. The Chinese female senior smiled without saying anything. The Caucasian man looked at me, and said "Can you tell her that I want to marry her?" I laughed and said to her, "He's asking you to marry him." She gasped, chuckling, shaking her head and waving her hands. Blushing, she held her left hand up showing the ring on her finger. "I'm married." She says, giggling. She tells me that she usually gives the food she gets to this Caucasian man because he can't walk well. She says that we should be nice to everyone.

I chat with her while she has the food, paying close attention to the Caucasian man who just had a small conflict with her about the possibly non-vacant seat that she takes. A Chinese male senior comes over and sits down next to me and starts talking to her. "Are you two friends?" I ask. He laughs, "She's my wife." We laugh. When the Caucasian man looks in my direction, I tell him, "They're husband and wife." Then, she points at her husband, saying "He's 80, I'm 78." I turn to the Caucasian man and repeat what she said in English. Upon finishing his food, the Caucasian man asks me, "Are you their daughter?" "No," I replied, "I just met them!" He continues to speak, "Tell them they're really nice people." I turn to her and her husband, "He told me to tell you guys that you're very nice!"

A Caucasian asks me to write down in pronunciation of the Chinese for "I am a stupid white guy." I ask, "Why do you want to learn how to say that?" I have no idea why he would. He

replies, "Because I want to make the Chinese ladies laugh." "Oh, I say," still a little stunned. "Now help me translate: 'Don't worry. They say that you take food and bring them back to your stores to sell. They're idiots.'" I cock my head. "You want to know the truth? I'll tell you the truth. People say that the Chinese ladies take food back to their stores to sell, but it's those who say that about them who actually do that. They take the food and sell it on Hastings or something." "Really? Who says that to them?" I ask. "You know, the people here, like fifty of them." He continues, "Because you know what I think? Why would anyone who is rich want to be here with us? We're dirty and poor. If they're affluent, they'd be sitting in nice cars, not here." I am blown away.

"This guy is so funny," a female Chinese senior joyfully tells me while pointing at the staff member standing in front of the line, counting and chatting with people waiting to get into the hall. Despite not understanding the staff, the senior finds the staff's tone of voice and hand gestures such as stopping people who want to butt in line amusing.

Standing off to the side, I see several Chinese female seniors waiting in line near the front. The staff member who is facilitating the line playfully put his arms out with his palms facing the seniors saying, "No, no, no, no," as if he is not allowing them to go in. But his voice is mellow and warm and then he smiles! The Chinese seniors are smiling too and playfully waving their hands at him. They know he is playing with them. Later on, when I speak to the staff member, he tells me, "They like playing with me."

I am sitting with and chatting with three Chinese female seniors when staff member bring out a cart of food boxes. The seniors looks at me and tells me to take one, I tell them I already eaten but they give theirs and tell me to heat it up at home and to eat it later.

She sits at the last chair in the row. A cup of coffee, a muffin and an orange sit on the chair beside her. With her black environmental bag in her lap, she holds a small salt shaker. A man comes up to her and without saying a word, gestures to the food on the chair. She lifts her orange at him and he shakes his head. She lifts the muffin and he reaches out to take it. He then hands her his orange, which she takes and places in her bag. He then reaches for her salt shaker, saying "I'll be back" before walking away. Noticing the exchange, I ask her if she does this regularly and she explains "The eggs are plain so I bring the salt so people can use it on their eggs. Salt isn't expensive, I have a big box at home. I am not expecting an equal exchange, but if they want to I will accept it. If they don't, then it's okay. "

"Personal backgrounds"

Through our conversations with Chinese people, we learn that each of them have complex histories and cultural backgrounds. Below are excerpts from our experiences:

I converse with a Chinese man while he is seated and has his breakfast. He isn't regular here and only comes here when he has free time and his house is very near from the site. He proudly shows me his bus pass and says that it costs around \$45 per month. He hesitantly says that he

only understands minimum English phrases and that “every Chinese should know written Chinese” when I suggests the idea of having Chinese signs around the place.

One Chinese lady who is in her 60s tells me that she has very poor eyesight as a result of the insulin she takes for treating her diabetes. I ask if she knows that she could stand in the disability line, she says that she cannot communicate her difficulties properly in English with the staff. She has a certificate that proves she is in disability, which she brings to show me a few days after. She only comes here because her husband leaves to China for a few weeks and she can only come to this place because it is closer to her home and she does not dare to go anywhere else due to her poor eyesight. She isn’t qualified for pension because she holds a visitor pass and has only been in Canada for a few years.

Through the small talks we have outside of the drop-ins, I learn that this 60-years-old looking Chinese man is from one part of Asia. “I have been here for 30 years!”, his murmur barely conceals his pride. He is a regular here and he comes here every day during the times at which breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served. He lives in the blocks nearby and he told me that he wants to save up his pension to buy a flight ticket to reunite with his family. We walk haltingly to the bus stop soon after he finishes his cup of coffee that he usually has after the lunch. I said, “Goodbye, uncle!” as he boards slowly onto the bus.

Despite living far away from this neighbourhood, she travels to the DTES on a regular basis because of her occasion routine of picking up cans and bottle in the area nearby and her habit to go around the local organizations to kill time. Her daughter, who is working and living independently, advises her to stop collecting the recyclable items. However, she proudly says, “Sometimes, I can earn up to \$20-30 just from collecting cans!” We spoke interchangeably in Mandarin and Hokkien, a village dialect, even though my fluency in Hokkien is not as good as hers. When I asked why she is by herself, she explains that she cannot communicate in Cantonese and that she does not like to interact with the people from the Mainland China. She seems relieved and happy knowing someone who finally speaks her language.

She is in her eighties and uses a walker. This is the third time I’ve chatted with her in the past week and half. Tears flooded my eyes as she told about the death of her son and her depression that followed.

“Routines and hobbies”

In addition to visiting food lines, we learned about other activities that take place in Chinese peoples’ daily lives. Below are excerpts from our experiences:

I ask what she is doing after eating breakfast and she tells me that she will be going to the foot soak, then to the women’s only senior centre to hang out with her friends. She enjoys hanging together, trading food and cooking together in the community kitchen program.

I say hello and he replies by saying that he knows how to play mah-jong. He asks me if I know how to play and I tell him I don't know. He eagerly tells me that it is very easy. He plays with the female Chinese seniors at a senior centre close by every day after the food line. Every morning he walks over from his home (he lives alone) to get some breakfast at the food line and hang around until the senior centre opens at 9:00 am. He invites me to go see the senior centre if I ever have the time.

Sitting in the black chairs against the wall, I ask her if she lives alone. She tells me that having grandchildren all grown up, she doesn't need to take care of them anymore. Living alone now, she says she can do 'what she wants when she wants'. She mentions how her grandchildren would critique her for spending her time at food lines because to them, it is 'for beggars'. After, she looks to me and asks with a light laugh 'I must be a beggar right?' I reassure her that her life is for her to control.

"Views on Canada"

She says to me 'there are two things I like about Canada: the air and the government.'

"The Canadian government treats us really well. We get this food. In China, it is not like this. We should be satisfied and content," she tells me. "It's important to cherish and be satisfied with what we have, contentment is the most important."

In the drop-in, she asks me if "welfare services like this" is seen in Malaysia and I replied "very rarely." She later expresses thankfulness to the Canadian government's generosity in providing the welfare for the homeless people on the street, whom she perceives as "dependent and lazy". She further says that today is the "paycheck day", so there is not many people accessing the drop-in as usual. "The poor spends all the money on drugs and alcohol", she disdainfully says.

SECTION 3 - Focus Group Data Summary

Introduction

Having learned about various qualitative research methods, we enjoyed having the experience of facilitating our own focus group. From translating the interview questions to role-playing crisis-management, we were apprehensive and wanted to make it a smooth and comfortable experience for everyone.

We divided the focus group data into 5 themes:

1. Experiences at the Organizations
2. Discrimination
3. Language
4. Daily Routine
5. Suggestions for the Organizations

1. Experiences in the Organization

“Our main purpose [of] coming [to food lines] is to see each other.” Many of the participants live on their own in the area. They are all well over the age of retirement so if they do not come out, then they would only be at home “staring at four walls”, so they decided to come out and “have fun [开心一下]”. There is a sharp contrast between themselves and people who are busy with work. “You young ones,” they said to us during the focus group, “you’re so busy with work; you don’t even have time to eat.”

Most of them learned about the organizations through word of mouth. One participant told us her story of becoming a member of the DTES Women’s Centre, and through casual conversation with fellow members there, she found out about these organizations. It caught their attention because of the free food that the organizations apparently offered. These participants really enjoy spending time at the organizations. A frequent and common comment that came up was that they like being on good terms with everyone, Chinese and non-Chinese people alike. “The Caucasian people and we are very familiar with each other now. They’re very nice! When they see us, they’ll say hi to us,” one participant said. Another participant chimed in, “You get to know them after a couple encounters and then you start greeting them when you see them. Then everyone is happy and well.”

Another recurring idea is that the participants see everyone as the same, regardless of race and culture. “We should not say that the Caucasians are not good people; there are good and bad Caucasians. There are good and bad Chinese too. If I fight with you and you fight with me, then it’s not good. We’re all a family and we’re all the same,” one calmly said. Another participant told us that instead of being stubborn, the main idea is to have self-discipline and not to get feisty. When asked who is stubborn, she replied, “There are stubborn Caucasians, there are stubborn Chinese. They are always people who cut in the lines!

2. Discrimination

“Is it against the rules that we are getting food from the food lines?” Before we even asked our first question, the participants jumped right into their experiences of discrimination

in the food lines, as evidenced through a participant's example: "When we get bananas, they give us a smaller one". Another participant accounted an experience with another food line user: "I tell him that he needs to stand behind me, but he pushes me and I almost fall, so I get mad and scold him, and then he quiets down." Yet another participant told us, "Sometimes four or five bums cut in the lines, but we aren't able to communicate, so we don't say anything." Most of the time, the Chinese seniors go into the food lines with very passive mindset: "We aren't brave enough to tell them how we feel. We go in with a mindset of 'if we get some food, it's good; if we don't, it's okay.'" When asked about the staff members' responses to these cases, they said, "The staff don't have the courage to stand up for what is right [主持公道, *take hold of justice*]. They "favour [服, *submit*]" the Caucasian people." The participants felt that the staff turned a blind eye by saying, "They know that we aren't satisfied, but we aren't able to communicate with one another."

Although they were unsatisfied about the discrimination that take place in the food lines, the participants also shared some positive interactions by stating, "That [particular] organization discriminates, but not these ones." They seemed to have some preferred staff, as evidenced through one of a participant's saying: "That fat dude jokes with us. He doesn't discriminate against us."

3. Language

Verbal communication between Chinese seniors and organization staff represents a very pertinent obstacle due to the language barrier. When asked how they handle the challenge of staff trying to speak with them, many participants ignore them altogether because "we can't understand and speak English anyway." On the other hand, one participant applies gestures such as "using hands and using feet" as a strategy and another participant mentioned presenting a business card of a Chinese-speaking staff that can be contacted for translation. However, there seemed to be an overall feeling of hopelessness when asked if they generally feel understood by staff. When they described some of their interactions with them, they simply replied with "They have nothing to say. They just give me the food and leave." Their tones of voice indicated hopelessness so there may be a desire for richer interactions that can close the gap between themselves and the staff. Even in times when they want to defend themselves as they felt that they were not treated equally, all they can do is "suck it up [吞下气 : *swallow air*]".

There was also a strong consensus when asked if they would find it helpful for organizations to have more Cantonese-speaking volunteers. In terms of having Chinese signs as an additional tool, many agreed this can be helpful, even though one participant who is illiterate said that she will not find this useful.

At the same time that there is eagerness from the side of organizations to learn useful Chinese phrases to facilitate communication, there is also a strong desire expressed by Chinese seniors to learn English. One participant said she wants to learn important English phrases not only to use in food lines, but to use in her daily routines such as "going to the bank, buying groceries, and taking the bus." When asked if they heard about any English classes available in the community organizations, one participant mentioned an English class that was taught by an English-speaking teacher. However, she did not think it would be useful because "when we

want something to be explained in Cantonese, they can't do it. How are we supposed to learn without a Chinese facilitator?" There seems to be a need to re-design English classes in order to be more accessible for people of all language backgrounds.

4. Daily Routine

Visiting different community services in the DTES neighbourhood is an essential routine in the participants' everyday life. They habituate themselves to going to bed and getting up early. They usually start off their day by cooking breakfast, exercising, and strolling in parks. All of the participants live on their own within the Chinatown neighbourhood, while their family members, who live somewhere else in the city, only come to visit or take them out on Fridays and over the weekends. Going around the neighbourhood seems to be an important way for them to sustain their health. When asked about their daily activities, they stressed that "Taking a stroll in the neighbourhood and eating some snacks help in making them healthier" and that "staying at home alone will gradually deteriorate their health." To them, being active is a necessity. "If we don't go out and stay at home all day instead, then we'll get sick even if we were in good health." They told us that engaging in those activities make them happy and keep them in good health. They continued to say that "We're most fearful of falling sick."

Subsequently, they spend most of their time hanging out in the DTES Women's Centre and local library as well as visiting on occasions, different sites such as Salvation Army, Union Gospel Mission, and First United Church. It seems that visiting different community organizations in the neighbourhood is a convenient choice for them because they have access to snacks, TV, and space for "chit-chatting" with their friends simultaneously. In addition to the food or snacks they receive from the community organizations, a few of the participants also buy groceries at local market stores to cook dinner at home.

5. Suggestions for the organizations

In terms of their preferred ways of accessing food security, majority of the participants responded positively to the methods of lining up and distributing numbered tickets. In discussing ideas or suggestions to better manage the food line-ups, the participants stressed the principles of self-discipline, order, and fairness by saying "Everyone needs to follow the rules. Don't butt in line and just leave after taking your share of food" and that "I like to line up because it shows more discipline. People would not rush to be the first [to access the food]." There was one Chinese senior who was very supportive and satisfied with the method of distributing numbered tickets. She said that, "Distributing tickets is the best method! One, two, three, four, the person who gets the number-one ticket would be the first in line; otherwise, it would be a total chaos!" However, a Chinese senior, who is in her late 80s, prefers drop-in style (the staff or volunteer brings the food to them) rather than lining up - her leg pains that she mentioned earlier may have contributed to this particular preference given that she already receives priority access.

Additionally, the participants also agreed to numerous proposed suggestions such as having more staff and volunteers who speak Cantonese and having signs and instructions that are written in Chinese. Implementing these strategies will not only help them to better

understand the staff members, but also improve their overall experience in accessing the provided services. When being asked about the kind of activities or programs that appeal to them, they mentioned about health and social-oriented activities such as aerobic classes, community kitchens, and day trips to parks or orchards for fruit picking.

SECTION 4 - Thematic Discussion

Introduction

At the beginning of the project, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves for producing a fruitful contribution to the community. As we immersed ourselves into this project, we learned that the issues regarding conflicts in food lines are more complex and intricate than we expected. We learned that it is crucial to listen to the voices and see through the eyes of individuals. These individuals are agents of making the necessary improvements that will benefit everyone in the long-term. Below is what we set out to discover and explain, as well as our interpretation of underlying meanings that explain what we observed during our six weeks as UBC UVEFS students.

1. Understanding of Food Lines
2. Tensions between Chinese People
3. Stereotypes and Discrimination
4. Care and Generosity
5. Frugality
6. Independence and Self-reliance

Themes

1. Understanding of Food Lines

In addition to meeting basic necessities, some Chinese seniors access the meal programs to spend their time, exercise, and socialize with their friends. In terms of the cultural understanding of line-ups, some of the Chinese seniors have the mindset of “early bird gets the worms” in that they perceive people standing at the front of the line would get a better, bigger portion of food than those who stand at the back. Unfortunately, there is no communication between the seniors and others including the staff, volunteers, and other patrons to reassure them about their wariness of missing out. Some seniors also perceive that it is okay to go back to the line for the second or third time if they see that there are leftovers, which could be their dinner or their spouses’ or neighbours’ meals for the day. From their point of view, it is okay to immediately go back to the line and exchange the food that they got, especially fruits, with ones that they think are better. Such action sometimes disrupts the flow of the line and conflict happens when some of the impatient users lining up at the back of line get annoyed by the seniors who “butt in line”. Some seniors also perceive that they can stand in the disability line due to their old age. However, the disability line is not consistently implemented within and across the organizations: some only allow people with disability to be in the disability line while some allow both of the elderly and people with disability to be seated. Also, some Chinese seniors have difficulty in communicating with the staff about their health and mobility conditions that may not be easily visible to the staff, volunteers, and other users. The seniors’

support and preference for the methods of line up and distributing numbered tickets are mainly due to their concerns for the order and fairness at the meal program. However, their old age does not allow them to stand comfortably in the food lines. For example, an 88 years-old female senior, who had a leg surgery and cannot stand long, always has priority access to the food (though it is unclear if she still has to line up in some organizations).

2. Tensions between Chinese People

While tensions between the Chinese people and non-Chinese people are more visible, there are in fact tensions between the Chinese themselves too. We have spoken to Chinese seniors who have mentioned that they know of other seniors who are impolite and inconsiderate, engaging in actions such as cutting the line, saying that “they make the rest of us look bad.” However, as with how they handle other situations, they passively accept what is. They do not want to create more problems by voicing their concerns, saying that “it’s not good if we tell them that we think what they’re doing is bad.” This is an indication that most of these Chinese seniors value harmony and when faced with conflicts and what they think is unjust, they rather suppress their emotions than to cause disharmony.

It is important to note that we have also noticed a sub-cultural contrast between the Chinese people themselves. There seems to be a difference between the Mandarin-speaking and the Cantonese-speaking seniors. We have not been able to talk much with the Mandarin-speaking seniors as they always kept their dialogues with us short, but from our brief interactions, observations, and conversations with other people, we have a sense that there is more of a tendency for the Mandarin-speaking Chinese seniors to engage in actions such as cutting lines, acting like they don’t understand what the staff are conveying to them, and getting fired up. It is critical to acknowledge that geographical differences in China contribute to Chinese culture and the way people portray themselves. In northern China, where most Mandarin-speaking people reside, people have a bolder personality. They eat large pieces of meat and foods made from flour such as buns and noodles and drink large bowls of alcohol. They live in vast fields of grass and ride on horses. Compared to the Cantonese-speaking people who reside in the southern parts of China, they are “louder” and more “vulgar.” This knowledge has implications for further understanding the behaviours of Chinese people in the food lines.

3. Stereotypes and Discrimination

Stereotypes like Chinese seniors are affluent and un-needy, that they trade or sell the food they receive from the organizations, that they do not need the meals because they never consume the food immediately, and that “every Chinese owns a grocery store or local market” are deeply entrenched. These stereotypes seem to be generalized to every Chinese senior who accesses the service and ignore the fact that some of them are in need of these services and resources just like the others. These stereotypes spill over to the interactions between the Chinese seniors and other users of the food lines or drop-in programs. Since some users

perceive that the Chinese seniors do not need to access the services or resources, they constantly observe, police, or mock the behaviour of the Chinese seniors at the food lines. There seems to be a double-standard: while some program users of other ethnicities can take extra shares of food or leave their trays on the tables, some seniors are being targeted by both the staff and patrons for doing so. The seniors claim that sometimes, the staff give them the (perceived) rotten apples or oranges or refuse to give bananas to them. At the meal programs, some seniors not only have to endure random racial slurs like “All Asians are liars”, but also the hostile treatment by the other users, as evident through the tripping incident. Due to their inability to communicate in English, they cannot voice their concerns or complaints to anyone for the unfair or hostile treatment they receive.

4. Care and Generosity

One of the biggest contrasts we witnessed at food lines pertains to the extra food that many Chinese seniors are criticized for taking. Before we went to the sites to observe the food lines, Chinese seniors taking more than their share was a concern brought up by community organizers due to the conflicts it caused with other food line users. Even as we engaged with the seniors in the food lines, we spotted these tensions between them and other food line users when seniors take extra and place them into their plastic containers. However, we learned that the reason for this behaviour is in fact, to give to others. One reason being that many live in the same building as other seniors who have mobility issues. This prevents these restricted seniors to visit the organizations on their own. Besides helping neighbours, they are also giving the food to their grandchildren. The reality is that many Chinese seniors get more food in order to pass it on. Even within Chinese seniors who visit the food lines together, they often care for each other by trading or giving away their food based on the food preferences of their friends.

During a conversation with a Chinese senior, she explains how illogical it would be if it was for personal gain. She explains that “taking extra food is not only heavy, but when we live alone, we have no way of finishing it all and the food would just go to waste”. Unfortunately, the action of taking extra food is often the last action many see the Chinese seniors do at food lines and it makes it hard not to think that they are simply being greedy. Their care for others is not as easy to see at food lines because their generosity usually happens once they leave.

5. Frugality

It is commonly known that in Chinese culture, frugality is a virtue. The practices we have observed from the Chinese female seniors have been a reflection of that. “I’m bringing it home so I can heat up it tonight and eat it,” one senior said. Many of the Chinese seniors that we talked to told us that they are low-income and are “lucky to have a place to live for a rent of \$375,” yet we heard remarks about them “looking well-dressed and not needing of the food”. This paradox may be explained by their culture of frugality. Most of them live alone or with their spouse and do not spend much. Their leisure time is spent in places such as local parks or

their homes. Their clothes looking neater may be a result of their care for their clothes. Many of them buy their own groceries and cook at home, but having food from the organizations help offset their costs, so they do not have to buy as much. It could be assumed that it is not that they have a lot of money, but they make most of what they have.

6. Social Isolation

Many of the Chinese seniors that we interacted with over the past five weeks live by themselves in either nearby or remote neighbourhoods. For instance, all of the eight participants in the focus group are living independently in the Chinatown neighbourhood. They told us that their spouses passed away and their children do not live with them due to reasons like their workplace is far away from their residence. In addition to the lack of instant social support, some Chinese seniors also shared with us the difficulty in getting their spouses or neighbours, who have mobility issues such as leg or back pain, to come to the organization. This situation partially explains why some seniors do not consume their food on the spot and leave the organizations soon after they pack the food. The well-being of these Chinese seniors concerns us because we unfortunately did not have the chance to meet and interact with given that our work did not extend beyond the physical space of the organizations. It would be a concerning issue if the Chinese seniors fall sick and could not come to the organizations to access the resources and services for themselves as well as for their significant others, whose survival may be heavily dependent on them.

7. Independence and Self-reliance

Although many Chinese seniors we interacted with live alone, they appreciate the fact that they have the freedom to take control of their own daily routines and to do 'what they want when they want'. Even when family members tell them to stop going to food lines because of danger and the stigma surrounding food lines as being 'for beggars', the Chinese seniors express how they enjoy having agency to make their own decisions. Regarding impressions of food lines, this strong sense of independence within the Chinese seniors remains. When addressing the issue of safety for seniors in food lines, we learned that many Chinese seniors in fact do not feel as if they are in a particularly vulnerable position. Although the language barrier between Chinese seniors and staff in food lines is still a concern, many seniors do not feel the need to rely on staff or volunteers for their safety. When asked if they felt safe, they describe food lines as no different to any other social situation. The way they take care of themselves is the same as in any other daily context such as 'walking across the street'. During a conversation with one Chinese senior about individuals breaking the rules, she explains how those who choose to not listen even when they understand the rules are only 'creating more problems for themselves'. This shows Chinese seniors' self-reliance because they are capable of looking after their own well-being and understand the consequences of their own actions.

A strong sense kinship and self-sacrifice for family resides with the seniors in their choice of using the food lines. "The young ones are busy, we don't want to bother them," one

Chinese female senior says to me while we stand waiting for her turn in line. Almost all of the Chinese seniors we talk to have children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. Yet, they live alone and spend their time in the neighbourhood. They do not want to be a baggage to their family and so choose to be as independent as possible, sustaining their health and well-being by accessing the food lines and engaging in other activities convenient and helpful to them.

Additionally, many of the Chinese seniors we spoke to have backgrounds and histories of hardship. "I was only eight when I had to take care of my four year old brother," one Chinese female senior told us. Another one told us how she used to farm, growing sweet potatoes and potatoes. At a young age they assumed responsibilities that forced them to become independent and strong-willed. Yet there are others who lived through times of war and heard about the violence, abuse, and bullying that happened to their relatives in Canada. One Chinese female senior in her eighties recounts the death of her son and her experience with depression. All of these experiences add to their resistant characters.

Suggestions

With the purpose of transforming these explanations into actions, we also include suggestions for addressing the larger initiative involving the topic of senior vulnerability in food lines.

Key Suggestions:

1. Have more volunteers and staff present at each meal sessions for the following reasons:

- a) Encourage volunteers and staff to engage in conversations with food line users**
- b) Encourage volunteers to facilitate conversation between food line users at each meal session**

- Although staff are performing their jobs such as cleaning up the plates and handing out the food, we noticed that the interaction between them and food line users is often limited to these actions. Having a more service-oriented staff will encourage the staff to engage in developing rapport with the food line users, which could be one type of responsibility on the job description of staff and volunteers.

2. Have more Chinese speaking volunteers and staff

- While we notice hand gestures and facial expressions are used as communication tools between Chinese-speaking food line users and non-Chinese-speaking staff and volunteers, there is a strong need for there to be more staff and volunteers who are able to communicate in Chinese. Having more Chinese speaking volunteers and staff will not only help to facilitate communication between food lines users and the staff, but also enable the Chinese seniors to voice their concerns and questions if necessary.

3. Have disability-identity cards made by each organization

- An issue that results in difficulty for staff and dissatisfaction among food line users is that there is sometimes no consensus to who is eligible to use the priority lines. Arguments occur when individuals self-identify as needing and others disagree. Having identity cards issued by staff will help to eliminate the problem.

4. Have signs and instructions written in Chinese and English

- This avoids confusion among the Chinese group in terms of the meal times, the menu, the rules of food lines, and the description of programs and activities available.

More Suggestions

1. Have Chinese and other ethnic groups come in to serve their cultural food

- This promotes cultural understanding between different groups of users by having Chinese or other cultural groups coming into the organizations to serve meals. One Chinese senior responded positively to this suggestion by saying, “Of course we would like it! Sometimes they have people serving Indian food.” This not only helps to break the stereotypes of Chinese people being only takers of the services, but also puts into light that they are also givers and allies.

2. Have activities that the Chinese and other ethnicities would enjoy participating together

- Organize activities such as karaoke, foot care, and baking classes to promote socializing between users.

3. Have an activity where the program users of different ethnicities can converse with each other

- During the drop-in times, bilingual volunteers can facilitate conversations and interaction between the users to bridge the cultural gap between them and help them learn about one another.

4. Have educational workshops for the staff

- In addition to teaching staff useful phrases in Chinese, we highly encourage staff to learn about the general backgrounds, motivations, and communication styles of the Chinese food line users. For instance, this report could be shared with staff to increase their understanding of what happens in the food lines and to enrich their cultural understanding. This could aid staff members in actively preventing discrimination and diffusing conflicts that happen in the food lines.

5. Have standardized meals on one tray

- This helps to eliminate the problem of users taking more portions or being selective with the food provided while addressing the concept of fairness across different types of users.

6. Have more nutritious food that suits the needs or the health condition of the senior users

- Many of the seniors told us that they cannot eat much of baked goods and fried foods due to the high sugar and high fat content. Foods high in protein like fish and eggs and fruits are preferred.

Limitations

We acknowledge that this report is in no way generalizable across all Chinese food line users for the following reasons:

- 1) For our focus group and interview, we only managed to recruit a majority of Cantonese-speaking participants despite aiming for a more balanced group including both Cantonese and Mandarin speakers.
 - Future projects could look at differences across different food line users who are from different geographical regions in the countries.
- 2) Most of the people we interacted throughout the time we spent at the community organizations were female seniors. Their opinions and experiences do not represent all Chinese food line users.
 - Future projects could look at the different experiences of female and male food lines users.
- 3) Due to meal times that conflict with school schedules, we were only able to visit community organizations at certain times. We understand that there may be different groups of Chinese people whom we did not get the chance to interact with for the purpose of learning about their experiences.
- 4) Acknowledging that each organization possesses different mandates and systems, our findings may not be applicable across all organizations in the community.

Appendix: Focus Group and Interview Questions

Preamble

Hi! Let's us introduce ourselves. My name is Pei Fang, she is Leanne, and she is Liana. How should we address you? We'll write down your surname on a sticker, so that it would be easier to address each other in the discussion. Please have some tea, we will have steam buns for you later.

你好！欢迎大家。我们首先来认识以下大家。我叫佩芳，她是 Leanne，她是 Liana 请问怎么称呼你们？我们写下你们的称呼在小卡片上，大家谈天的时候就会比较方便称呼彼此。喝点茶，我们等下有为你们准备了蒸包。

Thank you all for coming here today. We are UBC students and we wish to learn more about your experience in the food lines in the community organizations here. The community organizations ask us to discuss with you about your opinion and experience in the food lines because they want to improve their services based on your opinions. Since your suggestions are very important for them, we want to tape-recorder the discussion today; we want to make sure that we understand you accurately. We will not share the recording with anyone; hence no one will know who say what. If you do not want to participate in this focus group, you do not have to stay or you can listen to our discussion. Feel free to join the discussion if you have anything to add. We are about to start, do you have any questions or concerns?

谢谢你们今天愿意来这里。我们是 UBC 的学生，想要多了解你们在这里排队拿取食物的经验。那些组织要求我们和你们谈谈你们的意见和排队的经验，因为他们想用你们的建议来改善他们的服务。你的建议对他们很重要，所以我们会用录音机录下我们今天的谈话，我们要保证我们懂你们讲的话。我们不会和别人分享今你们这个录音，没有人会知道谁说什么话。如果你不要参与这个讨论，你们不需要留下来或者你可以坐着聆听我们的谈话。如果你有东西要讲，你任何时间都可以加入讨论。我们要开始了，你有没有不明白的地方，或者顾虑？

Icebreaker	
1. 你一般的日程是甚麽样？ a. 你每天通常做些什麼？ b. 你平常去那些地方？	What is a typical day for you? a. Where do you usually do? b. Where do you usually go?

Preamble 2: So now we're going to ask you some questions about your experiences coming to the organizations. 现在我们要谈谈你来这些社区组织的经验。

B. Your experiences coming to the organization	
2. ***你们平常去的社区组织有哪些？ a. 你们喜欢（）组织的什么？ b. 你们不喜欢（）组织的什么？	What community organizations do you often go to? a. What do you like about (insert the org

	<p><u>they mention</u>)?</p> <p>b. What do you don't like about (<u>insert the org they mention</u>)?</p>
<p>3. ***你为什么去这些社区组织?</p> <p>a. 有些人觉得我们唐人不需要来这里的福利机构, 你们对这些说法有什么意见?</p>	<p>What are your reasons for going to these community organizations?</p> <p>a. Some people think us, Chinese don't need to come to these charity organizations, what do you think about the opinions of others? (intending to probe for some stereotypes)</p>
<p>4. 你怎么会知道/打听到这些组织的服务?</p>	<p>How did you find out about the services?</p>
<p>5. 那些工作人员有让你觉得受欢迎和尊敬吗?</p> <p>a. 如果有的话, 如何?</p> <p>b. 如果没有的话, 是发生什么事情让你觉得这样? 你如何反应?</p>	<p>Do you feel welcomed and respected by the staff?</p> <p>i. If yes, how so?</p> <p>ii. If no, what happened? How did you react?</p>
<p>6. ***在联合福音, 你有没有看到任何问题?</p> <p>a. 还是在哪儿你有看到问题?</p>	<p>At UGM morning line-up, what are the problems do you see?</p>
<p>7. ***你觉得在这些的组织里安全吗?</p>	<p>Do you feel safe in the organizations?</p>
<p>8. 你觉得其他来社区组织的人怎么样?</p>	<p>What do you think about other people who come to the organization?</p>
<p>9. 你们觉得要怎样才能让排队, 等待食物的过程更舒服?</p>	<p>How can we make the wait more comfortable for you?</p>
<p>10. ***那些社区组织担心你们的饮食需求. 你们觉得他们给的食物够不够? 你会不会担心得到不够食物?</p> <p>a. 我们看到有些人插队, 你觉得他们为什么怎么做?</p>	<p>The community orgs. Worry about your food security. Do you feel the organization not giving enough food for you? Are you worrying about not having food for tomorrow?</p> <p>b. Some people butt in line, why do think they do that?</p>
<p>11. 你们觉得他们把食物送去给你的建议如何?</p> <p>a. 你们会比较喜欢他们送食物给你还是你们来组织领取食物?</p>	<p>How would you feel if the organizations sent the food to you?</p> <p>a. Would you prefer this way better than coming to the organization? Why?</p>
<p>12. 你平常拿了食物候会做些什么?</p> <p>a. 有时候, 我见到你们有些人拿了食物就离开, 我很好奇你们都去哪里了?</p>	<p>What do you do after you come to pick up food?</p> <p>a. Probe: Sometimes, I saw some of you left the place once picking up the food, where do you go?</p>
<p>13. 你有没有感觉你是这个社区的一部分?</p>	<p>Do you feel like you're part of the community?</p>

Preamble 3: We want to ask your opinion on the communication in these organizations. 我们想问问你对于在当你在这些地方沟通的意见。

C. Language	
14. 你觉得这里的员工和其他人明白你吗? (你觉得这里的员工明白你的话吗?) a. 如果不明白, 为什么?	Do you think you are understood by the staff? a. If don't, why?
你觉得你了解这里员工说的话吗? a. 你平常是如何和他们沟通?	Do you understand when the staff here talk to you? a. How do you usually communicate with them?
15. 你有什么建议可以让彼此更明白彼此吗? a. 譬如, 有中文的告示或者会说中文和广东话的义工?	Do you have any suggestions to us understand each other better? a. For example, notices written in Chinese or volunteers/staff who know the languages.

Preamble 4:

We're talking about the suggestion you have for the organizations. For example, we heard from some of you that the muffins are too sweet. What are your thoughts on that?

那些组织很好奇你们对他们服务有什么建议或问题。我们现在来谈谈你们对他们的建议, 我之前听说有些人说 muffins 太甜了。你们有什么想法?

Suggestions for the organization	
16. 你觉得那里的工作人员怎样? a. 你觉得那里有什么好? b. 你觉得那里有什么不好?	In what ways are staff helpful? c. What do you think is working/good about the food services? d. What do you think is not working/bad about the food services?
17. ***你有什么问题关于那个(机构: SA, FUC, UGM)? a. 如果有的话, 可以跟我们谈谈。	Do you have any questions or concerns about the food line-ups? a. if yes, could you tell us about them in detail?
18. 你喜欢什么方式? (像救世军进来坐着, 别人拿食物给你; 还是自己排队去柜台拿食物) a. 为什么?	How do you prefer to access food security (drop-in style, cafeteria etc..) a. Why do you prefer that way?

Wrapping up

19. 你来了加拿大多久？你为什麼来加拿大？	How long have you lived in Canada? What brought you to Canada? Where do you come from?
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