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## “The deceased has left; the alive has to move on”: Experiences of Chinese Widows in the UK

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### ABSTRACT

Relatively little is known about the experiences of Chinese widows, especially those living outside China. This qualitative study examines the experiences of eight Chinese or Hong Kong-born widows living in the UK. Using a semistructured approach to interviewing, participants were asked about their lives before, during, and after their spousal bereavement. Five major themes emerged: (1) complexity of marital lives; (2) experiences around the time of the death including fate; (3) loneliness and isolation; (4) the challenges of practical tasks; and finally, (5) current life. The implications of the findings for social policy and practice are briefly discussed.

### Background

Widowhood, especially in later life, is a significant and high-frequency life event for women (Bennett, 1997). The majority of research into women and widowhood has focused on women of White ethnicity and from the majority ethnic group (Carr et al., 2000), with much less research focusing on either women from majority or from minority Black and ethnic (BME) populations (Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, & McDonald, 2013). This is also true of widowhood studies conducted in the UK (Bennett et al., 2005; Davidson, 1999). A literature review of loneliness in older women reported that older women report more loneliness than male peers (Beal, 2006). However, widowhood is as common among BME older women as in British-born White women living in the UK. This study focuses on one such community, widowed women of Chinese-origin living in the UK in the North West of England. We examine the experiences of these women using a chronological interview specifically exploring the events before, during, and after their widowhood. We identify similarities and differences found in the literature with British-born White widows living in the UK so as to illustrate the need for culturally specific bereavement support for Chinese-born, UK-based widows.

There has been a substantial body of work examining the experiences of British-born older widows living in the UK (Bennett, 1997; Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Bennett & Victor, 2012; Bennett, Hughes, & Smith,

2005; Bennett, Stenhoff, Pattinson, & Woods, 2010; Chambers, 2005; Davidson, 1999). These studies suggest that older widows in general cope well with their widowhood (Bennett et al., 2005), although there may be impacts on psychological well-being and social engagement (Bennett, 1997). They also face challenges regarding loneliness and practical tasks. The evidence suggests that loneliness is associated with particular environments and times (Bennett & Victor, 2012). Many widows are found to become more independent in traditional male tasks, although some become less so as a consequence of family involvement (Bennett et al., 2010). More widely, there have been two important developments in the conceptualization of widowhood. First, Stroebe and Schut (1999) developed the dual-process model of bereavement which theorized two types of coping, loss-focused, and restoration-focused, with oscillation between them. There is some evidence that the former is more common closer in time to the bereavement, and restoration more common later (Richardson, 2010). Bennett, Gibbons and Mackenzie-Smith (2010) found that two psychological responses were associated with good psychological adaptation, one loss-oriented (intrusion of grief) and one restoration-oriented (new roles/identities/relationships) and two associated with poor psychological adaptation, again one loss-oriented (denial/avoidance of restoration) and one restoration-oriented (distraction/avoidance of grief). Many

researchers have turned their attention to resilience in widowhood. For example, Bonanno et al. have found that a substantial number of widowed people maintain stability in psychological well-being before and after widowhood (Bonanno, Wortman, & Ness, 2004; Galatzer-Levy & Bonanno, 2012). Similarly, Bennett (2010), in a study of widowed men found that resilience was not uncommon. More recently, Spahni, Morselli, Perrig-Chiello, and Bennett (2015) identified three latent profiles in older widows comprising depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, loneliness, hopelessness, and subjective health. The most common profile was the resilient, the least common was the vulnerable, and the middle grouping the copers. However, the majority of participants in these studies have been White, and none have focused on Chinese and/or migrant populations.

There are few studies examining the experiences of ethnic Chinese women, the majority of which focus on women living either in Mainland China or in Hong Kong (Guo, 2009), with few which look at Chinese women living elsewhere (Gee, 1999; Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, & McDonald, 2013). Chan and Chan (2011) interviewed 15 bereaved spouses (2/3 women) examining the influence of eastern philosophy on their experiences. They found that there was a time paradox, which focused on two conceptualizations of time, vertical, and horizontal. Vertical time referred to daily time, while horizontal time referred to whole lifetime. Participants referred to excessive vertical time; that is, days were long. However, horizontal time was shortening; that is, the end of his/her life was approaching. This paradox led to insecurity about the future and to participants not looking forward. They found participants experienced isolation in daily time, indicating loneliness.

In traditional Chinese culture, filial piety is the idea that when parents age children must do their best to look after their parents, obey their parents' will, and meet their parents' requests. Sons are considered more important than daughters, and sons in return are expected to take on more responsibility for their parents. There is evidence that filial piety influences Chinese experiences of widowhood. In a study of older Hong Kong Chinese people, Chou, Ho, and Chi (2006) found that living alone predicted depression in women but not men. The relationship was further mediated by health, family social support, and financial strain. Family support and financial strain may be influenced further by child–parent relationships. Those people with children were more likely to live with them than live alone and the researchers argued that the gender effect might be influenced by filial piety. Widowed men preferred to live with their sons and if that was not possible they preferred to live alone, confirming the

strong bonds between fathers and sons. However, women had a less clear preference and did not often choose to live alone. Widowed women living alone were more likely to be depressed because they had no alternative living arrangements.

Chow has conducted many studies among widowed people in Hong Kong (Chow & Chan, 2006; Chow et al., 2007). In a study of seven widows, she found major themes including the relationship with the deceased, emotional expression, relationship with other people, grief reaction, and coping (Chow & Chan, 2006). For example, the experiences around the time of the death were particularly salient, and their importance for later adaptation were identified. In another study, she found, contrary to cultural beliefs that Chinese people did not share intense emotional experiences, widowed people did share their grief socially with nonfamily members. However, there was no difference in health or emotional well-being between those who did and did not share (Chow et al., 2007).

Outside of China, there have been two studies of Chinese widows living in Canada. Gee (1999) found that Chinese widows living alone were more at risk from depression than widows from the majority population, when compared with married people. However, it was not clear why, and certainly the explanation was not related to filial piety since 90% of the widows did not want to live with their children. Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, and McDonald (2013) interviewed 20 Canadian Chinese widows and focused on support, including social and emotional supports. They found that daughters provided more support than sons, despite filial piety. They regarded their own financial situation as satisfactory. However, emotional support was more nuanced, and both loneliness and social isolation were prevalent. But despite this, acceptance and satisfaction with their situation was common. Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, and McDonald (2013) argued that the complex experience of these widows was rooted in their lives as both Chinese and as immigrants rather than in widowhood itself.

The lives of Chinese immigrants living in the UK are little studied (Chau & Yu, 2001). People of Chinese ethnicity represent approximately 0.3% of the population and 8% of the Chinese population is aged 65 years and over (Office of National Statistics, 2011). The participants in the current study live in Liverpool, and Chinese residents represent 1.7% of Liverpool's population (ONS, 2011). Liverpool is home to Europe's oldest Chinatown (<http://www.liverpoolchinatown.co.uk>). Many of the older Chinese in Liverpool worked in the catering trade either in restaurants, especially in Chinatown, or in Chinese or English fast food outlets

in contrast to the employment of many younger Chinese people. According to the 2001 census, 30% of the British Chinese post-16 population are full-time students compared to a UK average of 8% (Clark & Drinkwater, 2006) and self-employment rates for British Chinese are falling but still remain the largest in terms of ethnic minority group at around 30% (Clark & Drinkwater, 2006). Chau, Yi, and Tran (2011) have argued that the geographical differentiation needed for successful takeaways can lead to social isolation, although this is less the case for businesses in Chinatowns which benefit from geographical closeness. They also argue that in later life Chinese people may suffer from a double detachment—detachment both from the Chinese community, as a consequence of retirement and the mobility of their offspring, and from the mainstream community because of a loss of ties with their customers. Offspring are more socially mobile and may no longer work in the family business. Combined with an increasing number of interracial relationships among younger generations, this has the potential to lead to a dilution of the Chinese community, even in cities like Liverpool. In addition, when these participants left China or Hong Kong, they often also left their extended families. Thus, the traditional support mechanisms for bereaved Chinese widows may be diminished as may be the support drawn from shared cultural values. Further, many older Chinese do not speak much English (Chau, Yi, & Tran, 2011), and although this may not be a great problem while working, it becomes more so when older Chinese women retire from the workplace and need to engage with the wider community for health and social care services. It is notable that the interviews in the current study were conducted in Cantonese.

In this study, we were interested in the experiences of widowed Chinese women, who had come to the UK as migrants. Although our primary focus was on older Chinese widows, we did not exclude participants on the grounds of age. Our two research questions were what are the experiences of Chinese widows living in Liverpool; and what factors influence their adjustment to widowhood?

## Methods

### Participants

The participants were eight Chinese widows aged between 35 and 79 (Mean = 66 years; SD = 66.3), and all were living in Liverpool, United Kingdom. They had been widowed between 2 and 40 years (Mean = 16.5 years; SD = 14.3) and, although some of the

widows had been widowed for a long period of time, it was felt that these participants should not be excluded from the study as previous widowhood work has shown that the effects of bereavement are long-lasting (Bennett, 1997; Sasson & Umberson, 2014). The participants were of varying ages when they experienced bereavement (30–73; Mean = 50 years, SD = 15.2). The widows had lived in the UK for between 10 and 49 years (Mean = 29 years, SD = 12.91). Demographic details are summarized in Table 1.

### Recruitment strategy

The participants were recruited for the purposes of this study through a range of Chinese community organizations and approached by Author 2. Participation in the study was voluntary and the inclusion criteria were that the participants were of Chinese origin, female, were residing in the UK and had experienced spousal bereavement. The University of Liverpool's Research Governance committee approved the study, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured to the participants. All participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any point and informed consent was obtained by way of a detailed information sheet and succinct consent form. Information and consent forms were available in both English and Cantonese. To ensure anonymity, all names have been changed for the purposes of analysis. Participants are identified as P1–P9, followed by age at interview and age at bereavement (e.g., P1; 53; 51).

### Interview

Semistructured interviews, lasting between 45 min and 2 h, were conducted in Cantonese by a Research Assistant who had received extensive training from the Principal Investigator as to appropriate interviewing techniques for sensitive topics. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and were conducted in the participant's own home or location of their choice. The aim of the interviews was to learn what was important from the participant's perspective while maintaining some structure around general points of reference to ensure robust analysis. The interview topic guide consisted of seven components which follow a chronological structure; (1) introduction to the study and factual questions designed to provide demographic information concerning age, length of marriage, length of bereavement, and family relations, (2) experiences of married life together, quality of marriage, lifestyle, and details as to the transition from China to the United Kingdom, (3) explored the time around the death of the participant's spouse, (4) death circumstances (in terms

**Table 1.** Brief demographic details of the participants.

Participant	Age	Years married	Age married	Age widowed	Years widowed	Years in UK*	Country of birth
P1	53	29	29	51	2	35	Hong Kong
P2	35	4	26	30	5	17	Hong Kong
P3	68	12	24	36	32	25	Hong Kong
P4	75	37	19	56	19	34	Hong Kong
P5	79	54	19	73	6	10	China
P6	76	3	36	36	40	49	China
P7	71	47	19	66	5	40	China
P8	73	29	21	50	23	21	China

\*These are approximate.

of a sudden death or a prolonged illness), initial feelings, and emotions and initial support networks, (5) the time following the initial bereavement period, (6) how the participants were currently feeling about their experiences of bereavement, (7) advice the participants would have for people who found themselves in a similar position. The interviews were then transcribed and translated from Cantonese to English using the services of a professional translator. We have deliberately not anglicized the quotes, since we would potentially lose the cultural nuances of the widows' interviews.

### Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed by the first and third authors, who are experienced in qualitative research and analysis, particularly experienced with conducting and analyzing interviews of a sensitive nature, specifically around the topic of bereavement. The transcripts were analyzed using the principles of Framework, a modified form of thematic analysis that is designed to provide a systematic and transparent approach to data management and analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). First, the transcripts were read and reread by the first and third authors. Line-by-line coding of each transcript was completed by hand. These codes were used to generate a coding index of initial categories, which were then grouped into initial themes after discussion between the same two researchers. Data were assigned to the themes and categories in the coding index, using an Excel spreadsheet to manage the data. Each major theme was allocated to a chart, with a row for every case, and a category in each column. This "Framework" format allows easy access to summarized data from the transcripts and great flexibility in moving between case-based and thematic analyses. The initial themes and categories were refined to ensure that they summarized and synthesized the breadth and diversity of the coded data and associations between themes sought. To develop explanatory accounts, the summarized data were examined repeatedly to find patterns across the themes and cases and reflect on the meaning and explanation of the data. References

were made back to the original interview transcript to ensure that the participants' accounts were represented accurately. To ensure the rigor of the analysis, the transcripts coded by the researcher were checked by the second and fourth authors. After some discussion, if it was felt that an area of interest had been missed, the transcripts were recoded to include this area of interest. The emerging categories and themes were refined and minor discrepancies in approach resolved by discussion.

### Results

Five key themes emerged from the data and are presented in chronological order: (1) complexity of marital lives; (2) experiences around the time of the death including fate, (3) loneliness and isolation and (4) the challenges of practical tasks, and finally, (5) current life.

#### Complexity of marital lives

All the participants in these interviews had emigrated to Britain as adults from either mainland China or from Hong Kong, and one through Vietnam (although born in Hong Kong). In this first extract, Participant 5 describes the hardships she experienced in China and her separation from her husband. She was nearly 70 when she came to the UK, so had been separated from him for many decades:

I was below the poverty level in China. I had to thank to the Queen provide me the food that was enough for me to stay here. [...] Yes, I brought up three children in my hometown. It was hard as I had to do other stuffs such as loading stones and mud, cutting crops and hoeing fields without the assistance of cattle. Everything had to be done by hand, very tough. [...] From 1958 to 1961. I had been doing farm work like planting crops and sweet potatoes, building ponds until Chinese Civil War. ... We didn't have much time being together, only a few years. We got married in 1952. He went to Hong Kong in 1957 and came into the UK in 1963. He sent almost everything back home, such as rice, sugar and cooking oil while he was working in Hong Kong. At that time, my children were only a few years old.

My youngest son hadn't met his father before he came to live here. (Participant 5: age 79; widowed 6 years)

In this exchange Participant 7 describes her early married life:

But my husband came to here at his twenties. After 10-year separation, he helped us to immigrate to the UK. [...] Yes, I was working in Hong Kong, meanwhile, raising my son. [...] You are right. I took care of my kid and at the same time had to work. It was just how it was ... (laughing) [...] Yes, just him. Because my husband and I were separated from each other since I just had my son. He went to the UK while my son was still crawling. ... this was life. He had to bring the bread on the table. [...] It was very little at that time, only a few pounds per week when he started to work here. Forty years ago, the salary was very low. [...] ... You know, man struggles upwards and water flows downwards ... it was the way it should be. (71; 66)

The last sentence reflects the fatalism of many of the widows, which we will return to later. Few of the widows in the study had experienced straightforward married lives. The memories of the social upheavals experienced in China during the early married years of the participants born in China stayed with them, as Participant 3 recalls:

It was exhausting to live under the constant stress of the revolution, I didn't want to be involved in any of these revolutions and I didn't want to hurt anyone, I didn't want to be treated unjustly, I would have died if I had left the country later (68; 36)

Although most of the participants came to the UK before their husband's death, Participant 9 did not come to the UK until after her husband had died. At the point of his death, they had been in the process of applying to come to the UK where their daughter lived. She came, along with her son who had polio, at the same time, to live with the daughter. However, later they all maintained different houses.

The experiences of the Chinese widows both as married women and as young women demonstrate great adversity and challenge. Seven of the participants were married before the age of 25 years old and shortly afterwards took on the role of bringing up young children, alone or with absent husbands. Three of the participants were 19 years old when they married, so since their teenage years have held responsible family positions as mothers and sometimes as working mothers at a time when their husbands worked away and they were left alone. These participants experienced long-term separation, long-distance separation and revolution and often brought up families alone. One might expect that these experiences might prepare them for

widowhood better than UK born widows but this, as we shall see later, is not the case. Although UK born widows of an earlier generation experienced adversity and separation, the separation described by the Chinese widows in these narratives will be of a longer duration than UK born widows. It is also important to note that the circumstances and causes of death of the husbands were not dissimilar from those of British-born men reported in the literature: heart disease and cancer being the most common (Bennett, 2004).

### *Experience around the time of death including fate*

Although most of the widows had been living in the UK for many years, the influence of Chinese culture and beliefs was still strong. The participants often spoke about fate and about the force of nature. For these participants, the death of their husband was inevitable, and they were unable to control it. Participant 4 speaks of her husband's fate but also of their place in the natural world:

There was nothing I could do to make him back. This was his fate. Everyone will feel depressed when their beloved die. It will take years to complete grieving no matter how hard you try to pull yourself together. No one can help you if you don't stop feeling sorry for yourself. It is better not to think too much. Wow ... The universe doesn't give us what we can't handle. The world is run by God's will and everyone will die eventually. Let it be. (75; 56)

There are also contradictions in her narrative, on the one hand, grieving will last for many years regardless of her own actions, but on the other hand, she believes that she is only given what she can handle. There is the sense of both cruel and benign higher power. The inevitability of death and its consequences are strong in the narratives, as illustrated by Participant 6 who speaks of the inevitability of death:

If someone is dying there is nothing you can do about it. No one wants their loved ones to leave, but you can't stop nature running its course. (76; 36)

Participant 7 speaks not only of the deceased in terms of fate but also philosophically about where she is going. She feels no obligation to hurt herself with grieving. Fate and the inevitability of death allow her to move forward and live her life:

There is no reason for me to die along with him by ruining myself. I still have hope for this world and a long way to go. The deceased has left; the alive has to move on. (71; 66)

This last sentence was chosen as the title for the paper because it is expressed in a manner which typifies the Chinese narratives and differentiates them from those of British born widows.

Whilst for some widows the cultural beliefs around death were helpful or at least reassuring, for Participant 6 the cultural beliefs were troubling. She found the beliefs associated with ancestor worship frightening. As a consequence, she needed to move house, to avoid the fear of the deceased:

I know many women like to display some photos of their husbands at home. Yes, I know, they worship the deceased ... I don't like it, I am scared by it. I cannot go to sleep, even speaking of death. I like things that can make me happy; I love laughing; I don't like to think those ... sad feelings. This was why I chose to live in this house because it was brand new; I wouldn't be afraid of it. If I had to move into those houses in which people died, I would be frightened. (76; 36)

It is interesting that this widow is aware that for many of her cohort the belief in ancestors is important, and the sense of presence of the deceased was also a comfort. While UK-born widows do not believe in ancestor worship, many do get comfort from a sense of presence (Bennett & Bennett, 2000) or from religious practices.

### **Loneliness/isolation**

Earlier we mentioned that the effects of early separation did not prepare these Chinese widows for widowhood. As we have seen this was true for practical tasks but it was also true for the emotional consequences of widowhood. Loneliness and social isolation were commonly discussed:

But I feel lonely and there is no one I can talk to. I don't know a lot of things about this world so that I am afraid of making friends. I am afraid of getting in touch with this world. I don't what is right. I know nothing because I don't have the support from my husband. (Participant 3; 68; 36)

In addition, Participant 3 had lost her confidence in interacting with the social world, adding to the cyclic nature of loneliness and isolation. Participant 8 also describes the feeling of loneliness that stems from the loss of a significant attachment (Weiss, 2007). This reflects the experiences of UK-born widowed people (Bennett & Victor, 2012).

Yes, it was painful, needless to say ... there were a very long of time I felt ... because he always woke up very early and walked around in the room. Sometimes as I sleeping, I took my hand to him, as he was not there, I will look for him. This feeling had remained for a long time since his gone. (Participant 8; 73; 50)

I was unhappy since he died. I lost him and no one could replace his place in my heart. I cry every time when I think of him. (Participant 5; 79; 73)

Thus, when one considers loneliness as emotional and as a consequence of the loss of an attachment, rather than as social, it is not surprising that these participants feel lonely even though they have previous experiences of living alone. It is the absence of their husbands that is at the root of their loneliness. This absence is not the same as it was in their early life as they could have still considered themselves a part of a team even though their husbands were working far away. However, there are also women who describe social loneliness and loneliness stemming from a deficit between actual and desired social contact (Peplau et al., 1982). Similarly to UK-born widows in the literature (Bennett, 1997; Bennett & Victor, 2012), Participant 4 feels lonely when she thinks about, or sees, other couples (Bennett & Bennett, 2000):

I saw some couples look after each other in their daily life. I couldn't have the same life because I was all by myself. (75; 56)

Victor, Scambler, and Bond (2009) report that rates of loneliness in China are higher (between 15 and 30%) than those reported in British surveys (up to 9%) (but which do not focus on ethnicity) and our findings here demonstrate that both loneliness and social isolation were common among the Chinese widows.

### **Challenges of practical tasks**

A key theme of the narratives of the Chinese women concerned dealing with practical tasks following the deaths of their husbands, and this is true also of UK-born widowed women (Bennett et al., 2010). This is illustrated by Participant 1:

I used to enjoy the life as a housewife because I believed we could build up a good family. The consequence was, I not only did not have working experience, I also lost my independence of deal with things. I relied on him for everything. So when suddenly he was gone, I had to learn how to live and raise my son independently. It was definitely a hard experience. (Participant 1; 53; 51)

Interestingly, traditional gender roles remained for the Chinese widows, even among those widowed relatively young, in contrast to UK widows reported elsewhere (Bennett et al., 2010). Thus, there may be a larger skills deficit when a husband dies. This is acknowledged by Participant 2. Not only did this impact practically but it also had an emotional impact especially in terms of anxiety.

A lot of things suddenly became very worried. For example, a very simple [task], to change a light bulb.

I can't change one (laughter), I'm not going to change the light bulbs; these are trivial things, made me feel pressure, because I don't know. .... However I built up confidence by dealing with things independently. Looking back now, those things are in my daily life, like can't change a light bulb (Participant 2; 35; 30)

In some respects, the reliance on husbands for practical tasks was a surprise, especially since the participants had often been separated from their husbands while they were married and as they brought up their children. It may be that following separation women and men are more likely to adopt more firmly traditional gender roles as a response to their earlier experience and that these participants had come to enjoy these gender specific roles as a contrast to their previous roles of being all things to everyone. In this excerpt, the participant is also offering insight into how she deals with her widowed status and how she rationalizes what has happened; the loss of her husband is more to her now than the loss of emotional and physical companionship. It is a practical issue for her, which she finds easier to manage and discuss—on a practical level light bulbs cannot be changed. It might be seen in terms of the dual-process model of bereavement, with a focus on attending to life's changes (restoration focused coping) rather than a focus on grief work (loss focused coping) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). However, as Participant 4 reflects, not all marital relationships are so clearly defined by traditional gender roles, and where this is the case adapting to widowhood is easier:

Only to those who rely on their husbands too much. [You are very independent?] I think so. I can count on him; I also can do things by myself. If he was at home, he would have helped me for the housework. That was all. I can live without them (Participant 4; 75; 56)

### **Current life**

As time progresses the loneliness recedes and widows become more confident with practical tasks. Two themes emerge in particular: financial security and not wishing to remarry.

### **Financial security**

The Chinese widows speak more openly and more often about financial matters than UK-born widows. Returning to an earlier quote, Participant 5 thanks the Queen for having sufficient food. In this quote, Participant 7 is also grateful for what the UK state provides:

I don't need others help on the housework. For food, I don't have a big appetite so I normally only cook one dish for a meal, I am satisfied. I don't need to worry

about my living cost because the council benefit. I am really grateful to the UK government for it. What I asked for my life is fulfilled and I don't have any unrealistic demand ... I have what I need. (Participant 7; 71; 66)

These participants have small needs and require little. There is a sense in which these participants are reflecting back on a life which was very hard in China, where food and money were scarce. There were also participants who enjoy to spend money, and who have worked hard for it. Participant 6 wishes to spend her money on herself:

I am happy here (living alone) I like to go outside. I want to enjoy my life, be happy. I earn the money in hard way so I deserve to spend on myself. I don't like to waste my money on someone else. (Participant 6; 76; 36)

The willingness to talk about money to a greater degree than British widows may also stem from two sources. First, it may be that financial discussions are culturally more acceptable in the Chinese community, and second, it may also stem from the widow's involvement in business, where money is important.

### **Not wishing to remarry**

UK-born British widows speak significantly less often about remarriage (both in terms of advantages and disadvantages) than do British men (Bennett et al., 2005). Discussions of remarriage and the barriers and facilitators were discussed more frequently among the Chinese widows than the British widows. In this quote, Participant 2 speaks of both the advantages and disadvantages of remarriage. It is clear that if she does find someone, and she does not expect to, it will be on her terms and she will maintain her independence:

Of course I want someone to be with me and support me. But my previous experiences have taught me a lesson. If later I start a new relationship, I will do it in different way. I will not completely rely on my partner. In another word, I will make use of my own time to do things that I want. However, it is impossible to predict anything. Will I meet someone? When will that happen? I totally have no idea. (Participant 2; 35; 30)

Participant 4 is clear that she does not want to remarry, and that the risks are too great. This resembles some of the British widowers' discussions of remarriage (Bennett et al., 2013).

Why did I want to another marriage? I think it is stupid to get married at that age. You won't do any good to yourself. If you got married with someone rich, you could enjoy your easy life. On the contrary, if you married a worker who happened to love gambling,



you could end up the worse place. So why? I am content and can choose whatever I want.

Later, she points to the ways in which society has changed. She suggests that women no longer need a man to provide for them, and as she says women can live like a man:

Women were not allowed to work in the old days, gossiping about them. Women were considered to be naturally parasitic and needed to find a “host” to feed off of, for security, money, benefits, etc. Nowadays, we can live like a man. (Participant 4; 75; 56)

In the quote, she is also highlighting the changes she has experienced during her lifetime with respect to Chinese culture, and the position of women.

Participant 6 points to the risks of remarriage, especially in the context of her children. It is clear that her children would come first, and there is also an undertone of distrust for putative husbands:

I don't like being married. If I got married again ... I wouldn't love him for what he might do wrong with my children. They were not his blood so he certainly would not treat them as his own. I didn't want anyone to abuse my children or to call them names ... I felt uncomfortable with this situation, even if my second husband treated me kindly. (Participant 6; 76; 36)

Thus, Chinese participants in this study do not wish to remarry, and in that respect they are like British widows. However, their explanations are more forthright and have more in common with British men who have been bereaved of their widowers.

## Conclusion

Five key themes emerged from the data following a chronological order: (1) the complexity of marital lives and the description of events and experiences surrounding the death, which are in some way similar to the experience of White British-born women in the literature; (2) experiences around the time of the death including fate, which we feel differentiated the Chinese-born widows from the UK-born widows referenced in the literature, and reflects their own cultural beliefs (3) loneliness and isolation which were experienced more universally than the UK-born widows (Bennett & Victor, 2012) (4) the challenges of practical tasks which are similar to the experiences of widowed UK-born women (Bennett et al., 2010). Finally, similarly to White widows, the participants discuss, (5) current life, although current life is described differently by Chinese widows compared to White widows in Britain.

It was clear from the data that for many of the Chinese widows in the study their marital lives had been

complex, sometimes involving long separations from their husbands, and always associated with emigration. Thus, their marital experiences differed greatly from many of British-born widows. In addition, the influence of socioeconomic and cultural factors, including the involvement for many of the widows in the catering trade, and with less integration with the wider society influenced their experiences of widowhood. There were also key differences between the widows in this study and other British widows at the time of the death of the spouse, especially concerning the influence of Eastern philosophy and fate (Chan & Chan, 2011; Gee, 1999; Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, & McDonald, 2013). While British women often seek to attribute the death of their husbands to a specific cause (Bennett, 2004), the Chinese widows discussed the deaths in terms of fate and nature. The experiences of loneliness were similar to some British widows, especially with respect to the loss of their significant attachment (Bennett & Victor, 2012; Chan & Chan, 2011). However, there were also some differences—the experiences of loneliness were common among the Chinese and there were also more reports of social isolation in addition to loneliness (Chan & Chan, 2011; Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, & McDonald, 2013). Both Chinese and British women reported the challenges of practical tasks, but again there were differences. Among the Chinese widows, there was a sense that the focus on practical tasks was an indirect means of talking about the emotional aspects of bereavement. Finally, the Chinese participants, as with British participants spoke of their current life with positivity (Bennett, 2010). However, the focus of the Chinese narratives was first, on their financial security, especially in comparison with their early experiences in China and Hong Kong (see also Martin-Matthews, Rosenthal, & McDonald, 2013) and second, on discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of remarriage which were more common among British-born widowers (Bennett et al., 2005; Bennett et al., 2013).

The paper illustrates how some bereavement and widowhood experiences are cross-culturally similar such as feelings of loss, sadness, and loneliness. However, at the same time, those universal experiences are modified by the social and cultural context of widows. The widows in the study have experienced upheavals in their lifetime such as migration, revolution, unwished for marital separation. They have been influenced both by the culture of their place of birth and the culture of their new country. These experiences distinguish the Chinese widows from British-born widows. Participant 3 suggested that defined events and “knowns” such as death (in the context of death as a natural event) were easier to deal with than the unknowns, such as illness

and revolution. Thus, it may be that the Chinese widows experience bereavement with less of the uncertainty that British-born widows feel. However, the experience of migration and cultural change makes some of the experiences of widowhood more challenging.

There are two important limitations to this study. First, the sample size is small and the ages of the participants vary widely, so there may be differences in terms of how younger and older widows are coping with bereavement. It may be a sudden unexpected loss to lose a husband young and more expected to lose an older husband later in life. There may also be differences in how older widows cope as well as managing their own likely deteriorating health. Recruitment of the Chinese widows was challenging since, even in a city like Liverpool with a Chinatown, the Chinese community is disparate. Second, there are challenges of interviewing in one language and translating the interview into another. We were fortunate to have a Cantonese-speaking RA, and that one of the authors is from mainland China (working on secondment in Liverpool from China). This ameliorated both the language issues and the understanding of cultural differences. However, despite these limitations we believe that this is a valuable study which sheds light on the underreported experiences of an important sector of the population.

It is already known that bereavement research is typically underresourced and underinvestigated (Hudson, 2013) but we do know that bereaved spouses are more likely to suffer physical and psychological health consequences compared to the general population (Stroebe & Schut, 2007). Charlton et al. (2001) report that general health decreases in spouses following bereavement. Social support has been found to be an important factor in ameliorating the negative influences of bereavement (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). Research by Sorensen, Duberstein, Gill, and Pinquart (2006) has also focused on services tailored to support relatively socially isolated groups of people (focusing on dementia care). However, it has been found that the resources of the carer, their coping strategy, and their resilience have been related to their general health postbereavement more so than whether they are socially or geographically isolated from services. The research presented here suggests that Chinese widows might welcome more practical rather than emotional support for their bereavement experiences. As Chau, Yi, and Tran (2011) suggest, there is a need for culturally sensitive services tailored toward the Chinese community. The study illustrates the need for the availability of bereavement support which takes into account the Chinese cultural context.

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