“My Last Husband and Marriage:” The Impact of Inheritance Disputes on Chinese Immigrants’ Widowhood in the United States

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Abstract

This study explores the unique experiences of the emotional processing of the widowhood of individuals of the Chinese seniors, and immigrant background in the United States. By interviewing eight Chinese immigrant widows living in Phoenix, the United States, this study focuses on the comparison of social relations and lifestyles before and after their spousal loss, as well as the unique forces of their Chinese backgrounds and the transnational remarriages in their bereavement process, and then widow status. The narrative accounts of the participants therein illustrate that transnational marriage and blended families generate a series of practical challenges, including unexpected severed friendships and inheritance disputes between stepmother and stepchildren. The consequences are reflected in the increase of self-loathing and low self-esteem, the refusal to remarry, the rising anger at the betrayal of friends, as well as the rapid formation of a high level of independence and self-determination in such circumstances. These findings increase knowledge of widowhood of Chinese women with immigrant background, therein enrich ethno-cultural diversity in the widowhood studies. This study concludes with the implications of providing bilingual legal aid and counseling to Chinese-origin, US-based, and widows.

Keywords Marriage immigrants · Widowhood · Chinese elders · Bereavement · Inheritance disputes

Introduction

Widows comprise a significant proportion of all adult women. In 2020, Statista Research Department reported that there were 11.27 million widowed women living in the United States, consisting of 8.28% of the total female population.

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Widowhood is considered one of the most distressing and life-changing events experienced by adults (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). In the United States, given that the contemporary American nuclear family is socially and economically autonomous, widowed women may have few alternative sources of social, emotional, and financial support, and thereby the adjustments required by this community may be particularly difficult (Carr et al., 2001; Lopata, 1973). It is therefore important to study the meaning and consequences of spousal loss among older widowed persons (Carr et al., 2001; Lenette, 2014).

Elwert and colleagues (2006) pointed out that what studies on widowhood lack is attention to effect heterogeneity. Most studies have been focused on the simple presence versus absence of a marital tie and highlight the relationship between the nature of widowhood and the status of women in society (Martin-Matthews, 2011). The majority of research into widowed women and their widowhood had focused on white women and those from the major ethnic groups (Carr & Utz, 2001), with much less research focusing on women from minority ethnic populations (Jankovic et al., 2020; Martin-Matthews et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2013). The population of Asian widowed elders in the United States, according to the US Census Bureau (2016), comprises about 3.8% of American older adults population, and it continued to be overlooked, with insufficient research focusing on those Chinese-born widows living in the United States.

The existing research into the experiences of Chinese-born immigrant widows focuses on those living in Canada and the United Kingdom. Some researchers explored Canadian and British widows' subjective well-being. Gee (2000) surveyed 830 Chinese-born, UK-based elders and reported that the participants who chose to live alone had decreased wellbeing and were less likely to have a confidant compared to widows living with their adult children. The reason for this phenomenon draws on that living alone breaks the cultural ideal of filial piety of multigenerational co-residence, and this therefore generated depression in widowed older adults (Chan & Chan, 2011; Sereny, 2011; Chow et al., 2006). Bennett et al. (2018) recorded eight British Chinese women's experiences in a chronological order. They found that the participants face various challenges regarding loneliness and practical tasks.

Some other researchers were dedicated to explaining the widows' economic situation and its direct or indirect connection with experiences after widowhood. Qi et al. (2019) found most of the widowed Chinese seniors who lived alone had more resources and capacity to maintain independent living. Similarly, Lai and Leonenko (2007) found that for Chinese widows in Canada, living alone was associated with having a higher income and having a higher level of social support. Martin-Matthews et al. (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 Canadian-Chinese widows and reveal that the social and economic support they received can directly shape their widowhood.

These empirical studies have clarified the general image and basic characteristics of Chinese immigrant older widows. However, these widowhood studies mainly conducted in the UK and Canada, which leaves room for further research on the Chinese-born widows living in the United States. More importantly, many practical difficulties and family problems faced by immigrant older women, such as cultural differences in transnational marriages and remarriages, conflicts in blended families,

and property disputes, still have not received enough attention. In this light, this article seeks to address these two gaps. I interviewed eight Chinese widows who remarried to U.S. citizens and formed blended families, and then encountered various disputes with the blood relatives of the deceased after the death of their husbands. By examining their experiences before, around, and after their husbands' death, the purpose of this study is contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this group with the focus on how spousal loss and the follow-up unique experiences—such as inheritance disputes, and cultural conflicts between American adult stepchildren and Chinese stepmother—shaped their later life as to increase the knowledge of ethnic-minority widows. Recording such experiences of Chinese widows in the United States will expand ethnic diversity in the experience more of widowhood in later life. In my conclusion, I illustrate the need for providing necessary legal aid and bereavement support for foreign-born, US-based widows.

Methods

Study Sample and Recruitment

To explore the widowhood experience among older widowed Chinese women residing in the United States, 8 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Eight participants were approached and recruited by the author. These eight participants are between 53–92 years old. They had been widowed between 2.5 and 14 years.

The inclusion criteria were: 1) having been born in China; 2) residing in the United States now; 3) female; 4) having experienced spousal bereavement. This study, is similar to other studies on older widowhood, such as these which did not recruit individuals who were illiterate or showed signs of cognitive impairment (Martin-Matthews et al., 2013). Snowball sampling was employed to identify qualified participants. The first two participants were recruited through the Chinese community organizations in the Phoenix metropolitan area, by the author. These initial participants referred other individuals who met the inclusion criteria, thereby assisting in the recruitment into this study. The feasibility and validity of conducting fieldwork by a single researcher have been discussed by a great number of authors in literature. Miles (1983) found that working with three with three different fieldworkers caught up himself in a process which he called "the bureaucratization of fieldwork. He thereby admits that the lone fieldworker might avoid a false sense of security and authority. Giorgi (1994) drew a similar conclusion that as a part of the data reduction procedures, reducing the number of fieldworkers is an organized outcome that will still provide answers to the implicit or explicit questions the researcher wants to put to the data (p. 4). In this light, Hall and Howard (2008) pointed out that successful implementation of a study is not necessarily dependent on the number of researchers, since certain researches are suitable for a single researcher to conduct if he or she is sufficiently versed in the employed approaches.

The participants provided signed consent forms after being advised that their participation was voluntary and confidential. All the participants were advised of their

right to withdraw from the study at any point. This study received approval from the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board. Pseudonyms were employed here, in the place of the real names of all the participants and their family members, in order to ensure confidentiality, and participants were identified as P1 through P8.

Data Collection and Qualitative Analysis

Semi-structured and remote interviews were conducted with the participants, such as virtual or online platforms such as Zoom and WeChat, and telephone interviews, based on their preference. The interviews, lasting between 70 and 160 min, consisted of a series of topics about demographic information, family members, social networks, friendships, marriages, lifestyle, social and financial status quo, and multilayered impact of spousal loss. The interview guide consisted of five sections: (1) Demographic information drawing on questions such as age, years married, years widowed, years in the US, and the like, (2) transnational marriage, lifestyle, and family structures and relations, (3) stories and details around the time of spousal loss, (4) current life and daily arrangements, (5) as well as the feelings before, during, and after the bereavement. The interviews, of which seven were conducted in Mandarin and one in English, were audio-recorded, and then transcribed by the author. Given that some of the participants mentioned the real names of their husbands and other family members, these names were replaced with pseudonyms during the transcription. The seven Mandarin interviews were translated from Mandarin to English by the author. To ensure the faithful transcription and interpretation of the interviews, added linguistic notes and comments were added to where the transcription was not clear.

The transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 11 for coding. To analyze the transcripts, I coded the transcribed interviews and used a thematic analysis, which is a method for systematically identifying, organizing and offering insight into patterns of meaning across a data set (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Coding was completed, and then this was transformed into initial codes in NVivo, which generates them. Following the suggestion released by Mackey and Gass (2005), I repeated the data coding in 2 different periods, Time 1 and Time 2, for reliability and validity. The results in Time 1 and Time 2 are consistent.

As a lot of codes clustered around certain nodes, I grouped them into initial theme nodes. These nodes were refined and reviewed so as to map the data into five coherent key themes: (1) transnational romance and marital lives; (2) the inheritance disputes and family conflicts that break out immediately upon their husbands' death, (3) the loss of social relationships, (4) loneliness, and (5) current status quo and life arrangements. To ensure the rigor of the analysis, the coded transcripts were checked by a research assistant who received qualitative research training. Under the examination of the research assistant, references that did not fit the themes were imported back into the original interview transcript as to ensure that the participants' accounts were represented accurately.

Participants’ Characteristics

The participants were of varying ages when they experienced spousal loss (49–89; Mean=63 years; SD=11.04). The widows had lived in the United States for about 3 to 31 years (Mean:16 years; SD=9.03). Table 1 details the participants’ age-based demographic information.

The participants have many similarities in experience and demographic characteristics. First, all came to the United States well into their mid-life and migrated to marry with their late husbands. The youngest was aged 43 and the eldest was aged 61 at the time of immigration, with most in their 40 s and 50 s. Second, their late husbands were all the US citizens, and half of these men were veterans. Third, both the brides and grooms had their own children when they got married. Forth, the majority of the participants’ husbands either died intestate or left a will that did not address all of his estate assets, as a result, these women were involved in varying degrees of estate disputes with the decedents’ biological children. Last, most of them are living alone and they decided to live in this way. Most of the participants can speak English more or less. Three of them are bilingual in Mandarin and English, two are fluent in both Cantonese and English, two only speak Chinese, and two are trilingual in Mandarin, English, and Cantonese. The variation of the participants’ languages reflects the fact that contemporary Chinese immigrants come not only from Cantonese-speaking areas like Guangdong, but also from other regions (Yeung, et al., 2009). Detailed profiles are summarized in Table 2.

Results

The coded interviews clustered into five themes. In chronological order, transnational romance and marriage, (2) bereavement and the inheritance disputes that break out immediately upon their husbands’ death, (3) the deterioration of social relationships, (4) loneliness, and (5) the current status quo and life arrangements.

Transnational Romances and Marriages: “He Fell in Love with Me at First Sight”

Lauser (2008) stated that women do not only marry in order to migrate, but that they also migrate in order to marry. The purpose of the participants’ immigration was to get married and to live with their foreign husbands in order to achieve social

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

	Average	Range
Age	69	53–92
Years married	21	6–57
Age widowed	63	49–89
Years widowed	6	2–14
Years in the US	16	3–31

Table 2 *Demographic Details of the Participants*

ID #	Age	Language	Age widowed	Living Accommodation	Receives Surviving Spouse Pension
P1	92	Cantonese and English	89	Live alone, the daughter lives in the same neighborhood	Yes
P2	62	Mandarin	59	Live alone, the son lives next door	Yes
P3	63	Mandarin and English	58	Live alone	Yes
P4	68	Mandarin	65	Live with her younger sister	Yes
P5	53	Mandarin, Cantonese, and English	49	Live alone	No
P6	69	Mandarin and English	58	Live alone	Yes
P7	66	Mandarin and little English	60	Live alone	Yes
P8	82	Mandarin, Cantonese, and English	68	Live with a live-in-caregiver	Yes

fulfillment. All the eight participants met their late American husbands as divorcees or widows. For these women, romance with foreign men happened in three places: (1) tourist attractions; (2) workplace (i.e., international offices of multinational companies); (3) banquets/parties. In this first extract, the participants recalled how they met their husbands, decided to get married, and finally immigrated to accompany their husbands.

P2: I met him on September 15, 2011. He traveled to China with [...] my former colleague. [...] My colleague invited me to have a dinner party with them. [...] He fell in love with me at first sight, saying that he had never seen a woman like me. [...] On October 11, 2012, he proposed to me. I said, “It’s okay to get married, but I don’t want to leave Beijing, so you [...] must come to China to live with me.” [...] But when we got married, he was diagnosed with bowel cancer. [...] The medical treatments for bowel cancer in the United States were better, and he started to feel homesick. Taking into account his situation, ... I finally decided to accompany him to resident in the United States.

P7: My uncle wanted to introduce me to an American friend of his who was working in China as an expatriate employee, but I refused at the time ... I felt blind dates with white men were ridiculous. Half a year later, (my uncle) told me that he had been acting on behalf of me sending hundreds of emails to this guy. [...] In the end my uncle said that this guy wanted to see me in person and I must set a date (to meet him), otherwise he would have to tell the truth and be treated as a pervert. [...] I didn’t know he was such a gentleman until we met, so I continued to date him. Two years later, when he finished his work in China and was about to return to the United States, we discussed and decided that I would retire early and emigrate to the United States to get married and live with him.

Given that the transnational marriages of these participants were seeded in unintended transnational romance, they appraised that their marriages were of high quality. In their marital lives, language and culture were not barriers. Instead, the husbands and wives understood and made full allowance for each other in order to mitigate their differences.

P5: We rarely quarreled. [...] He liked to invite relatives and friends to have parties at our home. [...] We always had a great time. [...] I later chose to be a real estate agent, ... he, his nephew, and his daughter introduced clients to me many times.

P1: He not only took care of me, but also was nice to my children and my family. We are a half-way couple (a remarried couple), but he treated my children as his own. [...] When other people in my hometown heard about these things, they were all jealous of me, constantly referring to me that cyan smoke rose from my ancestral tomb (describing a person's fortune with sarcasm)."

For these participants, since transnational marriages are the continuation of transnational romance, they have beautiful memories of their marital lives. Such memories either were rooted in the tacit understanding of each other or in the husbands' guidance and livelihood care. However, transnational romances and remarriages lighted the fuse of a series of disputes and conflicts during their widowhood. The husbands' decision to remarry and the neglect of their blood relatives and friends after marriage caused the latter's dissatisfaction and vigilance. On the one hand, the relatives and friends of the deceased were worried that these women had an ulterior motive. As P6 recalled,

When my husband told his family that he was going to remarry, the first thing they said to him was: "She married you for money. You need to make a will to us in advance before getting married, appointing us to inherit your house and deposit. Otherwise we would not accept her."

On the other hand, the deceased's family also believed that the behaviors these husbands displayed in love were abnormal and irrational.

P2: During the first year of our relationship, he flew to China six times to see me. His friend said he was crazy, and his sister advised him not to meet me again.

Although meeting the true love of life in the late middle age undoubtedly brought them happiness, the cultural conflicts and uncertainties inherent in transnational marriage and cross-cultural communication is inevitable (Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001). The above remarks indicate that out of concerns about the grooms mental state and personal property, their relatives and friends do not support their decision to remarry. Such subtle dissatisfaction were intensified by the death of the husbands and evolved into substantial conflicts and insoluble contradictions after the death.

Inheritance Disputes after Spousal Death

Research on Chinese immigrant widows' experiences around the time of the spousal loss focuses on describing in detail the feelings, emotions and fatalist understanding of the nature of such emotions (Chen, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Gee, 2000). Besides the exploration of emotional reactions to the death of their beloved, family disputes over inheritance that break out upon the death also directly affect the widows' bereavement. In my sample, seven of the participants experienced estate and property disputes. These unpleasant memories were superimposed on the bereavement, causing them great pain. Inheritance disputes often began on their husbands deathbed, taking the dispute of where the decedent's body would end up as an early sign. The most intense case is that of P4, where she and her stepchildren, which even finally formed a physical confrontation.

P4: At last, the doctor let us go home and gave my husband hospice care. His children, especially his daughter wanted to move him to her boyfriend's house. In the first two times, they failed. [...] The third time, his two sons, his daughter, and her boyfriend, a total of four people came to my house ... and insisted taking him away. We argued for four hours. Finally they loaded my husband into their car forcibly. They also removed a lot of valuable items from our house, including paintings, guns, records, ornaments, and so on. [...] They were four and I was alone, so I couldn't stop them. I saw that I couldn't stop them, so I said that I would go with them, but they rejected me. I tried to get in the car, but his second son pushed me, he pushed me down. [...] I later told this to others, and they said I was supposed to call the police to stop them. But I had no idea at that moment.

The most direct feelings that such conflicts over inheritance and decedents' relocation brought to the widows are guilt and anger. They were outraged at being treated rudely and in physically harming ways. Also, they felt sorry and guilty for opposing their husbands' family. These two feelings are strong in the narratives, as illustrated by P5 and P6.

P5: His own children went against his will, and he died discontent. Every time I think of that he had no good clothes to wear, was not in his own home, and was not with me, I feel... deeply... I am very, very sorry for him. I let him down. I am incompetent, and I failed to let my husband leave this world with dignity.

P6: As a stepmother I am supposed to be responsible for maintaining a positive relationship with his family, yet there was and still is no successful outcome. We ended up with being enemies. I feel I am sorry for my husband. If he is alive, he will be very disappointed in me.

In addition to suffering mental guilt, they have difficulties in finding an English-Chinese bilingual lawyer and accessing relative legal support, which generates various inconveniences and even lead to the loss of property. Being caught in the inheritance disputes also meant that they had to spend a lot of time and energy in repeated

negotiations with the stepchildren and their attorneys. This kind of long seesaw battle is a torture even for those who win the legacy lawsuit or reach a compromise.

P7: It took nearly a month to find a lawyer. [...] I wanted a lawyer who can speak both Chinese and English, but [...] I could only hire an English-speaking lawyer in the end. I hired a translator to help me translate the documents and the meetings with the lawyer. [...] I put too much energy into it. I was afraid and frustrated countless times in the process.

P3: I wanted to go to court, but the attorney's fees would be at least \$10,000...and I don't want to spend that much money. I thought about going to the court just accompanied by an interpreter. [...] I could not find a willing interpreter. Nobody could provide the services I needed at that time, so I lost a lot of tangible property and homestead allowance that should have belonged to me. They (the stepchildren) insulted me, I have no way to defend my dignity. [...] Thinking of this, I feel my heart hurts.

The relationship between stepmothers and adult stepchildren *per se* is delicate and complicated (Ganong, 2011; Church, 1999). Even in the case of families native to America, in those blended families it is normal for the father's death to carry over into disputes over an inheritance, or beneficiary rights to a trust and estate property (Titus, 1979; Davidson, 2012; Carney et al., 2014). Research shows that only about 20% of adult stepchildren feel close to their stepmoms, and most stepmothers and their stepchildren do not grow closer over time (Peterson, 2002). These of Chinese-origin immigrant widows, akin to their American-origin counterparts, were unable to maintain close relationships with their stepchildren especially after the death of their husbands. Rooted in such family conflicts, the disputes over inheritance often erupt quickly and are difficult to resolve properly.

According to the accounts of these participants, they have encountered difficulties in different aspects during the entire settlement process over property and estate conflicts, including mediation, the seeking of bilingual licensed attorney, and due to litigation. Their limited English proficiency and insufficient understanding of American social norms and laws hindered the accessible social and legal support. In particular, the lawyers who are both Chinese-English bilingual and able to represent estate issues are hard to be found when the women need help. Given the insufficiency of the corresponding legal aid and counseling services for this group, they cannot reasonably protect their interests and dignity. Such experiences not only aggravated their bereavement in the short term, but also greatly consumed their time and energy long after their spouses' death.

The Deterioration of Social Relationships: "My Neighbor Called Me a Water Stealer"

Despite emotional torture and loss of inheritance, another problem the participant faced is that their social relationships deteriorated and social bonds were severed. Just as they could not properly inherit the properties of their deceased husband, they could not smoothly maintain the social relationships established more or less

with the help of their husbands. In this extract, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P8 have a lot of narratives about how the neighbors, friends, and clients betrayed or severed ties with them after their husbands' death.

First, the friendships between the participants and the friends of their husbands ceased right after their spousal bereavement. According to P3's description:

They (the friends) praised me in front of my husband, "We love Mark the most, but we love you more." [...] But right after (the husband's death), given that my stepdaughter and me have had some disputes over the estate, they corrected themselves, saying that I have an unusual relationship with my husband.

Severed friendship not only brought frustration to the participants, but also causes economic losses. For P5, after the death of her husband, a friend of her husband spread rumors, saying that she secretly transferred tangible property from her home many times, which damaged her credibility as a realtor:

He (the friend) claimed that one day he saw a truck parked in front of my house at 11 o'clock in the evening. He said he witnessed me removing a lot of the personal property from my home late at night in the dark. [...] As this version of my stories spread, I lost some acquaintances who tended to be my clients. [...] They ... don't believe me since then.

The participants were plagued with the change that their friends chose support the stepchildren in the property disputes. They also suffered from the betrayal of the friends.

P4: Sometimes I connect my water pipe to the faucet in the yard of my next door neighbor to water my flowers. When my husband was alive, that neighbor said I was welcome to use their water at any time. But ... after his death, I received a letter from the attorney of my stepdaughter. In this letter, there was this sentence: You weren't much of a spouse, [...] the neighbor caught your stealing water from the neighbor's property. My neighbor called me a water stealer. I was so, so mad at her, my blood pressure rose to as high as 180/110 when I read this letter.

P8: He (a friend) visited me in the name of condolences. [...] He entered my studio secretly and tried to steal the original Will for my husband' ex-wife. [...] He betrayed me in this way. Sometimes [...] I feel ... this betrayal is worse than my husband's leaving.

The friendships of these participants with their American friends seemed to disintegrate quickly with the death of their husbands. As stepchildren and stepmothers neither see the same facts nor reach the same conclusions in interpreting the facts, the friends and neighbors have their own perspectives as well and thereby chose to sever the association with these participants. The friends' contract in attitude before and after the death hurts the feelings of the sensitive and vulnerable participants who are in the middle of bereavement. In addition to feeling betrayed, they believe that the acquaintances dislike them because of the "evil

stepmother” stereotype and negative impressions of marriage immigrant women, as P4 and P5 self-questioned,

P4: Do the English folks subconsciously identify me as an unequal wife and evil stepmother who would take advantage of my husband’s biological children? Are they hostile to me just because I am from China, remarried to an American, got a green card because of my second marriage?

P5: During the inheritance lawsuit, I sometimes suspected that my attorney would favor my husband’s family. I know this idea is wrong, but sometimes I could not help but ask myself, this attorney is an American, wouldn’t he want to help another group of Americans? Or, would he think that my act of fighting for inheritance with my stepdaughter who just went bankrupt was particularly mean?

According to their questions to themselves, the participants attribute the family conflicts to gendered, cultural, and family relational stereotypes, considering that their immigration background and the family role as a stepmother have led to people’s cultural hostility towards her, and therein causes self-doubt and self-loathing.

Loneliness: “I Suspect that I Am Going Deaf”

As time goes by, grief and anger recedes, the participants gradually developed new strategies to adjust their new marital status and lifestyle. As the data summarized in Table 2, most of them choose to stay single and live independently, such that the loneliness brought about by this kind of life is a challenge that every widow discussed.

P1 senses loneliness through auditory perception: I had nothing to do in the past two years, so I just watched TV at home. [...] However, I watch TV from morning to night for a long time, so I then felt a little sick of watching TV. Except for watching TV, [...] I don’t now have anything else to do. I feel the room is too quiet after being alone. It is so quiet that sometimes I suspect that I am going deaf.

The people who live with relatives feel lonely as well. P4 lives in her younger sister’s house. The sister’s attitude toward P4 is complicated, which is the source of her loneliness. She remarked,

My sister both loves and dislikes me. She dislikes me for having no ability to grab my husband’s estate. [...] On the other hand I know she loves me. Once we quarreled, I said that if you keep scolding me, I would go back to China. She said to me, “You have to die in front of me even if you are going to die, you are not allowed to go anywhere.” I know she loves me, but I also know she does not understand me. I am the most isolated woman in the world.

Many publications report high rates of loneliness amongst both Chinese and immigrant widows (Carr & Utz, 2001; Guiaux et al., 2007; King & Carr, 2020; Luo, 2020).

They not only feel the loss of social relations and connections with other people, but also suffer the fear of losing social bonds with other people (Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007; Trivedi et al., 2009; Naef et al., 2013; Chow et al., 2007). The participants similarly experience loneliness. While different from the above analysis of causality between social relationships and loneliness, their narratives illustrate that the absence of their husbands directly generates their loneliness, which could not be replaced by any other people's company.

Independence and Self-determination: “I Want To” and “I Decided To”

Regarding their views on current life, a commonality is that the participants theoretically have multiple possibilities and alternative living arrangements after being widows, but end up with the same lifestyle, namely to live alone and keep single. Some of them can live with their biological children (either in the United States or in China) if they are willing to do so, some women have the opportunity to fall in love or get married again. However, they all reject remarrying, would not consider relocation, and insist on living separately from their families. There are three main reasons for their decision: (1) to escape the traditional roles of senior women in Chinese families; (2) to avoid the risks related to property, inheritance, and family relationship arising from remarriage; and (3) to remember the decedents.

Regarding the choice of living accommodations, some participants point that they keep living alone to avoid the responsibilities that they should automatically assume as grandmothers or mothers-in-law. What P4 tried to avoid is the task of taking care of her grandson. The traditional Chinese family culture stipulates that the retired grandparents should take care of their grandchildren to help their children during working days (Yang, 2013). As a retired widowed grandmother, she has a moral obligation to follow the familial norms, while she refused such a moral kidnapping:

If I move to my son's house, I will have to take care of my grandchildren for my son. If so, I may not even have my own free time. After Jack's death (the husband), I decided to live [...] here, in the United States. [...] My bank account in China receives ¥ 5000 (\$770) in pension every month. I gave my son my bank card and asked him to hire a good nanny. [...] I spent money to hire someone to fulfill my role. As for me, [...] I decided to live a life of ease and idleness the rest of my time.

The living habits of P3 are completely different from her daughter-in-law, which is the reason why she keeps living alone to avoid any possibility of friction with her daughter-in-law to the greatest extent:

She (the daughter-in-law) spends money like a paper shredder. [...] She bought herself a piano for her birthday last year. [...] I can't bear her spending money in this way. If I live with them, I might quarrel with her every three days. [...] I want to be a good mother-in-law. Although my son requested me to live with them many times right after that event (the husband's death), I know everyone would be unhappy if I went back to China. I rejected my son at the beginning (of being widowed).

The participants chose not to marry anymore and live alone because of two reasons. First, some of them could not let go of their feelings for their late husband. For instance, P2 is obsessed with fulfilling her “twenty-year promise” with her husband. She repeatedly emphasized this promise in her diary, letters to the deceased (see Fig. 1), and interviews:

When we got married, my husband promised to take care of me for twenty years. Now although he broke his promise, I need to fulfill his promise. That’s why I live near his tomb. I will accompany him in the next 12 years to fulfill the promise. [...] While having seen him die in front of me, I told myself, this is my last marriage, he is my last husband.

Otherwise, the risks and shortcomings of marriage cut off their fantasy of remarrying.

P5: Every time I get married, I have good times only for the first few years, and the rest are hard times. Maybe I not be suitable for marriage. The older you get, the higher the price of marriage may be. [...] I realized this truth in the moment, the days that my late husband was gone and his family slandered me. This will be my last marriage

After weighing and analyzing the pros and cons of various lifestyles, they made the optimal life arrangements. In their descriptions of life arrangements, they repeatedly emphasized their selfhood, such as “I want,” “I decide,” “I told myself,” and such like. Meanwhile, they refused to sacrifice their own interests and well-being to please others. Their remarks and life arrangements embodied a strong awareness of self and perceived choice in their widowed lives. Baxter (2004) considers that addressing the dilemma of identity construction between the “I” and the “we” symbolized the feminist reconceptualization. Abrams (1999) considers women’s autonomy an ongoing and improvisational process of self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction. The participants’ attention to selfhood and their self-determination after their spousal bereavement conform to such formation process of feminist personality.

Discussion and Further Implications

It is clear from the data that for the Chinese widows in the study, their experiences of becoming a widow have similarities and common ground that can be summarized and extracted. The five key themes of the participants’ accounts follow a chronological order: (1) Transnational romance and marriage, (2) bereavement and the inheritance disputes that break out immediately upon their husbands’ death, (3) the loss of social relationships, (4) loneliness, and (5) the post-loss status quo and life arrangements. Several issues of the five themes, such as loneliness and social disconnection, bereavement, marital lives, and current situations of Chinese immigrant widows, are explored and developed by previous researches from different access points or points of view (Martin-Matthews et al., 2013; Ng et al., 2016). This group reports

■■■■■■■■■■ II 逝世一周年感言

■■■■■■■■■■ II on the first anniversary of his death

我亲爱的丈夫 M■■■■■■■■■■ 今天是你离开我一周年的忌日.....

My dear husband ■■■■■■■■■■, today is the one year anniversary of your death.....

我和女儿■■■■■及女儿的丈夫■■■■■, 我们一起来祭拜你 🙏🙏🙏🙏

My daughter ■■■■■ and my daughter's husband ■■■■■, we are here to honor you

你离开我这一周年里, 是我人生最黑暗的一年, 很难熬、很不公平、很糟糕.....

The first anniversary of you leaving me has been the darkest year of my life. It has been difficult, unfair, and terrible.....

我带着你给我的爱, 用心去感悟你的孩子: ■■■■■, 他们欺骗了你, 他们没有遵守承诺, 他们给你丢了脸.....发生的一切事情, 都在你的意料之中.....你给我的文件, 我没有交给律师! 我不愿意去伤害你的孩子们!! 我对你的付出, 是因为我爱你, 我们的心在一起, 我们彼此愿意为对方做出伟大的事.....

With the love you have given me, I feel your children with my heart: ■■■■■, they have lied to you, they have broken their promises, they have disgraced you.....Everything that happens is in your expectation.....I didn't turn over the documents you gave me to a lawyer! I don't want to hurt your children!! I give to you, because you love me, our hearts are together, we are willing to do great things for each other.....

我愿意做你永远骄傲的妻子, 我会遵守我们信守二十年的承诺, 带着尊重, 带着感恩, 带着思念, 温和前进, 我爱你!

I will be your proud wife forever, and I will keep the promise we've kept for twenty years, Go forward gently with respect, with gratitude, with thoughts, I love you!

永远爱你的妻子: ■■■■■

Fig. 1 P2's Letter to Her Husband on His First Death Anniversary

a high level of loneliness and depression, with no effective coping mechanisms to mitigate this feeling. Also, in view of the complexity of marriage and foreseeable risks of remarriage, they do not consider remarrying (Bennett et al., 2018).

In addition to complementary and support previous research, my sample raises three issues and arguments that have not been previously uniquely discussed. The first is the impact of inheritance disputes on the bereavement of Chinese immigrant widows. The conflicts between the members of the blended family and the dispute over the division of inheritance aggravate the guilt and sadness of the widows for their deceased husband, increase their difficulties in practical tasks and spiritual burden, and plunge them into self-doubt and self-loathing. Their transnational remarriages with American citizens not only brought them happy marital lives, but also generated difficulties and tribulations to them during their widowhood. The subtle dissatisfaction of the deceased's biological children and friends towards their remarriages turned into cultural and inheritance conflicts after their spousal loss. In the process of dealing with inheritance disputes and other family conflicts, their ignorance of American laws, social norms, and related social services has brought them a lot of inconvenience. The various contradictions and difficulties they experienced confirm the cross-cultural interaction consequences predicted by cross-cultural communication theory. This theory predicts that people are inclined to communicate in ways that favor people from their ingroup and tend to compete with people from their outgroup (Merkin, 2017; Kim, 2017). As an individual outside of the ingroup where the deceased husband's relatives and friends belonged, the interests conflicts and cultural differences made these participants unavoidable to have confrontations with the ingroup, and thereby their widowhood was filled with heritage disputes and the continuous disintegration of friendship and family ties. Such special cross cultural communication that occurred in the context of the bereavement generates their resentment towards the deceased husband's friends and family, and then aggravates their suffering.

The second are the widows' underestimated states of independence and self-determination around the time of the spouse's death. The participants, under the premise of having alternative living arrangements, decided their current lifestyle and living accommodations. Some of them are unwilling to be bound by women's responsibilities and roles of traditional Chinese families, and thereby rejecting the option to live with their children. Some are determined to maintain the same lifestyle as when their husband was alive in order to fulfill their marriage promise. Some others, after weighing the pros and cons of remarriage, chose to live alone or be single in order to avoid disadvantages brought on by marriage. Many studies point out that widows are higher in self-determination and become more independent and over time (i.e., Martin-Matthews, 1999; Bisconti et al., 2004; Martin-Matthews et al., 2013). While in my sample, the verbatim accounts of the participants illustrate that their independence and self-determination did not gradually grow up nor diminish over time, instead, it basically took shape right around the time of the death of their husbands and was directly triggered by such events. Their remarks, such as "I chose to", "I decided to", and "I want to" reflect their capacity in processing their self-determination.

After experiencing all kinds of sorrows, joys, and impermanence, they eventually begin to explore their true will and dedicated themselves to defending what they really want and pursued, free from external influence and interference. This finding therein contribute to the Chinese immigrant widows' selfhood. Sprague and Hayes (2000) claimed that the expression of a self and self-determination is a crucial

feminist practice. In this light, widows' self-determination is also worthy of further consideration from the perspective of feminism.

Third, this article also illustrates the need for legal and social support around the time of their husband's death. Given the participants' difficulty in finding Chinese-English bilingual legal aids, lack of coping experience and ability, due to cultural differences in conflicts and emergencies, and insufficient accessible social supports, it is necessary to provide practical and legal supports with the emphasis upon the time of their spousal loss.

Representativity and selection bias constitute the limitations of this article. The snowball sampling method employed in this article also may result in selection bias. Akin to many studies focusing on gendered immigration widowhood, the sample of this study is small, which reflects the difficulty of recruiting qualified participants (Bennett et al., 2018). For Chinese immigrant widows, suffering from bereavement and property disputes at the same time is a unique phenomenon. Therefore, although the experiences analyzed in this article shows the special emotional processing of eight widows and provides evidence for future research, it by no means can represent the general experience of the entire Chinese-born immigrant widow group.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the lived experiences and feelings of senior and widowed Chinese women, living in the United States, who were immigrants by marriage. Taking widowhood as the key factor in framing the elaborations of the ripple effect of spousal loss and perceptions of their experiences, this paper expands the diversity and variability of widow studies. Their verbatim accounts provide hints as to how the husbands' death generates their loneliness, bereavement, as well as a series of familial and social conflicts.

This paper also rises three findings that are overlooked by previous studies. First, for the majority of the women in this study, the inheritance disputes in the transcultural blended family have caused harm to these widows on both the spiritual and practical levels, which are supposed to be further explored. Second, their independence and self-determination did not develop over time, but have formed and finalized around the time of their spousal death instead. Third, their loneliness is not rooted in the deterioration of social relations nor social isolation, but instead from the loss of their beloved husbands. Given that their friends participated in their property conflicts with the stepchildren and based on provided testimony for the other party, the feelings brought on by the severed friendships have only resulted in the anger of being betrayed. Therefore, these findings illustrate the need for the availability of bilingual legal aid in family law as well as counseling services for the surviving immigrant spouses during their bereavement process.

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Declarations

Conflicts of Interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent All participants have signed informed consents.

Ethics Approval This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Arizona State University (IRB ID: STUDY00013066).

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