

**The Volunteer Experience of Chinese Immigrants in Canada**

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### **Abstract**

*Volunteering is one of the most common, yet least studied social behaviours in Western society. Even less is known about volunteering among immigrants. Knowledge about volunteering among Chinese Canadians is largely based on anecdotes. Using secondary analysis of a Chinese-community-based age-stratified sample, the study reported here examined the meaning of, and factors influencing, volunteer activity in the community. Information collected from 289 Chinese immigrant participants from the Greater Toronto Area was included in the analysis. Descriptive and multivariate statistical methods were used to analyze the data. The results suggest 17.3% of the participants reported current volunteer activity and 34.9% of all participants have volunteered at some time in the past. "Helping others and enriching own life" (49.5%) was the most frequently reported reason for volunteering. The leading reason for not volunteering was "no time" at 45.7%. Logistic regression analysis found that individuals who were not married and those who lived in Canada for 5 or more years were more likely to have volunteered or be a current volunteer. The results suggest volunteer activity is not well predicted by sociodemographic (e.g. age, sex, education) characteristics. This study contributes to a new understanding of volunteer participation among Chinese immigrants in Canada.*

**Key Words:** volunteer, Chinese immigrant, Canada

### **Introduction**

In many societies, volunteering is an important resource for social and economic development (Flanagan et al., 1999; Abraham & Mackie, 2005). Volunteers selflessly commit their skills, energy and time benefiting society (Hall, Lasby, Ayer & Gibbons, 2009; Grimm et al., 2007). Volunteerism is a form of civic participation that produces goods and services to benefit individuals and their families, thus making volunteering an important component of economic activity (Wiener, Toppe,

Jalandoni, Kirsch, & Weitzman, 2001). In 2010, more than 13.3 million people (over 47% of all the population aged 15 and over) in Canada served as volunteers, providing approximately 2.07 billion hours of service, the equivalent of 1.1 million full-time jobs (Vezina & Crompton, 2012). According to earlier data, volunteering in Canada accounts for 11% of the whole labor contribution and creates \$13 billion for the economy, equivalent to 1.4% of Canadian GDP each year (Schugurensky & Mundel, 2005).

Previous studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between volunteering and good health. Volunteers may benefit directly and indirectly from volunteer activity in terms of improved physical and mental well-being and social connectedness (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Warburton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001; Windsor, Anstey, & Rodgers, 2008). Elderly volunteers, when compared to elderly non-volunteers reported a higher quality of life and lower mortality rates (Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Gottlieb & Gillespie, 2008; Hank & Stuck, 2008; Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Wheeler, Gorey, & Greenblatt, 1998). The reasons for this improved well-being are numerous. Volunteering may act as a buffer against depression (Li & Ferraro, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003) and increase job skills and their general satisfaction with life (Harlow & Cantor, 1996; Willigen, 2000). In addition, volunteering may help build civic skills, improve interpersonal skills and expand social networks (Brown, Nesse, Vonokur, & Smith, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Many immigrants contribute to Canadian society by volunteering. Though immigrants are less likely to volunteer compared to native-born Canadians, they devote slightly more than the average

number of hours (171 vs. 168 hours) (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009). Moreover, immigrant volunteers devoted a total of 357 million hours to their volunteer activity in 2003, the equivalent of almost 200,000 full-time jobs (Ashton, Baker, & Parandeh, 2006).

According to Statistics Canada (2001), Chinese Canadians constitute the largest population of non-European origin, with over 1 million in 2001. This report also suggests that 72% of Chinese immigrants were born outside Canada and over half of them (52%) landed in Canada after 1990. Among the more than 1.1 million recent immigrants who arrived between 2001 and 2006, 14% came from the People's Republic of China (Statistics Canada, 2006). Chinese people account for 20% of Canada's current immigration intake, and Chinese has become the third most commonly spoken language after English and French (Chui, Tran, & Maheux, 2007).

There remains a lack of consistent and comprehensive data and research on volunteering. This contributes to an underestimation of the value of this social activity. Chinese immigrants exhibit unique cultural beliefs and practices and little is known about their volunteer activities.

### **Methodology**

In 2005 The North Chinese Community of Canada in Toronto, Canada sponsored and conducted a community-based survey of

Chinese immigrants in Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to explore their attitudes towards, and involvement in volunteer activities. This current study consists of a re-examination (secondary analysis) of the original data from the 2005 study. The methods, including sampling scheme, questionnaire design and data collection described below represent those used in the original survey. Description of the analysis represents those processes used in the secondary data analysis.

#### *Sampling scheme*

In the original data collection, a cross-sectional study method with a convenience sampling approach was adopted. While a large completely random probability sample would elicit higher validity and generalizability, it was deemed to be impractical for this study due to costs. Conducting a random probability sample is also technically challenging as there is no easy way to identify and enlist all people of Chinese origin from which to draw a random sample. To reflect the wide spectrum of the Chinese immigrant population and their views on volunteering, a quasi-stratified convenience sampling approach, with age as a primary stratifying variable was used.

#### *Questionnaire design*

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the original data collection. The majority of the survey questions were closed-ended, i.e. participants chose their

response from the list provided. Open-ended questions were included to seek participant's opinions on the concept of volunteering. The questionnaire was designed and distributed to the participants in Chinese. By using Chinese, rather than English as the language of the questionnaire, possible misunderstandings were minimized and thus, the overall quality of the study was enhanced.

#### *Data collection*

In the original data collection the questionnaire was expected to be directly distributed to, and completed by, the participants independently. An online survey was included and telephone interviews were conducted during the latter part of the study to increase the number of participants. Consequently, the questionnaire was administered by three means: 1) self-completed paper version (over 85%); 2) self-completed online version; and, 3) interviewer-administered telephone interview. See Appendix A.

#### *Data management and analyses*

As part of the secondary analysis, all original data were entered into a database and SAS 9.1 statistical software was used for analysis. Univariate and bivariate analysis methods were employed for descriptive analyses. Logistic regression analyses were conducted to assess the independent associations between volunteer participation and an array of predictor variables (e.g. age, sex, and level of

education). To ensure accuracy of Chinese-to-English translation for the presentation of results, the translation of key information was carried out independently by two bilingual individuals. No major inconsistencies were found.

**Results**

In total, 312 people from all three inclusion methods participated in the survey. Data collected from 289 participants (92.63%) were used in the analysis. 17.3% of the participants reported current volunteering and 34.9% of all participants reported volunteering in the past.

Slightly more females (55.0%) than males (42.6%) responded to the survey. The age distribution largely reflects the nature of the sampling scheme: when dichotomized, a slight majority (63.7%) of the participants were younger than 44 years. The Educational Portrait of Canada, 2006 Census revealed just over half (51%) of recent immigrants to Canada between 2001 and 2006 held a university degree. This was more than twice the proportion of university

degree holders among the Canadian-born population (20%) and also higher than the proportion of 28% among immigrants who arrived before 2001. Also, a high proportion (76%) of the participants reported having an undergraduate university education or higher. However, only 26.3% of the participants reported having full-time employment. Most of the participants (77.7%) were either Canadian citizens or landed immigrants. While 60% of the participants had lived in Canada less than 5 years, the average length of time spent in Canada was 5.2 years. 35.3% of the participants reported their family annual income was over \$40,000.

In summary, socio-demographic characteristics showed that volunteers in this sample were more likely to be female (54.7%), younger ( $\leq 44$ , 66.7%), educated (university or higher, 72.6%), married (67.5%), employed full-time (35.9%), of lower income ( $< \$40,000$ , 47.9%), and a Canadian citizen (46.2%). Detailed information on socio-demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Socio-demographic characteristics of the survey participants*

		participants		volunteers		non-volunteers	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex	Male	123	42.6	53	45.3	66	41.0
	Female	159	55.0	64	54.7	89	55.3
Age	34 and below	105	35.3	45	38.5	60	37.3
	35-54	113	39.1	51	43.6	58	36.1
	55 and above	66	22.8	21	17.9	38	23.6

Level of education	College or below	84	28.0	31	26.5	46	28.6
	University or above	207	71.6	85	72.6	115	71.4
Marital status	Married	208	72.0	79	67.5	119	73.9
	All others	81	28.0	38	32.5	42	26.1
Employment	Full time job	76	26.3	42	35.9	33	20.5
	Part time job	15	5.2	8	6.8	7	4.3
	Retired	46	15.9	11	9.4	29	18.0
	All others	152	52.6	56	47.8	92	57.1
Family annual income (in Canadian dollar)	\$40,000 and below	152	52.6	56	47.9	90	55.9
	\$40,000 and above	102	35.3	48	41.0	50	31.1
Canadian citizenship status	Citizen	97	33.4	54	46.2	37	23.0
	Landed immigrant	125	44.3	37	31.6	84	52.2
	Other and unknown	67	22.3	26	22.2	40	24.8
Years lived in Canada	Less than 5	175	60.6	59	50.4	112	69.6
	5 or more	111	38.4	57	48.7	48	29.8

Among total volunteers (including current and those having volunteered in the past), “self-motivation” (44.4%) was the main reason for them to start volunteering, followed by “introduced by a friend or a family member” (35.9%). “Helping others and enriching own life” (49.5%) was the most frequently stated reason for volunteering. Others cited “gaining experience for employment” and “building social network” as the reasons for volunteering. Only 18.7% of the volunteers chose “using spare time” as the reason for volunteering. The majority of all volunteers (86.6%) indicated they would continue to volunteer in the future. For non-volunteers, the leading reason cited for not volunteering was “no time” at 45.7%. 31.9% attributed “lack of relevant information” as the reason

for not volunteering. Finally, 13.0% and 4.3% reported “never thought about it” and “not interested in it”, respectively and 63.8% non-volunteers plan to volunteer at some point in the future.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize participant’s opinions toward volunteering. In general, most people agree or strongly agree volunteer experiences would increase employment opportunities (70.8%), enhance social networking (88.9%), and enrich one’s life (85.6%). Only 4.0% of all participants believed it was not worthwhile to volunteer. Most people did not regard helping friends and working overtime at their workplace as volunteering, with the corresponding percentages of 84.2% and 81.2%, respectively.

Table 2

*Self-perceived meaning towards the concept of volunteering work*

Value of		Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Volunteering experience increases employment opportunities	N	67	125	67	12	0
	%	24.7	46.1	24.7	4.4	0
Volunteering work helps social net-working	N	112	135	29	2	0
	%	40.3	48.6	10.4	0.7	0.0
Volunteering work enriches one's life	N	106	132	37	3	0
	%	38.1	47.5	13.3	1.1	0.0
It is not worth it doing volunteering work	N	6	5	49	139	75
	%	2.2	1.8	17.9	50.7	27.4

\*: Missing values were not counted in this table. Percentages were calculated according to available data only.

Table 3

*Self-perceived meaning towards the concept of volunteering work*

		N	%
Do you regard helping your friend as volunteering?	Yes	43	15.8
	No	229	84.2
Do you regard unpaid workplace overtime as volunteering?	Yes	50	18.2
	No	216	81.2

\*: Missing values were not counted in this table; percentages were calculated according to available data only.

In one open-ended question, participants were asked to define the concept of “volunteer work”. As anticipated, there was considerable variation in their responses. Table 4 lists some examples. Most of the definitions were straight-forward, such as “*helping others selflessly*”. Others defined volunteering as, “*unpaid work to help others performed in a willingly manner that is not normally done by a government through hiring people*”.

Moreover, participants regard volunteer work as “meaningful and pleasant” and it is a way to “contribute the society” and meanwhile “enrich individual experiences and life”. From these respondent’s descriptions, volunteering consists of several basic elements including, volunteering: 1) is unpaid service; 2) helps others; 3) benefits society; and, 4) is performed willingly. In summary, Chinese immigrants perceive the meaning of volunteering work as willingly

offering help to others that not only benefits others but also achieves personal fulfillment, and thereby contributing to the whole society.

Table 4

*The meaning of volunteering work as expressed in participants own words.*

Subject	Definition
1.	Un-paid work that benefits individuals and society
2	Meaningful act that contributes to society and enrich individual experiences
3	A pleasant activity that helps others and enriches individual experience.
4	An obligation to contribute society
5	Unpaid work that makes our society and individuals' life better
6	Devote one's love and skills to help those in need.
7	Unpaid work to help other performed willingly that is not normally done by a government through hiring people
8	Offering pleasure to other people through unpaid work
9	Helping others and enriching individual life, and making friends
10	Helping others selflessly
11	An unpaid activity conducted during leisure time that benefits others.
12	Willingly repay society and make friends, sense pleasure, and enrich life at the same time.

To assess how each individual factor affects volunteer participation, we used a logistic regression model, with “volunteer” as the outcome variable and sociodemographic factors as predictor variables. As shown in Table 5, the two significant predictors were marital status and years lived in Canada. Compared with participants with all other marital statuses, participants who were married were less likely to become volunteers (married:  $OR=0.422$ ,  $95\%CI$  0.192-0.932). By

comparison to participants living in Canada less than 5 years, those who had lived in Canada for 5 or more years were more likely to become volunteers ( $OR=2.424$ ,  $95\%CI$  1.224-4.108). The results of the logistic regression analyses suggest a “volunteer act” is largely a personal choice not influenced by known factors such as age, gender and level of education. In other words, anyone can be a volunteer when the time and personal and family circumstances are right.



Table 5

*Logistic regression model examining the factors associated with volunteering participation*

Variable	OR	95% CI	
		Low	High
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	1		
Female	0.932	0.527	1.649
<b>Age</b>			
34 and below	1		
35-54	1.752	0.565	5.433
55 or above	1.175	0.407	3.393
<b>Level of Education</b>			
College or lower	1		
University or higher	0.957	0.499	1.836
<b>Marital status</b>			
All others	1		
Married	0.422	0.192	0.932
<b>Employment</b>			
All others	1		
Full time	0.555	0.163	1.893
Part time	0.358	0.092	1.391
Retired	0.238	0.046	1.240
<b>Family annual income</b>			
Less than \$40,000	1		
\$40,000 or higher	1.475	0.781	2.785
<b>Years lived in Canada</b>			
Less than 5	1		
5 or more	*2.242	1.224	4.108

### Discussion

The concept of volunteering is in part based on the way people view their relationship with society. In Canada for example, volunteer activity is one of the cornerstones of civic participation and building social capital. Moreover, volunteer participation has long been viewed as an accepted measure of community vitality and cohesiveness. Giving personal time and

energy to one's community through volunteer activity has many personal and societal benefits and is the engine that sustains many charitable and non-profit organizations.

The sense of duty to consider and attend to the needs of the community has always been an integral feature of Chinese culture. Whereas in Western culture volunteering is perceived as giving freely of

one's personal time and energy (separate from paid work), in Chinese culture giving personal time and energy to the community is part of the social fabric and thus not easily separated from activities of community living. Thus formal "volunteering", in the Western sense of the word, began later in China. For example, in 1989, the first volunteering project set up to help the elderly in the community was founded in Heping District, Tianjin City (United Nations Development Program & United Nations Volunteers Program, 2011). Therefore, most Chinese people know little about the culture and norms of volunteering.

The 2007 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (CSGVP) (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009) reported immigrants were less likely to become volunteers compared with native-born Canadians, with corresponding rates of 40% and 49%, respectively. Immigrants who have been in Canada for a longer period of time tend to volunteer more hours than those who arrived more recently. Among the participants of our study, the proportions of current volunteers (17.3%) and people who have volunteered at some point in the past (34.9%) are low. As previously noted, about 60% of survey participants have lived in Canada less than 5 years and the average length of time spent in Canada was 5.2 years, so most survey participants were new immigrants. Perhaps this is one of the reasons participants reported lower rates of

volunteering. For example, according to the United States Department of Labor (2009), Caucasians continued to volunteer at a higher rate (27.9%) than African-Americans (19.1%) and Asians (18.7%). Another report in England suggested Chinese/other ethnicities volunteered informally (28%), formal volunteering (18%) and any volunteering (37%) in 2007, while the volunteer rates for Caucasians were 35%, 28% and 49%, respectively (National Statistics, 2008).

There are many reasons why people volunteer, and undoubtedly motivation plays a key role in volunteerism (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996). In the present study, self-motivated initiation was cited as the main reason (44.4%) for individuals to start volunteering. Volunteers in this study hoped to achieve three main objectives through volunteering: 1) helping others and enrich own life (49.5%), 2) gaining experience for employment (40.7%), and 3) building social networks (36.7%). The findings are inconsistent with a previous national study in which the dominant volunteers were Caucasians. In the 2007 CSGVP, a similar proportion (45%) of volunteers expressed they approached an organization on their own initiative to become involved as a volunteer. More volunteers (93%) agreed that the desire to make a contribution to their community was an important reason for their volunteering

and more participants (48%) reported that they volunteered to network or meet people. However, improving job opportunities (23%) was less frequently cited as a reason in the CSGVP study (Hall et al., 2009). The results of this study also show discrepancy with studies in other countries. A study in Australia suggested the primary reason why one first began volunteering was because “someone asked (35.4%)” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, p.31). The survey also found 56.6% of volunteers noted helping others/community was the main reason for being a volunteer; this proportion is similar to results found in this study. However, volunteers wishing to gain social contact and learn new skills/gain experience through volunteering in Australia were very low compared to this study: 22.1% and 11.0%, respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Therefore, the reasons and goals for commencing volunteering differ not only among races but also among countries.

In our survey, the main reasons for not volunteering were “no time” (46.6%) and lack of relevant information (32.1%). These findings are supported by other research. In the 2007 CSGVP, non-volunteers stated they did not have the time (68%) and lacked relevant information (24%) (Hall et al., 2009). In England (National Statistics, 2008), the barriers to formal volunteering were work commitments (59%), doing other things in their spare time (31%), looking

after children or the home (29%), and lack of awareness (15%). The former three barriers can be seen as having no time. Thus, from these studies, it can be concluded that the two major reasons preventing volunteering are the lack of time and information.

Although people view the concept and interpret the meaning of ‘volunteering’ differently, participant responses shared many common aspects. First, almost all people perceive volunteering as an unpaid activity. Second, most people believe that the concept of volunteering exists within the context of the society in question. Third, volunteering is generally believed to be mutually beneficial for both society as well as the volunteers since many people described volunteering as a way to enrich volunteers’ own lives and make them feel valued. Thus, the definitions of ‘volunteer’ offered by different researchers and populations have common components (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Hall et al., 2009; European Volunteer Centre, 2006).

According to the literature on volunteering, many researchers confirm there are significant differences in the socio-demographic characteristics between volunteers and non-volunteers. Compared with non-volunteers, volunteers tend to be married, female, employed part-time, have higher education, and higher incomes (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2008; Lie,

Baines, & Wheelock, 2009; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004; Suanet, Broese van Groenou, & Braam, 2009; Sundeen, 1990; Uslaner, 2002). However, inverse relationships between variables of sociodemographic characteristics and volunteering have been observed in other studies. Freeman (1997) found among women the proportion volunteering and the hours volunteered had a rough U-shaped relationship to hours worked. A recent survey in Canada shows the unmarried are most likely to be involved in volunteering (Vezina & Crompton, 2012). Musick and Wilson (2003) found that although the effects of education and income in Caucasian volunteers are exactly as predicted by the conventional resource theory of volunteering, among black people, there are no significant socioeconomic differences in volunteering.

In the present research, logistic regression analysis showed that not being married and living in Canada for 5 or more years were associated with increased volunteer activity. Compared with previous studies, the results of the present study partially explain the overall observed variation for the different associations between marital status among volunteers. Therefore, these findings suggest volunteering is largely a self-motivated social behaviour not dependent on sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender, and education, but may be more

dependent on the individual's ability, energy and experience.

In general, the proportions of current volunteers (17.3%) and those who have volunteered at some point in the past (34.9%) are low in comparison with the general Canadian population. Since the study sample was drawn from a number of Chinese organizations that are more likely to have volunteers, the true proportion of volunteers in the general population is likely to be lower. We believe the main contributing reasons for the low volunteering participation among the Chinese Canadian population are likely caused by cultural barriers and a lack of social assimilation. Many new immigrants have not fully adapted to Canadian culture and thus volunteer opportunities may not be pursued. Individuals who have recently immigrated to Canada may also be more focused on settlement related issues; for example, establishing themselves and their families in home, work and school settings, as opposed to devoting time to volunteer activity. Survival related activities will likely be a higher priority for new immigrants. Limited English language skills are a common barrier to mainstream volunteer participation (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009). These explanations are supported by the finding that 54% of volunteers provided service in Chinese organizations.

This study has a number of limitations. The data collected from the original study

was collected in 2005. The study did not use a population-based random probability sample and it only included a moderate sample size in Toronto. Thus, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to other Chinese immigrant populations in Canada. As noted, the true proportion of Chinese immigrant volunteers in Canada could be lower than was found by this study. However, as the study population consists of people with various backgrounds and socioeconomic characteristics, the findings are believed to have good validity. Another limitation is that this study was conducted in Chinese and the back-and-forth language translation might bring a certain degree of ambiguity. Nevertheless, the translation tasks involved a number of people in this research team. We believe potential errors associated with language translation are unlikely to threaten the overall validity of this study. Finally, due to time and financial constraints, we were unable to collect some potentially valuable information such as types of volunteer activity and how volunteering benefitted the volunteers. Similarly, we were unable to fully utilize and explore the complete data set collected for this study. While we surveyed more than 300 people in this study, we only analyzed 289 subjects and, therefore, some of the data was not processed. However, we do not believe any additional sample size contribution would distort the overall results.

In conclusion, based on a relatively representative sample of immigrants from mainland China, this study provides a comprehensive picture with respect to the pattern and characteristics associated with volunteering. The benefits associated with volunteering to the individual and society are well documented. The findings suggest there is a potential pool of volunteers that have yet to be mobilized to provide service to Canadian society. Moreover, this untapped pool of volunteers can also improve the health and social benefits associated with volunteering.

Although this study cannot offer definitive explanations for the determinants of volunteer participation, the findings offer new insights in terms of how Chinese immigrants perceive the meaning of volunteering. Several opportunities for future research arise from this current study including research into the benefits of volunteering as a means of positively integrating into Canadian society and the potential of volunteering to ameliorate the stress associated with settlement in a new country.

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## Appendix A

### *Questionnaire*

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#### Questions on Chinese immigrants volunteering

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Q1. Are you currently a volunteer? 1. Yes 2. No

Q2. Have you ever served as a volunteer? 1. Yes 2. No

Q3. If you have ever served as a volunteer,

a. How did you start?

1. self-motivated search

2. introduced by a friend or relative

3. other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

b. Why did you want to do volunteer work? (check all applicable)

1. to gain useful experience for employment;

2. increase social network and enrich personal life;

3. help others;

4. fill spare time;

5. other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

c. Where did you serve as a volunteer?

1. Chinese organization

2. other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

d. How long have you been serving as a volunteer?

\_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months \_\_\_\_\_ days

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