

# Older Chinese Americans can improve family relationships, cognition through acculturation

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Older Chinese immigrants who adjust to their new cultural environment by learning the language, following the country's media and socializing with local residents can reduce acculturation gap with their adult children and protect their cognitive function, according to a Rutgers study.

The study, published in the journal *Aging and Mental Health*, is one of the first to explore the relationship between intergenerational families, acculturation and cognitive function among older Chinese Americans.

Researchers looked 2,900 Chinese Americans over age 60 who had at least one child and who participated in the PINE Study, an epidemiological study of older Chinese Americans. They analyzed three areas of acculturation—language, media use and ethnic social relations—and how they corresponded with [episodic memory](#), working memory and processing speed, which are [cognitive abilities](#) that decline with age.

They found that those who had better English proficiency, more frequent use of American media and associated with people outside their Chinese community showed higher cognitive function.

"One potential explanation is that increasing English proficiency is associated with the learning process, which may stimulate memory and related cognitive function," said lead researcher Mengting Li, an assistant professor in Rutgers School of Nursing and a faculty member at the Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research. "English proficiency could also enhance social engagement, which may help preserve cognitive function."

According to Li, the use of U.S. media is related to better cognitive function through processing and storing the information. The knowledge they gain from U.S. media also can bridge gaps between them and the younger generation, which can decrease family conflicts.

The findings can be used to design interventions to protect cognitive function of older Chinese Americans through improving English proficiency, using and engaging in American media and enhancing social networks, particularly for those who are in high-conflict households, and help with healthy aging, Li said. The findings also might apply to other ethnic minority aging immigrants in the United States who have cultural and linguistic barriers and have conflicted intergenerational relationships resulting from acculturation gap.

"It is important for older Chinese immigrants to not lose sight of their own culture. Meanwhile, they could work toward acculturation of their new community as a way to promote healthy cognitive aging in immigration contexts," Li said. "This study only examined the role of adapting to the receiving

communities' culture in cognitive function. Future study should also look at the impact of maintaining the heritage culture on cognitive health."

**More information:** Mengting Li et al, Family type and cognitive function in older Chinese Americans: acculturation as a moderator, *Aging & Mental Health* (2021). DOI: [10.1080/13607863.2021.1926426](https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2021.1926426)

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