

**To Find the “Myself”: A Reflection on Identity, Masculinity, and Mental Health Stigma in  
Chinese Diaspora Communities**

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It was of absolutely no surprise to me that Tiwari & Wang's 2008 analysis on usage rates of mental health resources found that Asian individuals were, on average, less likely to seek out mental health support systems than white individuals. What was interesting to me, however, was the fact that Chinese individuals were found, specifically, to be even *less* likely to seek support even compared to other Asian diaspora. From my own experiences, I have never found that I had even any desire to speak out whatsoever. The classic Japanese proverb rings true in my situation: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." It was improper to speak of such things openly. To some extent, one could argue that the total lack of discussion of taboo issues such as mental health created a self-perpetuating loop; if it is not acknowledged, then it is simply not there. "It was taught to me that it only affected weak people," said Lindsay Wong about her experiences with mental health stigma from her family (Li, 2019). The same was in my case; those with psychological insecurities were simply deficient in character and motivation. There was no excuse whatsoever not to complete your responsibilities to your family. "*Do your job.*"

From my experiences as the only male child of my family, I have received particularly strict instructions regarding my behaviour and my personality. Masculinity was seen as a given; as were other gender-based obligations such as supporting the family and having children. "*Be a man.*" This protection of "manhood" seen throughout my life has been noted in the literature regarding Asian mental health (Weiss et al., 2001, as cited in Livingston et al., 2018), with discussions suggesting that the "value of preserving family reputation (i.e. saving face), protecting manhood and fulfilling moral obligations to provide for others is particularly salient among Asian men living with mental illness in Canada, contributing to an escalation in self-stigma for those who are older, immigrants and unemployed (Livingston et al., 2018)."

The perpetuation of these ideas are not just limited to outside influences; internal self-hatred and self-stigma have also been noted as significant factors for mental illnesses in Asian men (Corrigan et al., 2014, as cited in Livingston et al., 2018). Since I had already been ingrained into a community that holds such perspectives regarding mental health, these same biases prevented me from doing anything. I was weak and useless, and I thought I had understood that. Perhaps, more so than anything else, it was this inability to acknowledge myself and speak out that was the true source of my psychological pain, much more than whatever bothered me at the time. *“Those with muffled voices are no better off than those without. There was no one that could hear me.”*

The option of ending my life was very attractive, at the time. This particular path to freedom was particularly tantalizing for me, as my understanding was that there was no possibility that anywhere could have been worse than where I was and who I was. *“Is there any escape outside of the bridge?”* I related very much to Virdee’s 2020 interview of Shreya Patel, where Shreya highlighted the damaging effects of this lack of conversation on suicide and other “unspeakable” topics: “[individuals] don’t feel accepted, they will shut down, lock down, express through anger and go into a spiral.” Substance use was my eventual decision. Anything that could alter my current state of mind was good enough for me at the time, and while gambling and gaming certainly were fine methods, alcohol was a much more convenient option. *“The nectar that set me free.”*

Over the last few years, I have slowly come to the understanding that I needed to find a way to tolerate myself without the use of any escape whatsoever. As such, I did whatever I could to dedicate more time and resources towards gaining a further understanding of myself and other people (the primary factor leading me to my current area of study, psychology). While I was still quite hesitant to reach out despite the overwhelming evidence of how beneficial it

was, I had begun the process of exploration. I have described in my poetry above my struggles with my lack of identity, and my hilarious conclusion to dedicate my life to my name. However, the simple truth is there; without discussion, without communication, there will never be a development of mutual understanding. In particular, the generational and cultural gap between different immigrant generations must be acknowledged. While I believe that it will be difficult to establish intergenerational understanding, I believe that simply starting the conversation in the first place is the best thing to do. Intergenerational conversations are already taking place; online forums such as Subtle Asian Mental Health (SAMH) Facebook group promote a community of support and open discussion:

They post heart-wrenching stories such as students who feel a sense of worthlessness because they don't meet academic expectations and as young adults whose parents threaten to disown them if they move out before marriage. Some people disclose a mental health diagnosis, while others are simply looking for validation and support (Li, 2019).

Of course, limitations still exist regarding approaches towards creating a more accepting psychological health structure. While concepts such as cultural humility (Jisrawi & Arnold, 2018) have been explored in mental health literature, a culturally sensitive approach to mental health campaigns may still not be able to account for the specific needs of Asian diaspora communities (Li, 2019). The widespread implementation of improvements in mental health infrastructure will likely require a systems-level paradigm shift that may require decades of education and cultural advancements to change. However, as long as the acknowledgement of mental wellbeing as a priority exists, there will be strides taken to build and develop upon it.

A quick final note; my perspectives have been developed from my personal experiences and education. My reflections and experiences may not be fully generalizable to all individuals, and as such some of my suggestions may not be appropriate in all circumstances. I wanted to take this opportunity to acknowledge the importance of considering the individual contexts of each person-situation interaction.

## References

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