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Falling Through the Cracks: Structural Positioning and Professional Agency among Chinese Immigrant Social Work Professionals in the United States

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Abstract. Chinese immigrant social work professionals occupy an ambiguous structural position within the U.S. social work profession. Their linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge, and connections to immigrant communities can create employment opportunities, yet these capacities do not necessarily translate into equitable compensation, career mobility, or professional authority. Drawing on four semi-structured interviews with Chinese immigrant professionals educated in U.S. social work programs, this qualitative study examines how immigration status, racialization, language, and organizational context shape the professional experiences of participants. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes: unequal career mobility, racialized and linguistic labor, conditional racial belonging, bicultural clinical reflexivity, and the construction of professional and community support. Findings suggest that participants did not experience these structural conditions uniformly. Immigration dependency was particularly consequential for one participant, whereas others emphasized language, supervision, representation, and community networks. Participants navigated these structural constraints through reflective practice, professional networking, mentorship, community education, and organizational leadership. This article argues that Asian representation must be accompanied by material equity, institutional support, and meaningful access to professional authority.

Keywords: Chinese immigrant social workers, racialization, bilingual labor, racial triangulation, cultural reflexivity

1. Introduction

"Sometimes we are allies to both Black and White communities—a buffer zone in between—but other times, we become the common enemy of both." That remark, offered by one study participant, captures how ambiguously Asian immigrant social workers are positioned in the United States. Across community mental health clinics, hospitals, schools, labor unions, and immigrant-serving organizations, these professionals serve a wide range of clients; employers often hire them precisely because they are bilingual and familiar with immigrant communities. Yet what their work actually involves, and what they experience professionally, has received little recognition. Within the U.S. social work workforce, Asians make up only a small share, and scholarship has tended to lump their

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experiences together or miss the finer differences tied to immigration histories, language proficiency, ethnic background, and organizational setting. Studies of Asian American social workers have documented lives squeezed between the model-minority and perpetual-foreigner stereotypes, as well as organizational barriers bearing on their practice and advocacy efforts [1]. Two questions anchor this study. First, how do immigration status, racialization, language, and organizational context shape the career opportunities, clinical practices, and sense of professional belonging of Chinese immigrant social work professionals in the United States? Second, how do these professionals respond to such structural conditions, both individually and collectively?

The argument advanced here is that the U.S. social work profession values Chinese immigrant professionals only conditionally. Bilingual skills, cultural knowledge, and close ties to immigrant communities ease their entry into employment and strengthen service delivery. The very same attributes, however, can steer them toward under-resourced community-based organizations, pile on labor that goes unpaid and unrecognized, and collide with pervasive assumptions about Asian workers' diligence, compliance, inherent foreignness, and limited English proficiency. Prior research bears this out: bilingual social workers routinely absorb extra translation and service-related duties while neither their workload nor their compensation is adjusted [2].

Not every participant felt these structural conditions in the same way. In one case, employer-sponsored immigration status sharply limited occupational mobility and bargaining power. Participants who had lived in the United States longer, or who had migrated through different pathways, raised different concerns: language proficiency, access to professional networks, organizational representation, and supervisory support. What emerges, then, is a map of differentiated structural positioning rather than a single universal story of immigrant precarity.

None of the participants simply absorbed these structural constraints. Each worked out bicultural ways of practicing clinically, pursued formal supervision and personal therapy, mentored early-career professionals, built peer support networks, and took part in community education and organizational leadership. Such actions show real professional agency, but they cannot replace broader structural reform. Resilience, however considerable, is no substitute for equitable compensation, ethical immigration sponsorship, adequate supervisory support, or transparent promotion pathways.

Three contributions follow from this study. Empirically, it records the lived experiences of a group of immigrant professionals that research has largely passed over. Conceptually, it puts intersectionality in conversation with racial triangulation, treating immigration governance and language hierarchies as central mechanisms of labor market positioning. Practically, it points to organizational measures that agencies can actually take to support immigrant and bilingual practitioners. The conceptual framework and methodology come next, after which an integrated findings and discussion section is organized around structural constraints and around individual and collective forms of agency.

2. Background and conceptual framework

2.1. The racialized political economy of social work

Social work is widely framed as a helping profession dedicated to advancing social justice, yet it also functions as a stratified labor market. Professionals work within agencies that distribute salaries, caseloads, supervisory support, benefits, and advancement opportunities unevenly. Race and immigration status therefore shape not only interpersonal treatment in the workplace, but also where professionals enter the field and what career opportunities become available to them over

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time. Early research on Asian American social workers identified widespread concerns about organizational fairness, glass ceiling effects, ethnic discrimination, and limited career prospects [3, 4]. In a recent study of 17 Asian American social workers, Bersamira et al. found that participants navigated persistent tension between being framed as successful, self-sufficient "model minorities" and being perceived as perpetual foreigners [1]. Inside organizations, such stereotypes pushed these workers toward longer hours, fewer mistakes, swallowed disagreement, and emotional distress handled without institutional backing. The same narrative hid anti-Asian racism, and disparities within Asian American communities themselves, from the view of organizational leadership. And in advocacy contexts, the model-minority story has made it harder to show that Asian American communities, too, carry unmet needs that merit targeted resources and support.

Viewed through a racialized political economy lens, the analytical question moves away from whether employers openly hold prejudicial attitudes and toward how organizations value—and reward—employee skills such as bilingualism, cultural knowledge, flexibility, and work ethic. An employee, for instance, may be prized for drawing in clients or shouldering extra responsibilities while still earning lower compensation and sitting outside core decision-making. Formal recognition of diversity, in other words, need not come with an equitable distribution of resources, authority, or professional power.

2.2. Intersectionality and racial triangulation

Intersectionality describes how social positions and systems of inequality work in combination, not as independent, isolated forces. Crenshaw showed early on that treating race and gender as mutually exclusive categories limits what analysis can see [5]. Read through this lens, the present study assumes that race, immigration status, language proficiency, gender, and professional role can combine to produce experiences that no single analytical category fully captures.

Nevertheless, intersectionality alone cannot fully account for participants' descriptions of being positioned between Black and White populations in the racial hierarchy. Kim's framework of racial triangulation posits that Asian Americans have historically been racially positioned through two interconnected processes [6]. They may be favorably compared to Black Americans through model-minority narratives, while simultaneously being constructed as inherently foreign and excluded from full civic and national belonging. Asian racial positioning is therefore fundamentally relational and unstable, rather than simply occupying an intermediate space between White privilege and Black oppression.

2.3. Immigration governance

Immigration status is often treated as a legal or demographic characteristic. In the context of employment, however, it can also structure enduring relationships of dependency between workers and employers. For workers who require H-1B visa sponsorship, an employer must file a petition on the prospective employee's behalf [7]. This legal linkage between immigration authorization and employment can therefore severely constrain workers' ability to change employers, negotiate for better compensation, or challenge unfair workplace practices.

Migration may also influence professional opportunity through less formal processes. Immigrants may lack family members already in the profession, familiarity with U.S. hiring practices, or established professional networks that provide information about internships and better-resourced employers. Legal immigration status and social capital must therefore be considered together when examining career mobility.

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2.4. From cultural competence to cultural reflexivity

Bilingual and bicultural professionals are frequently assumed to be naturally competent to serve clients from similar ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. Communication and trust benefit when language and cultural background are shared. Such overlap rarely removes cultural difference altogether, yet bilingual workers still find themselves expected—without extra training or pay—to translate documents, interpret for monolingual colleagues, attract clients, and handle culturally complex cases [2]. Cultural humility offers a different framing: culture is not a static body of knowledge that professionals simply master and apply. In Tervalon and Murray-García's definition, cultural humility is a continuing process of self-evaluation, attention to power imbalances, and nonpaternalistic relating [8]. The related term cultural reflexivity is used here to capture how participants critically examined the way their own cultural socialization and experiences informed their clinical judgment and practice.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and participants

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine how Chinese immigrant social work professionals understood their professional trajectories and workplace experiences. Because the study centered on how participants subjectively interpreted immigration, race, language, culture, and professional belonging—rather than on how often predetermined experiences occurred—qualitative interviews fit the purpose.

Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. To be included, a participant had to have immigrated to the United States from a Chinese-speaking society and hold a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree from a U.S. institution. Interviews were conducted with six participants, four of whom formed the final analytical sample. Every participant had completed MSW training. One, however, clarified that his current role in union-based advocacy and leadership is not formally classified as a social work position. He stayed in the sample: his social work education remained relevant to his career, and his account offered insight into immigrant advocacy, leadership, and professional representation. Professional experience across the group spanned roughly a decade to more than two decades. Among them were roles in psychotherapy, community mental health, child and family services, aging services, immigrant advocacy, labor organizing, program management, community education, and administration. Several had moved between multiple roles and organizational settings. Exact years of U.S. residence, specific employers, educational institutions, and leadership titles are deliberately kept unlinked to individual quotations, in the interest of participant confidentiality.

3.2. Data collection

Every semi-structured interview took place between August 21 and September 1, 2025. Topics in the interview guide covered educational and migration backgrounds, what drew each person into social work, the main professional challenges they had met, cultural differences, experiences of racialization, the professional and personal support available to them, perceptions of gender in the profession, and advice for early-career immigrant professionals. Each participant chose the language of the interview—English, Mandarin Chinese, or a mix of the two. Code-switching between Mandarin and English was common, especially around immigration status, clinical concepts, and

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other terminology learned in U.S. professional contexts. Before each interview began, the purpose of the study, the voluntary basis of participation, and every confidentiality procedure were explained. All names and identifying organizational details were redacted during analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

Analysis of the interview data followed reflexive thematic analysis, an approach that treats the researcher as an active participant in interpretation [9]. Theoretically flexible, thematic analysis suits a small qualitative sample in which both similarities and differences matter. The work moved through repeated readings of transcripts, initial inductive coding, memo writing, cross-case comparison, and the iterative development and revision of themes. Coding was mainly inductive, anchored in participants' own language and stated concerns, while a set of sensitizing concepts—inclusion of intersectionality, racial triangulation, immigration governance, racialized labor, cultural reflexivity, and social capital—informed the process. Themes were treated as analytical interpretations built through engagement with the transcripts, not as pre-existing, objectively defined categories.

Among the early codes were employer sponsorship, restricted occupational mobility, low-wage community work, bilingual advantage, language insecurity, Asian work ethic stereotypes, conditional racial positioning, cultural conflict, mandatory reporting, supervisory support, personal therapy, network building, professional representation, and community education. Five overarching themes eventually organized these codes: (1) immigration status and unequal career mobility; (2) racialized and linguistic labor; (3) conditional belonging within a Black–White racial framework; (4) bicultural reflexivity in clinical practice; and (5) professional and community infrastructures of support.

3.4. Translation, reflexivity, and ethics

The researcher translated Chinese-language excerpts into English and lightly edited them for readability, removing redundant repetition and filler words. At every stage of translation and analysis, preserving conceptual meaning and nuance came first. Excerpts originally delivered in English likewise received light editing for clarity where needed, with their substantive meaning untouched.

The researcher, a Chinese international student holding an MSW degree, overlapped with participants in language, education, and migration experience. That shared position helped build rapport and let participants speak more openly about culturally specific experiences. The same identity, though, heightened the risk of taking unstated agreement for granted or slipping the researcher's own views into leading questions. Reflexive memoing served to separate participants' accounts from interviewer assumptions and to flag moments when a participant disagreed with, qualified, or redirected a question.

To protect anonymity, each participant received a unique numerical identifier. Where specific employers, educational institutions, geographic details, and leadership positions might, in combination, identify an individual participant, they were left out of the analysis. The precaution mattered most for senior professionals and for participants speaking about immigration sponsorship, workplace discrimination, or organizational conflict. No claim of statistical representativeness is made; the aim is an interpretive account of how structural positioning and professional agency manifest within this small, heterogeneous sample of immigrant professionals.

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4. Findings and discussion: structural positioning and agency

Participants' reflections reveal that Chinese immigrant social work professionals occupy neither a uniformly disadvantaged nor a uniformly privileged position in the U.S. social work field. Their experiences varied significantly depending on their individual backgrounds and circumstances. Key factors shaping these differences included immigration circumstances, English language proficiency, length of U.S. residence, professional sector, and access to organizational support. Overall, participants' accounts coalesced around two core dimensions: structural positioning in the labor market, and personal and collective coping strategies.

4.1. Immigration status and unequal career mobility

Immigration status emerged as the most salient structural constraint in Participant 1's account. As the youngest participant in the sample, this participant referenced immigration status more frequently than any other concern. It directly shaped every stage of their career trajectory. Following graduation, the participant encountered many employers with little to no experience sponsoring H-1B visas. The participant also perceived that their immigration status led some organizations to reject their job applications outright. The community mental health clinic that eventually hired the participant had limited experience sponsoring Chinese immigrant employees, requiring the participant to independently source and cover the cost of legal immigration assistance.

This dependence continued beyond the initial job search. Participant 1 remained with the organization for approximately a decade, partly because of uncertainty about whether another employer would offer sponsorship: "I stayed at that mental health clinic for ten years because I felt that perhaps no other organization would sponsor me. Immigration status was always a source of pressure. Sometimes the pressure was stronger and sometimes weaker, but it was always there."

The participant contrasted this trajectory with that of colleagues who did not face similar immigration restrictions—including U.S. citizens and second-generation immigrants. Because the participant remained dependent on their employer for visa sponsorship, a portion of the revenue generated through their clinical sessions was retained by the organization. "I have always felt that I am falling behind economically," the participant explained.

Participant 1's experience illustrates how immigration governance can readily function as a form of labor governance. The employer's role extended far beyond providing employment, as continued employment was directly tied to the participant's ability to maintain legal immigration status and pursue permanent residency. As a result, the participant's ability to negotiate higher compensation, leave an unsatisfactory workplace, or establish an independent private practice was severely constrained.

Notably, immigration dependency should not be framed as a universal experience across the sample. Across the interviews, employer sponsorship was a central concern for Participant 1 but far less prominent in the accounts of the other interviews. Other participants, who had resided in the United States for longer periods or migrated through different immigration pathways, did not identify visa sponsorship as their primary career barrier. For them, the consequences of migration manifested primarily through language barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. professional norms, and limited access to established professional networks.

Participant 1 described arriving in the United States without relatives or close contacts who understood the social work field or psychotherapy profession. As a result, they secured entry-level opportunities through formal job applications rather than through personal or professional connections. The participant observed that U.S.-born professionals often received informal guidance

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from family members or acquaintances already working in the field, whereas immigrant professionals frequently had to acquire this knowledge independently through trial and error.

The intersection of precarious immigration status and limited social capital can therefore channel immigrant professionals into organizations that are accessible to them but comparatively under-resourced. Bilingual professionals are in high demand at community nonprofit organizations, which also tend to understand the needs of immigrant clients well; participants nonetheless saw these organizations as paying less than hospitals and private practice settings. Nonprofit status alone does not explain the pay gap, since many hospitals are classified as nonprofit institutions too. The meaningful contrast lies between community-based human service organizations and better-resourced settings such as hospitals, government agencies, and select private practices. How large that gap is becomes clear in the wage data: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show healthcare social workers in general medical and surgical hospitals averaging $76,520 a year in 2023, against $55,590 for those in individual and family services [10]. Participants' accounts, together with existing research, point to several mechanisms behind this persistent disparity. One mechanism is fiscal: community-based organizations depend heavily on government contracts whose funding often fails to cover the full costs of organizational operations. At the same time, government payments are frequently delayed while contract amounts remain fixed, which pushes still more financial risk onto frontline service providers. A second constraint concerns revenue: community-based organizations are limited in how much revenue they can generate from the populations they serve. These organizations exist, by mission and design, to serve low-income local communities—the same reason they are more likely to hire bilingual social work professionals who speak the languages of community members. That community-focused mission, however, limits how much they can screen clients by ability to pay, and given the nature of human services, their clients frequently carry substantial, complex needs while unable to afford high fees. A third mechanism: employees of community-based organizations generally fall outside civil service pay structures and collective bargaining agreements—the very arrangements that lift compensation for government employees performing equivalent roles [11-13]. Participants' accounts line up with Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) data as well. In CSWE's analysis of the 2018 Survey of Social Work Graduates, Asian and Pacific Islander respondents were more often employed in nonprofit organizations than MSW respondents overall (48% versus 31%) and more often reported difficulty finding a satisfactory social work position (65% versus 49%) [14].

None of this implies that community-based employment is inherently undesirable. Meaningful relationships, professional growth opportunities, and a sense of purpose drew genuine praise from several participants in immigrant-serving organizations. Trouble starts when immigration dependency and unequal access to professional networks make lower-paid community work less a freely chosen vocational commitment than a constrained entry point into the profession.

4.2. Racialized and linguistic labor: opportunity and exploitation

Participants consistently described language as both a valuable professional resource and a significant source of vulnerability. Chinese proficiency let them communicate effectively with Chinese-speaking clients, grasp the nuances of migration experiences, and gain employment in organizations serving Chinese immigrant communities. Participant 2, for one, used their own immigrant experience and Chinese language ability to support immigrant workers who previously had limited access to linguistically appropriate services. The participant explained: "When I first came to the United States, I did not speak English. I understand the struggles they go through, so I

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feel more obligated to help fellow immigrants with needs that I could not address for myself at that time."

Bilingual ability was what first opened the path to an MSW degree for Participant 4. A community advertisement for a scholarship program specifically recruiting bilingual MSW students introduced her to the profession. She spoke with a faculty member, completed the university's standard admissions process, and enrolled in the MSW program with full scholarship support. Over a long career since, that same bilingual capacity kept generating opportunities in clinical practice and organizational leadership alike. Shared language, participants also noted, facilitated trust and helped them explain complex institutional systems in culturally recognizable terms.

Material reward, participants made clear, does not necessarily keep pace with bilingual proficiency. Participant 1 found that thinking and practicing across two languages deepened clinical understanding, yet that same ability stayed "difficult to translate directly into a financial advantage." The pattern is well documented in prior research: bilingual social workers shoulder additional interpreting, translation, and relationship-building work, while their workloads and compensation remain comparable to those of monolingual colleagues [2].

A bilingual professional can also find the labor market narrowing around them. Chinese language skills, Participant 3 explained, carry high value in organizations serving Chinese populations yet matter far less in settings where clients primarily speak other languages. When job applications failed, the participant rarely read discrimination into the outcome; more often, they saw a mismatch between an organization's client population and their own linguistic strengths. Such linguistic matching feeds occupational sorting as well, with the result that bilingual Chinese professionals become disproportionately concentrated in comparatively low-paid community organizations.

The "bilingual advantage" has a flip side, though: English is not the first language of Chinese immigrant social work professionals. Workplaces where English is the primary language of practice and administration therefore present a distinct set of professional challenges. One client, Participant 3 recalled, ended treatment with the words, "You do not speak English very well. I do not want to talk to you anymore." However personally the participant tried not to take the comment, both they and their supervisor saw it as discriminatory. Language proficiency cut both ways for Participant 4 in professional settings as well. Chinese fluency opened opportunities where bilingual services were required, yet working in English as a second language sometimes affected the speed and ease of professional communication. Judgments of language fluency often mediate perceptions of professional authority. A professional may hold every required training and clinical skill and still leave hiring committees uneasy about their English language proficiency.

Racialization also operated through seemingly positive stereotypes about Asian workers. Participant 1 described a former organizational leader who attributed the participant's heavy caseload to inherent Chinese diligence: "He would say, 'You are Chinese, and Chinese people are diligent.' It was a deeply racist comment. On the one hand, he hired many Chinese graduates who needed sponsorship. On the other hand, part of his motivation was that Chinese workers could bring in more clients, work hard, and create the greatest benefit for him."

This dynamic illustrates what can be understood as a model-minority bargain: conditional access to opportunity is offered alongside unspoken expectations of compliance, high productivity, and limited resistance. Bersamira et al. similarly found that Asian American social workers associated model-minority stereotypes with heightened workplace pressure and assumptions that they could take on additional work without complaint [1].

Participant 4 partly echoed the perception that Chinese employees tend to work beyond formal hours, while their non-Chinese colleagues strictly protect personal time and work-life boundaries. In

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Chinese cultural contexts, voluntarily working overtime is often viewed as a sign of professional commitment and dedication. However, this does not mean that all Chinese workers accept this cultural norm, that cultural expectations should be translated into institutional demands, or that working excessive hours should be treated as a standard professional expectation.

4.3. Conditional belonging and racial triangulation

Participants did not describe a single, fixed Asian racial position in the U.S. context. What connected their diverse perspectives was a shared sense that Asian identity is recognized conditionally, and often interpreted only in relation to Blackness and Whiteness. White people may view Asians as just another racial minority group, while Black people may perceive Asians as "less-white white people" who enjoy relative racial privilege. Like the bat in Aesop's fable, Asian people are left perpetually uncertain whether they belong with the birds or the beasts.

Participant 1 articulated this problem most directly: "The greatest consequence is that we cannot exist through our own identity. Our existence is defined in relation to Black and White people rather than through who we are. That is why we feel invisible." Other participants framed this intermediate racial position in more positive terms. Participant 3 suggested that being neither White nor Black could make Asian professionals appear approachable to clients from diverse racial backgrounds. This participant characterized Asian professionals as generally perceived as friendly and nonthreatening. Rather than accepting this description as an inherent characteristic of Asian people, it is more analytically useful to frame it as another manifestation of the model minority bargain discussed above [1]. Participant 4 emphasized that Asian invisibility in organizations also reflected limited institutional voice and representation. The participant argued that Asian communities' needs are often overlooked when community members do not formally report them or advocate for targeted resources. This participant did not deny the existence of structural discrimination, but placed greater emphasis on individual and collective agency: "If you have no voice and no data showing that there is a need, people can easily ignore you. We should make our voices heard."

4.4. From cultural difference to bicultural reflexivity

Participants initially encountered significant tensions between cultural expectations learned in Chinese social contexts and the professional frameworks taught in U.S. social work programs.

Participant 3 described how Chinese social work students may initially find it difficult to report suspected child abuse or neglect, because state intervention can feel like "disrupting the family" unit. In Chinese cultural contexts, family matters are often regarded as a largely private domain, and outsiders are generally reluctant to intervene in how parents raise or discipline their children. Over time, the participant came to frame mandatory reporting as a mechanism to prevent greater harm to children, rather than as an attempt to punish parents.

Participant 1 provided a clear example of this process of bicultural transformation. Early in their clinical training, this participant brought deeply held achievement-oriented expectations to their work with children: "I believed that raising children meant encouraging them to study, earn good grades, and attend a good university. During my early internship, I experienced a conflict between my cultural emphasis on education and the children's actual mental health needs." Sustained personal reflection and accumulating professional experience gradually sharpened the participant's awareness of how personal cultural formation shaped clinical judgment. In later practice with Asian and Asian American clients, the emphasis shifted toward helping clients examine how collective

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cultural expectations had formed their identities, and toward values they could experience as authentically their own.

Clinically, bicultural experience also gave participants a distinctive interpretive resource. They compared, questioned, and adapted professional knowledge from both cultural contexts, treating neither framework as universally correct or superior. Knowing both Chinese and U.S. cultures allowed some participants to interpret clients' experiences from multiple, nuanced perspectives. A client's difficulty setting boundaries with parents, for example, could be read not only as a sign of limited autonomy but as an expression of care and filial piety. Pushing that client flatly to enforce firm boundaries could then risk damaging family bonds that mattered deeply. Parental pressure over academic achievement may likewise strain a child's mental health, yet it can simultaneously reflect immigrant parents' deep concerns about economic security and intergenerational upward mobility.

Taken as a whole, this ongoing bicultural reflection deepens Chinese immigrant social work professionals' clinical empathy and strengthens their ability to connect meaningfully with clients. Instead of a paternalistic "I know what is best for you" attitude, they offer practical, culturally relevant guidance grounded in respect for clients' lived experiences.

4.5. Building professional and community infrastructures of support

Established professional networks were unevenly available to participants, so support had to be developed intentionally. For Participant 1, personal therapy and consultation were the primary forms of support. Peer support groups and educational activities for Asian colleagues were this participant's own initiative, and the supportive professional culture they fostered persisted even after the participant left the organization. Clinical supervision was the support Participant 3 singled out as most critical during the transition from student to professional: "My first supervisor helped me complete the transition from student to full-time work. He helped me understand why I was doing the work and helped me avoid early discomfort and burnout."

Support, for Participant 4, operated on a broader, community-wide scale. Outreach efforts drew help from community partners; resources and promotion opportunities came from organizational leaders; community education and policy advocacy initiatives drew backing from elected officials. Now advanced into senior leadership, this participant frames community building as a core social work responsibility rather than an activity separate from professional practice.

Professional networking ran through every interview, surfacing both as an individual career advancement strategy and as a collective response to systemic underrepresentation. Advice to early-career immigrant professionals was to reach out to senior colleagues proactively, request support when needed, utilize community resources, and drop the assumption that every problem must be solved independently. Participant 2 encouraged immigrant professionals "not to be afraid to ask questions" and to take proactive action rather than waiting passively for opportunities to arise. Actively seeking help and intentionally building supportive professional networks carried the same emphasis from Participant 1.

5. Conclusion

What this study lays bare is the conditionally valued position Chinese immigrant social work professionals hold within the U.S. social work profession. Bilingual competencies, cultural knowledge, and embedded relationships with immigrant communities enhance service delivery and create employment opportunities. Those same capacities, though, can also channel professionals into under-resourced sectors, generate significant uncompensated labor, and reinforce unreasonable

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expectations of diligence and compliance. Immigration dependency, language hierarchies, and the dynamics of racial triangulation each serve to intensify these structural conditions. Against these external pressures, participants responded through bicultural reflexivity and by building professional and community infrastructures of mutual support. Such adaptive strategies make clear that immigrant professionals are not passive subjects of structural inequality.

Individual resilience and community commitment, for all their value, cannot substitute for institutional accountability and structural change. Three key areas for organizational action and reform emerge from the findings. Agencies offering immigration sponsorship come first: sponsorship procedures should be transparent, accurate information about legal rights and responsibilities should be provided, and immigration dependency should never be used to suppress worker mobility or bargaining power. Sponsorship is an ethical employment practice, not an informal favor for which workers are expected to accept below-market compensation or excessive workloads.

The second area is bilingual and bicultural labor, which organizations should formally recognize —and remunerate. Recognition with substance would mean salary differentials targeted at these skills, workload allocations adjusted to reflect them, and hard limits on informal translation and cultural brokerage duties. Where the additional labor of bilingual employees goes uncompensated, what follows is symbolic diversity; material equity in the workplace never arrives.

The last area concerns diversity initiatives: numerical representation alone is not enough. Asian professionals need meaningful opportunities to define community concerns, participate in core decision-making processes, and develop collective advocacy agendas. Representation without real authority may raise visibility, but it leaves existing organizational inequalities fundamentally intact.

Treating Asian immigrant professionals as tokens of diversity, or as convenient bridges to immigrant client populations, is a practice social work organizations must move beyond. Only with ethical sponsorship practices, equitable pay, compensated bilingual labor, and transparent leadership pathways can these professionals do more than be present in the field—they can fully belong and help shape the future of the social work profession.

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