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Historical roots of depressive symptoms in older adults: Gam Saan songs

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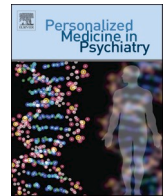
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## Historical roots of depressive symptoms in older adults: Gam Saan songs

Dear editor,

We read with enthusiasm the recent study by Chen et al. [1] on predictive symptoms of late-life depression (LLD), identified by utilizing a longitudinal network analysis. Their finding that subjective experiences such as, “Everything was an effort,” “Felt depressed,” and “Felt lonely” were predictive of the future development of other depressive symptoms is a powerful illustration of the core psychosocial mechanisms driving LLD. It confirms what many of us see in clinical practice, but it also tracks perfectly with the historical record of the Chinese community.

We suggest that these prodromal influential symptoms have deep historical and cultural antecedents within this community, for example the Chinese diaspora deeply affected by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States. As such, it warrants greater consideration in the cultural and historical formulation of LLD risk. When we look at the Gam Saan (Gold Mountain) songs, the folk lyrics written by early Chinese migrants to California, we see these exact same three themes playing out over a century ago [4]. These weren’t just lyrics and songs; they were a record of collective mental health of Chinese migrants who faced an “abnormal existence” defined by isolation and hardship.

The lyrics’ central themes, such as the lamentations of loneliness (due to family separation and the bachelor society), the profound effort yet disappointment due to racial discrimination and failed Gam Saan dreams turning into nightmares/insomnia (e.g., “A hero loses his prestige” and are “Deprived of their spirits and prowess”), and pervasive sadness (i.e., felt depressed) over the hardships in a hostile new land, demonstrate that these specific symptoms are not arbitrary modern risk factors. They represent a historically embedded profile of psychological distress within this cultural group.

Furthermore, this historical resource has shown clinical utility in addressing a common LLD symptom that frequently co-occurs with the phenomenology identified by Chen et al. [1]: insomnia. The collective psychological burdens expressed in these songs have led to further consideration of culturally appropriate psychoeducational tools for older Chinese Americans [2,3]. The shared emotional narrative provides a powerful, culture-specific tool for connecting with older Chinese adults, validating their ancestral trauma, and addressing the very same central depressive symptoms identified by Chen et al. [1]. Clinicians are already starting to use this history to help our patients.

The network analysis gives us the “what,” but these Gam Saan Songs provided us a historical window into these affects. Recognizing the cultural and historical embedding of “Everything was an effort,” “Felt depressed,” and “Felt lonely” may enhance tailored interventions for LLD, particularly by leveraging culturally familiar mechanisms for solidarity, as these songs themselves once provided.

### Author contribution statement

All authors participated and approved the draft.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Benjamin K.P. Woo:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Jamie O.P. Chung:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

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### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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