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Finding ways to bring aging immigrants into mainstream social and political life

Edmonton – Age may just be a number, but as immigrant Canadians grow older MacEwan University’s Dr. Hongmei Tong in the Bachelor of Social Work program says we need to look at how we provide services for older people.

“I’m interviewing and conducting focus groups with Asian immigrants – the largest group of immigrants to Canada,” said Tong. “I’ll be researching what Edmontonians originally from China, India and the Philippines think about civic participation, the barriers they face getting involved in their communities, and how their unique historical, cultural, political and societal backgrounds influence how they participate.”

Tong received a $172,853 funding grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Grant to look at how policy makers, service providers and communities can support aging immigrants to engage in mainstream social and political life.

“I’ve interviewed more than 100 elderly immigrants,” added Tong. “One person from China told me about feeling isolated in the city, she couldn’t speak English and she struggled to access services, and it really affected her health. She wanted to contribute, but she felt vulnerable and alone.”

The issue and effects of social exclusion are clear so Tong is looking for ways to help seniors integrate socially into the communities they live. “Our society—and many others—are facing the reality of increasingly aging populations,” say Tong. “It’s a demanding issue because the changes connected to aging aren’t just biological, they are also psychological. We need to understand those things and what they mean for our society, and how we can provide better services to address them.”

Ultimately, Tong wants to identify culturally appropriate strategies and approaches that can be used to make easier for older adults to get involved in their communities.

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