Becoming and Being Adoptee: Chinese Adoptee’s Narratives

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1. Adoption Trajectories

An Introduction

I became interested in studying adoptees over the course of my first two years in college, as several factors, both academic and personal, coalesced. Studying adoption is important to me because I am a transnational/transracial adoptee myself and identify as such. My positionality informs my research. I have found that being an adoptee studying other adoptees is a strength, it has given me access to communities and stories to which another researcher may not readily access, and it has provided a generous and critical perspective because similar systems and experiences led to my parents’ adoption of from Guatemala in the mid 1990s. This vantage point has also given me the privilege to recognize gaps in the literature.

As I began to engage with my special major in Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) and dive into the works on adoption I noticed a disjointedness between the field’s claims of the transracial adoptee experience and the literature on transracial adoptees. CMRS scholars actively recognize the transracial adoptee experience as a “mixed race” experience, whereas scholars of adoption and adoptees themselves rarely understand these experiences as similar or connected (G. Reginald et al. 2010). I found that Asian-American literature and scholarship rarely focuses on the transracial Asian adoptee experience, though scholars have recently challenged the field to do so (Eng 2014). I originally intended to lay bare these disparate perspectives with the hopes of revealing a way to reconcile the Chinese adoptees’ identities and the claims made by CMRS and Asian-American Studies on them, but ultimately found that my data spoke predominately to adoptees’ experiences of being Othered by White communities.
One of my main interests is in the study of adoptees, as opposed to the study of adoption. Though the two are closely related, my study on adoptees centers their experiences, whereas studies of adoption may focus on other aspects such as the policies and systems that create and propagate international adoption or perspectives of adoptive parents. In fact, the dominant discourses on adoption have traditionally focused on the act of adoption itself, the adoptee’s transfer from birth country to adoptive country, from birth family to adoptive family, as well as a focus on the voices of adoptive parents speaking about adoption. This is evidenced by the sheer number of scholars who study Chinese adoption who are also mothers of Chinese adoptees (Park 2014; Dorow 2006a; Dorow 2006b; Louie 2015; Volkman 2005). This perspective has its place and may even strongly critique adoption as a system overall. Interestingly, when this literature is written by adoptive parents it is informed by their positionality as parents. This thesis sets out to understand how the adoptee understands their own experience without this frame. Given my identity as an adoptee, I felt that I was well positioned to seek out the experiences of other adoptees and share their stories in the coming chapters.

A Note on Terms

Throughout this work I will use the terms transracial and transnational adoptee interchangeably, because the Chinese adoptees that I interviewed fall into both of these categories. A transracial adoptee refers to an individual who is a different race than the guardians who raised her. The term, and identity, transracial adoptee (TRA) has existed in the literature on adoptees for over 50 years (Herman 2012). The last three years have frequently seen controversy around the term, beginning with Rachel Dolezal’s capture of the nation’s racial imaginary that continues to this day (See the new Netflix Original: The Rachel Divide. Mahdawi 2018). Popular
media has run with the term transracial, appropriating it from the adoption community. Any use of the term outside of its original intent to describe the experience of adoptees is at best uninformed and at worst malicious. Either way, the popular use of the term transracial, that effaces its historical meaning, is detrimental to the transracial adoptee community and their use and claim of the term. (For further discussion on transracial adoptee’s view on the appropriation of the term transracial see Andy Marra’s open letter (Marra 2015). A number of transracial adoptee activists and advocates have signed onto this piece). A transnational adoptee refers to an individual who is born in one country and adopted and raised in a different country. Although at times I will use international adoptee interchangeably with transnational adoptee, I will not use interracial adoptee in place of transracial adoptee, because the use of transracial is both a political claim to the term and a reclaiming of the term appropriated by the popular press. I will not use the term intercountry adoptee, synonymous with both international and transnational adoptee as this is not the term that has appeared in the literature with which I have engaged.

It is tempting to conflate the transnational and transracial adoptee identities at times, but a differentiation is necessary when discussing the heterogeneity of adoptee experiences. Take for example a Russian adoptee being raised by White parents in the United States, this transnational adoptee will have a very different experience than the transnational adoptee adopted from Ethiopia, or El Salvador, or Korea, raised by White parents in Italy. The Chinese adoptees I interviewed were all adopted from a different country than they were raised in and understood to be a different race in the American context than the parents who raised them. Thus, they hold both a transnational and transracial experience, despite these being separate phenomena.

Throughout this work I have also intentionally chosen to capitalize both the B in Black when describing African Americans as well as the W in White when describing White or
European Americans. I have done this intentionally to prioritize the socially constructed but felt and lived realities of these groups of peoples. It is particularly important to intentionally recognize and state the existence of a White race because Whiteness is constructed as the norm, that which we racialize others relative to. For a long time, in most fields of study, Whiteness has slipped from under the critical, researching, eye because it has operated from the privileged position as norm and thus been rendered invisible. My thinking on the capitalization of the W in White has been informed by Gary Okihiro’s work Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation and a continuing conversation around Critical Whiteness Studies (Okihiro 2016).

The majority of the time when I use the term parent without a modifier I will be referring to the adoptive parents. Anytime that I do address an adoptee’s birth parents I will explicitly differentiate this.

Adoption Heterogeneity

I want to lift up the reality that adoption can be many things to the many actors involved in and affected by it; this is the heterogeneity of the adoptive and adoptee experiences. Adoptive parents find themselves motivated to adopt for a number of reasons. Some adopt because they fell called to do so by God, as in the case of Saroo Brierly’s adoptive parents (Brierly 2017; Lion 2016). Other parents are ideologically motivated, they find themselves in an ethical dilemma, they want to be parents but recognize that the world’s population is already teeming, or alternatively, that there are so many children in the world who need homes. Another factor that may lead couples to adopt is because they are unable to conceive biologically but still wish to raise children. This may be the case for same sex couples as well as heterosexual couples. The
reasons for adopting presented here are not exhaustive but represent several of the dominant justifications given by parents when asked about why they chose to adopt in the first place.

Like adoptive parents, adoptees are diverse in their relation to and experience with adoption. Many of the Chinese adoptees that I interviewed felt that adoption was something that had happened to them, the act of being adopted, but never an identity that they would claim, “I am an adoptee.” The majority expressed that they felt grateful or thankful that they had been adopted and given the opportunity to grow up and live in the United States. Some of my participants shared stories of deep trauma in relation to being adopted, trauma born out of the narrative that they were abandoned by their birth families. Adoptees also relayed feelings that their existence was racially dissonant because they are phenotypically Asian but were raised in White households with White culture. Likewise, a few spoke to feelings of inadequacy because of being female. These participants felt that they were given up for adoption based solely on their sex assigned at birth and struggled with the need to be perfect, a need to deserve the life that they had received because of their adoption. These themes of loss and trauma are present in all adoptee communities and serve as a reminder that adoption is more nuanced than the much-celebrated narratives of bringing a child ‘home,’ saving it from a ‘worse’ life, and providing an adopted child with opportunities. Although these are some of the various perspectives that adoptees maintain, others choose not to engage or acknowledge their adoption at all. This was not expressed by my participants, perhaps a function of the study’s methodology, but was relayed to me by my participants about other adoptees they know or their siblings who were also adopted. On top of all of these various perspectives, the adoptees with whom I spoke for this study and who I know change their minds, express contradictory sentiments, including trauma, loss, gratitude, and a sense of completion all at once.
A Brief Literature Review

Over the course of the last 20 years a number of influential pieces have been written on transnational and transracial adoption, specifically as it relates to adoption of Asian children. These works are made up mainly of two demographics, Korean and Chinese adoption (Park Nelson 2016; Kim 2005; Kim 2010; Borshay Liem 2000). Despite two decades of research on adoption, few pieces have been written directly addressing how Chinese adoptees, their views, beliefs, and voices fit into how we understand transnational adoption in the United States. In filling this gap, it is important to ground my work on Chinese adoptees in the adoption literature.

Returning to the number of scholars who study adoption who are mothers of adopted children, an argument can be made that the majority of the literature has been written by, and for consumption by White parents. This makes sense in the context of international adoption, White parents advocated for international adoption starting in the 1950s and are the demographic most given to adopting children from abroad today (Herman 2012; United States 2009).

There is a long history of international adoption from Asia, starting in the 1950s. During this decade the Holt family began advocating for adoption from South Korea in what would become understood as the first international adoptions to the United States (Oparah, Shin, and Trenka 2007; Herman 2012). Adoption from China began in the 1990s with the opening of the country to international adoption, the result of overpopulation in China and the sheer number of orphans in state custody after the implementation of the one-child policy in 1980 (Fong 2015, Dorow 2006). In the United States, the 1990s were a moment when multiculturalism, a superficial celebration of cultural difference, was entering society’s collective consciousness. Shelley Park, the mother of an adoptee speaks to this directly, explaining that she and her partner wanted to “be able to transform our family into a site of racial integration, thus living the values
of multiculturalism that we (at the time, uncritically) professed” (Park 86). The confluence of multiculturalism and the changing policies in China led to the Chinese adoptees in my study being adopted to their White families in America.

Simply because this literature is written by White parents does not mean that all of it is not critical of international adoption and the incentives that drove their own choices to adopt. Toby Alice Volkman’s 2005 edited collection, Cultures of Transnational Adoption, which has been particularly important to how scholars study and understand international adoption. Volkman, herself the mother of a Chinese adoptee, asks whether or not a new culture of adoption is being created by the existence of these non-traditional families. The collection brings together perspectives on a number of sites, both sending (India, Korea, China) and receiving countries (US, Australia). In the chapter penned by Volkman, she argues that the search for authentic Chinese culture is inevitably disappointing as an authentic Chinese culture is a misnomer, it does not exist. None the less, many parents of Chinese adoptees borrow from what little they know and to which they have access to about Chinese culture in an attempt to create a more welcoming space for their children. Here, the superficial embrace of American Multiculturalism lets both parents and their children down, misunderstanding events out of context as culture and encouraging a mis-match of appropriated celebrations that replicate racial stereotypes.

Similarly, Sara Dorow, another mother of a Chinese adoptee, is particularly critical of the international adoption system and the construction of Asian babies as more adoptable against Black domestic infants in her monograph Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship (2006) and an essay “Racialized Choices: Chinese Adoption and the ‘White Noise’ of Blackness” (2006). Dorow sets out to understand how actors and institutions interpret the adoptee, identify adoptees experiences and assign meaning to this interpretation. She is very
forthright, explaining that her “approach thus focuses not on the adopted person’s self-constructed identity but on the constellation of sites and actors who read and make and tell who she is (Dorow 2005a, 6).” Her work is important as it continues to build off other analyses but even this critical scholarship continues to center adoptive parents instead of the adoptee.

Since the early 2010s, there has been a push by scholars to employ a queer lens to understand transnational adoption and its potentially disruptive effect on the nuclear, heteronormative family. In his recent scholarship, The Feeling of Kinship (2010), David Eng grapples with transnational adoption from an Asian-American perspective, concurrently employing queer theory and psychoanalysis. In chapter three of the work, “The Language of Kinship: Transnational Adoption and Two Mothers in First Person Plural,” Eng engages with Deann Borshay Liem’s premier documentary about her journey to reconcile being born of one culture and raised in another, a daughter of two cultures, two mothers.

Similarly, in her critical and necessary work on monomaternalism and biocentrism, Shelley Park engages with First Person Plural, Eng and the riddled history of adoption in chapter three of her monograph Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood (2013). In this chapter in question, titled “Queer Orphans and Their Neoliberal Saviors: Racialized Intimacy in Adoption,” she expands and strengthens many of the arguments put forward by Eng. The queer lens, with its focus on norms and structures, gives a much-needed critique of biological essentialism in relation to biological and adoptive parents, as well as creating space for multiple mothers in the imaginary of the adoptee and their adoptive families that may or may not be made up of same-sex couples.

Methods
I was inspired to write about adoptees when I first read the piece “Why a Generation of Adoptees are Returning to South Korea,” a New York Times article telling the story of hundreds of Korean adoptees finding their way back to Korea and creating new communities in Seoul (Jones 2015). My original thesis proposal was interested in exploring the relationship between social and institutional policies, like the stigma against single-motherhood in Korea and the one-child policy in China, and how that informs adoptee identity formation. Ultimately the scope of this research did not allow such a comparative study, with my participant pool allowing me to study the Chinese adoptee experience more in depth and not that of Korean adoptees.

The research presented in this thesis was collected with approval by the Swarthmore College Sociology and Anthropology Department’s Departmental Review Committee. I chose to collect my data in Boston and the greater Boston area (Quincy, Newton, Cambridge, Brookline, etc.) because of the high rates of adoption in Massachusetts. With the high number of adoptees living and growing up in Massachusetts I knew finding contacts would not be difficult. In addition, Boston has all of the attributes of a population who would adopt: a large White population that is liberal and wealthy (United States 2009). In the months leading up to the summer I tapped into a network of friends and colleagues who are from Boston and the greater Boston area. I asked these individuals if they knew of any Chinese adoptees between the ages of 18 and 30 from Boston and if they could put me in touch with them via email.

In deciding the age of the Chinese adoptees, I wanted to engage with for my data collection I considered both age of consent and age of the demographic. I chose to interview individuals over the age of 18 to avoid needing consent from the participant as well as consent from a parent or guardian. Studying Chinese adoptees between the ages of 18 and 30 was also intentional, with respect to the history of intercountry adoption between the United States and
China. Prior to 1992, adopting from China was difficult and the pool of potential adoptive parents in the United States was limited. After 1992, when Chinese law became less stringent about who could adopt, there was an increase in the number of Chinese adoptees available and adopted (Fong 2015). The population I hoped to engage with for this study are those adoptees, adopted in the 1990s after the eased restrictions. Ultimately, my participants ranged in age from 18 to 22.

Through my networking I was able to obtain over 50 email contacts of Chinese adoptees. Between late April and early August I was receiving email addresses and reaching out to each potential participant. The email that I used was standardized and explained the study, informing the potential participant that if they chose to participate they would aid in the completion of my senior thesis (Appendix A). If an individual did not reply within three weeks, I sent a follow up email inquiring about their interest in participating in the study. If they failed to reply to this reminder email then I did not reach out to them again.

Because I asked people to provide me with contacts of Chinese adoptees they knew living in Boston, I was not always put in touch with individuals who grew up in Boston. Additionally, some of the respondents were attending college in Boston but had already returned to their homes for the summer. Several of the adoptees who replied to my email had grown up in the Boston area but were not living there currently, having moved away with their families or for college. I made the decision early on that I would only interview individuals that I could meet with face to face. I chose this because I wanted the opportunity to employ participant observation during the interviews, getting a sense of not only what they said, but how they said it physically with their bodies and motions. I also felt that I could engage in a deeper conversation with my participants if we were sitting in the same room.
Of the over 50 contacts I reached out to, I was able to interview sixteen transracial/transnational Chinese adoptees between the months of June and August. Of those sixteen, fourteen had grown up in Boston and Boston suburbs. An additional participant had attended college in the Boston area and had been working in Boston for a year at the time of the interview. Another participant was in Boston for a two-year position but had grown up in a similar upper class suburban setting outside another major city on the east coast. I kept the two additional informants because we were able to meet in person and, having lived in Boston during their adult lives, they brought valuable insight into the Chinese adoption experience. In the email correspondence the participants and I set up a time and place to meet that worked for them. I conducted interviews in coffee shops across Boston as well as in the Boston Public Library. It did not come as a surprise that all of my participants self-identified as women. The majority of the children put up for adoption in China during the 1990’s were girls, the result of family planning policies and gendered notions of tradition.

Using a semi-structured interview style, modeled after Colleen Butler-Sweet’s approach in her piece “‘Acting White’ and ‘Acting Black’: Exploring Transracial Adoption, Middle-Class Families, and Racial Socialization,” I spent between forty-five to two hours conversing with my participants. I broke my interview script up into five sections: 1. Background 2. Childhood / Family 3. Roots 4. Adoptive System and 5. Community (Appendix B). During each interview we went through the same script, discussing questions relating to their racial identities, their experiences growing up adopted, their relationship to China, their understanding of the international adoption system and feelings towards the one-child policy.

It was important to be generous and caring in these conversations because not all adoptees experience their adoption in the same way. Some adoptees have had extremely
traumatic experiences, while others have never engaged with their adoptee identity and still others have dedicated their lives to studying adoption. With this in mind, employing the semi-structured interview as a method allowed me to diverge from the script as I saw necessary, engaging with the interviewee where they were ready to meet me. During the interviews I took copious notes with regard to the respondents answers as well as body language cues. I was ready to stop the interview at any given moment if the participant notified me they wanted to stop or if perceived that the interview was causing them considerable stress. Thankfully this was not the case with my participants.

I continued to gain contacts through snowball sampling, asking each of my participants at the end of their interviews if they knew of any other Chinese adoptees who might be interested in participating in the study. I was able to interview one of my participant’s younger sisters through this method, as well as one of my participants best friends.

There is a tendency when talking about transracial adoption to call into question the morality of the systems and institutions that support, perpetuate and reinforce the placement of children from one race with parents of another. This is evident in the piece on transracial Korean adoptees who have returned to South Korea and are calling on the end of international transracial adoption altogether (Jones 2015). Such sentiments have existed, for instance found in the National Association of Black Social Workers’ (NABSW) position statement on transracial adoption, where they take “a vehement stand against the placement of black children in white homes for any reason” (National Association of Black Social Workers 1972). Although the reader will note my critique of transracial adoption, such adoptions take place within ideologies of cultural and national superiority and inferiority, domestic and foreign policies, and notions of
gender, race and class in which some groups are overvalued and some undervalued. For these reasons, I have worked hard to avoid passing a moral judgment on the institution itself.

This does not mean that we, adoptees, adoptive families and scholars of adoption should not sit with tough and critical questions around adoption. We should constantly be asking ourselves ‘where are the birth parents in these narratives’ or ‘what systems are in place that have made it so readily and easily possible for White parents to adopt Black, brown, red and yellow babies?’ Why is our policy work aimed at facilitating easier processes of transracial adoption processes, both domestically and internationally rather than finding ways to support and keep children with those minority and third world families that are not able to, for whatever reason, keep their children (Oparah, Shin, and Trenka 2007)? These are some of the questions that have informed my research and my own perspective on both my lived experience and those in this study.

In addition to the interview I had each of my participants fill out the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), a psychological survey tool used since the early 1990s, to understand how these transracially adopted participants relate to their ethnic identities (Appendix C). The survey is a 15 question Likert-like survey, where the participant is asked to self-identify their racial group and answer a series of questions related to this identity. The scoring of the survey results in an overall mean that consists of two sub scores, also averaged: Ethnic Identity Search and Affirmation, Belonging, and Commitment. The means range from 1 to 4 with higher means indicating a closer affiliation with the self-identified racial group and lower means indicating more of a distant affiliation with the racial group. The first question of the survey, how the participants identify racially, is informative because it can be directly contrasted with the participants response during the interview, which I have done in Appendix A: Demographics. On
the survey, of the 16 Adoptees I interviewed seven self-identified as Asian-American, five as Chinese and four as Chinese-American. I chose not to use the data collected outside of this qualitative comparison because the scope of the thesis did not allow me to dive into quantitative analysis. All of the names in this work and some of the places have been changed to protect the anonymity of my participants identities.
2. Narrating Adoption

Yeah, actually my mom started one of those little journal things, you know how moms write pregnancy journals. She did one for adoption that she recently gave me [it]. And there are tons of stories from when I was little.

Jessica, 22

Introduction

This chapter examines the various narratives that adoptees are told and how they affect the way they see themselves and understand their experience. As the opening quotation conveys, stories play an integral part in how adoption, like childhood in general, is commemorated in the family. In this quotation, Jessica’s mother has chosen to take a practice common of mother’s having children biologically and adapting it to remember her own experience of adopting from China. Whether or not she always had intended on giving this journal to her daughter someday is unclear, but the stories take on a new meaning in relation to the Chinese adoptee’s selfhood. The stories, once for the parents, how they started a family, are also part of the adoptee’s narratives of how she got to where she is today.

These stories are often tales of transnational journeys that leave both the adoptive parents and the Chinese adoptee changed forever. In answering how these and other narratives affect the Chinese adoptee I have stumbled upon a knot of interconnected questions:

- What does the child get out of hearing these stories in their adolescence?
- How are photos mobilized to narrate adoption?
- How do decorative items from China operate in the Chinese adoptee’s house?
- How do adoptive families and adoptees cope with loss and abandonment?

These questions and more arose in my interviews with Chinese adoptees. In the analysis that follows, I hope to offer a more complete understanding of the adoptee experience, including their socialization. Of
course, all parents make choices about what art to put on the walls of a home, and what stories to share with their children. I have not done a similar study of children raised by biological parents—parents whose choices also signal to their children constructions of past, present and future that are also social constructions. Indeed, it is not always clear whether the choices of parents are because of being adoptive parents or because of their own personalities. As I wrote at the outset, however, this investigation is less about the motives, similarities and differences of adoptive parents from biological parents and more about the experience of adoptees—of growing up with adoptive parents whose identities are different from their own, weighted by the importance of race and nation of origin in a society obsessed by both.

The discourses and narratives brought up above have addressed how parents and adoptees interact, but there are stories and storytellers outside of mothers and fathers. This chapter is also interested in how adoptees narrate their own experiences. These discourses can often be described using the adjectives ‘thankful’ and ‘gracious,’ as the main sentiments adoptees express towards their parents and having been adopted. These feelings are informed by how the adoptee understands what life would have been like in China.

Parental Narratives

When asked if their parents ever told stories about their adoption growing-up, the research participants highlighted the story of their parents traveling to China to get them, the stories that they were told about being received, and the story of how they were found in China. These origin stories are a powerful trio that aid in the construction of the adoptee as adoptable. They also work to justify both the adoption of a particular child and the incorporation of racial difference in the nuclear family. For the parents, these stories function as much as a memory as an explanation. For the adoptee, in light of their coming of age, these stories take on a new life: they mark the beginning of their history and their membership in the nuclear family.
These stories are aided by other narrating devices, like clothing saved from when the child was adopted, photos or videos of parents traveling to and receiving the child, as well as Chinese artifacts placed around the house. These narratives can also be disrupted at times, like when the adoptee experiences “issues” like night terrors or separation anxiety, or when children who almost were adopted occupy space in the nuclear family.

Orientation I: Traveling to China

So, my mom…she went with a small group of parents who were adopting from China. But then, where I was from was a different part of China than where the other parents were going. She was sort of on her own, she had a translator, but it was--she’s just said it was really difficult navigating…I think where I’m from is pretty rural, or relatively rural, easy enough to get there with busses and everything, but she said it definitely was a trip to get me.

Kayla, 22

Kayla Green was 13 months old when her mom travelled across the Pacific to get her. In recounting Kayla’s adoption story, her mom was sure to highlight her own difficulty in navigating across not just various spatial geographies, but also linguistic and emotional terrains. Over the course of two weeks, the usual amount of time that adoptive parents spend picking up their children in China, Kayla’s mother would move from “West” to “East,” from English speaking areas to Chinese, and maybe most importantly, from being a person without children into motherhood (Volkman, 84). This moment is particularly important for not only the adoption of the child, but the adoption of a new identity for the new mother. Perhaps this is why in recounting this common adoptive narrative Kayla finds it necessary to emphasize that “it was definitely a trip to get me.” This emphasis, along with the distinctiveness of her parent’s story-- it
was her mom who had to leave the group and travel alone to get her-- conveys an air of originality to Kayla’s origin story and the importance of this difference from other adoption trips.

All Chinese adoptees have this story about their parent(s) traveling to China to receive them. This story, although a recent one in the many stories of Americans, has become archetypal. What has quickly become archetypal, however, is always unique, specific, and original for each adoptee. These stories serve an important purpose in creating an origin story for the Chinese adoptee. Unlike those with blood relations to the parents who bore them, the adoptee does not have a story about how their mother carried them for 9 months and gave birth. Traveling to China is the story of how they came to be their parents’ children. If this helps to frame the adoptees orientation to their familial relations, there remains the nagging insufficiency for the Chinese adoptee-- the blank spaces before they were brought to the orphanage, the question of where they really came from. The story about how their parents traveled to China to get them can partially fill those blank spaces, giving the adoptee a foundation for life’s story.

Eng and Shelley both argue that in adopting transracially, parents expect that the child will perform certain affective work, completing the nuclear family. Parents often believe, the authors argue, that it is only by erasing the racial difference through prioritization of the adoptee as simply a member of the (White) family, what Eng calls racial intimacy, and effacing the adoptee’s past, can she fully serve her affective role. Eng’s case study is based on Deann Borshay-Liem, herself a Korean adoptee who lived in Korea until she was 8, and her autobiographical documentary *First Person Plural*. For Borshay there is the erasure of a recollected past, those 8 years that she lived in Korea, whereas for Kayla and other Chinese adoptees adopted when they were infants, there is no memory of China.
Orientation II: Receiving the Child

One of the stories that Chinese adoptees are told in tandem with how their parents traveled to China is the actual moment of being received by them. Parents would generally stay in small groups, traveling to the province from which they were to receive their children from. Upon arrival at the designated receiving site, sometimes the orphanage where the babies are or the hotel where the adoptive families are staying, infants are brought out by a handler or caretaker and given to their new parents. This same scenario has been recreated thousands of times across China every year from 1993 to the present. The story of these receptions has also been retold thousands of times more to the Chinese adoptees growing up in the United States. This is one of the stories that Gina Stolberg, 21 years of age, was told when she was growing up:

The women handed me to them at the hotel and-- my mom has this weird conspiracy [sic, belief], that... my birth mother somehow was the woman [who handed her over]. Because when they got the pictures of all the babies, I was the only one who had a different colored background. And she could just tell, the woman who handed me over was sobbing, like so sad, and she just knew me really well.

The story begins like any number of other narrations, she was received in a hotel and handed over to her adoptive parents. But the story is interrupted when Gina relays that her mom has a “weird conspiracy” regarding her transference. In choosing to describe her mother’s belief as “weird” Gina reveals the seeming improbability of the situation narrated by her Mom, that Gina’s birthmother actually handed her over to Mrs. Stolberg. The mother’s story is evidenced by the photograph of Gina being different than the other girls in her adoption group, as well as the emotionally charged reaction of the caretaker who hands her over to Mrs. Stolberg. I chose to share this story precisely because it stands out in the emotional landscape that the “receiving the child” orientation usually takes place in. Gina’s mother’s perception of the events that occurred
when she received Gina capture the sadness of loss involved when the child is not only being received by adoptive parents, but concurrently being relinquished by birth parents and birth country.

Despite how real this story is for Mrs. Stolberg, Gina is unconvinced. This highlights one of the important caveats to these narrative orientations, they all may be based in truth, Gina really was handed over to her mother by a caretaker who was crying, but the truth has already been interpreted once before it reaches the Chinese adoptee. The nature of stories and memory is that they grow and change over time. One person's perceptions of a situation may not be the case for someone else, like Gina’s dad who does not believe his wife’s inclination either, though he was also in China to receive Gina. As in all parent-child relationships, narratives are crafted or modified so that they can be told to and understood by the child, this is no different for the adoptee.

One of the narratives related to receiving the child that is crafted and has been important to the Chinese adoptee community is the story of The Red Thread. Rebecca explains that “it’s basically like the child that you’re really compatible with is the child that you end up with, out of unknown reasons.” The sentiment of the Chinese proverb is that a red thread of destiny connects you with the people that will be important to you in your life. The story maps well onto the narrative of the reception and imbues the moment of transfer with added emotional and cosmic weight. Rebecca continues, explaining that her mom “would tell me about that as a kid. As a way of being ‘you’re the perfect child for me,’ stuff like that, making me feel loved.” This story is hopeful and reassuring to the child, they were always meant to be in the United States and always would end up in the safety and comfort of their current lives, but the intention and impact of the proverbs explanatory power often go unexamined.
In their blog, “The Red Thread Broken,” an anonymous Chinese adoptee writes extensively on and about international adoption, critiquing many aspects of the system, in particular, looking at the narrative of the Red Thread. The author writes on the ‘about this site’ tab that “The problem with saying that children are connected to the people ‘destined’ to become their adoptive parents is that it is also saying birthmothers are equally destined to be in situations in which they have to relinquish their children and that these children are destined to lose their first families, countries, cultures, and everything they know.” This analysis is powerful because it calls into question the intent behind the adoptive parents’ deployment of the narrative. In many cases it seems as though they share the story to comfort their child in the face of the child’s loss and abandonment. But what do the Chinese adoptees take away from the story? That they were always going to end up abandoned and united with their adoptive parents. Where is the agency of the birth parents? The blogger explains how “Keeping the discussion of adoption at a ‘divine’ level and ignoring the actual political and socioeconomic issues surrounding it ensures that the problems which drive adoption will continue.” In the Chinese context these political and socioeconomic issues were the One Child Policy in China, and the associated fines charged to those who fail to follow the policy. From my interviews, parents often did discuss the One Child policy with their daughters, but in a way that highlighted their gender as the reason for their abandonment, rather than the nuances of a policy that continues to affect China today (Fong, 2015; Greenhalgh, 2008).

Returning to the orienting narrative at hand, Jessica Neumann, a 22-year-old adoptee explained that “In order to actually receive me [chuckles] I guess is the word, they would just call whoever was in charge of the group, and say ‘By the way, so and so’s baby is on the way.’” When narrating this story to me, Jessica easily found the word ‘receive,’ but took pause after
saying it. Her pause hinges on the use of ‘receive’ to describe her adoption, the actual, physical transference of the child out of state custody and into the hands of White Americans. In the moment Jessica realizes the insufficiency of the word ‘receive’ to describe the scenario; she is not just being received, but her entire world and future are about to change. Receive also connotes an air of possession that Jessica may have found uncomfortable as she realized the implications of her being owned or bought by her parents. I will continue to expand on the theme of commodification of the adoptee in the following chapter.

In the second half of Jessica’s quote she expresses the seemingly inconsequential nature of the exchange. The urgency and importance of the situation is deflated in the adoptee’s words, “By the way, so and so’s baby is on the way.” Jessica shared this attitude again a little later on in the interview, “And they [the caretakers] just kind of were ‘Here’s your baby, surprise.’ And then they handed me over and that was kind of like the thing.” This tone taken on to describe the reception may relate to Jessica’s own cynicism around explaining her story to those who ask about her adoption. By framing the interactions as casual, Jessica and her audience can laugh at the story rather than take the time to sit with the discomfort that showed through when Jessica took pause on meaning behind the word ‘receive’ earlier.

Jessica’s story continues; she explains how “I came bundled up in 7 layers of clothing apparently. All of which I still have. And, I guess they needed to prepare me for-- I guess to them it’s sort of like a ceremony going from one family to the another.” Jessica was not the only adoptee to report that she was adopted with multiple layers of clothes on and that her parents kept every layer. Although it is not uncommon for parents to keep mementos from a child’s upbringing, for the adoptee these items are transformed into powerful narrative devices. These objects take on an almost magical state-- these are the clothes that you were wearing the moment
that everything changed, one of the only things you have of another life that you almost led. These are the only material items the adoptee has of China that is tangibly theirs. Jessica compares her bundled state to being prepared for “a ceremony,” some kind of important occasion, this occasion just happens to be her “going from one family to another.”

Items from China, what I will call artifacts, play a role in the socialization and narration of the Chinese adoptee’s place in the family as well as help ground the adoptee’s origins in something tangible. For Jessica, it was the clothes that she was wearing when her parents received her. But the adoptee and the clothing she was wearing are not the only things that adoptive parents brought back with them to America. For Miriam, a 22-year-old adoptee, these objects decorated her house growing up it was “just stuff they had gotten in China. Zodiac things, we have a zodiac wall hanging. And we have like little pictures that say, ‘Happy New Year,’ or whatever, written in Chinese…. little art things they had picked up while they were there.” Objects purchased from China and displayed in the house show an appreciation of the culture that Chinese adoptees came from, but concurrently essentializing Chinese culture, a topic I will discuss later on. Additionally, the objects are intended to convey this appreciation but may act to “other” the child, by highlighting their racial difference, or objectify the child. Recognition of this is found in Tina’s words, “I tell my parents, or I tell my friends, ‘My parents are just trying to add onto their Chinese collection.’ because I have so much Chinese stuff in my room.” Again, I will return to this conversation around commodification and objectification of the adoptee in the following chapter.

Artifacts are not the only narrative devices that parents use to explain the adoptee’s story to them. Parents also utilize videos and photos to remember their narrations, adding layers to bring to life, and relive, the receiving stories for the adoptees. Growing up, Li Parker, an 18 year
old adoptee, had “this huge photo— not huge, it’s like two or three inches thick. But it’s a photo album of pictures that they took when they came to China to adopt me.” These two or three inches of photos are not only the beginning of Li’s life in the US, not only her parents’ joyful entry into parenthood, but each photo acts as a visual cue to a different story. Li explains that the photo album proceeds chronologically, mapping “by the plane before they left to my whole family in the airport when I got here [to the United States].” Outside of providing visual representations of the story that they have been told, some photos of their adoption become important to the adoptee’s own identity, verifying that they really did come from somewhere else and in some cases with other people.

This was Emma Ross’ experience with photos. Her experience was less about her parents’ journey and more about her own relationship to her adoption. Much like the stories that parents tell their Chinese adoptees growing up, the photos take on new meaning when the adoptee comes into their own consciousness, interpreting and remembering their own encounters with the photos. Emma and I spoke extensively about photos when I asked if she had any memories of China:

**Emma Ross:** The only thing that I have from being adopted now are the photos. But no memory.

**Chris:** Can you tell me about some of those photos.

**Emma:** Let’s see, I have a photo. I think it was my first photo, it’s just a close up on my face. I think I was six or seven months old in that photo. I was really fat. I think that’s the photo that my mom received, the first one. Then I have a photo of me in the orphanage with another baby, whose name is Maggie, now. And she was adopted in the same adoption group as I was. Which is really cool because we were crib mates in the orphanage… I guess she’s my closest memory because, even though I don’t remember it, I’ve known her throughout everything. That’s a cool photo, you can see us in there.
Like a story, a photograph can have multiple interpretations of it. To Emma’s parents, her referral photo, was what they would have emotionally invested in prior to her physical arrival in their arms in China. As her first photo, this is where Emma’s “memory” starts, the first moment that she can point to her existence. Prior to this photo, there are very few, if any records of her – a note in police records that she was found and the location, a note for orphanage admittance, and the paperwork that her parents filled out when adopting her (Fong, 2015). To Emma the photo of herself in a crib with Maggie, another Chinese adoptee, adopted at the same time as Emma, helps her better understand herself by grounding her history in this relationship. Maggie is her “closest memory... because [she has] known her through everything,” everything being the period between the days at the orphanage and Emma’s present reality in the United States.

Orientation III: Finding the Child

The final orientating story I will look at are the stories of how Chinese adoptees were found abandoned in China. These are the stories of how the child was found in a park, by a popular restaurant in town, at the police station, outside a college. This narrative is particularly present in the Chinese adoptive community and exists in relation to the One Child Policy. Although the One Child Policy was written to equally affect any family with more than one child, because of a patriarchal society valuing sons more than daughters, the enactment of the policy became highly gendered, ultimately leading to the abandonment of thousands of baby girls (Greenhalgh 2008; Fong 2015). The abandoned infants who were found and subsequently adopted have had their stories recounted to them countless times by parents and have shared some of those stories with me.

These ‘finding narratives’ are important because they support the discourse that all children who are adopted internationally are orphans. More specifically, in the Chinese adoptee
community, that all the baby girls up for adoption were abandoned by their parents. Both of these claims are not so universally true, but various institutional and discursive elements sustain these narratives in order to lead American adoptive parents, and in turn, their daughters, to believe that they are. (Andrews 2007; Dorow 2006). In fact, by US federal law, all children that are being adopted from another country must be categorized as an orphan. This can be achieved by the birth parent permanently terminating their claims to a child, thus releasing them to their new adoptive parents (Park 2010).

Discursively, White adoptive parents are led to believe that all girls are abandoned because of the One Child Policy. This is not the case, as Mei Fong discusses in her work One Child: The Story of China's Most Radical Experiment, which looks extensively at various aspects and repercussions of the One Child Policy. Fong describes how “The one-child policy imbued the whole process with virtue: the outside world believed these girls to be unwanted and voluntarily abandoned” when in fact the story was much more complicated and ethically muddled (171). For example, in 2005 six orphanages in Hunan province were accused of baby buying, with similar scandals surfacing in 2009 and 2011 (171). Because the family planning policy required government officials to maintain low levels for birth quotas, and because these officials could be harshly punished (fined, fired or loss of reputation) if they did not maintain the mandated number of births for their region, some managed their districts strictly, while others lied to protect themselves and their communities. Strict enforcement of the One Child Policy included forced abortion, heavy (discretionary) fines, or the removal of children into state custody (73). The final two means of policy enforcement were manipulated to financially benefit certain officials. Finally, unbeknownst to many American adoptive families, the process of adopting domestically for Chinese citizens was extremely difficult to navigate. Domestic
adoption, in practice, could only occur through middlemen, a practice that was deemed child trafficking by the Chinese government (174). Kay Ann Johnson, a mother of a Chinese adoptee, “is now a strong critic of the system, arguing that China’s discrimination against domestic adoption perpetuated the myth that girls were not valued in China. In reality, many of those girls could have found loving homes within the country” she maintains (175). Throughout Fong’s work it becomes evident that children, particularly girls, were not always abandoned in the ways that both they and their parents are led to believe. Yet, these discourses are invested in, perpetuated by, and a comfort to adoptive parents, justifying the ethicality of their choice to adopt. In a sense, these discourses become real for the Chinese adoptee too because they are repeatedly told and socialized in these narratives.

For the adoptive parent, “finding the child” is a story communicated by the orphanage, the caretakers, or the director. These stories become evidence for the parent that their child was abandoned and thus a subject able to be saved (Park, 2014, Dorow 2006). The institutional backing lends credibility to the discourse, discouraging parents from asking questions or seeking more information about the specific situation that resulted in the abandonment, or orphaned status, of their newly adopted daughters. The story of being found thus takes on multiple meanings, one of which is verification of the child’s original orphan status.

One of the things that cannot be stressed enough is that every Chinese adoptee has a story about being found. Savannah Healey explains that “apparently I was left outside a factory and some older woman picked me up and brought me to her house. But she couldn’t take care of me so they gave me to an orphanage.” Emma Ross shared that “Yeah, so I think how it goes is found by a police officer, taken to an orphanage, more in the city. That’s about it. Really not much information.” In both Savannah and Emma’s stories, it is evident how the stories that they were
told convey an air of uncertainty, much like their origins altogether. Savannah expresses how “apparently,” and Emma that she thinks this is how the story goes. Perhaps these are their narrative styles, but the tone also alludes to their own doubt born out of the blank space of their past. Dana’s story was that she “was left in a basket, literally in a basket, at the entrance of a gate, a community.” A baby can only be found where they were left, orphaned, abandoned by those that brought them into the world. These stories show how the adoptee is told their history begins when they are found.

Establishing the adoptee as orphan is just one meaning given to the finding narrative. For the parents of Rebecca, her story of being found was a justification of how much her birth parents cared about her. She explains, “I mean my mom always said that my biological parents must have really cared for me or something because they kept me for a while and risked getting caught or whatever before putting me out for adoption.” Rebecca was a little older than most children when she was found, which becomes evidence for her mother. Using this narrative in defense of her birth parents helps to ease the reality that Rebecca was “found in a bush by a restaurant,” abandoned by her birth parents. Generally Chinese adoptees have little to no information about their birth parents due to this abandonment, but that doesn’t mean that the ways that they weren’t abandoned don’t take on meaning. For example, Rebecca’s finding story continues, “and I think they said it was a frequented restaurant, by everyone. It was supposed to be that I would be found pretty quickly.” Again, the story asks us and Rebecca to recognize that despite the terrible act of abandoning a child, her birth parents did the best that they could to make sure that she was found quickly and safely.

In framing Rebecca’s birth parents as people who tried to keep her, as people who wanted her to be found quickly, they can believably be understood as good people. They didn’t want to
abandon Rebecca, but hard circumstances must have led them to do so. Framing the birth parents in such a way is important for the adoptive parents because it relieves a lasting tension in adoptive families, the ghosts of the other family. In some ways it would be easier to frame the birth parents as bad people, people with no redeemable qualities. What would make integrating the child into your family easier in both the adoptive parents and child’s imaginary, than people who didn’t want to take care of the adoptive child? But this logic belies the Chinese adoptees relationship to her birth parents. However tenuous, these are still the people that gave birth to her, and however biologically essentialized or socially constructed the importance of this relationship might be, it exists for the adoptee. By constructing the birth parents as righteous, people who had no choice, who tried to fight the system, the adoptive parents can acknowledge the importance of the relationship between the birth parents and child, while also relying on—intentionally or unintentionally—on a discourse of abandonment.

Disruptions: Other Children and ‘Adoption Issues’

Rebecca: Do you want to ask about adoption issues?

Chris: Adoption issues?

Rebecca: Yeah, I assume that must have come up in your other interviews.

Chris: It just comes up kind of naturally. I don’t really have a question written into my script about it. But if you want to talk about.

Rebecca: Oh, I just assumed that it must come up because there are lots of… Ok, well I guess I had adoption issues.

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Although the previous orienting narratives have intensely influential discursive power, they exist alongside other narratives that work to disrupt the picture of the heteronormative
White (with a little bit of difference) adoptive family. These are the stories of other children, those that were almost adopted, that persist in the memories of the adoptive parents and occupy space in the family. These are the stories of night terrors and separation anxiety, inexplicable anger and the need to be perfect that adoptees have and are told about in adulthood. I share this section and these stories neither to pathologize the adoptee nor their experience, but rather to interrogate how these ‘disruptions,’ as I will call them, affect the adoptee, their relationship to their family and perceptions of self.

In my conversation with Rebecca Swanson, aged 21, she asked me out of the blue if I wanted “to ask about adoption issues,” mainly because she felt that they are not talked about frequently and should be, but also because of her own experience with ‘adoption issues’. I keep this phrase, ‘adoption issues,’ in quotation marks because this is how Rebecca captured the very real experience that several of my participants had growing up relating to their status as adopted. Additionally, I wish to mark that ‘adoption issues’ can be interpreted as having pathological connotations. As stated in the quotation and can be noted in my interview script (Appendix B), I had no question about ‘adoption issues’ because I felt that it might be triggering for the adoptee, causing them to relive traumatic experiences. Rebecca was correct in assuming that conversations about ‘adoption issues’ came up frequently. The traumas of adoption and their resulting issues deserve time and space for discussion.

Other Children

The narratives of other children, Chinese infants that were almost adopted instead of my participants, was not uncommon. Indeed, four of my interviewees reported being told about these other girls growing up. Adoption is, on the surface level, understood as a happy moment. A
couple embarks on parenthood and an orphan finds a home -- everyone’s needs are met. This
shallow perspective does not remember the birth parents who gave up their children as a result of
any number of structural, institutional or social motivators. Nor does this perspective honor the
loss of heritage and language that the transnational adoptee undergoes upon their adoption. Even
less understood is the way children that adoptive parents thought they were going to adopt are
remembered and mourned in the family, and in turn, how this presence affects the Chinese
adoptive. My interviews revealed various forms of loss, although the scope of this thesis will not
allow me to address all forms, I chose this particular loss to explore because I did not come
across research on it in other studies.

I again want to turn to Rebecca’s story to help understand this experience. It was not until
Rebecca was an adult that her mother shared this story with her. She says:

Actually, something that is kind of interesting, my mom was... Ok. So, when you go
through the adoption process... you’re given a picture of the baby you’re going to get.
And so that picture that my mom got actually wasn’t me, it was a different child. And
then apparently as a parent you get attached to this picture because you’re like ‘that’s my
child.’ So then... she got a call [that] said that that baby she got the picture of was no
longer available. And they didn’t tell her anything more than that. And my mom didn’t
know if it was because the baby had died or if the baby had some illness and it was likely
that the baby was going to die and so they wanted to give her a healthy baby because the
Chinese government is kind of weird about this kind of thing. And my mom was really
upset because she was thinking if the baby is in trouble she wants to financially help the
baby before she even gets it because she sees it as her child at this point. But they
wouldn’t tell her anything. Then she got I think a Xerox copy of what my baby picture
was. So, then she ended up adopting me. But it was only within the last month that she
knew she was getting a new baby. And so we have no idea what happened to the other.
But here I am. That was kind of interesting. And I didn’t know about that growing up, I
only knew about it the past couple years. I think that would have been more upsetting to
me as a kid.

I quote Rebecca extensively here because her narrative is particularly robust, describing the
adoption process from the beginning, when her mom got a picture of a baby that wasn’t her, to
Mrs. Swanson’s devastating loss of “her child,” to the last month when Rebecca’s Xeroxed photo came through. The first part of the story relates back to the previous sections that explored the importance of photos in narrating the adoptees place in the family. As Rebecca’s quote makes immensely clear, the parent becomes “attached to” the referral photo that they receive, so much that they understand the infant in the photo “like ‘that’s my child.’” With this investment established, it was extremely hard for Mrs. Swanson to find out that she would no longer be taking this child home when she travelled to China. Rebecca attributes the loss of the baby to either its death or its health, because “the Chinese government is kind of weird about this kind of thing.” Mrs. Swanson wishes that she could help; she both wants the infant to be healthy and she wants the child to be well so that she can be her healthy baby that she brings home to the United States. This is her baby, and it’s unfair that the Chinese government will not tell her anything about the child’s fate.

In the last sentences of the passage Rebecca supposes that it would have upset her as a child if her mother told her this earlier, but provides no explanation for why this would have been her reaction. Perhaps it would have upset her because it exposes the fortuitous nature of her adoption and to an extent, her life in the United States. It’s possible that Rebecca might have imagined that she easily could have been this unnamed child that became a footnote to her life. These existential crises might have been out of the scope of young Rebecca’s mindset, perhaps she would have been upset because, like her mother, she doesn’t know the end of the story of this other child. Did this infant die, was she sickly, was she retrieved by her birth family from the orphanage? This open ended story is unsettling because it allows our imaginations to wander, considering any number of tragic endings for this vulnerable baby girl, ward of the Chinese state.
At the same time it invites us to consider the suspicious actions of the Chinese government in relation to international adoption (Fong 2015).

Despite this unnamed child never coming to the United States with the Swanson parents, her story takes up space in the family and exists in relation to Rebecca. When Rebecca’s parents decide she is old enough to process the story and finally tell her they unintentionally ask her to reorient her origin story to include this additional narrative. In revealing how much her adoption was due to chance, Rebecca’s parents reinscribe a narrative of gratitude. Because Rebecca can imagine herself as this unnamed infant who didn’t get the chance to come to the United States and have the opportunities that she does, and because the improbability of her parents adopting her is revealed in that she was part of their adoptive process only in the final month, the Chinese adoptee is left with the sense that they are lucky.

Interestingly, sharing the story of the other child is not as far as some parents have gone in commemorating the child they were supposed to receive. Stephanie explained to me that her parents “weren’t going to get me at first, they were going to get this other girl [who her parents] named Lisa, and we have a picture of her on our mantel actually. But she died before my parents could adopt her.” Not only does this child have a name, Lisa, but she has her own physical space in the house, serving as a constant reminder of her presence in the family. Choosing to display her photo on the mantel is a compelling one, the mantel is usually reserved for photos of the family that one wants to be seen or noticed. The fact that Lisa’s photo is being displayed on the mantel shows the importance that she has had to Stephanie’s parents.

In naming Lisa, especially with an American name, Stephanie’s parents have clearly claimed this baby as their own. The loss associated with her death takes on personal significance, enough to commemorate her both with regards to, and without regard to, Stephanie, the adoptive
daughter that they did receive in China. Stephanie is left interpreting her own positionality in the family in relation to Lisa who died before she could be the daughter that Mr. and Mrs. Martin wanted.

These are both families that chose to share the existence of another child with their current adoptive children, but these stories are not always readily shared. Take Zoe, she was only told about her mom almost adopting another girl when her grandmother accidently brought it up, unaware that Zoe’s mother had kept it a secret.

Oh, she said she told me once that she actually got a different kid and then somehow, like, got me. I don’t know how that happened. I guess the other kid had something wrong with her or something and she was like, ‘I don’t know if this is right.’ And then got me the next day. [pause] She doesn’t really talk about that though. My grandmother brought it up. And my mom was like “Shh, don’t say anything.” But I still heard it.

From the quote it sounds like Zoe’s mother might have noticed that something was wrong with the child that she was originally matched with and decided to notify Chinese officials, in turn returning her to their custody. What motivated Ms. Thompson to keep this story from her daughter? Was it feelings of shame that she rejected another baby? Or fear that Zoe would feel unwanted or unloved because of these origins? It could also be that Zoe’s mom felt this was a private matter, though the grandmother considered it a family matter that should be shared with Zoe. This quote also reveals the replaceable nature of adoption, there is always another infant baby girl, one with better health at that.

The story begs us to be critical of the Chinese government in situations like this, not only are they happy to replace the child with another, but are able to do so quickly, within a day. These factors, the replaceable nature and the willingness to replace, inform the adoptee’s perception of their existence in the US. Like Rebecca, Zoe is left wondering why she is here, how did she end up so lucky as to be adopted? The added fact that Zoe’s mom didn’t want her to
know informs the lengths that parent’s may go to preserve the image of the perfect family, the sense that Zoe was the first and only child that Ms. Thompson wanted and loved. These narratives begin to expose the constructed nature of these happy stories and reveal the loss and trauma that accompanies a child’s adoption, that the adoptee grows up in.

‘Adoption Issues’

As stated in the opening quote of this section, adoptees are thinking about their experiences, naming their trauma, and trying to find community in their shared struggle with ‘adoption issues.’ These experiences are important to lift up because they not only disrupt the notion of a happy family that saved a third world child, but they also show us how the Chinese adoptees themselves understand the trauma of being abandoned. One of my interviewees, Stephanie, shared with me how her sister, who is also adopted from China, doesn’t like celebrating her birthday. Stephanie states, “She doesn’t really like her birthday, I think, because she views it as the day her parents gave her up. I think she views it as like her parents didn’t want her.” Stephanie thinks that her sister’s birth-day is inscribed with meaning that others might not experience, it is the day that she was brought into the world, but immediately given up. It is interesting that Stephanie highlights her sister’s experience and not her own. What does it mean to see your sister struggle with trauma? This is how Stephanie understands her sister’s adoption issues, a sensitive or taboo topic concerning a day that is traditionally celebrated and special. Whether or not Stephanie considered this perspective before, or thinks it at all herself, she has worked hard to understand and justify her sister’s dislike of her birthday.
Similar to Stephanie, Jessica described to me ‘adoption issues’ that her sister, also adopted, was experiencing. Jessica explains that “it’s actually gotten to be a little bit of a problem. She’s had sort of an identity crisis for a while, where she’s like ‘You guys aren’t my family, my family’s in China.’ And I guess technically that’s true, because there’s different definitions of family.” The norm that parents are biologically related to their children is extremely strong in society and a non-traditional family structure, like those that involve adoption, challenge these norms. Living this means that your relationship to your parents is constantly being interrogated by strangers, your lack of family history is brought up, and you are constantly left explaining your adoption. This is the pressure that ultimately leads Jessica’s sister to have “an identity crisis,” demanding that her real “family’s in China.” Again, we must ask ourselves how does this affect Jessica, the sibling? Jessica is clearly concerned for her sister’s well-being but characterized the crisis as “a little bit of a problem” recognizing the awkwardness of her sister rejecting their adoptive family. This awkwardness, or uncertainty, reveals Jessica want to show her concern for her sister, but also come to terms with her own definition of family, one that includes adoptive parents.

Participants also spoke directly to their experience concerning ‘adoption issues.’ Dana described getting angry about her adoption: “there’s a couple times of year that I’ll get really mad that I’m adopted. Like I’ll think, like, why would two or one person give up a child, you know, like I don’t understand, couldn't they work through it?” Although not all adoptees know anything about their birth families, there is a spectrum of knowledge that ranges from a lot to nothing. Generally, because Chinese adoptees were left in public spaces to be found by passerby, there is little to no information on birth parents, other than the occasional note left with the child. This lack of information was intentional, meant to protect the anonymity of the parents.
Although it was illegal to have more than one child, it was also illegal to abandon children. These policies in turn have left Dana and other Chinese adoptees with little to know explanation for their abandonment, or their birth parents’ inability to keep them. In another quote, Dana broadens this sense of anger to include an “anger around not knowing your past.” Most adoptees relate to this absence or loss of a culture that occurred the day they left their birth country. Dana feels angry that she lost this history and this anger is exacerbated by lack of an outlet to express it.

Although anger is one way that the trauma of loss has manifested itself in Chinese adoptees’ lives, another common experience that my participants spoke of was separation anxiety. Rebecca, who opened this section on disruptions, explained how she didn’t like timeouts when she was child, and relates it back to her own trauma:

Another thing that was related to adoption growing up I really didn’t like timeouts. Like I know no kid likes it, but I think it probably had to do with abandonment or something. If my mom put me in my room and closed the door and wouldn’t let me out or wouldn’t be with me I guess, that really freaked me out... So yeah, that was my trauma, I guess.

Rebecca’s perception of her dislike for timeouts is tied to her understanding that this is how her own trauma of being abandoned has manifested. If she was abandoned once by one set of parents, why shouldn’t this adoptive parent also leave her? Even without her own memories of the abandonment she is aware that she is not originally from the US, her mom is not her birth mother, and she has been told that she was left somewhere, found, and brought to the orphanage where she was later adopted from. Carrying these stories, and a sense of being different have localized themselves in an anxiety that she will be left again. Its powerful that reflecting on her upbringing, Rebecca has not only interrogated how this trauma has affected her but has insisted that I, and others, acknowledge the existence of issues, of trauma that exist in adoptee communities.
Ella, another participant of mine, has trauma manifested as a racial anxiety. Ella dislikes interacting with people who are of Asian descent, despite the fact that she presents as a Chinese subject herself. She elaborates, explaining that, “When I was a baby, if my mom let a Chinese woman hold me I would start shaking and crying.” This anxiety that is “still kind of an issue today with me,” has been documented since she was an infant, a deep trauma that has followed Ella her whole life. When I asked her where she thought this anxiety was coming from she surmised that “Honestly all I can say is from the orphanage. Like maybe something happened in the orphanage that I connect with, but I couldn’t tell ya.” Identifying her trauma in the orphanage, Ella locates the origins of her anxiety to a time before her memory; the reality of the situation is that she doesn’t know where the trauma comes from.

I share these experiences of adoption ‘issues,’ traumas, and their manifestations in adoptees’ lives to give voice to the reality of their existence. These are not the experience of all Chinese adoptees, but they are the experience of some and merit a platform to be heard, sat with, and analyzed. These experiences do not just affect the adoptee; parents have gone to great lengths to address these ‘issues,’ paying for their children to go to therapy out of pocket (to keep it off record), actively parenting to dispel any feelings of abandonment, listening to them when they say something is wrong. The existence of trauma is influenced by orienting narratives and informs how the family makes sense of the adoptee’s difference. While adoptive parents might make space for the trauma and address it, the sense that one was abandoned is pervasive in the story of the Chinese adoptee’s origins.

The Adoptee’s Narrative: Re-Orienting?
My participants were mixed on how they’ve begun to think through their stories as adoptees. Many have internalized the narratives that their parents have told them, while some have begun to think critically about their adoption. The majority of my participants were either unconcerned with their adoption story or were thankful that they had been adopted, because the alternatives, staying in state custody at the orphanage in China, or never having been put up for adoption in the first place, are understood as much worse than their current lives in the United States. For those who were re-orienting their perspectives, becoming more critical was often spurred by returning to China and seeing realities that contradicted those constructed in their imaginaries by parental and dominant discourses about adoption from China (Chinese girls were abandoned, they would be working in rice paddies or on farms, they would still be in the orphanage, they would have died, etc.). These narratives are important to study to further our analysis of adoptee racial identity formation, as well as to cast a critical eye on the seemingly unquestionable truths of parental orientations.

Narratives of Gratitude

**Chris:** So, if you could sum up your adoption in a word or two, what words would you use?

**Zoe:** I’d say, thankful, super-duper lucky, happy. All positive things. Nothing negative.

Zoe’s comment that she has “nothing negative” to say about her adoption is a stark contrast from the disruptions and traumas talked about in the last section, yet these two realities exist for the Chinese adoptees that I interviewed. The discourse of thankfulness is very influential in adoptee communities. How does one hold both their appreciation for being raised by their adoptive parents while also taking space to critique adoption, mourn their losses, and
reinterpret their stories? For most adoptees there is an immense pressure to emphasize gratitude because they do not want to offend their parents. There is a constant fear that critique will be seen as indignation or resentment (which it may be).

Many Chinese adoptees, and others adopted from third world countries of the global south, are presented with narratives that their lives are overall better (financially, materially, educationally, medically, etc.) in the United States than they would have been in their birth countries. Speaking to what she thinks her life might have been in China, Sierra explains that “I envision myself maybe in a farming family. But conversations I’ve had with my friends and family, they’ve been kind of, I guess I’ve convinced myself my quality of life is better over here. But obviously I have no idea.” In conversations with friends and family Sierra has been convinced that her life is better having grown up in the United States. Implicit in this is the sense that you should be thankful to the people who gave you this chance, the opportunity to lead a better life. Even though Sierra confesses she “obviously” has “no idea” what her life would have been like in China, she and others have constructed a reality for her, one in which she should be grateful she isn’t working on a farm or still in China with her birth family.

These narratives are dominant not only in the imagination but may be reinforced when adoptees return to China and see with their own eyes the difference in access and privilege that Chinese nationals have compared to their families. When asked to speak to how her life could have been so different, Zoe continues, explaining that she would “probably be working in a field, probably wouldn’t get schooled. I’m not sure I would have access to healthcare.” She considers the possibility that she “was in the city,” but feels that if she was in an urban setting her family would have been wealthier and “would have paid to keep me.” Zoe concludes that she was born “somewhere poorer.” This sense is reinforced when she returned to her home province, noting
that “there were a lot of poor people there selling little trinkets that they made. Trying to get by. I didn’t see a lot of wealthy people in Guilin. Just tourists. Lots and lots of tourists.” The presence of tourists exacerbates the class difference present when Zoe returns to the village she was adopted from. The presence of “poor people” “selling little trinkets” to the tourists provides a real picture for Zoe of what her life might have been like if she had never been adopted.

When Tina returned to China during her study abroad she commented how “It was probably the biggest milestone in my adoption journey. Because I was able to see if I had not been adopted how poor I would be.” This moment of return and the subsequent realization of how poor she might have been becomes real evidence that she is so lucky to not be one of the “little starving children that came up to” her, the children that she was compelled to give all her snacks and treats to. I include this narrative in support of my argument that returning to China may reinforce narratives of gratefulness in the adoptee, but also to reveal how perspectives of white saviorism and first world status have been internalized in transracial adoptees. This should come as little surprise when considering that the Chinese adoptee has been raised in Whiteness and in privilege, but leads us to more questions: Do these perspectives bring them closer to Whiteness and privilege? What does it mean to hold a contrary opinion when the development of this patronizing worldview has dominated your socialization?

Re-Orientations

Although returning to China strengthened notions that life in there would have been worse for some, this was not the case for all Chinese adoptees. When Stephanie returned to China for the first time through a program at her high school she stayed with a family living in a
city. While in China she had time to reflect on her perceptions of the country and the lives people lead there:

We [Stephanie and the daughter of the family she stayed with] went to school, we went to her apartment and her dad drove us and stuff. And we were driving in the car home from her school and I was thinking about what it would have been like if I had grown up in China. I think when I was younger I imagined growing up in China being like, I’d be really poor, my family wouldn’t have a lot of money, you know, I’d have to work on a farm or whatever. And then I saw her family and realized it could have been different, possibly. I think I just imagined everyone’s life in China as being very hard and everyone struggling. But I realized that wasn’t the case, but it might have been if I had stayed with my family.

Stephanie’s trip to China helped to re-orient her mindset, away from the discourses of Chinese (and third world) destitution and towards a broader recognition of diversity of lived experiences for people in other countries. This possibility is important because it can start to dislodge the seemingly unbudgeable narratives that Chinese adoptees were abandoned because they were not wanted or because their families couldn’t take care of them, that their lives will always be better in the United States because the adoptive White family has more to offer than a life in China ever could. When other possible lives are realized they start to undo the harm that the single, dominant discourse about abandonment and the one-child policy has caused—namely, the closing off of any questions asked, any other (less tragic) possibilities considered. The dominant orienting narratives operate to both start and end the story of the adoptee’s life in China so that a new life can begin in the US. They function, ultimately, to close off the Chinese adoptee’s belief that they could have a chance at reunification with the birth family. Additionally, if there is nothing but the pain of abandonment in China, why interest yourself with the study of Mandarin or engage in the culture that rejected you?
3. Othering

**Chris:** When you think of China, what comes to mind?

**Tina:** The feeling of not being so different. The feeling of— I’ve always wanted to know what it was like to be another number. I’ve always really wanted to know what it was like to be Asian and for it to be ok.

Introduction

Tina, a recent graduate of a small liberal arts college, illustrates succinctly the difference that transracial adoptees feel in their lives. Tina speaks to her desire “to be another number,” and thinks that if she was in China that the eradication of her difference would surely follow. At the same time, we see that she is occupied with her racial identity, she has a desire to feel it’s ok for her to be Asian. Perhaps Tina is right, moving through an imagined homogeneous space like China might alleviate her feeling of racial difference, but, as we’ll see later in this chapter, this might not be as true as she and other adoptees readily imagine. This excerpt highlights one way that an adoptee may feel their difference, racially, but is by no means the only experience of difference¹. In this chapter I will explore how the Chinese adoptee is Othered in three parts of her life: public, predominantly white, spaces like a swim club, school, or the doctor’s office; the private space of the family; and trips, heritage or study abroad, returning to China.

The themes that emerged from the interviews that I conducted help to situate the adoptee’s racial identity in the discourses that they encounter regarding their adoptive

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¹ Transracial adoptees in my study commented on the othering that occurs due to their non-traditional family structures, such as single mothers and parents in same-sex unions. Although this is falls outside of the scope of my chapter, it’s important to note that several respondents spoke to the point that this kind of difference overshadowed their experiences of racial difference. Perhaps this is due to the popular understandings that adoption is a viable option for these on-traditional families to achieve or move closer to the heteronormative nuclear family and move closer to acceptance in the United States imaginary. For more of a discussion on this, see Shelley Park’s groundbreaking work *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*. 

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subjectivity as they grow up and move through the world. I chose to use the term othering because, despite the adoptees racialization largely influencing their socialization, it is not the only aspect of being, feeling, and being seen as different that affected their own self-perceptions. This chapter will task itself with better understanding how the adoptee is othered through microaggressive questions and comments, that both highlight and erase racial difference while also commodifying the adoptee and racial dissonance experienced in predominantly Asian spaces. One reason issues around race and difference cropped up frequently was because all of the Chinese adoptees I spoke to were adopted by White parents and the majority grew up in the predominantly White, upper class suburbs of Boston.

Othered in Predominantly White Spaces

Growing up, all of my participants moved through predominantly White households, suburbs, schools and other institutions that structure our daily lives. This would not be a markedly different experience than any other minority growing up in majority White spaces, except that the Chinese adoptee has been racially socialized in a White family. When an adoptee is asked to consider their racial identity, or made to sit with their difference, any claims that they might have made to ‘normal’ identities, those identities that are immediately understood, accepted as true and do not require explanation, are challenged and interrogated. These moments of Othering then demand energy of the adoptee to explain and defend their positionality as an authentic experience, as well as navigating and figuring out what being a transracial adoptee means.

One of the most common experiences that highlights the Chinese adoptees status as different is when she is asked to speak to her medical history. This question can be displacing
because, unlike people who live with their biological family members, the adoptee doesn’t have access to family history. This question, usually posed during doctor’s visits, reminds the adoptee of the history and family that they have lost in their (involuntary) movement across international borders. Dana explains how she copes with this question, admitting that she doesn’t know the answers but relies instead on an insistence of her present self:

It’s just that missing piece and I think it comes up a lot when I have to go to doctor’s appointments. And they [medical professionals] ask you “what’s your medical history… family history, right. And I’m like “I have no idea” … I’m like “I don’t know, like I can just tell you what I am now.” Um, and then sometimes I do think about my friends when they say like, ‘Oh yeah, I was born in this hospital and this many ounces,” And they’re like, “What about you?” I’m like, “I have no idea…”

In the second half of her statement, Dana helps illustrate how another aspect of family history is brought into quotidian conversation. When references to being born are brought up, the adoptee is again left explaining to someone that they do not know the answers to their questions, forcing a confrontation with themselves why they do not know. In this moment the Chinese adoptee is made Other by the nurse or doctor inquiring about their medical history and the friend discussing the story of their birth because these individuals assume everyone readily has access to this information. This is not the case for the transnational adoptee, and in recognizing the assumptions the questioning individuals make, the adoptive subject is positioned outside the norm.

In many of the interviews that I conducted adoptees mentioned medical history as one of the first things they would ask their birth parents about if given the chance to talk with them. This question ranked among questions that might, on the surface, seem more effectively important to narrating the Chinese adoptee’s adoption, questions like “why did my birth parents give me up?” “and “did you ever miss me?” Despite its seemingly innocuousness, questions
surrounding an adoptee’s history can hold great weight in their minds and function to highlight
the adoptee’s experience deviant from the norm.

More injurious in nature, racist comments are meant to mark the adoptee as different,
specifically along racial lines. Ella recounts how “Obviously, in middle school you start realizing
‘Oh I’m different from other people’ and you’re like ‘Ok, people are making fun of my eyes.’ In
juxtaposing these comments, Ella shows how realizing her difference is tied to racist comments
that other children made with regards to her Asian phenotypic features. Rebecca recalled a
similar instance surrounding her “almond eyes”:

And I remember studying the Alaskan tribes at some point in my elementary school
career and they described them in the book and they said they had almond eyes and some
kid kind of pointed to me, ‘like you.’ And that was kind of uncomfortable. ‘Cause you
know unless you’re looking in the mirror constantly and if you’re culturally white you
just don’t think about it very often, but like when someone points it out to you like that
it’s kind of jarring. So that happened.

In this quote we see how a racist comment, drawing attention to Rebecca’s differently shaped
eyes, causes discomfort for the adoptee. No one wants to feel as if they are different, and no one
wants to be the target of a racist remark. Yet, a desire to fit in takes on a particular racial hue
with regards to the transracial adoptee. Rebecca describes the pointing out of her racial
difference as jarring. Her statement “if you’re culturally white you just don’t think about it very
often” implies some sort of internalized effacement of her Asian identity, clarifying that she only
knows a culturally white perspective as her reality. For some this will seem almost
inconceivable-- a raced, Asian subject moving through the world generally unaware that they are
perceived as such-- but for many transracial adoptees, this is their racially socialized reality,
having been raised by White parents in White spaces.
Dana explains that her racial identity is not at the forefront of her identity when she is moving through the world, “I just, I don’t see myself as being Chinese when I walk into a room. I just, it’s a lot of just like, it’s really interesting, like I just, like I said, like obviously I know what I look like. But I just have like this, like Whiteness or something that carries with me [pause].” In attempting to find the right words to describe her experience, Dana struggles, often using filler words such as ‘like’ and ‘just’ as she searches for the phrasing that will capture her reality. She settles on “Whiteness or something,” that is carried with her wherever she goes. Her uncertainty makes clear that she has either never been challenged to think through this experience or that sitting with her Whiteness makes her extremely uncomfortable. Immediately after this quote we sat in silence as she continued to collect her thoughts on the issue.

Despite not always recognizing their difference, the racial difference of Chinese adoptees in White families exists plainly to peers and strangers. This is demonstrated when people ask, or implicate by their reactions of disbelief, ‘why don’t you look like your parents?’ The question betrays a hegemonic, heteronormative, and biological essentialist understanding of family; children should look like their parents because when a man and women have kids they pass on their phenotypic traits. This is what we are taught formally in school as well as informally in interactions with kin through comments like ‘you have your mother’s eyes’ or ‘you have the family nose.’ This understanding and the question at hand leave little to no room for non-traditional families.

Consider Jenny’s story of a girl at her swim club growing up, the girl “asked why we [Jenny and her parents] looked different, why- it was hard, but I was like, it was hard to explain it to her, because I don’t think she fully understood it either. But I do remember that moment and she just kept asking questions…” In the view of a child there is an obviousness that a daughter
and their parents should look alike. It is taken as fact and trying to explain that not all families are like this proves difficult at that age or with that level of understanding. Rebecca describes a similar experience, “there was this kid Kyla Marks, she was really interested in me. And she would ask where my real parents were, emphasis on ‘real’ and there was that.” In both of these examples, the difference that the adoptee felt in those moments has stuck with them over the years, so much so that Rebecca remembers the child’s full name and that Jenny emphasizes that this moment is particularly salient from her recollection of childhood memories. The other kids’ perceptions reveal a socialized and logical understanding of family structures, but it’s not only youth who take issue with the differing racial makeup of families. Adults also participate in this othering as Dana recounts:

One time I was at a conference with my Mom when I was ten I think. And one of the attendees came up and asked, like they had heard that my mom was a part of the organization, and they asked which one, which person and she happened to be standing five feet away and I was like “Oh, it’s her.” And he was like “That doesn’t make sense.” and I was like “Yeah, that’s my mom,” they said, “But how? I don’t understand.”

To the man at the conference the familial relationship between Dana and her mother doesn’t add up. He is in such disbelief that he asks for an explanation, “But how?” much like the kids who kept asking questions in the previous paragraph. These questions operate to displace the Chinese adoptee and to call into question her own understanding of relation to family members that do not look like her as like any other familial relationships.

Emma she reminisced about a similar scenario when she was picked up from camp:

I can remember any time I would go into a camp and my mom would pick me up. People wouldn’t believe that she was there to pick up me. They would be really hesitant... One time I was at this dance camp and my mom came by and it was this same reaction of like, “Oh... I didn’t realize she was your mom. I didn’t believe it.” That’s kind of a nice example and one that kind of hurt a little bit more, that sat on my mind.
This quote illuminates the stakes at hand for all parties involved, racializing individuals, normative notions of family, parental authority, and the safety of children. The counselors at the camp need to make sure that authorized adults are picking up the kids, failure to do so could put the kids in danger. The situation lends itself to racial profiling, the children will most likely be picked up by family members or parents who look like them, who are the same race. When this isn’t the case, confusion ensues and the failure of this heuristic reveals counselors’ assumptions, “I didn’t believe it.” It is important to note that there is an affective component involved in this othering and its subsequent recounting. Emma realizes that this example captures a moment when she felt set apart from her family and is only memorable in how painful a memory it is.

Othered in the Family

The nuclear family is a product of public influences and private socialization, particularly with regard to the transracial adoptee, resulting from transnational movement and their intentional envelopment within the home. Studying how the adoptee relates to their family is essential because the family is the first location of socialization, racial or otherwise. As shown in the previous chapter, how parents narrate to their transracially, transnationally adopted children the story of their adoption has an incredible amount of influence on the adoptee’s own identity formation process. Parents engage in both highlighting the racial difference of the adoptee and erasing that difference.

To further complicate discourses flowing from the popular imaginary into the homes of Boston families there remains the unaddressed transactional origins of the transnational adoptee to the adoptive family. Within the relationships to their parents, Chinese adoptees must grapple with their own commodification as well as the commodification of an imagined Chinese culture.
Such commodification relates to the long history of the West’s exotification and fetishization of the East and Asian cultures at large (Orientalism). The relationship of White parents to Asian ‘culture’ is fraught, due in part to history and in part to their own racial positionality (Louie 2015). We are left asking ‘Can White parents ever relate in an ‘authentic way’ to Chinese culture?’ Especially when Chinese culture, to the average White American, is essentialized or reduced to acceptable, consumable and celebratory pieces, like specific holidays, traditional dance and food. I will address the essentialization of culture more in depth in chapter 3 of this work.

As Park explains, concerning her own positionality as a mother of Chinese adoptees, sentiments of multiculturalism and a desire to include this in her life lent parents like Park herself to choose to adopt in the first place (Park, 2014). Modern notions of multiculturalism, the uncritical celebration of cultural difference, have permeated how the adoptees recall their upbringing. When prompted to talk about what it was like growing up as an adoptee in her household, Jessica responded:

Well, from the very beginning my parents were very set on, “this is who you are. You are American, but you also have Chinese heritage.” So, they tried to incorporate Chinese culture into my life by sending me to Chinese camp and Chinese school. I sort of became, what I guess society would term as white washed, through the years.

In the first part of the quote Jessica reveals her parents’ intent to inspire Jessica’s American identity. This no doubt stems from her parents’ own inability to relate to their daughter’s Chinese racial identity. As such, they can emphasize and cultivate a shared national identity, an American identity. Jessica’s parents may also be motivated by a fear of how others will view and treat her. If she is able to assert an American identity, drawing on notions of the American Dream and a country of immigrants, evoking a colorblind, post-racial era, then maybe she will be able to intervene before people Other her. In acknowledging her Chinese heritage, and finding ways to
incorporate Chinese activities in her life, her parents are navigating society’s expectations that they will celebrate the cultural difference in their family and expose their Chinese daughter to her cultural heritage.

The shortcomings of any intent to help Jessica develop and support exploration of an Asian racial identity from her parents’ efforts must be acknowledged. Jessica explains how “society would term [her] as white washed,” that over the years her racial identity has oriented closer and closer to her White parents. In contrast, if her parents goal was to celebrate cultural differences then they had much greater success. Jessica easily recalls her parents’ attempts to incorporate Chinese culture into her world, whether or not it was incorporated into her own ethnoracial identity. While this quote exposes the multiculturalism at play in the Chinese adoptee’s upbringing, it also begins to undermine our traditional understandings of race and culture.

To better understand how racial difference is concurrently highlighted and erased in the adoptive family it will be illustrive to look at the stories of Ella Healey, a 22 year old Chinese adoptee. Ella used the following anecdote to describe her racial identity to me. It is important to note that Ella’s younger sister, Savannah Healey, whom I also interviewed, is a Chinese adoptee who has an exclusively Asian friend group.

The other day I was at home with my dad and my sister had all her friends over and we were all eating dinner. And you know, they left, and I was just talking to my Dad and my Dad was like “It’s funny because I don’t see you as your race, I see you as my race [White], whereas I see your sister as her race [Asian].” And I was like “that’s funny though, because I feel the same way.” So, there’s definitely a disconnect between my ethnicity and my identity.

Ella’s White father actively erases Ella’s racial difference. Yet, he recognizes his own racial difference with regard to his other daughter, Savannah. In answering how she racially identifies,
Ella uses her friend group as an example of why she identifies as “definitely not Asian.” Further, she understands her father’s perception of her race, “as [his] race,” as a function of her friend group, “they’re all white, except for one Asian adoptee,” This is especially in contrast to her sister whose friends are all Asian and whom her father interprets as Asian.

This quote is particularly poignant because it compels us to question how a parent is able to hold two differing racial perceptions of daughters both adopted from China? Although Ella’s suggestion that her interpolation as White is due to her friend group, this may be only a factor that reinforces this perception. She is certainly not the only person of color who travels in predominantly White spaces, and subsequently feels that they are not ‘enough’ to claim a certain minoritized racial category. But Ella’s experience is distinct even form this in that she is adopted and has been racially socialized by White parents. If Ella is “definitely not Asian” in her self-identification, one of her parents sees her as White, but phenotypically she presents as Chinese, how can the hegemonic racial hierarchy make sense of her experience?

In this moment Ella and her father share in a private confession. In supporting her father’s perception of herself as White, Ella affirms this view and asserts her own sense of disconnect between her race and felt racial experience (“ethnicity and my identity”). Much in the way that Omi and Winant speak about “a crisis of racial meaning” that arises when people socialized to think and see in monoracial terms interact with an individual who is racially ambiguous, who doesn’t readily fit into any one category, Ella’s lived experience and self-identification disrupts notions of pure or real races (126, 2015). Both the surprise and confusion in relation to how Ella is racialized by her father, as White, and how she sees her racial identity, also as White, begins to expose the fiction of race. The insufficiency of categories of race raises racial dissonance in those who meet and interact with Ella. There surely are people who want,
and demand, that Ella identify as Asian because of her phenotypic presentation. However, race is socially constructed, presenting real consequences in the lives of those who are most oppressed by the system, but not based in biology; though phenotype and genotype are often conflated in the laypersons understanding.

This experience exemplifies Eng’s racialization of intimacy in how Ella’s racial difference is effaced in order to accommodate her father’s view of her. The parent-child power dynamic present offers a way for us to recognize the influence that Ella’s father has on his daughter’s racial socialization. Like any parent-child relationship, the parent is generally seen as an authoritative figure, socializing their child to the ways and norms of the society. When Ella’s father vocalizes his racialization of her as White he may only be articulating a perception that he has had of her for years, something he is finally admitting, but that has informed Ella’s own racial identity growing-up due to this power dynamic. Earlier I stated that perceptions of Ella’s friend group may only reinforce her father’s view of her as White—the question is where did this view come from in the first place? Because racial formation is a process, it may be impossible to point to a particular moment in Ella’s life where she started feeling “definitely not Asian,” but what is evident is that her father’s interpretation of her reinforces her own perception, giving her permission to claim Whiteness, much in the way that her confession that “I feel the same way,” has given her father permission to continue to racialize her as his own race, White. As Ella comes of age, she becomes better equipped to convey her feelings about her racial identity, beginning a push-pull, negotiation of her race with friends, strangers, and members of her family.

Another adoptee, Li, shared how her younger brother, the biological son of her parents, will sometimes ascribe a White racial identity to her. Li explains, “Sometimes it’s funny though, I’ll say something, and Walter will say... ‘Oh, but like, we’re both White.’ And [I’m] like
‘Walter, I’m not White.’” Perhaps Walter is seeing what was also obvious to Ella—Chinese adoptees are White because they were raised in a White family, with and within White culture, they are thus “American,” “definitely not Asian,” and “white washed.” For Li there exists a need to correct this mis-racialization though; no matter how similar Walter and Li are in the way they were raised, this does not change her race.

When asked how she identifies racially Li provided more nuance than this quote might reveal. Thoughtfully, she discusses the Common App, a required form to apply to colleges in the US, to help illustrate the tension in her identities:

So, on the Common App and stuff, I wrote that I was Chinese/Asian and White. Just ‘cause, I mean, so I’m from China, so I’m obviously Chinese. But I never grew up with that anything. So, it wasn’t a part of my life. So, I feel like it would be misguiding to say I was just Chinese. And it would very obviously be misguiding if I said I was just White, American.

Li is concerned with misleading others about her race and this racializing gaze informs how she navigates her racial self-identification Part of her choice to incorporate all three racial identities on her application are misgivings of claiming Chinese heritage, because she “never grew up with that.” Likewise, she recognizes that it would be “obviously” misguiding to say she is “White, American” because she phenotypically presents as Asian. Perhaps this is another reason she feels the need to correct her brother, out of fear that people will get the wrong idea about her when he tells them he has a sister who is White like him.

Returning to Ella, much in the same way that her dad erases her racial difference, Ella’s mom does not actively recognize how her daughter is racialized by others and thus is not able to acknowledge the impact of these interactions. Recently, Ella found herself in a fairly common situation, in a store shopping with her mom, and being asked if they are together:
It’s actually funny because I told my mom, after we walked into a store, and I was like “This happens a lot,” [being asked if they’re together] and she was like “Oh, I didn’t even notice,” and I was like, ‘‘Yeah, ‘cause you’re the white person in this relationship and they don’t look at you, they look at me,’ and she was like, ‘Oh, wow.’ So, we went into a different store in the same mall and it happened where someone was like, ‘Oh are you with her?’ And my mom, because she was aware of it now, burst out laughing and she was like ‘Oh my god Ella, you are so right! Like I had never...’ Even if it had had happened, she was there, she wouldn’t have noticed if I hadn’t had told her. It was funny to have her, once I told her, she was aware, she could notice it now. That was a comical...

It is not until Ella points out the frequency of this scenario that her mother is able to recognize the racialization of Ella, racially interpolated as Chinese or Asian, in relation to her, a White woman. Ella finds her mother’s reaction funny, calling it ‘comical’ because of how extraordinary it seemed to her mother, but how ordinary it is to Ella’s existence. It is particularly interesting how Ella positions herself as the Other in the situation in order to explain to her mom, “the white person in the relationship,” that of course she doesn’t notice because people’s attention is on Ella, the Other.

The implications of this scenario are wide ranging. How does Ella cope with these events that mark her as different from her mother and serve to highlight the racial difference that exists between them? Ella seems to have learned to cope with the situation, but now has to educate her White mother about how racism and the racial gaze operate in relation to the Chinese adoptee, the Asian-American subject, and her non-traditional family structure. What effect does this new power dynamic have on the relationship; Ella the racially literate and Mrs. Healey, the racially illiterate? Will Ella’s mom listen and learn from her daughter, would the reality of Ella’s experience have been understood without the immediate demonstration of it? Why did Ella’s mother not notice in the first place and what implications does this have on how Ella has been taught about race, racism, microaggressions and moving through the world as a woman of color?
Although this isn’t the experience of all transracial adoptees, nor the experience of all the Chinese adoptees I interviewed, it is worth mentioning that not all White parents who adopt are ready or able to educate their children of color about race in America. My interviewees had a wide range of experiences, some parents, particularly mothers, were engaged in scholarship on the topic of adoption. Other parents were creating projects, curriculums and stories about Chinese adoption. While, some remained wholly oblivious to race and the ways that it played out in their children’s lives. Tina shared that her “mom would always make jokes like ‘Oh, Tina, I know how you feel being the only person of a color in a room, because now I feel like I’m the only White person in the room,’ and she would think she knows how I feel about being racially different, but she never did, because at the end of the day she can always go back to her house where everyone is White.” Tina is well aware of the privilege that her mother’s White skin affords. Whereas Tina feels that her racial difference, moving through majority White spaces in Boston, is constantly being highlighted and exaggerated.

Interestingly, Tina does not mention that when she returns home part of the difference she feels will also disappear. In the home, she is interpreted as a daughter, adopted, yes, but a daughter all the same. In her parents’ minds is there enough room for Tina to embody both racial difference (Tina as an Asian subject) and the social role of daughter? The above quote indicates that her mother is not thinking particularly deeply about race, racial difference, and her daughters racial subjectivity. She would rather minimize Tina’s reality by making fun of it and equating it with her own experiences. Like Tina, Ella struggles to relate to her parents her experience of being racialized and her parents struggle to comprehend. She notes, “And that’s a thing I would tell my parents [about people making fun of her eyes] and they don’t know how-- other than the fact that it’s bullying, it's not like something they’ve had to deal with.” Perhaps, the impossibility
of parents to understand their daughters’ racial reality leads them to ignore it altogether, understanding them solely as daughter without acknowledging racial difference.

The Adoptee as Object: Commodification and Consumption

An interesting theme that arose from the interviews that I conducted was the experience of feeling that one was an object of parental desire. This is an extremely difficult experience for the adoptee because it challenges the foundation of the relationship that they have with their parents: is it one of love and kinship or is it one of exchange and exotification? This tension and strain in the relationship may lead to ‘adoption issues,’ similar to those mentioned in chapter 1. Additionally, a commodifying experience can lead to an existential crisis in the adoptee, leading them to ask ‘Why am I here? Am I only here because my parents couldn’t have kids so they decided to buy one?’ Further, does an understanding of their life mean something different in light of this transaction? This feeling of being commodified, of being ‘bought,’ furthers the adoptee’s feeling of being Othered.

Gina captures these sentiments when she is considering her mother’s intentions behind adopting her, “Did she adopt me because she just loves Chinese stuff, or does she love Chinese stuff because she adopted me?” These lines are moving because the reader is also asked to question these intentions dichotomously based in familial relations, something that we value, and in exotification of the Other, something that when made explicit, makes us deeply uncomfortable. Gina’s sentiment implies one is a better option than the other: if her mom loves Chinese stuff because she adopted her, Gina is able to reconcile her own subjectivity being the catalyst for her mother’s interest. Being adopted because her mom likes Chinese stuff calls into question the ethics of transracial adoption, Gina is literally reduced to part of the collection. This
later sentiment also gives way to the essentialization of Chinese ‘culture,’ and should be
critiqued.

When Kayla, 22 years old, and her older sister, 24 years old, found themselves together
abroad, they had a moment to discuss their adoption, both away from their parents and away
from their normal environment:

When me and her [Kayla’s sister] actually talked about it in Amsterdam about two weeks
ago, we kind of felt like our parents took us as, kind of as their projects, they wanted to
help someone and create someone, I don’t know, successful and something that they
could kind of, just say, “Oh, this is my kid, I helped you.” I don’t know. We felt like they,
we were just saying, we didn’t feel very close to our parents. Yeah.

The sentiment that the child you raise will be your creation and successful is not a new, but the
accompanying notion that both Kayla and her sister were ‘projects’ in need of helping (similar to
and informed by the savior sentiment of third world children ‘in need of saving) in order to be
successful is indicative of how the savior narrative works its way into Chinese adoptees’
positionality as daughters in a White family. Kayla summarizes how ‘being a project’ has made
both her and her sister feel, not “very close to our parents.” It is the feeling of being an object
that is worked on by the parents and that needs help from the parents that makes the Chinese
adoptive question her authentic familial relationship to her parents.

These experiences and questions expose the capitalistic and consumerist dimensions of
international adoption in particular. It is well documented, and has been theorized, that adoption
was outsourced to developing nations as the pool of White infant babies in the US began
decreasing due to better health care, family planning and contraception. Concurrently,
historically there has been a positioning of Black infants as less desirable to adopt due to both
their race, the location of Black within the racial hierarchy, and the statement by the Black Social
Workers calling transracial adoption ‘cultural genocide,’ as well as sensationalized stories about Black mothers regaining custody of their adopted children (Dorow 2006).

Take Ella’s story about when her parents went to China to receive her. Upon being handed over the caretakers “were like ‘Wait a second, this baby is not healthy,’ they were like, ‘oh, do you want another baby.’” Ella explains that she “didn’t know that that they [her parents] were offered a different option, like a human option, until this past year.” Ella’s choice to reiterate that the option that her parents were given was a human option emphasizes how she perceives the ease with which the Chinese government was ready to give another baby in her place. The story reveals the commercialized nature of international adoption, parents want healthy young infants, sick and old orphans are undesirable and thus ‘unadoptable.’ Her parent’s choice to still take her has had a lasting impression on Ella, she says that “I didn’t know my parents were offered a different kid after they realized how sick I was, so that’s also kind of been thank you for keeping me. Gratefulness.” Although her parents are not particularly instrumental in inspiring this sense of thankfulness in Ella, they do not tell her she has to be grateful because they chose to keep her, the end result is that she also invests in her commodification, her knowledge that had they been other parents they might not have chosen to take a sick baby home.

Another aspect of this commodification is the parent’s choice to adopt from China in the first place. These choices are often framed to the adoptee as happenstance, inconsequential, the result of a mundane interaction in the parent’s life leading up to the decision to adopt (e.g. a friend mentions they know someone who recently adopted from China). Stephanie explained how one of her “moms had said ‘Oh, I want to adopt a baby from China’ and my other mom was like ‘What, where did that come from?’ And then they thought about it and then that’s when they
got my sister.” The way that the story has been narrated to Stephanie leads her to believe that this want to adopt her older sister came seemingly out of nowhere, the same decision that in time resulted in her adoption as well. The reduction of her parents’ decision to the phrase “they thought about it” also informs us how Stephanie is thinking about her parents’ choice to adopt: it was something that they considered, then did. It wasn’t something that they debated, argued about, disagreed on, had misgivings about, or considered for an extended period of time. Even if some of these did happen, the way that the story has been told to Stephanie has provided an aura of simplicity to the decision.

Take the simplicity in Emma’s story:

Yeah so, my mom tried to have kids on her own. But wasn’t successful…. she said it was kind of just by chance, she was talking with a friend and the friend said… “So, Lisa, I guess you’ve given up on having kids now, haven’t you?” Because my mom was 45 at the time… “No, I don’t want to be done, I don’t want to be given up yet.” And then the other friend put her in contact with this woman who was head of the adoption agency. And my mom was in contact with her and from there things were set in motion and that’s why I’m here. It’s kind of weird to think about, that my mom tried so many different ways to have a child on her own.

Emma is led to believe that her mother’s choice to adopt “was kind of just by chance,” the result of a friend inquiring about her mother’s plans to continue trying to have kids biologically or not. In her own words, Emma describes how “it’s kind of weird to think about, that my mom tried so many different ways to have a child on her own,” before even considering adopting. At play is the Othering that an adoptee is made to feel in relation to biological children, the ‘normal’ or assumed means of creating a family. This case is important because it centers on the adoptee’s own parent narrating how she tried several times to have children prior to adopting. One of the implications is that adoption is a secondary option, only considered after other options have been exhausted. This choice pursued after trying to and failing to have one’s own children also frames...
adoption as a failsafe, the unspoken dialogue being “If you can’t have children biologically, then you can always adopt from China because they have so many healthy infant girls that need homes.” This framing informs how the Chinese adoptee understands her positionality in relation to the parent, Emma is made a product that is easily procured from China.

If this dialogue is usually unspoken, Miriam’s parents gave voice to it when they described their choice to adopt her from China. She laughed in slight embarrassment, slight disbelief, explaining that “they say this, they were like ‘Yeah it was sort of the thing to do at the time.’ And I’m like ‘You can’t say that.’” Posing adopting from China in the 90s as “the thing to do” implies a faddish or trendy aspect placing it alongside other commercial crazes, essentially reducing or demeaning the significance of adoption. Miriam’s response that “You can’t say that,” reveals her recognition of this as problematic.

Forever Foreigners in China: Returning to be the Other

Returning to the birth country is seen as a special and monumental event in the adoptee’s life. Not every adoptee chooses to return to their country of birth and every adoptee that does has different expectations and experiences when they do return. The Chinese adoptees that I interviewed returned to China for a variety of reasons, many returned in their youth with families to explore their heritage and return to their orphanages. These are commonly known as ‘heritage trips,’ and as such an extensive market, aimed at transnational adoptees and their families, has been created. Several of my participants were in college or recently graduated and had spent time in China through study abroad programs. A few had hosted exchange students in high school and were able to visit these students at later dates. Some of the adoptees I spoke with participated as
exchange students themselves in China, while others travelled there through educational trips. One participant went specifically to search for her birth family in China.

Whatever the reason the adoptee had to return to China, one of the common experiences that my participants shared was feeling out of place in China. Many described feeling like a foreigner despite looking like everyone around them. This is another example of how the adoptee is Othered; a facet of their experience that is especially painful because it occurs in a context where they expect to (re)connect with their heritage.

Several of my participants described feeling like tourists when returning to China. Kayla, for example, explains that “I think for me it was more of a tourist sort of experience, rather than reconnecting. I think because I had no memory of being there it was not like I was reconnecting with it…” The lack of memory inhibited Kayla from connecting in a meaningful way, rather she found herself “learning [about] it for the first time.” This analysis presented by Kayla positions her inability to reconnect squarely on her own experience, being adopted at an age when she wouldn’t have formed memories yet. Indeed, this is not the full picture, Kayla describes interactions with local Chinese, “people, not looking at us oddly, but trying to-- I think they could just tell that we weren’t, hadn’t grown up in China, that we were American and kind of were foreigners. I think that was pretty obvious to everyone.” In sensing her Otherness and the inability of others to understand or place her difference Kayla feels further distanced from a people and a culture that she cannot remember.

For Tina, who spent an extended amount of time in China studying abroad, the extended interaction with Chinese nationals allowed her time to adapt her own presentation to blend in socially. Tina describes how anyone who stuck out of the racially homogeneous landscape would get a lot of stares. On the bullet trains Tina explained “I got a lot of those looks too when I first
was in China. Because I would dress like an American but I would look Chinese. And people
would look at me like ‘Are you American or are you Chinese? Are you a Westener? I don’t
know really what you are?’” This is the Othering that Kayla also felt when she was visiting
China for the first time. Yet, Tina spent enough time in China to actively change how she was
perceived. In a lot of ways, this adaptation was necessitated by these relentless interactions that
questioned what she is and asked her to explain the difference to everyone who asked. She
described, “I started wearing more Chinese clothes and soon the stares would decrease, and I
would just be another Chinese person. And it was really nice because I wouldn’t have to talk or
explain my story or I didn’t have to feel like a foreigner.” Changing the way that she presented
herself gave her access to Chinese spaces uninterrupted by her adopted (different) upbringing in
the United States.

Of note is Tina’s own playing with the cultural difference and the national assumptions
made in her racialization. She posed that she could get away with this ruse “[u]nless I started
talking and then they all realized ‘Oh my god this is a White person.’” As long as she did not
speak, she obtained access to a China that she might otherwise not have seen. This phrase reveals
not only how Tina thinks others perceive her, but how she sees herself in relation to the racially
homogenous bodies all around her. Back in Boston Tina often feels that her Chinese-ness, her
racial difference is exaggerated. Likewise, in China she has found that unless she manages her
perception and racial difference as “a White person” this difference is all that people see when
they speak to her. Tina, like many adoptees, finds herself in the catch-22 of being a forever
foreigner in both the US and China.

Ella and her friend captured this sentiment perfectly when voicing thoughts on returning
to China:
One of my really good friends who was adopted from China went back and she was like ‘It was weird because I felt at home but at the same time I felt like a visitor in my own home.’ And I almost wonder if you get more stares there as a visitor who cannot speak the language, versus living here, looking different.

When Ella’s friend talks about feeling like a visitor in ‘her own home’ she is attempting to capture the feeling of familiarity she sees in the faces of those around her, but the simultaneous sense that she is still foreign in China, never able to be native to that place. Likewise, Ella’s musing gets at the heart of being Othered in both the US context and the Chinese. It’s not optional for the Chinese adoptee experience difference, but rather the extent to which they will feel and recognize the feeling of it.
4. “Cultures” of Chinese Adoption

Introduction

This chapter explores the adoptee’s relationship to cultures and communities that may or may not claim or be claimed by the adoptee. By cultures I am referring to the partially expressed notions of Asianness and Chineseness that White parents teach their children whom they adopted from China, as well as a potentially radical and emergent Adoptee culture. Andrea Louie (2015) alludes to this emergent culture, though mainly focused on the raising of Chinese adoptees, in her monograph How Chinese are You? I expand on this notion, bringing in the voices of Chinese adoptees. The second section of this chapter will explore the transracial adoptees relationship to race, particularly their proximity to Whiteness.

Analyzing these themes is important to understand identity formation, specifically, racial identity formation. Omi and Winant reveal how race is, and has been, reduced to culture in the United States context (2015, p.21). On an individual level, what does this mean for an adoptee who is told that Chinese culture is traditional ribbon dances, Chinese takeout, Chinese New Year and the Harvest Moon Festival? Much in the way that immigrants entering the United States were told to assimilate, allowed to keep ‘acceptable’ notions of culture that did not conflict with particular White American values, the Chinese adoptive family has struggled to move past a celebration of acceptable (essentialized) notions of Chinese and Asian. These include ethnic or traditional food, some token holidays and various forms of cultural expression that do not challenge the dominant hegemonic order where White Anglo-Saxon Protestants values are privileged. As bell hooks notes in her piece Eating the Other, there is a truth in that “cultural,
ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate.” For many adoptive families this is a reality.

Reduced or partial notions of Chinese culture and cultures born out of the adoption experience need to be put into conversation with White “culture” because many Chinese adoptees find that these are the communities and worlds that they live and move through on a daily basis. The final section of this chapter explores how Chinese adoptees relates to race in their lives, particularly in their ability to assert a White identity. Transracial adoptees disrupt entrenched notions of race by challenging people’s assumptions about how they will or should racially identify. Although the identities that Chinese adoptees holds are complicated and nuanced, studying them is important because their seeming contradictions exposes the fallacy of biological race, singular and normative notions of the family, and provides insight into how Chinese adoptees are understanding their positionality as racialized subjects, particularly in this historic moment as a critical mass come of age and continue to think about their adoption.

Cultures of Chinese Adoptees

My conceptualization behind a culture of adoption is in part born out of Toby Alice Volkman’s 2005 edited collection, Cultures of Transnational Adoption, in addition to my reflections on Omi and Winant’s theorization around the reduction or conflation of race as culture (2015, p.21). Volkman’s work proposes that we understand adoption practices, like Chinese adoptee groups or group reunions, and rituals, like recreating baby pictures every year at reunions, as a part of a particular culture that emerges out of transnational adoption itself. She suggests that we these should be studied separately from other cultures such as Asian or Asian-
American cultures or Chinese cultures. This section will explore this suggestion, and attempt to build off of it by exploring adoptees’ perceptions of these practices and rituals.

Though Volkman’s work generally suggests that a culture of transnational adoption exists because they are enacted and structured by their adoptive parents, I want to interrogate how adoptee cultures may also be understood more broadly. The construction of Chineseness and Asianness by White adoptive parents is a specific expression, or imagined projection, of an “authentic culture.” I put this phrase in quotation marks to mark the fallacy that there is such a thing as an authentic culture. Rather, I argue that there are heterogeneous subcultures that are commonly understood through an invisible and hegemonic lens. This lens reduces each subculture to partial, occasionally superficial, and singular, “real” versions that are more authentic than those subcultures created and maintained by a community of immigrants that includes adults. Although all cultures left behind in the project and journey of migration—and thus all former cultures play a particular role as, in Benedict Anderson’s words, an imagined community—when adults who are not migrants themselves attempt to create this imagined culture for their adopted children, the project has the potential to reflect the kinds of distortions that are reflected in stereotypical narratives. One aspect of those narratives are the ways that culture and race are essentialized and treated “real” or “authentic.” Quite separate from the issue of intentions, the adoptees with whom I spoke became suspicious of the conception of Chinese culture they were presented, taught and socialized into. It is this “culture” that I concentrate on in the following section.

Chinese ‘Culture’

It was nice to have someone who really knew the culture personally and wasn’t kind of just, like my parents tried to introduce us [Stephanie and her sister] to stuff. But they were just guessing, they had never been to China before adopting us so they didn’t really know.
I open with this quotation because it reveals Stephanie’s perception that her parents “didn’t really know” about Chinese culture prior to adopting her. She finds comfort in her Chinese immigrant dance teacher because the teacher “knew the culture personally,” an impossibility for her parents. On the surface there is a simplistic and believable logic—of course most White American parents will not know much about Chinese culture, except for what they might have read in a textbook in school or picked up from popular culture. Of course adopting a daughter (or in this case, daughters) from China would suddenly change the parents’ relationship to China and what constitutes as Chinese identity. And of course an immigrant, someone born and raised in China would have a more personal, first hand knowledge of the culture. But again, this is the surface.

Underneath the surface of these understandings, we need to ask what “culture” is Stephanie referencing? How is Stephanie understanding Chinese culture and how is this being reinforced by her parents? From where does this understanding come from? The richness of being Chinese, the heterogeneity of various cultures and ethnic groups, is reduced to the experiences of a single immigrant dance teacher, whose background provides the necessary authenticating touch to be taken on face value as representing all of Chinese culture. Despite opportunities, or attempts, that Stephanie’s parents might have made to expose her to facets of Chinese culture, without this authentic background of “knowing the culture personally” any and all attempts can be written off as well intentioned but missing the mark. There is truth to these conclusions, as Stephanie states, her parents were “just guessing” because “they had never been to China before adopting us.” Recognizing their own inability to transfer Stephanie’s birth culture to her, her parents have enrolled her in a dance class with an instructor who will
hopefully be a mentor to her and pass down ethnic knowledge. This endorsement of the dance instructor’s knowledge shows that not only do her parents believe that the instructor represents authentic Chinese culture, but that they want their daughter to believe this too and learn from it. This is a markedly different approach from parents of Korean adoptees, who generally subscribed to the ‘as if begotten,’ mindset of the day, that an adopted child was to be reared as if they were the parent’s biological child. This colorblind mindset created even more of a rift between Korean adoptees sense of culture and sense of self (Park Nelson 2010). Parents of children adopted from China took a different approach, incorporating Chineseness into their family and child’s activities to the best of their ability. This partial or reductionist expression of a rich culture is present in many of the adoptees that I interviewed.

Similar to Stephanie, Ella was enrolled in Chinese dance when she was a child. In our conversation about whether or not she wants to return to China, she explained that she wanted to learn about the culture of China and felt that she could do that most productively if she went to China. She explains, “I want to go back because I want to see where I came from and what everything is like there. And not the life that I missed, but the culture, because I was never really taught about [it]. I did do Chinese dancing when I was younger, like ribbon dancing.” In juxtaposing how she was not taught about the culture with the caveat that she “did do Chinese dancing,” she qualifies her previous statement, conveying that she indeed was exposed to Chinese culture to a small degree. What’s interesting to me is that Chinese dance becomes the focal point of Chinese culture in Ella and many other Chinese adoptee’s lives. This ‘traditional’ or ‘cultural’ activity is the practice to which Chinese adoptees have access and are exposed and becomes the basis of their knowledge about what Chinese “culture” is. Although I concentrate on Chinese dance here, this well intentioned exposure to one aspect of Chinese culture with relevant
cultural authorities maps well onto other activities in which adoptive parents enrolled their daughters when they were growing-up, like Chinese language school or Chinese culture camps.

Perceptions of Chinese culture serve the purpose of filling the gap between the Chinese adoptee’s racial difference and their place in the White family. If their racial difference is not fully acknowledged or discussed actively, a need for acknowledgment has been sated by exposure to, endorsement of, and subscription to simplified notions of Chinese “culture.” Take Jessica’s discussion of her cultural exposure growing up:

I remember the little things, like I got this cute traditional Asian dress. And I would wear it all the time, but it was probably only for things like prom or if you were going to someone’s wedding. But I remember I would wear it all the time... I have a ton of pictures, there was a park that we used to go to all the time and just kind of soak up Asian culture I guess. I know I got this weird Asian bowl haircut that was not a good look, at all. But you know, it was cute because it was Asian.

Jessica expresses her satisfaction with her haircut “because it was Asian.” It is only the fact that this style was “Asian” that redeemed its weirdness, ultimately making it cute in Jessica’s view. Similarly, Jessica’s Asian dress that she loved so much becomes the cultural exposure that she remembers when she is an adult, even though she does the cultural significance of traditional dress in China (whether you would wear it to a Prom or a wedding). Jessica also remembers going to a park to “soak up Asian culture I guess.” This reveals Jessica’s own uncertainty about the purpose of going to the park, though she is aware that part of the intention behind it was to expose her to Asianness. These somewhat superficial exposures to Asian “culture,” Asian people, and Asian things are what Jessica has internalized as her ties to Chineseness. For better or for worse, a haircut, a dress, and proximity stand in for all her parents do not know about the country and continent from which Jessica comes, and their good intentions are reviewed in her reflections with me as reminding her and the other members of her family of difference that are neither fully hers nor full expressions of Chinese culture.
Exposures like dance classes are not the only ways that adoptive parents bring Chinese essence into the adoptees’ lives. A common practice is to celebrate Chinese New Year. Not only does this follow a similar line of logic as enrolling adoptees in dance classes--that they will attain some cultural knowledge from the experience--but this practice also finds institutional support in the broader Chinese adoptee community in the United States. For example, Sierra recalls how her “adoption agency had an annual [Chinese] New Year’s celebration.” Across the country adoption agencies sponsor Chinese New Year’s celebrations as a service to adoptive families. Much in the way that the parents reinforce simplified notions of Chinese cultures, agencies and families alike have found that Chinese New Year is a desirable, family friendly, and translatable, easily moving from Chinese tradition to the American holiday context so that they can enjoy the festivities with their children. Similar to adoption agencies, Families with Children from China (FCC), a popular organization created by adoptive parents and having chapters across the United States, routinely host Chinese New Year’s celebrations. These institutions are participatory, supporting and enabling parents’ promotion of superficial notions of Chinese culture.

So what do the adoptees think about this? Rebecca spoke to how her family celebrated the Harvest Moon Festival, another holiday palatable to the American imaginary:

We celebrated the Harvest Moon Festival... we would eat moon cakes. I always kind of thought that was a little odd, because anything that we did was just researched by our parents, you know it was like anyone with any cultural authority was there. And we would just go to the local park to look at the moon. It wasn’t a big deal. And we would go to a Chinese restaurant, which obviously isn’t super authentic I guess in Arlington Mass. But yeah we would do those things.

Despite well intentioned attempts of the adoptive parents to expose the Chinese adoptee to Chinese “culture,” the adoptee is aware of the dissonant and illogical nature of their White parents’ introduction of Chineseness into their lives. The lack of a “cultural authority” and the knowledge that parents “just researched” whatever cultural event was being introduced into the
family leaves the adoptee to question their own claim of the identity. If they have only ever known fake or extremely fabricated notions of Chineseness, and are aware of, or believe in the inauthentic nature of this cultural education, how are they supposed to claim an identity as an Asian-American, Asian, or Chinese? For many Chinese adoptees, the combination of being raised in a White household with White values and “White culture,” as well as the lack of authority over “real” Chinese culture, leaves them with the feeling that they cannot claim any of these ethnoracial identities.

Although this Chinese “culture” might not be authentically Chinese, it is important to look at the benefits of Chinese culture that the adoptee received growing up. I have often used the phrase ‘well intentioned’ in this section because parents of Chinese adoptees have tried to engage with their children’s cultural difference through various means of cultural exposure. Even if the Chinese adoptees today find their parents’ attempts at cultural education odd or inauthentic credit is due for the effort. Acknowledgment of the creation of a new culture, that of the adoptee, is also necessary to fully understand the place of essentialized culture in the world of the adoptee.

Adoptee Groups and Adoption Practices

I have attempted to make a distinction between those cultural traditions that exist outside of the Chinese adoptee’s family-- Chinese New Year, Chinese dance, etc.-- and those things that are wholly born out of the experience of adoption from China-- adoptee groups, reunion photos, ‘Gotcha Day.’ I have done this in the hope of further parsing out the reality of an existing or emergent Chinese adoptee culture, one born out of an adoptee community with similar or shared practices. What purpose do these communities serve and how should we understand the cultures that are born out of them? Can these cultures be understood as a facet of the heterogeneous
Asian-American experience, or should they be understood as multiracial, seeing as they are born out of interracial relations and transracial socialization? Is it possible that the Chinese adoptee experience can occupy both spaces at once, or is the experience singular such as to merit study separate from these other groups? Asian-American studies have much to offer to understanding the Chinese adoptee’s racialized experience, but Critical Mixed Race Studies has actively named these transracial lives and can both empathize with and theorize about their liminal existence. These are some of the questions and considerations that I have in mind when approaching these stories.

One of the hallmarks of Chinese adoption, and the practice that sets them apart from many other adoptees is the existence of adoptee groups. These groups were born out of the policies of the Chinese government that required parents to arrive in China and adopt in groups of families (Dorow 2006). Forming a close bond, many of these parents stayed in touch and gathered annually to reminisce, catch up, and provide an adoptee environment for their children. Kayla’s group, for instance, met actively while she was growing up, she explained that their “families would all meet up or go trick or treating or something. I guess Massachusetts is just really common too. I had that growing up as well. They still send Christmas cards and stuff.” Many adoptees described this group environment as important and special, it was one of the only places that they did not have to explain themselves or their story, a place where people just got it. This was Ella’s experience, “I think that it’s almost like an unspoken relationship or bond. ‘Oh yeah, I’m adopted from the same area or same country and I have white parents and that makes us similar and we can relate a little bit better than if one of us wasn’t adopted.’” These meetups were common and marked many Chinese adoptees’ upbringing. It is interesting how for Kayla these connections reach into the present, like the Christmas cards that her family gets every year.
This was similar to the experience that Jessica had, she described how these other adoptees “were some of the first people to come to the earliest birthday parties.” The groups played a secondary role to the adoptees’ adolescence, they existed to normalize, but were sometimes viewed as overrated because their parents orchestrated the affair. Jessica described how “then we kind of went our separate ways,” as they grew up. Jessica narratives her parents continuing fostering of this relationship explaining that “Then in college we all got back together. Our parents brought us back together.” Ultimately Jessica found it “was really cool to see where everyone went,” and this was only possible because her parents had created this space to begin with.

Both the adoptee and their parents benefit from these meetups in different ways. My data suggests that parents developed strong bonds with other adoptive over the course of their children’s adolescence. Dana explained how her group “recently just stopped [meeting], like two years ago, ‘cause everyone is getting older. But my parents still meet with [the other parents] twice a year.” This is interesting because it informs an investment of the parents in this network that generates an excitement to come together and share updates about their lives and reminisce about their shared experience of adopting from China separate from the social bonds of their adoptive children themselves. Additionally, we get the sense that there is something that the adoptees are not getting out of the meetups that their parents are.

Another practice that many adoptive families have participated in is celebrating or commemorating the adoption of the child. This practice goes by several different names, Gotcha Day, Family Day, or Adoption Day are the most common, and usually involve remembering the day that the Chinese adoptee met their adoptive family for the first time. Stephanie explains that rather than celebrate Gotcha Day, her family called it Coming Home day “because when I was
adopted, both of my parents did not get me. So it was the day I came home.” As a shared practice among Chinese adoptees, a celebration like Gotcha Day may be something to bond over when Chinese adoptees meet for the first time. Similar to the reunions of adoption groups that carried on without the children, Coming Home Day seems to be as much about the adoptee as it does about their parents relationship to their child’s adoption. Stephanie admits that, “to be honest, the day comes by and I do not even recognize it as my Coming Home day until my mom texts me, ‘Happy Coming Home Day!’ Or she sends me flowers at school or whatever. But I do not think of it at all.” The implications of Stephanie’s disinterest in her Coming Home day and her mother’s insistence on it are that her mother continues to ascribe adoption into Stephanie’s life, while Stephanie moves through the world disjoint from this identity.

The practices thus listed have been moderated or facilitated by parents, but as the Chinese adoptee community has begun to come of age they have also began to reflect on their common experiences. One way that Chinese adoptees have done this is through writing college application essays about their adoption. Rebecca explains how she “never ended up using [the practice essay] for college,” because she “thought it was too cliché and silly.” But it turned out that two of her Chinese adoptee friends also wrote college essays about their adoption.

We ended up swapping them, I don’t know why we decided to do this, because we thought it was funny that we all wrote about adoption. And it was so interesting because our personalities shown through in the essay. Because Melissa is very type B, go with the flow. And she was kind of like “Yeah I’m adopted, like whatever” and Meghan is very fiery and so she was like “this system is stupid, the Chinese government is stupid, blah blah blah.” And then mine was like “yeah, I’m adopted.” And I was a little contemplative about it, then I was like I moved on. It was something that happened to me and here’s where I’m at now. It was very different approaches and it was so reflective of our personalities.

Rebecca’s particular experience of writing a practice essay is revealed to be common practice when she finds out that two of her adoptive friends have done the same thing. There are not a lot
of opportunities to deeply reflect upon one’s identity in comparison to others who have a similar experience and have also deeply considered their stories. College essays are one of those moments, and however cliché it may be, being adopted is an important identity that one can reflect on in a way that colleges are excited about. Being able to share these stories with one’s friends is at once funny and profound. From the essays Rebecca glimpses each adoptees personality and grows closer to them, simply by sharing her story and having heard theirs.

Notably, the movie *Somewhere Between* has given adoptees a mirror for which to see themselves and their experiences reflected back. Directed by the mother of a Chinese adoptee, the documentary follows three different Chinese adoptees as they prepare for and travel to China. This film came out at a time that many Chinese adoptees were the same age as those portrayed in the documentary, young teens navigating their complex and multiple identities, searching for community and answers as they reflect on their adolescence and move into adulthood. Miriam explains the importance of the film to the Chinese adoptee community, remarking how its release came at “about the time I think a lot of adoptees around my age… were thinking about [being adopted from China] when that movie came out in 2011, 2012. And it was the first major, not mainstream, but as close to mainstream as you get with one of these things to come out and cause a lot of discussion, a lot of adoptees to think about their identities as a Chinese adoptee.” As a cultural touchstone for the Chinese adoptee community, the documentary is important because it created a space for adoptees to discuss with their parents their own opinions on adoption, as well as inspire Chinese adoptees to begin engaging with an identity based around their own experience.

College essays and *Somewhere Between* provide something that adoptee groups and Gotcha days do not-- the creation of space for adoptees to freely think about their experiences.
Adoptee groups, because they are created and maintained by adoptive parents for the majority of the adoptee's adolescence, may not be the place that they feel comfortable or able to explore or grow into a new understanding of their identity. On the other hand, Gotcha Day is about the act of being adopted, of being ‘got,’ rather than thinking about what that action means for the adoptee’s identity in the present. College essays are written by the adoptee for the adoptee and provide a space to express one’s self and one’s experience without a parental intervention or oversight. Likewise, Somewhere Between mapped well onto Chinese adoptees’ coming of age around the country and so they were able to see themselves in the participants, a mirror removed from a parent’s interpretation or framing.

A Challenge to Race: Adoptee Identities

What is evident is that adoption in the United States, particularly from China, has begun to create communities of Chinese adoptees that are growing up, becoming more self-reflective of their adolescence, the ways that they were brought up, and how the world sees them. This section will critically look at the adoptee’s racial identities, exploring the ways that their ascribed and asserted identities expose the illogical nature of race in the United States.

The transracial adoptee’s positionality sits at the nexus of cultural expectations, racial assumptions, and biological notions of race and family. Cultural expectations are the ways that both people of color (POC) and White people anticipate that the Chinese adoptee will be culturally Asian based solely off of their phenotype, a reduction of race to culture (Omi and Winant 2015). This is also true for the family as parents attempt to provide bits and pieces of “Chinese” or “Asian” culture to their Chinese adoptees. Other White adoptive parents and Asian-Americans expects that they will acculturate their ethnic children to their ethnic cultural heritage.
(Louie 2015). Although this is what is expected socially of the adoptive parents, the adoptee often finds that these efforts are inauthentic or insufficient, failing in the end to fill in the space of what was lost. The racial identity that they do feel, though, is White, because they only authentically know a ‘White culture,’ that they were raised in.

This is where the adoptee’s perceptions of themselves begins to conflict with those ascribed to them by strangers. A person’s phenotype is supposed to align with the way that they racially identify, so that someone with tight curls and dark eyes and skin is easily distinguishable as Black, and likewise, someone with straight hair, blue eyes, and light skin is categorized as White. The Chinese adoptee disrupts this logic when they assert that they are somehow White, contrary to their perceived race. Likewise, this is at times reinforced by others perceptions that they see them as White too. Outside of strict racial (il)logics, to say that transracial Chinese adoptees are only Asian would miss the larger scope of their experiences being raised in Whiteness and the privileges that this has upbringing has afforded them (White privilege through a proximity to Whiteness). This socialization is the realm of the socially constructed, though it borrows the terms Black, White, Asian, Native, etc. from the racial hierarchy, it does so because this is the language readily available to understand the world at large, the language that people can understand. By exposing the social nature of the race categories that we use every day, the transracial adoptee challenges notions of biological race.

At the same time, because adoptees are the children of their parents, though they do not share the same racial experience, they disrupt dominant understandings of the family. Much like race, ideas about the family are hegemonic. The nuclear family is not only the ideal, but the presumed structure. Implicit in these hegemonic notions is a belief that families are ideally constructed when they are biologically created. Parents conceive and give birth to children who
are their blood relations. This logic plays a part in race too, parents should be the same race as their children, parents that are different races should produce a mixed race child. Divorcing racial self-identification from racial biology one can better understand the transracial adoptee’s experience, as unnatural as this separation may feel. The Chinese adoptee is asked to assert different racial identities depending on the situation. Upon identifying with a certain race, whether this is the socially ‘right’ race for them to claim in any given instance, they are interrogated, asked to defend their choice and to verify that their claim of a certain identity is authentic. Being transracially adopted is complicated and my study’s participants shared with me their understanding of race in a racially stratified world.

Dreams of Whiteness

Li: When I was little, I used to dream I was White like them.

Chris: Dream when you were asleep, or daydream?

Li: A little bit of both.

Li’s quotation conveys a subconscious perception of herself. In the private and unmediated space of her dreams she is able to realize both a desire to be White and grapple with the fact that, phenotypically, she is not. I write this not to imply that Li wants to be White in a pathological sense, like Toni Morrison’s character Pecola Breedlove in The Bluest Eye (1970). Rather, I want to explore the ways that a desire to be White functions beyond a more typical reading of this as a move to privilege or an idealization of White beauty standards, though these are both present in the Chinese adoptee community. I want to highlight the feeling that some adoptees express that it would be easier if they were White like their parents, if they did not feel
their racial difference, and the reality that many transracial adoptees with White parents do feel White.

This sense of being White is seemingly unambiguous for Ella Healy who declared to me “I definitely would identify as either Caucasian or White, I guess.” Although she asserts definitively that she identifies as Caucasian or White, she qualifies the certainty with an “I guess” at the end of the sentence. Even a Chinese adoptee who is sure that they are not Asian, that they are White, is unconfident in the assertion of an unabashed White identity. What will other people think? How will they react? Other people’s racializing gaze is powerful in the world of the adoptee, much like it is for any minority that finds their race subdominant in the US.

For Gina, when she is asked “What are you?” she knows the response that people want to hear-- Chinese. At the same time, she finds it frustrating that answering ‘American’ would be unsatisfactory to the asking parties. She explains that “I also just identify as an American, I would say. I don’t know, that’s something I never really think about. I definitely, I just consider myself like anyone else.” Here American becomes “like anyone else,” a shared national identity, but I suggest that it also implies a racial identity, a White one at that. In fact, she continues, remarking that “American isn’t really the right word,” instead explaining that “I identify with whatever culture I grew up in, which wasn’t really China, because I was so young when I was adopted.” In this second thought, Gina is looking to describe her racial experience without having to explicitly name it as White. The identity ‘American’ disguises her difference and her proximity to Whiteness. She wants to be identified based on “whatever culture [she] grew up in,” that is, the White cultures and ethnicities of her parents.

For many, and like most students, adopted or not, attending college is the first time that Chinese adoptees have lived away from the families and communities that raised them. With this
transition comes a slew of racial anxieties. Chinese adoptees are leaving familiar spaces with people that know how to understand their unique experience. In college, people come from a diverse set of backgrounds and experiences, often without a framework to interpret the adoptee subject and their racially disruptive experience. Stephanie’s anxieties lay in her roommate’s perceptions of her based off of her White sounding (not ethnic) name:

> When I first moved into college my freshman year. You know how you get the email saying like ‘Oh you’re in this room and these are your roommates.’ My name sounds White, so my roommates, I think, pictured me as White. So, it’s always like, I feel like people do a double take when they see me in person, rather than just having my name.

Stephanie’s fears originate from the knowledge that people are going to make assumptions about her and her race based off of her name alone. This is brought to the forefront, especially for roommate matching, because the newly enrolled student is excited to meet their roommate and connect. Although it is highlighted in this situation, the feeling that people do a ‘double-take’ when they see her in person is generalizable to anyone who knows Stephanie only by name and not by face. Being questioned in these new communities creates the sense that the Chinese adoptee is abnormal, leading them in turn to question how normal their reality is or is not compared to others. Realizing their unique positionality is something that can only happen beyond the comfort of their communities where knowledge of their adoption may be commonplace.

Just as the transracial adoptee’s distinct positionality becomes apparent in college, finding themselves in monoracial affinity spaces reveals the distance between the adoptee experience and that of other Asians. Take Rebecca’s experience going to her college’s Asian Student Union:

> When I got to college I tried to join ASU, or I did join ASU, they didn’t kick me out or anything. I just didn’t feel like it was a good fit. It was like girls who would only date
Asian guys or girls that were just very different [from her]. And then I met the Koreans and I met the international students. Those were good friendships but also they were very different from me. I think that was when I became aware of how White I am.

Rebecca self-selected to leave her school’s Asian affinity group because it was not “a good fit,” she did not find people in the group with similar experiences or interests to her. Outside of phenotype, Rebecca did not find commonality to feel that she had a place in ASU. Presumably, the other Asians in the group were raised by Asian families, either in the US or abroad, and would not be able to relate to Rebecca’s experience of being raised by a White family. Although the structure of the ASU might have felt distancing, she explains that forming close and intimate friendships with a group of Koreans and a group of international students made her aware of “how White” she is. Taken together, her discomfort in the ASU and her friendships with other Asians not reared by White people, reveal an unquestioned racial identity that was socialized as she grew up. These experiences in college reveal the importance of new environments and the challenges that they present to adoptees in navigating their identities as well as insight into how the Chinese adoptee interacts with others’ perspectives.

Although Whiteness in the Chinese adoptee may be challenged by making new friends, there is a chance that certain friendships will reinscribe a White racial identity on the transracial adoptee. Much in the way that family members ascribe a White identity to their Chinese adoptees, White friends readily informed my participants how they do not see them as White. Although some challenged their friends on statements of these kinds, others were silent. In the same way that adoptees feel safe in their home environments, White friends who have known the Chinese adoptee for a long time might be more comfortable sharing their perceptions of the adoptee’s race to them. This was Jenny’s experience in high school:

There was one time in high school when, I was taking a class, it was called money management, and it was a class that-- it wasn’t a class you would take if you were an
honors students, it was an easy class... And my friend asked me [chuckles], she said “Are you the only white person in the class?” and I said “Rachel, I’m not white.” And she said “Well, you know what I mean.” So that was the one, I do always remember that moment. It was just kind of strange, and it might have just been how our high school was divided, more by like how smart you were and where you lived and in your class, versus, what you look like.

Reflecting on situations like this they are indeed “kind of strange.” What compelled Jenny’s friend Rachel to use race as the distinction between Jenny and the other students enrolled in the class? Why not just say “Are you the only honors student in the class,” or “Are you the only upper class student?” Perhaps this was not Rachel’s first instinct because she sees herself in Jenny, and claiming Jenny as like her in terms of race bridges some kind of gap, an apparent phenotypic difference that needs erasing. Likewise, Rachel and Jenny’s similar class identities are most likely not as salient as their racial differences. In recalling this encounter, Jenny cannot help but chuckle at the ridiculous nature of the declaration that she is White. Jenny is not afraid to correct her friend, assuring her that she is not White and to classify her friend’s assertion as misguided and a mischaracterization. What is compelling is Rachel’s retort, “you know what I mean.” Upon reflecting on this interaction, Jenny can only surmise that Rachel might have been conflating race and class because her school was more divided by intelligence and “where you lived,” than by “what you look like,” (i.e. race). Of note is Jenny’s declaration that she “always remember that moment” (emphasis added). What makes this racialization different than others that Jenny has experienced? Is it Rachel’s proximity to Jenny, as friend, someone who supposedly knows her and is trusts, that makes it surprising that she has just raced Jenny in an illogical way, or a way that does not actually map onto how Jenny sees herself? It reveals the distance between Rachel’s perception of Jenny and Jenny’s self-identification, or at least comfort with claiming a White identity, disturbing the notion that Rachel knows Jenny well. It might also
be that the encounter was so explicit, Rachel’s assertion was so persistent, that it sticks out in
Jenny’s memory.

Continuing with Jenny’s experiences, she shared with me that though this particular
moment stuck out it is not the only time that a friend has ascribed to her a White identity.

I’ve also had that comment before. They are like “Oh, I don’t think of you--” I’m not
exactly sure on the wording, but it’s like “I don’t think of you as Asian, or Chinese,” or
they say, “Oh, I think of you as White.” And I guess, I don’t think that’s ever bothered
me, but it’s kind of put things into perspective. And I don’t know why it’s happened
multiple times.

I wanted to include this excerpt to emphasis the different ways that this racialization or erasure of
racial difference is presented to the transracial adoptee. These interactions are by no means
limited to Chinese adoptees, and they really do “put things into perspective.” They reveal not
only the erasure of racial difference operating in the White friends’ minds, but their need to
express that to the adoptee, lest they should attempt to assert an Asian, Asian-American,
Chinese, or a POC identity, anything ‘deviant’ to this more ‘true’ White racial identity. In many
ways these comments retract the agency of the adoptee to identify with another group or
community, because despite a clear racial difference, their friends only see a White girl. This
does not stop Jenny from disagreeing with her friends, she feels the need to correct them every
time, but this need to correct is born out of a want to be accurate or true to her phenotype, rather
than a challenge to their choosing an identity for her. She corrects them “because I’m not White,
and I think if I said that I was I would get a weird look, like ‘Really?’... And I do correct them
because I am Asian, in the physical sense, and I would be lying to myself if I wasn’t.” There are
two explanations presented by Jenny; both attempt to align with the dominant racial hierarchy.
First, she invokes the reactions that she would receive if she were to say she was White -- people
would respond incredulously something she would rather not deal with. Then, Jenny sites her
phenotypic presentation and the fact that she “would be lying to” herself is she tried to say otherwise. Comments such as these make the color line evident in the adoptees life as they navigate notions of race not only in the world at large, but internally as well.

Reactions to ascriptions of White identity to the Chinese adoptee are diverse, take Dana’s thoughts on the process:

It’s just interesting how other people also see it, and maybe I’m also identifying with it because I’m letting them say that about myself. You know, that’s another thing, it’s like, maybe I’m not... I mean I’m not trying to offend anyone, I’m just trying to think of the best way to explain it.

Dana is unsure whether her choice to stay silent on her friends’ assert that “‘You’re such a White girl’” or you are “‘just like us’” conveys that she is actually identifying with what they are saying. She explains that she is not “trying to offend anyone,” with her resonance with Whiteness, an attempt to make sense of her lived reality, searching for the words to best explain it to those who have not lived it. She fears that people will be upset that she feels White. It is worth imploring who would be offended by her identification with Whiteness? Clearly, not her White girlfriends who have already affirmed her claim to Whiteness. Living in the liminal space, being between Whiteness and color, having a foot in both privilege and oppression, means that parties on both sides of these borders will protest her identification. People of color will question her intention behind claiming Whiteness, and if the answer is not deemed reasonable enough, then these groups will disavow her, mark her as an opportunistic deserter of the struggle. On the flip side, White people will interrogate an adoptee’s credentials to claim Whiteness: why would Whiteness, the seat of privilege, open its arms to an Asian? It will only do so if the subject poses no threat to White privilege and power.

These examples have thus explicated how the Chinese adoptee understands the ascription or highlighting of their racial difference. But are these transracial adoptees constantly having
their racial identities made salient? The truth is that the majority of the time Chinese adoptees are not thinking about how their racialized by strangers, family, and friends until it is brought up in their lives. For Ella, who strongly identified as “definitely not Asian” and “Caucasian or White” it is not until she sees herself that she is reminded of her racial difference.

Sometimes I have to look in a mirror and be like “oh yeah, you look different.” But then I’ll be walking around with my friends and I won’t notice it until we hit a glass window and I’m like “oh look, I’m a lot—” Well I’m also very small and they’re all White, blond, tallish girls and I’m just there.

Here we can read how Whiteness is embodied rather than sought after. It is not that Ella actively wants to look like her friends who are “White, blond, tallish girls,” but that she does not see herself as distinct or different than them until she encounters her reflection which contradicts this self-concept. Ella feels as though she embodies a White identity and that the world sees this as well, but she has to shatter this sense when looking into a mirror and reminding herself of her racial difference.
5. Conclusion

Adoption from China has continually entered into the national consciousness, even though it peaked in 2008 the first generation of adoptees, adopted in the mid-90s, is just coming of age today. Chinese adoption has entered the mainstream so much so that it merited inclusion in the popular television show Modern Family, now in its 9th season. Throughout this thesis I have worked hard to center the perspectives of adoptees, a voice that has been underrepresented in scholarship on adoption. Studying Chinese adoptees is important as its first generation of adoptees become adults and start to reflect on their experiences growing up in White families. Their experiences and the ways that they narrate their lives will be important to the next generation of Chinese adoptees who come after them, or for any generation of transracial adoptees. Although my data did not suggest that many Chinese adoptees are thinking critically about their adoption and the systems, both legal and institutional, that brought them to the United States, it does suggest that this might be because many of my participants are coming into adulthood and only just beginning to reflect on their adolescence. As my conversation with Dana suggests, when she spoke to her girlfriends about their plans to have kids, there are other situations that the adoptee has yet to be exposed to that inspire reflection on one’s own experience.

Like experiences that bring up adoption, the adoptee will continue to encounter race in their lives, and will continue to be racialized by others. Because race is unavoidable in any person of color’s life, the adoptees racial identity will continue to be interrogated and challenged, no matter what identity they ultimately choose. If they choose to identify predominantly with their Whiteness, with the family that raised them and the culture that they know, other people of
color will surely question and challenge them to justify this choice asking ‘Is it that they wish to move closer to Whiteness, to move away from minority status?’ Likewise, if they choose to identify with their Asian heritage they will surely be questioned not only by their White friends and family members, but by other Asians who ask “how Asian are you?” What about individuals who feel both justified and a need to claim both of these identities in order to be whole? Studying the transracial subject exposes the fiction of race in American society, the socially constructed nature of the categories that dictate much of our lives and interactions with others.

In saying socially constructed, I mean to invoke the experiences of the adoptees who voiced how they felt ‘White-washed’ because of the racial socialization that they received growing up. In relation to other Asians, they feel insufficient; they cannot claim that racial identity because they were not raised in Chinese culture. At the same time, based on their phenotype alone, the only option that they have is to choose to identify as Asian or else be seen by everyone else in society as foolish -- the adoptee who deserves sympathy because they do not ‘know how it (race) works.’ The truth of the matter is that no one else knows how it works either. What else accounts for adoptees’ White friends who think of them as White when they are clearly Asian? Race as a system is illogical and is constantly changing to make sense of our world inventing, modifying, and adapting systems of racial classification ad hoc to account for racial projects that expose its falsity.

Transracial adoption is a grand racial project, one that is constantly laying bare the fiction of race. The transracial adoptee becomes the site of racial crisis for White parents, White friends, friends of color, Asian communities, Asian American communities -- anyone and everyone who is invested in racial boundaries, monoraciality and the racial hierarchy. Parents attempt to reconcile this racial difference of their adopted child through the essentialization of culture, an
easy and consumable stand in for Asianness. Likewise, when friends comment on how they see the Chinese adoptee as White they reveal their own need to make sense of having a friend who they know is Asian, but who was raised in a household exactly like theirs. If navigating the adoptee’s racial identity with the people who are closest to them wasn’t difficult enough, misunderstandings about the adoptee’s positionality are also exhibited in Asian communities.

Upon returning to China, adoptees are made to feel their difference, even though they appear the same as everyone around them, they will always be their White parents’ children. This is the difference in socialization, of a socially constructed racial identity, at play in the adoptee’s life.

If the adoptee’s experience is so confusing and disrupts race so much, how are we to understand anything about them? This is where Critical Mixed Race Studies and communities of other adoptees can intervene. To the mixed race individual, and to the scholar of multiraciality, self-identifying with multiple racial heritages makes sense. Scholars of multiraciality theorize about liminality, the state of being in between, about borderlands and composite identities. This theorization and language begins to capture part of the adoptee experience. Through multiraciality questions about not being enough for one space or the other find an answer, or at least a community of people who feel the same way. Although multiraciality shares many commonalities with transracial adoptee experiences, it does not share all of them. For the majority of Chinese adoptees, a monoracial identity is easily assigned to them by others based solely upon their phenotype. This means that although some of their experiences with race might be better understood through the lens of multiraciality, Chinese adoptees will not share all the experiences of mixed folks. In so far as it is a helpful comparison, transracial and mixed race identities should be put next to each other. But we should not be afraid to depart from this comparison when it loses its ability to help further our understanding.
When both traditional notions of race and multiracial theories alike can no longer account for the adoptee’s experience, we must turn to adoptee communities as they reflect on their own lived experiences. Born out of these spaces and groups, narratives of adoption and experiences of adoptees can begin to make sense of a seemingly incoherent set of identities. This is where adoptees become and be their whole selves, claiming a distinct identity apart from the claims of other groups.
6. Bibliography


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### 7. Appendices

#### Appendix A: Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age at Adoption (in months)</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>How do you identify racially? (Interview)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tina Morieux</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hunan</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Racially? [Surprised] Like, I identify as Asian, or Asian-American.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephanie Martin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hunan</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Um, Chinese.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina Stolberg</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hefei</td>
<td>Chinese/Asian-American</td>
<td>I obviously know people are like ‘What are you?’ And they’re like ‘Are you Hawaiian? Are you Vietnamese?’ I’m like, no, I’m Chinese. But I also just identify as an American, I would say. I don’t know, that’s something I never really think about. I definitely, I just consider myself like anyone else. I don’t really ever think about identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Swanson</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hunan</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>I guess, I mean, Asian. East Asian. Because that’s what everyone sees when they see me. Although my name, Rebecca Swanson, is very white, and culturally I’m 100% White, I don’t speak any Chinese, I know very little about China. Culturally 100% white, physically Asian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella Healey</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hubei</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>So racially I identify as definitely not Asian... Like White. But I’m aware of my race. So like I know that some people will assume certain things of me because.. But at the same time when I’m with my friends I forget about that. And then sometimes something will happen where I remembered that... I definitely would identify as either Caucasian or White, I guess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter Cross</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Um, I guess I would say Asian-American. The reason I hesitate is because I think that’s kind of a vague statement. Because there are so many different types of and mixtures of that... I was adopted from China so...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Racial/Mixed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Savannah Healey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18 Jiangxi</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Parker</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10 Anhui</td>
<td>Chinese + American/White</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenny Miller</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7 Guangxi (Autonomous Region)</td>
<td>Asian, Chinese.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sierra Meyers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14 Zhejiang</td>
<td>Chinese-American, yeah.</td>
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<td>Miriam Allen</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5 Jiangsu</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Jessica Nueman</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Chinese-American</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Zoe Thompson</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9 Guangxi (Autonomous Region)</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dana Delgado</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24 Anhui</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
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</table>

I think I would said I’m Asian-American. Like I’m pretty white washed, but I still sort of identify as an Asian, because that’s how I look, I guess.

So on the Common App and stuff, I wrote that I was Chinese/Asian and White. Just ’cause, I mean, so I’m from China, so I’m obviously Chinese. But I never grew up with that anything. So it wasn’t a part of my life. So I feel like it would be misleading to say I was just Chinese. And it would very obviously be misleading if I said I was just White, American.

I would -- racially… I would say I’m Chinese.


I would say I’m pretty white, [laughs] because of where I grew up and just my family...but I know I’m Chinese, if that makes sense [laughs].
Appendix B: Interview Script

I. Background

A. How old are you?
B. Where did you grow up?
C. How long have you lived in the Boston area?
D. Are you a currently a student? What are/did you major in?
E. How would you describe/or how would you identify your adoptive family’s racial or ethnic background.
F. How do you identify racially?
G. Where were you adopted from?
H. How old were you when you were adopted?
I. Do you have any memories from your home country?

II. Childhood / Family

A. Can you talk to me about what your experience growing up as an adoptee has been like?
B. Was there ever a time that your being a different race from your parents came up in your adolescence?
C. Did your parents try to expose you to the culture of your country of birth? Can you give examples?
D. Do you have any siblings?
   1. Are they also adopted?
   2. Can you talk specifically about what growing up a different race from your sibling has been like?
E. Can you think of a time when you imagined what growing up in your country of origin might have been like?

F. Do people ever comment upon how you look in relation to the rest of your family? Can you give an example?

G. Did your parents tell you any stories about your adoption when you were growing up?

H. Have your parents ever talked to you about why they chose to adopt?

III. Roots

A. Have you ever thought about going back to [China or Korea]?
   1. If yes, why do you want to go back?
   2. If no, why do you not want to go back?

B. Have you ever tried to learn the language from the country you were born?
   1. If yes, why do/did you want to?

C. When you think of [China or Korea] what comes to mind?

D. How would you describe your relationship to [China or Korea]?

E. If you could talk to your birth parents, what would you say to them?

IV. Adoption System

A. What do you know about the international adoption system?
   1. Was there ever a moment when you wanted to learn about it?
   2. What do you think about the international adoption system as it stands today?

B. Would you ever consider adopting yourself?
   1. Why or why not?

C. What do you think about the one-child policy?
D. What would you say to a prospective adoptive parent who is thinking of adopting someone of a different race from them? And someone of the same race?

E. What would you say to a prospective adoptive parent who is considering adopting internationally? What about adopting domestically?

F. What do you think of the fundraisers that some potential parents use to fund international adoptions?

G. Do the identifiers transnational and transracial mean anything to you?

V. Community

A. Did your parents ever try to find role models that were the same race as you when you were growing up?
   1. How do you think that you might have benefited from these relationships?

B. Would you change anything about the way you grew up (you were raised)?

C. Have you ever talked to other adoptees your age about their experiences being adopted?
   1. If so, what did you talk about?
   2. If not, if you could talk to another adoptee, what would you say?

D. If you could give advice to a younger adoptee, what would you tell them?

Do you know of any other adoptees who might be willing to participate in my study?
Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Christopher Malafronti, and this fall I will be a senior at Swarthmore College. This summer I’m collecting data for my upcoming senior thesis on Chinese and South Korean adoptees living in Boston and the surrounding area who are between the ages of 18-30. I’m interested in how transnational adoptees understand their adoption, their identities as adoptees, and the adoption system in their country of origin.

Your name came up in a conversations with [NAME OF PERSON], who suggested that you might be interested and willing to participate in my study.

Would you be willing to meet for a interview of about 45-60 minutes long? We could meet at a time and location of your choice. The interview would also include a short 15 question survey about ethnic identification. I would keep your information confidential and not include your name or identifying details in my thesis.

Thank you very much for your consideration, I hope to hear from you soon!

Best,

Christopher Malafronti
Swarthmore College ’18
Appendix D: The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) Survey

In this country, people come from many different countries and cultures, and there are many different words to describe the different backgrounds or ethnic groups that people come from. Some examples of the names of ethnic groups are Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, Asian American, Chinese, Filipino, American Indian, Mexican American, Caucasian or White, Italian American, and many others. These questions are about your ethnicity or your ethnic group and how you feel about it or react to it.

Please fill in: In terms of ethnic group, I consider myself to be _______________________

Use the numbers below to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement (Circle).

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

1- I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

2- I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

3- I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

4- I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

5- I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

6- I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree
7- I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

8- In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

9- I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

10- I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

11- I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

12- I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.

(4) Strongly agree  (3) Agree  (2) Disagree  (1) Strongly disagree

13- My ethnicity is

(1) Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and others
(2) Black or African American
(3) Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and others
(4) White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American; not Hispanic
(5) American Indian/Native American
(6) Mixed; Parents are from two different groups
(7) Other (write in): ________________________________

14- My father's ethnicity is (use numbers above) _____________________

15- My mother's ethnicity is (use numbers above) _____________________