



Where do I belong? An in-depth look at how adoption affects identity  
formation in Chinese American adoptees

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**Abstract:**

The first wave of Chinese American Adoptees adopted from China in the early 1990 to mid-1990s are now coming of age and beginning to experience independence living away from their adoptive families and communities. Through 8 in-depth interviews, this exploratory research examines how adoptees create a sense of belonging for themselves and resist marginalization and exclusion due to racism, assimilation, loss, exclusion, and abandonment. While exploring how the international system of adoption supports Western notions of white superiority, this research simultaneously explores how adoptees destabilize the racist notions of “Chineseness” and “Americanness.” A major finding of this study is how adoptees redefine their experience for themselves, through using terms such as “none/zero generation” or Chinese diaspora. Another major result is that adoptees start to research and question the adoption narrative told to them by their parents. This study found that adoptees expressed empathy for others, because of their own experiences and the challenges they faced being adopted.

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## **Introduction:**

I grew up with the dominant narrative of adoption being inherently “good”. From what my adoptive mother and I know, I was abandoned at a hospital soon after I was born because my family knew I would be found and taken care of. I was then taken to an orphanage where I lived until I was 16-months old. My Chinese mother was unable to take care of me, but I do not know exactly why. My adoptive mother learned from the orphanage director that my birth mother may have been a migrant farmer passing through the area of Hangzhou, where I was born, or that she may have already had other children and was unable to keep me due to China’s “one-child policy.”

My adoptive mother had tried to adopt me earlier, but China closed down adoptions for a year in 1993 to bring their adoption standards up to par with western standards. My adoptive mother came and adopted me on May 26th, 1994. The first food she ever fed me

was strawberries. I was malnourished and had heat rashes when she took me “home” to Seattle, in the United States.

When I was younger I often asked what my life would have been like in China if I had stayed. My adoptive mother from the orphanage director that I would be working in a factory from a very young age and then I would be married by the time I was twelve or fourteen so that I would no longer be taken care of by the orphanage, but by my husband.

This story has always made me feel like I should be thankful to be adopted. Often when I was younger I would realize I never felt a sense of belonging in the white area of Seattle where I lived and went to school due to my Chinese appearance, but then I quickly found out how alienated I felt when I was around Chinese people with whom I felt that I did not share a sense of shared culture or language with.

Through critically examining adoptees’ narratives that they have created for themselves with the help of others, I hope to problematize international adoption itself and bring up the question of “who is adoption for?”. I hope to use this project to create a deeper understanding of the subtle forms of resistance to racism and the pressures to assimilate into whiteness..

Thousands of children have been adopted from China since the late 1980s. Research has been conducted by sociologists and psychologists to better understand why adoption from China is so popular here in the U.S. There is limited qualitative research on how adoption affects Chinese American adoptee’s formation of their own identity and personal narrative. Through the use of in-depth interviews, this exploratory research provides deeper insight into the Chinese American adoptee experience.

Inequality is a root cause of adoption. There are many “push factors” such as the “One-Child-Policy,” an internal state policy of China, a punitive form of family planning, and “pull factors” such as global inequality that allows for middle to upper class white people from first world countries to adopt internationally from China. I use the notion of *colonization* to partly discuss the removal of babies of color from poor countries by white parents living in “rich” western countries. Chinese adoption is a result of unequal power relation that exists between the birth parents and the adoptive parents and China and the United States. Colonization in this sense is closely tied to the assimilation of Chinese adoptees into dominant white culture. In assimilative practices of adoption, “leans towards reproducing...—middle-class American kinship and its hegemonic whiteness and heterosexuality” (Dorow, 2006, p. 5).

Due to the nature of transracial adoption, adoptees face a unique set of challenges growing up. Through exploratory research I seek to use this project as a way to learn more about how adoption impacts adoptee’s identity. From facing abandonment by their birth parents and their removal from the Chinese homeland and heritage, I want to learn how these issues impact adoptees in how they view themselves and others. This research explores the impact of being socialized and growing up in a white community that never fully accepts them while also examining adoptee’s feelings of marginalization by the Asian Pacific Islander community. It examines the tools adoptees use to combat marginalization, racism, and ignorance. This study also explores ways Chinese American adoption upholds and feeds into a system of white superiority. This research is also important in providing insight to

different individuals and organizations focused on creating change surrounding anti-racism, reductions in ethnocentrism and essentialist notions of identity.

Although I feel I have personally benefited from adoption and so have many of the adoptees I interviewed, I use this exploratory research as a way to critique the ways that the institution of adoption upholds systems of global and local oppression such as racism and economic inequality. I also hope to generate more knowledge about Chinese American adoptees and their identity formation(s), their experiences with oppression and their subtle ways of resisting systems of oppression. I also hope to show how Chinese American adoptees destabilize the racist essentialized notions of “Chineseness,” and “Americanness.”

I recognize the critiques of adoption as being a violent system that removes children from “poor 3<sup>rd</sup> world” countries to live a better life in “rich 1<sup>st</sup> world” countries like the United States. This white “savior” complex, one of the major factors in international adoption today is problematic because it is closely tied to the violent colonization of the majority of the world. There are close ties between international adoption and U.S. colonialism, because in both cases, there is an infantilization of the “other” and an assumption that these “3<sup>rd</sup> world” people need *our* help because they are backwards. This is not too different from transnational adoption in Asia where there is an emphasis on the stereotype of Asians being unfit/unable to care for their own children (Trenka et al, 2006). A global economic inequality is represented in the ability of adoptive families to pay thousands upon thousands of dollars to rescue a baby from rural China where their family was too poor to care for them.

It is not my position or the goal of this thesis to decide for adoptees that they have a better life being adopted or would have a better life not being adopted. I do believe that Chinese American adoptees lose so much (culture, as sense of belonging etc) when they are adopted and assimilated into the dominant white western world. I do use some strong language to characterize adoption such as comparing it to colonization, but I do not feel comfortable going as far as calling adoptive parents colonizers. Adoption is personal to me which has made it more difficult for me to be critical of it. While I criticize the role adoptive parents play in the lives of their children, I firmly believe that the greater system/institution of adoption is what perpetuates a system of inequality and racism and does not help the deeper root causes (global economic inequality, lack of access and knowledge to family planning/contraception, history of white superiority etc.) of why there are so many babies in need of adoption within the “3<sup>rd</sup> world”. Many people see adoption as a “win-win” situation for both the babies in need of adoption and the parents in need of a child. This is not entirely wrong, because I know that I feel I have benefited from adoption. What is often forgotten is the process of silencing of the hardship that comes from loss, grief, abandonment and racism that adoptees face.

I have conducted 8 in-depth interviews (with a duration of 22-minutes to an 1 hour and 24 minutes) with Chinese American adoptees here at the Claremont Colleges about their adoptive experience here in the U.S. The questions include topics such as their feelings towards being adopted from China, their experiences with their Chinese heritage here in the U.S., and how/if they identify as having a multiplicity of identities. In order to satisfy the Disciplines of Sociology and International Intercultural Studies, the theoretical groundings of

this research are in postcolonial studies and critical race theory while the methodology and literature review are grounded in the research process for sociology.

### **Historical Background:**

Adoption of East-Asian children dates back to the Korean War and the foundation of the Holt International Adoption Agency as a Christian rescue mission by Harry Holt and his wife (Volkman, 2003). Chinese adoption is a relatively new phenomena. In 1988, only twelve immigrant visas were given to children adopted from China by the U.S. State Department. This number has steadily risen since then to 5,053 in 2000 (Johnson, 2004). By 2008, close to 70,000 children, ranging from less than a year old to college aged, residing in the U.S. were adopted from China (Evans, 2008). Chinese adoption differed from other international adoption due to the strict rules set for adoptive parents that required them to be over 35-years old and childless, starting in 1992. Another major difference is that the majority of babies given up for adoption are females (Johnson 2004). In 2011, and the preceding decade, up to one third of all international adoptions were from China (Tan and Jordan-Arthur 2012).

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping instituted the famous “one-child policy” in order to reform China. He made population control a main priority of state planning. Since the implementation of this policy and its continuation has caused a range of problems leading to international adoption including, “female infant abandonment, the obstruction of adoption inside China, and the denial of basic citizenship rights for many “over-quota” children (Johnson, 2004). The traditional values of Chinese culture often marginalize women due to the formation of kinship groups centered around male dominance. This dominance is often

reinforced in state policy where rural families are restricted in their movement and welfare is defined by males who traditionally care for their parents in their old age. Women traditionally take care of their husbands families after marriage. This leads many families to see their daughters as “belonging to other people” (Johnson, 2004, p. 5).

In China, the responsibility of family planning and birth control is given to the women. Many times birth control options are limited to sterilization. When an unplanned birth happens, women are often to blame. Husbands and in-laws pressure their wives to give birth to sons and sometimes are abused and abandoned when they fail to produce (Johnson, 2004). Traditional Chinese Confucian values and population control led to a high gender imbalance of girls to boys. Many girls were never legally registered and were hidden from the government through informal local adoptions and fostering (Johnson, 2004). The importance of bloodlines in Confucius Chinese culture make it harder for orphaned children to be adopted domestically (Johnson, 2002). One of the competing ideologies that has its roots in the Ming and Qing Dynasties is that of *Minglingzi* or “mulberry insect child.” This term is used to refer to children adopted outside bloodlines. It comes from a folk tale of a Wasp who takes in the children of a mulberry insect and transforms them into their own. It emphasizes the “likeness” of a child to their family as trumping the importance of biological bloodline of a child (Johnson, 2002, p. 384). These preceding factors make up the “push factors” that led to the flow of Chinese babies to Western countries.

Due to the traditional gender bias, in the 1990s, most of the girls abandoned and taken to orphanages were healthy, 2nd born girls. Domestically, healthy orphaned boys were a rare

commodity and often times and peasants waited outside in near by hotels to adopt even sickly boys due to the long waiting lists of families that needed a boy (Johnson, 2004).

China opened their doors to international adoption in 1990. In early 1990s, more domestic adoptions occurred than international adoptions as orphanages sought to fight over crowding. While the number of international adoptions exponentially increased in the 1990s, the number of domestic adoptions remained consistently low (Johnson 2002). This is partially due to the formation of a nationwide system created by China to handle to increasing flow of Chinese children out of the country through international adoption. The mandatory fee of \$3,000 USD given to the welfare organizations such as foster care and orphanages has helped to improve the quality of care and the infrastructure of most orphanages. This policy was meant to deter domestic adoptions of children into families with pre-existing children and to have another excuse to monitor local families. While hindering domestic adoptions within China, this policy encouraged international adoption.

Domestically, within the United States, “pull factors” that encouraged the increase in international adoption. One pull factor was the stigmatization of the children within the domestic foster care system (Lee, 2006). Another factor was the movement in 1972, by the National Association of Black Social Workers to discourage the placement of African-American children with White adoptive families (Clemetson, 2006). Then in 1999, China lowered the required age of prospective parents to 30-years old. The lowering of the age restriction and some other restrictions on adoption was meant to increase domestic adoption rates (Cao, 2004). In the U.S., Many parents who are unable to have biological children due to fertility problems chose to adopt internationally (Cao, 2004).

International adoption is being increasingly recognized as an “industry” due to the amount of money pumped in to the process. In 1999, on average, transnational adoption was priced to be around \$12-\$25,000 USD, excluding the price of foster care, travel, and medical care (Trenka et al, 2006). Today, according to Holt International Children’s Services, one of the largest adoption agencies in the United States, Chinese adoption can cost a family up to \$40,000 USD. Those who are able to afford the high price of adoption are mainly white middle/upper class well educated couples. According to a 2014 U.S. News and Worlds report, domestic adoptions through the foster system cost anywhere from \$0-\$2,500 USD. The ability of wealthy, majority white parents from western countries to go in and “buy” a baby that is assumed to come with “less baggage” than a foster child from within the United States is often misleading. Even though many Chinese American adoptees are adopted before they are 9 months old, there are many other issues such as feelings of rejection by an entire country and culture and unresolved issues of racism within the United States that can complicate the assimilation process.

### **Literature Review:**

#### **Parent’s Construction of the Adoption Narrative**

Parents play an important role in the formation of their child’s identity. From the different cultural experiences that they choose to expose their children to, to the different narratives that they choose to tell their children about their past, parents have large influence in shaping the trajectory of their children.

In their study titled, “It Was Like This, I Think: Constructing an Adoption Narrative for Chinese Adopted Children” Chatham-Carpenter use qualitative survey data collected

from 35 adoptive parents with children from China to further explore how the *abandonment* narrative is told to the child. Many researchers found that the majority of the adoptive parents surveyed chose to tell the dominant birthparent narrative which portrayed the Chinese birth parents in a more positive light while emphasizing the positive aspects of adoption (Chatham-Carpenter, 2012 and Fong and Wang, 2001). The dominant birth parent narrative includes: the acknowledgement of two mothers (birth/adoptive), the hurt the birth mother probably felt when giving up a child, the pain that the child felt missing their birth mother, and how the child is now being cared for and loved by their adoptive parents (Chatham-Carpenter, 2012, p.178). By emphasizing the “heroic” aspect of their role in the adoption story, adoptive parents create a pathway to their own acceptance by the child.

This strategy to explaining adoption is similar to what researchers Rowena Fong and Anne Wang found in their study of 10 families with adoptive children. When parents are challenged with explaining their adoptive child’s abandonment, most parents chose to tell the facts and place the adoption story in historical/social context of the “one-child policy.” The factual telling helps to minimize any resentment that children might feel towards China and their birth parents (Fong and Wong, 2001, p. 27). Fong and Wang found that adoptive parents work to instill a positive identity in their daughters in five different ways including: creating a birth heritage, instilling pride in their Chinese identity, including the adoptive parents’ story, explaining abandonment, and then if needed, dealing with their child’s medical/physical needs (Fong and Wang, 2001, p. 23). The historical context of abandonment allows for adoptive parents to explain the greater forces behind their adoptive

child's birth mother giving them up. It helps to lower the pain associated with being given up for adoption.

### **Creation of a Birth Heritage**

Many parents feel the need to create a "birth story/birth heritage" for their children to help provide them with a sense of where they came from. In doing so, adoptive parents incorporate different cultural customs from their child's culture of origin. In addition to the positive birth story, Fong and Wang found that adoptive parents work to create a balance in the creation of a birth heritage for their adopted child. Some researchers found that parents want wanted to integrate cultural customs into the daily lives of their children, but not too much in fear of creating an unwanted sense of difference in their child (Fong and Wang, 2001; Dorow, 2006). Several studies stated the importance of parents of transracial adoptees in instilling a sense of pride in their child's cultural identity and heritage, in order to help them fight stereotypes and racism (Fong and Wang 2001; Tan and Nakkula, 2004; Grice 2005; Boykin and Toms, 1985).

Many times adoptive parents are inconsistent in their messages surrounding their Chinese cultural heritage due to a difference in what they believe and what support they actually provide towards their child's ethnic socialization. These inconsistent messages surrounding culture can lead the adoptive child to have lower self-esteem and lower levels of adjustment in adolescence (Mohanty, 2013, DeBerry, Scarr & Weinberg, 1996). Just as Fong and Wang found in their study, Grice found that adoptive parents become stewards of both American culture and Chinese culture and try to instill a "symbolic identity" in their Chinese adopted children (Grice, 2005). Adoptive parents may try to encourage the child's

Chinese heritage through emphasizing and participating in certain cultural practices such as Chinese food or cultural celebrations like the Harvest Moon Festival (Grice, 2005, p. 3; Tessler and Gamache, 2012). Evidence shows that cultural learning is emphasized heavily when children are younger, and by age 7 or 8 many Chinese adoptees had had exposure to formalized Chinese language instruction and showed a high interest in returning to China. Many parents look towards outside resources such as culture camps or heritage tours to educate their children about Chinese culture (Tan and Nakkula, 2004; Powers, 2011).

Parents act as gatekeepers of information surrounding the child's adoption. In a study of 1233 Chinese adoptees ages 4-16 yrs. old conducted by researchers Femmie Juffer and Wendy Tieman, many adoptive parents start talking about adoption upon their arrival (2010). Children are mostly interested in looking at photos of their adoption and learning about the story of their adoption (Juffer and Tierman, 2010). One way parents provide their children with more of a connection to their adoption and Chinese heritage is through giving them a Chinese name. In a study of 282 Chinese adoptees, 90% of the girls surveyed had a Chinese name and of those only 40% did not use their Chinese name (Tessler and Gamache, 2012). They found that girls who had higher levels of "ethnic exploration" or pride and interest in their Chinese heritage were more likely to use their Chinese name and to have participated in a school project related to China. They are also more open to discussing their adoption with peers and their parents. Having at least one adoptive friend helped to increase the level of ethnic exploration (Tessler and Gamache, 2012). Having parents that are encouraging and supportive of this ethnic exploration helps adoptees to gain a sense of empowerment surrounding their adoption.

## **The Negative Effect of Having Parents be Cultural Stewards**

Although the previous studies listed above discuss the importance of having parents be cultural stewards of both American and Chinese culture, some researchers have found that white adoptive parents are often unable to fully and accurately present Chinese culture to their adopted children which leads to the construction of an overly romanticized and simplistic Chinese cultural narrative (Powers, 2011; Dorow 2006). Sometimes parents get distracted with the celebration and “exotification” of their child’s culture and forget to address issues of race at a deeper level (Clemetson, 2006). By not addressing issues of race and difference, parents place their adopted children in a vulnerable place where they are more susceptible to feelings of discrimination and racism without providing them the tools to cope with these issues (Clemetson, 2006).

This is evidenced in girls who have higher levels of “ethnic empowerment” or more positive feelings about their Chinese heritage, but have a higher perception in their daily life of being victims of racial discrimination and negative stereotyping. Researchers also found that these girls were more self-conscious about looking different from their peers and family and reported higher levels of sadness when thinking back to their loss of birthparents and the circumstances in china that led to their adoption (Tessler and Gamache, 2012). This highlights the important role parents play in helping to educate their children on how to deal with racism and discrimination.

Although heritage tours provide a way for adoptive parents to help their Chinese adopted children explore and reconnect with their Chinese cultural roots, oftentimes these tours serve to further the simplification of Chinese culture. This oversimplification of a

child's Chinese cultural identity is expressed in the following excerpt from a parent that Powers interviewed during her field observations of an adoptive family's heritage tour, "I'm sure there's peace and simplicity to that rural lifestyle-but that she just didn't look like she belonged. Even though she's Chinese, she's so American" (Powers, 2011, p. 70). She follows this quote up with the analysis that "what we see happening on homeland tours is that the 'strange' and 'different' really become the "poor, or the exaggerated Asian stereotype" (Powers, 2011, p. 69). In her dissertation, Katherine Agathon found that heritage tours provided many Asian American adoptees with a place to start the healing process of their adoption. The adoptees in her sample cited different reasons to return to their homeland diverse reasons including learning more about their culture and searching for birth parents (Agathon, 2011). Researcher Sara Dorow shares the worry that heritage tours result in the exoticification of China for the benefit of white American parents (Dorow, 2006). Heritage tours are dominated by adoptive parents who seek a closeness to the culture that their children came from.

### **Integration into White American Families**

With the high cost of adoption and the restrictions that China places on who can become adoptive parents, there are very few families that can adopt from China. The majority of parents who adopt transnationally from China are in their mid-thirties to early forties, white, college educated, and have a significantly higher median income than that of non-adoptive families (Johnson, 2002; Powers 2011; Gelley, 2011). The assimilation of Chinese American adoptees into their family's "white culture" is inevitable. Researchers Fong and Wang also found that it was important for adoptive parents to integrate their own

cultural and religious backgrounds into the lives of their adoptive daughters. One mother even stated that it was important for her daughter to be proud of her “white background” (Fong and Wang, 2001; Tan and Nakkula, 2004). In their study, that included 11 in depth interviews with white families that had adopted from China, researchers Tony Tan and Michael Nakkula, found that white adoptive parents play a large role in creating an identity for their adoptive children surrounding the notion that adoptees are racially Chinese, but culturally American (Tan and Nakkula, 2004). They found that 8 out of the 11 of the families described their children as “Chinese American” which created a sense of multiculturalism and served as a way to negotiate their child being racially Chinese while culturally American. They also found that the term of “American Chinese” was also used because parents assumed that Americanization was inevitable because of the influence of dominant American culture and the choice of white American adoptive parents to raise their families in majority white neighborhoods (Tan and Nakkula, 2004; Mohanty, 2013). Out of the 11 parents, only one adoptive mother refrained from labeling their adopted child’s identity. Researcher Jayashree Mohanty found that the cultural-racial identity in transracial adoptees are related to how comfortable they are with their own racial group and the racial group of their parents. (Mohanty, 2013). Many parents fear that negative racial encounters will harm the adoptive child’s identity, but Grice found that parents need to acknowledge their adoptive child’s difference, while also affirming their similarity. This helps to separate race from adoption (Grice, 2005, p. 10).

### **A Place of Belonging**



with the racial difference can have a deep impact on adoptee's identity formation and global self-esteem.

While adopted children may struggle with finding a sense of belonging due to feelings of loss and abandonment, academically they are doing well. Academic competence and self-esteem is an important area of identity formation. Research on Chinese adoptees shows that Chinese adoptees have been measured to perform academically at the same level or at a level surpassing their peers (1502). An explanation of the success of academic performance of Chinese Adoptees is that due to their Asian appearance, some teachers will expect high performance from Chinese adoptees due to the "Model Minority" stereotype. Many Chinese adoptees are unfamiliar with the cultural practices that formed the model minority stereotype (Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012, p. 1502).

Although many parents view the *Americanization* of their children as inevitable, *Americanization* does not lead to full acceptance into White American culture. Marginalized acceptance of Chinese adoptees into white American culture can often lead to barriers of acceptance by ethnically Chinese Americans. The lack of acceptance by both cultures often leads Chinese adoptees to become a "perpetual outsider" that lacks a cohesive sense of belonging (Tan and Nakkula, 2004). In her field research on homeland tours, Powers found that one Chinese adoptee immediately felt like a stranger and insider in China right away. She was an insider because she was racially Chinese, but remained an outsider due to her different behaviors and posture (Powers, 2011). The lack of Chinese behavioral and cultural markers and the adoption of American behaviors and culture is an experience that many ethnically Chinese families experience in the U.S. Researcher Mia Tuan found that cultural







## How Do Adoptees Cope?

Researcher Harold Grotevant is concerned with adoptee identity formation with the added challenge of coping with a disjunction between biological and cultural difference. When adoptees have no biological reference point or commonalities with their adoptive families, how do they “construct an integrated sense of identity?” (Grotevant, 1997, p.11). In reports from clinicians, Grotevant found that adopted children are referred to get psychological therapy up to five times more often than non-adopted children.

Grotevant identifies the different stages that adopted people have to pass through to come to terms with their adoption. The first is categorized as the adoptee is unaware of the identity challenges they may face in the future until, the second stage of *sensitizing experiences* hits them and they are made aware of their difference through the “hostile feedback from others.” This then leads to the third stage of conflict where the adoptee questions their self-identity which leads to the fourth stage of either, doubt, exploration or crisis of their identity (Grotevant, 1997, p.16).

Grotevant also examines the narrative approach used by the Family Story Collaborative Project. This approach looks to see how adoptees create a cohesive narrative through the integration of their adoption into their identity. The steps to narrative coherence include: *internal consistency, organization, congruence between affect and content, and flexibility*. The Internal consistency can range from very coherent internal narratives that fit together to form a larger story, or it can be made of fragmented and conflictual stories that are unexplainable. Organization is how the adoptee manages and responds to their narrative. These can include highly organized narratives where the story flows together and everything

makes logical sense, or poorly organized narratives where there are holes and the story is unable to flow in a coherent way. Congruence between affect and content is a way to understand how the relationship between what the adoptee express or thinks and the resulting emotions that are expressed. Finally, the flexibility relates to how the adoptee can explore alternatives narratives to their own narrative, and the realization that their story is full of complexities. (Grotevant, 1997, p.19-20).

An important component of helping adoptees forage their own identity and cope with negative feelings of difference is the creation of Chinese identity specific to adoptees. Adoptees need to find ways to “signal membership” in an American pan-Asian community based on popular culture and symbolic gestures (Powers, 2011). Researcher Michael Lee in his 2006 literature review found that the term “Chinese Diaspora” better described the adoptee experience. The term diaspora helps to show how adoptees are not only passive “objects of displacement but also active change agents” (Lee, 2006, p. 57). This term is important because it creates a space to examine how adoptees create their own unique experience that is different from the “white American experience” and the “Asian American immigrant experience.” Through using in-depth interviews, my research will provide more insight into ways that adoptees have agency in the creation of their own unique experience. It will provide adoptee’s personal stories on foraging a new path for themselves that exists outside of the limited pre-existing boundaries.

My exploratory research will extend this previous research through examining the different experiences adoptees have with their parents, their Chinese heritage, facing racism, and finding belonging. These studies are majority survey data that has been collected



United States and China violently force adoptees to adapt to an “unnatural” and “transitory” space (Anzaldúa, 2006, p. 25). Their existence as a hybridity of Chineseness and Americanness, adoptees serve to disrupt the national and cultural borders that keep divide “us” from “them and what is “safe” versus “unsafe” (Anzaldúa, 2006, p. 25). This deterritorialization is important because it “has destabilized the fixity of *ourselves* and *others*” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 19). In other words, adoptees who are not easily placed the realm of Chinese culture and nation or American culture and nation, complicate claims to national and familial belonging. Like theorist Ien Ang, these interviews will question the authenticity of the identity of the “real” Chinese or the “real” American.

This research also seeks to question the cultural and familial narratives told to adoptees in relation to their ability to form their own subjectivity and agency. Subaltern studies often asks, “Who is speaking?” and “how do we know who is speaking?” It also calls into question the role of those who exist outside the margins of society and who are a part of the “underclass.” Many of those existing as part of the “underclass” are the poor women who are forced to give up their children.

This question is pertinent to the adoptee narrative, because there are many conflicting influences working to shape the adoptee experience. These include and are not limited to the dominant discourses created for adoptees by the following: adoption agencies, adoptive parents, the orphanage, culture of origin, dominant culture, media messages, “adoption experts” (social scientists), and the dominant literature.

This thesis wrestles with the simplistic dominant discourse that is perpetuated through literature and social science today of Chinese mothers forced to give up their child for

adoption due to the “one-child-policy,” so that their children can have a better life somewhere else. It complicates adoption because “the simplistic assumption that a poor country in a developing country will have a preferred life with a family in a “rich” country is misguided, imperialistic and overlooks the sacrifice and loss, not only to the sending country, but to the child” (Dorow 17).

This research will show that individual creation of the “self” is non-linear, “moving from *pre* to *post*, but as a cultural economy of circulating relationships of power and exchange” (Dorow, 2006, p. 25). It looks to show how complex feelings of loss, abandonment, and fear are not erased by adoption and a “new start,” but in many ways heightened. It explores how adoptees are affected by these deeper concepts of loss, abandonment, and fear. In their research, Trenka et al, found that,

For many transracial adoptees, the pain of loss and unbelonging generated by our living in the borderlands of racial, national and cultural identities produces a kind of spiritual sickness. It is a malaise that expresses itself in depression, rage, grief, rootlessness, and addictions. Some of us feel pressured to censor our own pain as an act of loyalty toward our adoptive families (Trenka et al, 2006, p. 14)

This research will share different adoptee’s unique stories of coping with feelings of difference, “in-betweenness,” and not belonging. These feelings affect some adoptees more than others and each adoptee reacts uniquely. This research provides them with a space to share their own experiences with being adopted.

### **Post Colonial Studies**

What is being lost in Mimicry? What is being gained? This question of *belonging* has a huge impact on the Chinese American Adoptee’s life. If Chinese adoptees can only mimic the culture and customs of their white adoptive family, then how do they create a sense of belonging for themselves?

Why is the Chinese infant so desirable to white-middle class American families? Researcher Sarah Dorow answers this in her book, *Transnational Adoption: A cultural economy of Race, Gender and Kinship*, when she states, “The desire for a child that can be reproduced to belong to a white middle-class American family despite difference... The deferral of the need for race and culture knowledge might thus maintain the fiction of young, flexible, Chinese child, which in turn maintains the fiction of the universalized white American family” (Dorow, 2006, p. 89). It is not only abandoned Chinese infants that need families, but also white American families that are in need of healthy desirable infants to help reproduce the American dream of a white “nuclear” American family. Dorow discusses how white middle class families have constructed the desirability of Chinese infants based on their ability to be “normalized” into the family as quickly as possible. Between the popular reproduction of Chinese culture as “strange” and “culturally appealing” and the “racist love” and the “embrace of the *acceptable model* of the racial minority,” Chinese children are brought into White American families (Dorow, 2006, p. 88).

Dorow goes further to discuss a parent’s role in controlling how much Chinese culture their children are exposed to. She discusses the tension that exists where white adoptive parents want to do “something” with Chinese culture, “but not too much” (Dorow, 2006, p. 89). Parents are looking to find a balance between the right level of “whiteness” and the right level of “Chineseness” for their child. While the adoptive infant may seem like they lack agency, theorist Homi Bhabha would “call this mimicry that is constructed around ambivalence,” which gives agency to the colonized Chinese infant. The mimicry represents an *ironic compromise* between the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha states that, “

mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (1984, p. 126). The Chinese infant serves to destabilize the “nuclear American family” through their mimicry of *Americanness* and “American culture.” Chinese infants threaten the colonizer’s sense of racial privilege which in turn destabilizes colonization itself (Parker, 2008, p. 254).

As infants and young children, Chinese adoptees are forced to assimilate to the customs and cultures of their adoptive family. They end up enacting an ultimate form of mimicry on a micro familial scale. Bhabha further describes mimicry when he says, “in a world of cultural mixing and differences of power, colonized people often end up mimicking their colonizers, adopting the colonizers’ language, educational systems, governmental systems, clothing, music, and so on” (Parker, 2008, p. 253). As an infant, adoptees are forced into new ways of identifying and new ways of being that are different and strange to them. They no longer are able to learn their own local Chinese customs and instead they learn the culture and custom of their adoptive family. As they grow up and are socialized into their American families, they still are able to menace the power structure through their creation of a hybrid identity that is not completely “the other”/Chinese or white. Bhabha would see this mimicry as a form of agency. He describes this agency when he states, “when less powerful people mimic more powerful people, they can menace the power structure” (Parker, 2008, p. 255).

This is accomplished because mimicry “problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the “national” is no longer naturalizable”(Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). The Chinese infant now becomes “American.” Although America is full of difference (racial,



born Chinese. The essentialization of “Chineseness” by parents and the media is a way to bring a sense of China to adopted children. The essentialization of what it means to be Chinese is used by peers and strangers when they say to an adoptee, “you’re not a real Asian” or define an adoptee as “whitewashed” or “Banana.”

### **Resistance**

In the book, *Outsiders From Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, Editors Jane Trenka, Julia Oparah, and Sun Shin discuss the more conflictual side of adoption that is often hidden from sight in traditional narratives. They discuss subtle forms of resistance against total assimilation into their “white adoptive culture.” They explain, “we refuse to assimilate into white culture or to submit to narrow ideas about cultural authenticity in communities of color, choosing instead to name our own experience... recognizing that our experiences as adoptees of color are as authentic as those of non-adopted people of color” (Trenka et al, 2006, p. 14). As an adoptee it is sometimes hard to forge one’s own path toward self-acceptance of one’s own identity because everyone and everything is telling you what or who to be. People constantly question the authenticity of our adoptive families and the authenticity of our unique experiences. The base level of resistance is having the courage to reject the adoption dominant narrative, because adoption is complex and not purely “good” or “bad.”

It is painful to take a step back and separate one’s self from others. The search for identity can often be isolating and create deeper divisions between the individual who is searching and their support network (family, friends, etc). It is hard to reclaim what has been taken because it can be an acknowledgement of victimization. Due to the nature of

transnational adoption, it can evoke deeply rooted insecurities and pain. Trenka et al further discusses this when they write,

On one hand, we resist being defined as victims condemned to half-lives between cultures, without meaningful connections to our families or communities...on the other hand, our experiences of racism, isolation, and abuse and our struggles with depression, addiction and alienation indicate that adoption across boundaries of race, nation, and culture does indeed exact a very real emotional and spiritual cost (Trenka et al, 2006, p. 5)

How can adoptees have agency and start to regain power over their own lives and start to heal ourselves? Trenka et al discuss this when they say, “for many of us, it is only by facing the pain, without judgment or self censorship, that we can transform it into healing” (Trenka et al, 2006, p. 10). This self-exploration is important. It is a way for adoptees to regain what they have lost in the process of adoption.

### **Methods:**

I conducted 8 in depth interviews of 8 Chinese American adoptees which consisted of 7 female identifying students of a consortium of colleges in Southern California and one male identifying student that graduated in May of 2014. I sent out an email to the adoptees I knew at the consortium and then asked them what Chinese American Adoptees they knew. Once identified, I contacted those adoptees through Facebook message and my school email. Two of the interviewees were from the all women’s college in the consortium and the other 7 were from the social justice and social science focused college in the consortium.

In recruiting the interviewees for my study I used a convenience sample. Adoption is not a common topic of discussion or something that many people share with other people which is why this sample is a convenience sample. Also, the time constraints on this project made it hard to recruit enough adoptees to have a large enough pool to randomly sample

from. This creates a weakness in the research due to the fact that since it is not randomized and therefore cannot be representative or generalizable to the adoptee population at the Consortium.

I chose to do in depth interviews as my method of collecting data because I was able to get stories and opinions that went deeper than what I could get in a survey. A weakness of this method is that sometimes the interviews turned more into conversations where I as a researcher shared opinions that influenced how people answered. Another weakness was how time consuming the interviews were to transcribe so some sections of some interviews were skipped when transcribing. There is more freedom in interviews to discuss anything so there was no uniform presentation of the questions to each subject which may have also influenced people to say different things.

The male identifying student, Michael\* was unique in my study due to the fact that he was born in Hong Kong and lived in Hong Kong until he was 11 with his adoptive family. Hong Kong was under control of the British from the end of the first Opium War until 1997. Hong Kong developed as a colony of the British, and the Island has a greater mix of both Western and Chinese culture.

The youngest in my sample was a freshman who was 18-years old and the oldest was the 2014 graduate who was 23. The age range of when they were adopted from China ranged from 2 months to a year old. All families used the services of an adoption agency. Three interviewees were adopted from foster care situations and another three were adopted from orphanages in China. One person in my sample was first in an orphanage and then transitioned into a foster home where her parents adopted her. Another interviewee was in an

orphanage but then moved into a foster family sponsored by the orphanage where she was adopted. The majority of the adoptees in my sample were adopted from Eastern China.

One interviewee in my sample had Asian parents. Maria's\* mom is third-generation Japanese and her dad is second-generation Chinese and grew up speaking Chinese. I included her in my sample because she expressed a lot of the same feelings of struggling to find belonging that her peers expressed that had white parents. She also was socialized in a predominantly white neighborhood. Many of the parents of the adoptees in my sample were White. All the adoptees in my sample were adopted by heterosexual couples.

I conducted two interviews over Skype and the rest were in person at the consortium. One interview was conducted by Skype because the student was abroad in South East Asia. The other Skype interview was conducted over Spring Break because our schedules had not matched up previously.

After conducting and recording the interviews, which ranged from around 22-minutes to an 1 hour and 24 minutes, on my iPhone, I transcribed the interviews word for word using Garageband and Microsoft Word. I left out sections that were tangents and had nothing to do with adoption. Then I hand coded the interviews by topic. The topics I used were: expressing gratefulness of their adoption, adoptees showing agency around the topic of their own identity, feelings of difference/experiences of racism, adoptee specific issues: birth history and biological parents, transmission of culture through adoptive parents and the return to China, growing up around multicultural/other adoptees, feeling white/negative stereotypes about origins transmitted from dominant white culture, and basic demographic information. Through coding, I began to find common themes to center the data around and

pull quotes to support. These include: the role of adoptive parents in the lives of adoptees, feelings of in-betweenness due to marginalization and the agency that results.

## **Results:**

### **The Role of Adoptive Parents**

My research found evidence to support the importance of birth parents in connecting their children to their Chinese birth heritage. Several interviewees mentioned the roles their parents played in transmitting Chinese culture through providing the opportunities to be involved in cultural events such as ribbon dancing and trips to Chinatown. Parents look to provide an “authentic” experience of what it means to be *Chinese* to their children. My research supports the theories that Ien Ang (2000) presented about the dominant ideology of what it means to be Chinese, serves to define what “Chineseness” is for the child.

“Chineseness,” and the “Chineseness” identity that is fed to the child is based on what their parents think is China based on popular culture or travels. This limits the Chineseness that adoptees can be or identify with when there are so many different ways to be Chinese. One interviewee, Laura\* who is now a freshman in College and was adopted at 5 months by a white couple from a small city in Jiang-Xi Province discusses this when she says,

Yeah, we used to go to Chinatown all the time and they would buy me like silk clothes and stuff. I had like outfits that fit me up through like high school like from when I was a little baby. And then we would celebrate Chinese New Year and the moon festival thing which, I’m not sure what it represents.

Laura’s lack of knowledge about the cultural tradition of the Harvest Moon Festival shows the over simplification and general inability of some parents to provide an accurate portrayal of Chinese culture to their adoptive children. This quote emphasizes how Laura’s parents are choosing to expose Laura to the Chinese culture they think is the most “culturally authentic”



parents act as gatekeepers to their children's cultural education in the sense that they maintain control over what cultural events their children attend.

Previous studies emphasized the role of heritage tours in the formation of Chinese adoptees cultural identity. The prevalence of adoptees making a pilgrimage back to China was a major factor in my study, with 7 out of the 8 adoptees interviewed having returned to China at least once. Of those interviewed, only two returned to the orphanage or the place where they were adopted and 1 returned to the place of her birth. Most of the heritage tours were described as "touristy" where adoptees and their families visited the major cities and sites in China providing them with a "window" into Chinese culture. This evidence supports the types of heritage tours researcher Katherine Agathon (2011) found adoptees went on when making their returns to their country of origin. Samantha\* an adoptee who was adopted from Guangdong province at 9-months by a wealthy older couple critically recounted her trip of when she went back to China at 12/13-years,

Although we did go to the orphanage, it was also like let's go tourism around. So we went to Shi'an and took a cool train and we saw Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, which don't tell anyone, my mom threw up on. It was also under renovation so it didn't look that cool. We, I dunno, this sounds really white savior-y and fucked up, but we talked to a family who was so poor they had a one room house and they raised like 8 kids in it and we just like talked to them about their life. That sounds really poverty porn now that I think about it...

This quote by Samantha problematizes the simplification of heritage tours. The way she describes her experience as "let's go tourism around" shows the limited and removed view of China she saw on her heritage tour. This exoticized perfected image of China that Samantha saw was a result of China promoting their best image, the adoption industry promoting what they think adoptees want to see, and parents acting as the gatekeepers over their child's exposure to China. By emphasizing the image of an "impoverished China," the adoption

industry also supports the racist superior western notion of white saviors coming and rescuing babies like Samantha from a condemned life of poverty. The adoption industry and China make money off of heritage tours of adoptees returning to the homeland, by showing adoptees and their families the “good” images and spaces of China, they want to paint a picture of China that gets adoptees to return to visit. Parents want to show their children parts of China that will give them pride, but they also face the challenge of placing the adoption in social/historical context. By doing showing Samantha the “poverty stricken” side of China, her parents reinforced the morality of their adoption to themselves and Samantha. For both Samantha and her parents the poor family served to reinforce the privilege and opportunities she has in the United States.

Amy,\* who was adopted at 2 months old by a white/Caucasian identifying couple expressed different sentiments towards her trip back to China. Her family like Samantha’s used the trip as a way to immerse themselves in Chinese culture by going and sightseeing in major cities,

Vacation totally vacation, sightseeing. Um, I hadn’t been back, my parents wanted to wait until I was older to go back, Uh, we didn’t go back to the orphanage or my hometown, but we did go on a tour of Shanghai, Beijing, Xian, as well as over to Tibet, so...and to be honest it wasn’t that important to me to go back to my hometown...

Amy made her return trip at an older age because her parents wanted her to understand the significance of it. She also did not return to her hometown in China. This further highlights the role that parents have in deciding when to go on and where to go when participating in heritage tours. The tourist-y nature of the trips back to China supports the findings of Sarah Dorow (2006) that parents want their children to have exposure to some Chinese culture, but not “too much.”





would be asked this question who are like immigrants also. So I dunno, if you are Korean and you're not adopted but your whole family is Korean and you say, "oh I'm from Fresno, Ca..." and people are like, "no, where are you really from?" It's kind of like that question can be addressed to not only adoption.

### **Justification of Family When Adopted**

Adoption presents a unique challenge to families because of the dominant discourse of family being legitimately defined biologically. Researchers Bochner and Ellis (1997) and Suter (2008) found that although adoptive families are legally "families," they still must constantly justify their family status to strangers when asked. Liliana further discusses a moment when her family status was questioned,

Um... I think though it has been interesting when I've travelled different places with my parents, especially places where adoption isn't as prevalent...um there have definitely been moments of disconnect where um people not knowing who I am in terms of who they are—or my relationship to them. I think there was one incident when I was with my parents in like 2012, when we were in Egypt and this person came up and he was very confused and like he didn't understand that my father was my father. He just couldn't see that, physically he couldn't see that. And it made sense. I think that I remember afterwards though that I got really mad at my father and I think because I thought he had said that I was adopted or something. I dunno, I think that it was—thinking about it now it was the first time that I had someone question or not understand it. I think it was something that was strange and in a way I felt very defensive about it. I dunno um. But that was my only experience and my first experience of someone not understanding and me just I dunno...reacting kind of negatively.

As shown above, feelings of frustration are often emerge due to the lack of sensitivity that adoptive families often receive from strangers surrounding race. Defensiveness of family status is something unique to adoptees. Liliana was not the only adoptee to have her family status questioned, Laura reported that from a young age people questioned her family's status because of the racial difference between her and her parents,

I guess like the most extreme case was when I was at the park with my dad because he's like this white guy—tall old white guy. He's not that old, he's a little old though. And then anyways, he was like pushing me in the swing and then this woman comes over to me and goes, "are your parents here?" Then I'm like, "yeah." And walked away. I could see her watching from the sidelines my dad pushing me in the swings.

I could see what was going through her mind and then a few minutes later the police showed up and I was like, “he’s my dad. Back off.” I was like 5 at the time, but still. Moments of extreme difference like Liliana and Laura experienced are formative to one’s identity as an individual and as a member of a family. At the young age of 5, Laura was put in a position of having to defend her family’s status to a stranger. Even after defending her family, the stranger still did not believe that her family was legitimate and so she called the authorities. This sent a strong message to Laura that something was “wrong” with her family.

The institution of the “real” American family leaves little room for families that exist outside of the biological and heterosexual norm of a family. The definition of the “real” American family is exclusive and emphasizes the role of having the role of becoming a parent as essential to fulfilling one’s adulthood (Trenka et al, 2006). The narrow definition of what constitutes a “family” creates an invisibility of those that do not fit into the “ideal” or the “real” American family. Transracial families threaten the normative power that white biological families have because no matter what, families cannot completely erase the “past” their racially Chinese child. Her racial identity remains on the surface.

### **Experiences With Behavior Problems Linked to Adoption**

Due to enormous changes in environment, loss of a culture, and family, adoptees are more likely to have behavioral problems and are referred to psychological therapy at higher rates than non-adoptive children. I did not specifically ask adoptees about their experiences with therapy, so my specific sample does not reflect the research Grotevant (1997), 3 out of the 8 interviewees reported having siblings with serious behavioral problems resulting from their adoption. Laura has a brother who was adopted at 9 months from Taiwan. She



our lives would be spent with him screaming about how he couldn't have MacDonald's. Which makes him sound like a brat, but actually it wasn't just that. You know there's like lots of like psychological, definitely adopted related things going on here and that's like why he was—like you know he's run the gamut of all the stupid diagnoses that the medical industrial complex can come up with. You know like: RAD, ADHD, ADD, what ever. We don't even know that any of that even was true or if it's still true? ...But yeah, like, lots of problems, made our lives miserable. Still don't know what's actually wrong with him. But I think a lot of its being pathologized more than it should be.

Samantha's analysis of her brother's behavioral problems shows the complexity of diagnosing a child with these behavioral disorders. It shows the impact that one child's behavior problems have on the entire family. This is further illustrated when Samantha recounted her experience with family therapy,

We had a therapist, but he wasn't like that good, I don't think. Like he was like a family therapist and that's different from—he was nice and I liked talking to him, but I thought that the whole point of him being there was to help us solve all of our problems and when I found out he wasn't there to do that, he was just there to talk to me for whatever reason that I couldn't discern.

Her experience with family therapy was not transformative in her life and did not have an impact on her identity. The therapy was geared more towards helping her brother. The behavioral problems of her brother were formative in Samantha's identity by making her feel like she need to be "perfect" to counteract her brother's behavioral problems. She explained this when she said,

And I was like, well one I was like, "hah, I'm the good child." And on another I was like, "well my parents lives really suck because of my brother so I'm gonna be like the best child ever. Which I can't tell if it's that, or if it's the general trend of adoptees being really perfectionistic.

Mary\* (who I include in my sample despite the racial similarities between her family, expressed similar feelings of "whiteness" and racism due to her socialization in a predominantly white community), who was adopted at 8 months from Western China by a Chinese dad and Japanese mom, also had a sibling who was adopted from China that had





brought in this picture that was taken right after the A-bomb in like Hiroshima and I showed my history teacher—it was just me and her, I dunno when...at lunch or something. Then she just assumed my grandfather like fought for the Japanese and I was like—it was like an awkward moment. Yeah, I couldn't really believe she thought that, but I guess like coming from her perspective I could see how she would...so that's like the only time where that kind of thing would come up. In both Samantha's and Naomi's case, they were assumed to be Japanese just based off of how they look. A certain Asian culture and historical knowledge was assumed to belong to them. These issues caused them both to feel uncomfortable. Both of these experiences support researcher Mia Tuan's core thesis that questions whether Asian Americans will ever be fully accepted as "honorary" whites in American culture. The racist and nativist nature of the comments directed at Chinese American adoptees is an indicator of why Asian Americans are considered still "foreigners" in America today. These comments served as a marker of difference that lumped adoptees in with the Asian "community" that they often times feel excluded from.

It is not just authority figures that police the identity of Chinese adoptees, but friends and peers also play a huge role. Amy discussed this in our interview when she said, "My actual Chinese and Taiwanese friends make fun of my Chinese because I can barely say anything." Speaking Chinese is one thing that is an indicator of cultural authenticity that is defined by other people. In college Mary noticed that her peers feel comfortable calling her and her Chinese adopted former roommate out as being "in authentically Chinese" for not being able to use chopsticks and never having eaten Green tea ice cream. For her peers, chopsticks and green tea ice cream symbolize the "authentic" Asian or Chinese,

More so in college, I don't know how to use chopsticks very well and people will laugh at me because I'm Chinese I'm supposed to inherently know how to use chopsticks, like I literally came out of the womb knowing how to use chopsticks. I

use forks, and that's not a bad thing, I don't think that's assimilation. My roommate coming here had never tried green tea ice cream, and someone literally said You are not a real Asian. Great, that is your ONE criteria for being Asian, or white... eating green tea ice cream. Little things like that, so OK, I don't know how to speak Chinese, but that doesn't make me NOT Chinese. I'm like not a great driver and driving stresses me out, not because I'm Asian it's because you have to watch a lot of stuff. A lot of it, it's a stereotype like model minority, but I fit into it... it's you either fit into it or you don't, and the binary thing we're all very complex people and we have different aspects to us so it's not like it's either here or there or nowhere, everywhere etc. It's very hard.

In this quote, Mary brought up how the stereotypes limit one's identity when imposed. She recognizes the limits to their truth and how her identity is much more complex and extends beyond the stereotypes that others impose on her identity.

Racial stereotypes surrounding what constitutes the authentic Chinese and the authentic Asian extend to strangers who will comment allowed when they notice difference. This happened to Amy when she went to Texas to spend time with her younger niece who is white. Strangers perceived Amy to be the hired help because of her racial minority status and the stereotype of service employees being predominantly from 3rd world countries such as China. Amy discussed this when she said,

But when people have asked me like, Oh are you the nanny? I just look at them like, you're a fucking idiot, NO I'M NOT! You know, and it's like I dunno that's like one of those things where it didn't bother me, but it's just like the ignorance of like assuming, you know? And so when that would happen I would just laugh it off and be like, no like I'm the—you know what I mean? I'm the aunt. That may have influenced me though one thing that's interesting is when I do go to Texas and I'm with them, it's like I feel like I normally dress pretty casually, but when I go out with them, I feel like I almost have to dress more designer or that type of thing to show that like I have money, I'm not the help. Which sounds kind of weird, but yeah...

This quote shows the frustration Amy felt when the limits of her identity have been defined by others. The deeper message within this racist assumption is that Asians are second class

citizens to whites and should remain servants to whites. This led Amy to feel that she needed to differentiate herself from the stereotype of her race by changing her style of dress.

### **The “Authentic Asian” Defined within the API Community**

Many of the interviewees expressed frustration with feeling excluded from the Asian Pacific Islander (API) affinity groups on campus. Based on race, every adoptee is included upon enrollment in the API affinity group on their campus and the greater umbrella API affinity group for the consortium. Although these affinity groups are meant to be all encompassing and provide a place for Asian Americans to discuss issues of commonality, many adoptees felt that they lacked shared experiences with their peers who have at least one Asian American parent. This is because the API assumes that membership within the “Chinese” or “Asian” race creates a sense of “belonging based on naturalized and fictive notions of kinship and heredity” (Ang, 2000, p. 295). Adoptees who have been removed from this community and placed in the white cultural community, have no sense of belonging or kinship to other Asians. Liliana articulated this feeling of disconnect with her peers in the API affinity group when she said,

I don't know if you felt this way in your freshman year, but like just talking about the difference of me being Asian American and having this disconnect with the experiences of other Asians. I dunno, I felt like when I was in the APAC mentorship program, just having this disconnect where I like didn't feel like I particularly belonged to be honest, and so a lot of the experiences that they were talking about and API history and stuff like that of Asian Americans struggling and their families struggling...I felt like to be honest, I was only in that, and I only qualified for the mentor program and even to be in that, it's not a club—organization was because of the way I looked. I dunno, I never felt wholly a part of it.

Amy felt like college would provide her with a place to explore her Asian identity, but when she experienced the API affinity group at her college, she felt like she did not belong. She described her experience below,

I would say for a while I kind of wanted to play into that identity of being more Asian and taking that up in college, but to be very honest with you—and I brought this up at Sycamore\* and some of the groups on campus—the Asian community who they consider themselves legitimate Asians are not very open to people who don't have the culture, the language or the values. And people when they would—they people say like later, you know two years later, “when I first met you it was so obvious you were like SO whitewashed and Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. So I never felt comfortable almost.

Amy was not the only one who emphasized the importance of language and culture in the API affinity groups. Also, this shows how Amy's identity is just as much limited by the API community as the white community. Laura also mentioned how she was made to feel excluded from the API affinity group because of her lack of knowledge surrounding Asian languages,

I know like when I first got in here over the summer, APAC added us all to a group and they were talking in some Asian language with characters and I was like, “Um, I have no idea what this means.” And they were like, “I thought you were Asian.” The API affinity group made it clear that language and cultural experiences are key markers of “the authentic Asian.” Laura's experience with the API community shows that the API community has adopted western “scientific” notions “race” used to uphold western/white superiority (Ang, 2000, p. 294-295). It's exclusivity questions, who gets to decide what being “Chinese” or “Asian” gets to mean? The rigid definition of what it means to be Chinese and Asian at the college consortium contradicts the multiple faces of the Chinese diaspora. There are many Chinese identities and some cannot be simply defined by language, race or culture alone. Adoptees who lack these cultural experiences and have no knowledge of the language are made to feel like they do not belong in that space. They are made to feel different. This is hard when the White American culture they grew up does not fully accept them because racially, they are Chinese.





of a comfortable economic status, but as a result she felt that her identity as an Asian and an adoptee were not as prominent.

Although he grew up in Hong Kong with his adoptive parents until he was 11, Michael still felt a strong connection to and identification with the white community. This shows the major impact of having white parents from a young age on an adoptees identity. Michael further articulated the assimilative power of growing up in a majority white community when he said,

Along the lines of how my identity has changed, it wasn't until college when I heard about APAC and things like that...until I realized that oh my identity is different because growing up, especially being kids you don't really notice things, it's just like oh there's another kid. Um like in middle school and high school, when I was here in the U.S. people didn't really comment on it because I feel like I, well partly Fresno is just so...homogenous like there's a lot of white people, especially at my high school. So it's like there's not really enough diversity for people to realize that someone is difference even though that kind of sounds weird. That like in high school there wasn't a lot of—so and my parents being white and me being raised by white parents I could identify with them a lot and with my white friends without any issues, unlike someone who might be an immigrant or something who can't relate as well. Mitchell attributed his ability to assimilate and connect to the white community as a result of growing up in a homogeneous city where people did not comment on his difference. Having been socialized by white parents and white friends helped him to identify with the white community.

Although Mary grew up with a Chinese dad and Japanese mom, she still felt white growing up. She discussed this when she said, “Definitely growing up I probably thought I was white. Like I never talked about how I was Chinese, I went to a predominantly white high school, middle school, all that stuff.” This quote highlights the powerful influence the greater community has on an adoptee's identity. Unlike Michael, whose identity was greatly



Samantha's parents decision to not discuss racism with her was a result of their own racist notions. The idea that Samantha would not face racism due to the stereotype that Asians are the "model minority" allowed for them to socialize her into the white community without educating her on race.

### **Rejection by the White Community**

Although many adoptees assimilated into the white community and identify with the white community, they are constantly reminded of their racial difference through racism.

Samantha who grew up in a majority white community in Kansas, discussed the racism she faced in school,

My senior year of high school I was talking to my, she's not really my friend because we don't know each other well, my Asian acquaintance/friend. We were in English class together. She's like half-Chinese and like it's because her parents are White and Chinese. We were chatting about something that had nothing to do with that and then this White guy who's her friend came up and said, "What's all this Chink talk?" I can't believe he said that and at first I was like, it didn't even register, it went right over my head because I didn't even think about that... and then like 5 seconds later I went, "what did you say?" and then it went really quiet. All I did was glare at him and then go back to what I was doing but he obviously got the message that, that was horrible. He's from Texas by the way. And looking back I'm like now, what would have been better, do what I had done and not have made a big deal about it because he clearly knew it was wrong or to like stand up and yell at his face and like give him a piece of my mind which would have been really satisfying, but at the same time the whole room went quiet because they were waiting for me to say something really horrible, because you know White people love to watch other White people getting thrashed for racism. Like I'm not going to give you that satisfaction for—you know, you can just use me as your minstrel whatever.

This quote highlights the difficult position that adoptees are put in when others fail to look past their Chinese racial identity. Samantha who only more recently started reconnecting with her Chinese identity, was put in a position of having to defend an identity that she did not feel a strong connection to. Samantha's Chinese identity was still a major part of her so she got defensive, but then had to make a choice about how far she was willing to go to call

out her peer for being racist. Samantha was not the only one who faced racism in the classroom growing up, Mary discussed her experience below,

Then middle school I think I really thought more about my Asian-ness and Chinese-ness. There was this one incident in math class where this White guy was like doing this with his eyes and he was with his friends and I don't think it was directed at me but I don't know if they were talking about me or Chinese people in general. That made me start thinking that they are parodying what I am.

This quote by Mary shows how racism played a role in shaping her identity. Racism impacted her because it showed her that people thought her racial identity was something to “parody” and make fun of. Laura had a similar experience when she was in elementary school with a teacher who was trying to be helpful and racially sensitive, but just ended up making things worse,

In second grade—I think it was second grade, I was telling my friend about it and then she asked me a question about it and the teacher overheard her ask me a question about it. It wasn't anything intrusive, at least I didn't think so at the time. Then my teacher flipped out, she like pushed us aside, she sent me to the kitchen and then closed the door. She talked to my parents and she was like, “you cannot do that.” And then she came and talked to me and she was like, “Are you okay?” And that was the first time I realized that something was different cause before that I hadn't realized that. So I guess she kind of instilled a sense in me that what I was a part of wasn't right or that I needed to keep it quiet or couldn't talk about it.

Laura further highlights the role that authority figures have in impacting the identity formation of adoptees. The experience of having a teacher try to protect her from “racism” only led Laura to feel more different and marginalized. The teacher limited Laura's identity by making her feel that her Chinese and adoptive identity was something that “wasn't right” and couldn't be discussed. This supports previous research by Clemetson (2006) that emphasizes the importance of discussing race within adoptive families in order to provide Chinese American adoptees with the tools to cope with issues of race. Diana told of an



Um...frustration at just like the stupidity of the world. It's like when people always comment on my race being like, "So what are you exactly?" And then I'm like, "ummm hmmm... yeah so what are you?"

Although they appear harmless at first, when microaggressions are broken down, the meaning and message behind them is often meant to hurt the other person. In this specific case, the meaning behind the microaggression was that all Asians are racially ambiguous and that they are perpetual foreigners that do not belong. The frustration that Laura felt towards others questioning her racial identity is not uncommon among the Chinese adoptees in the sample. Laura also brought up other microaggressions she has faced, "*oh wait you don't look—you're Korean, your eyes are way too big to be Chinese, or like, you're pretty for someone from China.*" These examples of microaggressions, are particularly frustrating because they are a form of backhanded compliment. It implies that Chinese having small eyes is bad and that Chinese people are ugly. If these types of comments were directed at White people, it would sound weird and be marked as socially rude. This is a form of White privilege that Chinese adoptees living in white communities are excluded from. In this respect Chinese adoptees are reminded that they can never fully be considered "white" because of their race.

Mary's identified that microaggressions directed towards her were in the form of insensitive questions about her race or family status. She discussed this when she said,

It's like a guessing game... my identity is not a game. With the microaggressions of are those your REAL parents? I just roll my eyes, that's a very insensitive question and it's none of your business whether or not. If I know you like that than obviously I think you'd know the answer to that, I just think it's really rude and inconsiderate and entitled for people to just expect me to bear it all to them.

In this case, the microaggression directed at Mary implies that her family is not legitimate.

Both Mary and Laura discuss how a major form of racism they face is through people's

microaggressions that publically question parts of their identity that would not be questioned if they were White and born in the U.S..

Naomi also recognized that the main form of racism she faced in college was the result of microaggressions. She explained this when she said,

I haven't really been a victim of um really blatant racism here at college but I guess like you could say that there are tiny little microaggressions that happen, but it's not like it happens everyday so...I dunno it happens sporadically. You know when they happen, but it's hard to recount when they did or what happened. This shows how many microaggressions are subtle enough to not be memorable, but aggressive and negative enough to be recognized. Also, microaggressions make lasting impacts on the recipients due to their powerful messages of White superiority.

### **Feeling Like "I Should be Educated on China"**

A common theme that emerged in the interviews was that adoptees felt that they should know more about their Chinese heritage. Having grown up in White communities with White parents who acted as gatekeepers of their Chinese heritage, some adoptees felt guilty that they did not have a deeper connection with their heritage. Amy attributed her lack of connection to her heritage to being adopted at 2 months old. When asked about her connection to her Chinese heritage she said,

To be very honest, I feel like I should and it's something like I said before, I should think about more, but I honestly don't... I will say it is attributed to the fact that I was adopted at such a young age. Yeah, some people who are adopted at a couple years old or that kind of thing who might have memories or something. I just have like absolutely nothing.

Liliana who returned to China multiple times and studied abroad in a small Southeast Asian country,

I've been lucky enough to go back a few times. Um I dunno, I don't feel a particular deep connection with China, um, but as I've gotten older it's changed just my

personal relationships there's feelings towards how connected I feel or disconnected I feel with my roots and stuff. I dunno, but I um don't feel any deep or I guess I've never felt any kind of deep blood earth type of connection with the country. Part of that again is that I was adopted at such a young age so I really grew up and was socialized in an American context and so um, a lot of things like tradition, culture, language, I think is a big part of it that I just don't have... that also plays into me feeling disconnected in a sense.

This quote highlights the lack of connection that Liliana felt with China despite her trips back to China. Like Amy, she attributed her lack of connection with her China to being adopted at a young age. She then went on to connect her feeling of disconnection from China to her socialization into the white "American" culture.

Diana expressed frustration with her own lack of knowledge about China and her Chinese heritage when she said, "God, I wish I was freaking more educated on China. You know what I mean. Just like I'm adopted from China and political discussions about China are just like...HELP!!!" Diana also discussed her wish to have a deeper connection with her culture. When she was younger she participated in ribbon dancing, but quit because she no longer had interest in it. This quote emphasized the delicate balance that parents of Chinese adoptees must have when enforcing their child's heritage. It questions the role that the parents should play. In Diana's case, she wishes that her mother had been more forceful in making her stay with ribbon dancing as a way for her to connect with China,

I kind of wish my mom had like pushed me to like stay in it sometimes or to do more like heritage or culture related events. At the same time, I understand like why she wouldn't have pushed me to because if your child's like complaining about—like yelling about how they don't want to do something, then it's like difficult to make them do it...

On the other hand, when asked about her thoughts on China, Laura stated that she did not want to be educated on China. Instead of backing off like Diana's mom, Laura's mom continues to emphasize her Chinese heritage in ways that Laura is not receptive to.

I'm sure it's like a fine place to live. Um I guess that I don't really like talking about it—studying about China/learning about China because my mom keeps like pushing me to take a class about China here and I'm like no thanks. And she's like, look at this, it's Chinese American this... and I'm like no.

In Laura's case, her mom's pressure is pushing her further away from her Chinese heritage.

Parents must find a balance in how much pressure they put on their children to remain connected to their Chinese roots.

### **Marginalization and Feelings of Being “In-between”**

The rejection of adoptees from both being accepted into the API community and the White community has deepened many adoptees' feelings of marginalization. Adoptees who were interviewed recognized that they did not fit into any designated group. This heightened their sense of feeling like they do not belong. Michael discussed this when he said,

But then getting into college—it just because here at Pitzer we talk about things like identity so much that it became a lot more apparent and made it—and as I was thinking more about it what group I fall into because it doesn't appear that I fall into any group that we have already designated.

Liliana analyzed this feeling of “in-between” designated groups when she said,

I also obviously don't fit in with being white. There's this duality of like your physical appearance and then the way that you were raised and socialized kind of not necessarily being super cohesive or um fitting into a nice box as um society likes to create little boxes as um demarcations and different identities. It's not as, it's a little bit more blurred for me I feel.

She recognized her identity as being more blurred and less defined by society. This is similar to Diana who recognized that her identity was more “influx,” and not concrete. Diana felt this partly because she identified with being Chinese/Asian American, but at the same time she lacked one of the major “authentic markers” of being able to speak Chinese so she felt like she could not completely identify as that. She also felt conflicted with being identified as White, because it did not completely explain her identity,





“perfect” Asian stereotype both in terms of physical characteristics and being “smart.” She highlighted this when she said,

Well I feel like in High School the stereotype of eh...trying to be like the really good looking Asian person because you're like the only Asian person in your group of white friends...I dunno that's a stereotype you see in like in the movie Mean Girls. You see it in a lot of movies I feel like... I feel like people have pinned me as a smart person, maybe because I'm Asian, before they actually know me.

Samantha also recognized this pressure to be perfectionistic due to her own personal family situation, but also attributing it to a pattern of adoptees being perfectionistic that she has noticed. She further explained this when she said,

And I was like, well one I was like, “hah, I'm the good child.” And on another I was like, “well my parents lives really suck because of my brother so I'm gonna be like the best child ever.” Which I can't tell if it's that, or if it's the general trend of adoptees being really perfectionistic.

These quotes highlight how feelings of in-betweenness can lead Chinese American adoptees to feel that they have to be perfect to be accepted by their family and others in the community. Being caught in-between being racially Asian and culturally White presents unique challenges to Chinese American adoptees and their families. While there are many instances where adoptees feel affinity towards their white communities, instances of racism serve as a constant reminder of their difference. Many adoptees have been rejected not only by their white communities, but they also face marginalization in API communities because they are seen as “inauthentic.”

According to theorist Homi Bhabha, adoptees feelings of “in-betweenness” indicate their agency. The fact that adoptees have absorbed the “white culture” they have grown up in, but appear racially different is destabilizing and threatening to the white community. Adoptees are no longer completely recognizable as the “other” which leads them to occupy a new space of being that threatens the normalized structure of white identity. On the flip-side,

Adoptees also serve to destabilize the API community because they look Chinese, but do not connect in the same way to the culture and customs of that community. This is an example of the disjuncture of race from culture that Dorow (2006) discusses. The presence of the visible “other” cannot be racially separated from the adoptee, even as they assimilate into their white communities. An indicator of their agency is the racism and microaggressions that the dominant communities use to keep adoptees aware of their difference and “lack of agency.” In their “in-betweenness” adoptees have formed a hybridity of both identities that undermines the rigid essentialist definition of each group and thus provides them with agency.

### **Agency: An Adoptee’s Response to Feelings of Marginalization**

This section explores how adoptees respond to feelings of marginalization and exclusion due to racism and ignorance within the communities they seek to find membership within. Marginalization is a result of binary oppositions (white vs. Chinese, China vs. the United States) that define the dominant discourse within society. Theorist Gloria Anzaldua, would recognize this marginalization as belonging in the “borderlands.” In between the national and cultural borders of China and the United States a third hybrid culture is created (Anzaldua, 2006). This culture created by adoptees threatens the careful national and cultural border that has been fabricated to provide a sense of stability and power. Through creating an identity separate from a “white identity,” adoptees are able to question the legitimacy of and power of the systemic hierarchy of society created by white western males that controls the categorization and valorization of minority races and cultures.

This section seeks to examine the “results” of feelings of “in-betweenness” or not belonging. It shows how adoptees have the power to shape many of their own experiences despite facing loss, exclusion, and racism. How do adoptees use agency create their own community and sense of belonging?

### **A New Identity for Adoptees**

One way that adoptees seek to overcome feelings of marginalization and exclusion by both the API community and the White community is through the creation of a new adoptee identity. Like Theorist Ien Ang, many adoptees sought to create a new identity that criticizes Chinese essentialism and the “authentic, pure, real” Chinese (Ang, 2008, p.138). Researcher Richard Lee in his 2006 study on adoptees as a Chinese Diaspora emphasized the importance of this term because it showed how adoptees have agency. He wrote how the term diaspora extends beyond the displacement of adoptees from their homeland, to how adoptees create a new experience for themselves despite their loss (Lee, 2006). Samantha explained her idea for a new Chinese Adoptee identity as being “Chinese Diaspora” or “None/Zero Generation.” When I asked her to explain further she gave this answer,

**Samantha:** Diaspora. It’s like Chinese diaspora because the important thing is the movement of bodies rather than the personal self identification or lack of identification with a thing. You can read the blog post.

**Lianna:** Like you know, some people identify more with being chinese, some people identify more with being adopted, some people identify more with being American or white or I dunno..

**Samantha:** I was thinking about this the other day and It was kind of my main reason for trying to invent another term... Is because if you’re adopted, you’re also Chinese adopted, then you can’t really call yourself Chinese because you didn’t grow up there, you can’t really call yourself Asian because again you didn’t really grow up there, you can’t really call yourself Asian American because who actually identifies as Asian American? It’s always whatever specific Asian American because the Asian American pan-identity wasn’t constructed the same way the black identity was. And then you can’t really call yourself Korean, Chinese, or whatever, because you’re not whatever generation, so basically, honestly you can’t call yourself American, LOL.

So you're up a creek right? Then you should call yourself Chinese Diaspora or I was thinking none or zero generation because if you call us 1<sup>st</sup> generation, then it has a different connotation than people who are actually 1<sup>st</sup> generation.

Samantha explained that the term Chinese Diaspora was a better fit to describe physical movement Chinese adoptee's bodies across borders. This term holds no expectation of a connection to an "authentic cultural China," which adoptees often lack in the eyes of the API community. Samantha used the term, "None/Zero Generation" to explain how Chinese American adoptees lack the same experiences as "first generation" migrants often have.

Mary also discussed how she felt the term "Chinese Diaspora" better explained her identity when she said, "I think it's more and more contributing to my identity and how I see myself as part of a diaspora forcibly immigrated to America." This quote by Mary used the term "diaspora" to refer to her adoption experience as "forcible migration."

In addition to creating a new term to describe the adoptee experience, some adoptees discussed the need for the creation of a new space for Chinese American adoptees to exist in. Adoptee experiences are often not discussed publicly and adoption is viewed as a taboo subject. Laura discussed the need to create a discussion about the adoptee community and the issues that adoptees face when she said,

I think in school, people would always put me in that Asian category. Like when they were talking about Asian American history the teacher would look right at me and I was like, nope. So I think that definitely played a role, but like also in schools, people need to talk about the adoptee community because that's pretty much invisible.

Mary discussed her role in the creation of an adoptee community at the consortium of colleges she attends. She felt the need to create a space where adoptees can discuss the realities of adoption the common issues that adoptees face. She explained this when she stated,

Since starting college, my ex-roommate, my friend, and I are starting an adoptees club at Sycamore\* because we know a lot of Chinese adoptees predominantly as

opposed to domestic adoptees. I think that it's great to form a community where it is very open about your role and the adoption industrial complex talking about the microaggressions that we get like why aren't we grateful and things like that. Mary further recognized the complexities of creating a space for adoptees to find belonging when she said, "we can create an imaginary space, intellectual space, but we can't make a physical space of belonging, actual location." This quote emphasizes how adoptees can work to unpack issues surrounding adoption and create a better understanding for themselves and others, but it is still hard for them, physically to find a place to belong due to being a racial minority that does not fit in perfectly with the API community.

Many adoptees felt they had multiple identities such as being American, Chinese, and/or an adoptee. Some of the adoptees in the sample discussed the challenge of fitting their conflicting identities into one identity. Mary discussed this further when she said,

I just want all of my identities to be one, that'd be great! Very much trying to rectify the Chinese adoptee-ness and Americanness. I feel like those two are the most in contradictory of each other, the other ones I can very much reconcile. Naomi also discussed how she created a hybrid, singular identity combined from the multiple aspects of herself when she said,

I guess for me, I would just say like I don't have multiple identities because like who I am goes kind of into all different categories, but I don't see myself as being fully into any of those categories so I kind of create a new identity out of all of that. And that is like my single identity, but it's combined out of a lot of different things. This is an example of the agency that adoptees have through existing in the "borderlands" of Chinese and white American culture.

### **Responses to Racism**

Another way adoptees found agency was in the construction of their response to people's ignorant comments about adoption or race. Adoptees often responded with practiced snarky comments back when bombarded with invasive questions. The aggressive

nature of the snarky questions in response to the invasive questions is meant to show these questions are insensitive. This is a form of subtle resistance that works to combat racism, ethnocentrism, and assimilation into the “white adoptive culture.” It produces agency through a reclamation of what has been taken away from them through the system of adoption. Samantha discussed this when she said,

No you wouldn't have grown up in a sweatshop, no you don't have to be grateful, no you don't miss your parents... blah blah blah, yes they're my real parents. It's like every time someone decides to ask you personal questions because apparently you don't have personal barriers because you're adopted... You should ask them, Does it feel weird knowing that at one point your face touched your mother's vagina? Or is that too personal of a question? Were you in vitro or were you done the natural way? Or was it a Cesarean?

Samantha's responses were meant to shock people into thinking about the connotations and deeper meaning behind their invasive questions. Through these snarky comments, she is reclaiming her right to define “family” however she chooses. She is fighting back against the oppressive “savior” complex of the West that defines her as a victim. Through this she is redefining her own agency. She is rejecting the ethnocentric, orientalist image of “China” as the impoverished “other.” Laura provided another example of the type of insensitive question adoptees are subjected to followed by how she personally would respond,

Uh let's see...there are a lot of them. Um my parents get them too, but I probably get them much more. Why don't you look like your parents? And now my answer is, “oh recessive genes.” And then I like change the subject.

Both Laura and Samantha added in some humor to their responses to help highlight the ridiculousness and invasiveness of the questions people ask them.

Mary further explained how these questions have affected her personally. She described the complexities behind her response and the emotions that these questions bring up for her,

**Mary:** Yes, it's so much more complicated for us and that's for us to deal with. It's not like, oh let me get on stage and share all of my inner thoughts with you. I don't need to broadcast that and it's especially rude when non-white people do that because I just thought that you would know better.

**Lianna:** It's not like I go around asking every person who's not white, where are you really from?

**Mary:** Exactly. It stings and it hurts, but I answer and try to be polite about it because I don't want to be the angry Asian, and get all defensive about it because then people critique you more.

### **Deciding to Not Continue Chinese Classes**

Many parents of Chinese American adoptees enrolled them in Chinese language or culture classes at a young age. Several adoptees in the sample discussed their decision to stop taking Chinese language classes. Samantha decided to stop taking language classes because she felt that it was not helping her learn the language or build a deeper connection with her heritage. She described her experience when she said,

And I had Chinese language school when I was like... before 7 years old but I don't actually remember any of it because I remember... the only thing I remember about it was that I hated it because that's not how you learn a language. It was like this lady gave us cassette tapes while she said words, and I was like this teaches me nothing and when we were in the school which was a very tiny building, they'd give us pieces of paper and they'd have Chinese characters written on them. And they'd be hollow so they'd kind of look like... um... I dunno, like that? And then they'd have numbers on them and then you'd have to color them in with different colors with crayons and while I was doing this, I was like this is the dumbest thing ever, how is this supposed to teach me how to speak Chinese? So I, I don't know if I quit or if I just stopped, but I did not learn anything.

Amy had a similar experience where her mom wanted her have more cultural experiences, but she found it boring and decided for herself that she wanted to spend time doing other things,

They put me in chinese language courses um to learn chinese as well as a chinese dance course at Colorado College. Um and we stayed involved with the other adoptees and their moms and families. So she tried to kind of keep—she wanted to keep the culture to me if I wanted it and to be very honest, I got bored of the language classes, didn't like the dance classes to be honest and didn't really like a whole lot of

the other adopted kids. I had my own friends so it was kind of me that strayed away from it.

These adoptees had a say in how connected they wanted to remain with their Chinese heritage. Their parents exposed them to the culture, but did not force them to stick with the cultural lessons. This is another example of the power that parents have in influencing their children's connection to their heritage. Many children dislike attending school or church, but they are forced to attend by their parent. Due to the sensitive nature of adoption many parents may feel like they cannot force their children to have a cultural connection with their Chinese heritage, so they do not force them to attend classes or events.

### **Forming an Independent Opinion: Questioning the Dominant Adoption Narrative**

Adoptees in the sample have started to form their own opinions about adoption.

These opinions exist outside of the dominant adoption narrative that their parents told them. Adoptees have started to do their own research and question the purely “good” nature of the system of adoption. Naomi started question this narrative when she read an article published January 14, 2015 by Maggie Jones, titled “Why a Generation of Adoptees is Returning to Korea.” The article was about South Korean adoptees returning to South Korea to seek a greater connection with their heritage, while also trying to stop the system of adoption which they found to be oppressive. When asked what her thoughts were towards adoption, Naomi expressed the complexity of her feelings,

I never thought that international adoption was a bad thing, but now that I've read those articles, it makes me question my own opinions and so before—like two-weeks before this interview, I had nothing wrong with international adoption. I thought it was like fine, I thought it was—if kids are in need of a family and families want to have kids then it's a really good solution. But now that I've read those articles, I am second guessing that opinion and kind of like wondering if—it makes sense that families that really want a baby but can't have a baby turn to adoption, but at the same time adoption is filled with so many social factors in the home country where the adoptee is from that forces the family to give up this child and so I think it's





Michael expressed how he has benefited from being adopted and having multiple identities when he said,

Like depending on the situation I will say like, I'm from Hong Kong, or I'm from the U.S. and yeah it really depends on the situation but I do feel like sometimes I carry multiple identities and usually I use whichever one works for my benefit the most. This quote highlights the agency Michael feels due to his ability to use each identity to his own benefit. Laura also discussed the agency that using her Chinese identity has given her and the opportunities that her Chinese identity has opened up for her when she said, "I feel like sometimes I can use my Chineseness to my advantage if I need to like for scholarship purposes or for other things where I need those diversity points. Like I can use that to my advantage if I need to. But I fully feel Caucasian because of the way I was raised." This quote emphasizes the complex feelings that were brought up when Laura chose to use Chinese identity to her advantage. It shows the removal and distancing of her Chinese identity due to the connection with her white identity.

The ability to use their "Chineseness" to their advantage gives adoptees agency. Racially, Chinese American adoptees are always seen as Asian or Chinese, which, in the case of Laura, does not always match how she personally wants to identify. Theorist Ang explains this further when he writes, "As I have put it elsewhere, 'If I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*.'" (Ang, 2000, p. 297). This is further complicated by the question he asks of "Can one, when called for, say no to Chineseness?" In the case of Laura and Michael, there are many benefits to consenting to identifying as Chinese that make it hard to completely reject/ignore their "Chineseness".

### **I Can Choose to be However "White" I want to be**

Laura further discussed how she has chosen to identify as Caucasian because of the connection she felt to growing up in a white community. Her choice to identify as Caucasian is complex due to the fact that the outside world will never view her as white because of her race. Laura explained this further when she said,

I identify as Caucasian, but at the same time I realize that if I were to put that on a form, people would question that and it would probably throw off someone's data if it were for a research thing—a statistics thing. And I will always have to explain it to somebody unless I decide to change my identity because everybody will look at me and call me Asian. Like I was taking a picture with two other people and they happened to be Filipino, and the person taking the picture was like whoa look at all the diversity that's represented here and the guy next to me was like, well we're all Asian. And I'm like, Hmm...debatable.

Laura's choice to identify as Caucasian shows agency. It provides an example of how adoptees "menace the power structure" of the dominant white community. When the colonizers, or the dominant white community looks at Laura, they see mimicry. She is almost "*almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). Laura's ability to decide to identify as Caucasian although she is racially Chinese, threatens the white communities sense of racial privilege over her. This in turn destabilizes colonization itself (Parker, 2008). Through her mimicry, Laura is in some ways hoping to access the power that comes with being able to identify as "Caucasian" or white.

She also understands that others will never view her in the same way she views herself. She decided to pushed back against a society's label for her as "Asian." At the same time the issue is more complex because of the social forces that are telling her she needs to become White.



to feel a sense of belonging and kinship with other people within the “Chinese race,” but she does not. In a sense has broken the sense of Chineseness as being a “racial community” or “one big family” (Ang, 2000, p. 296). She feels marginalized because of the classification of her race as a minority status and the assumption of the attachment of cultural difference, she is constantly forced to identify as “Chinese” and viewed as the “other” when she does not even self identify with being “Chinese.”

### **Empathize With Other People’s Situations**

Adoptees have unique families. Due to the insensitive comments and microaggressions that adoptees face on a regular basis, it has led them to be more understanding of other people’s situations. The experience of adoption has led the adoptees in this sample to have more empathy with other people’s unique experiences. Michael described this when he said,

So I’m very grateful for the things I have and I think, in terms of shaping my identity...I think it’s helped a little bit to help me empathize with others just because knowing that I could have been in their shoes in that situation and I’m not. Because of her own experience, Naomi also said she did not assume things about others. She emphasized that she did not assume things about people’s family status or the diversity of their family make-up because of her own experience with having parents of a different race,

I never assume like that—From my own family’s experience I never assume that someone’s a certain race or has a certain cultural capital because maybe they don’t. Or like I never assume that they’re from the U.S. or I never assume that um they are like—have the same their parents are the same race as them because of my experience. So I think how diverse my family is makes me be really open minded to other people’s situations and um makes me not assume anything about them. Laura emphasized that her experience with adoption led her to be more open and understanding and less judgmental. From her experience, Laura knows that the snap

judgments people make about others do not work, because many times there is more than meets the eye,

Definitely because I don't walk down the street going like, You're this or this because I know from my experience that that's not always how it appears. So I think that's definitely impacted the way I view other people  
Diana also discussed how she has empathy for people who have the different experience of not being adopted. She discussed how she has empathized with people who are not adopted and how she has tried to be understanding of their ignorance when it comes to adoption,

I don't know if compassion is the right word, but I have a lot of like empathy or not empathy, understanding for people who aren't adopted and don't really know, I guess you could say, what's culturally competent for talking about adoption topics.

### **Conclusion:**

At first glance, international adoption seems like a match made in heaven. Wealthy, well-educated white parents going to impoverished rural China to “rescue” babies that are condemned to a life of poverty as a result of the country’s overpopulation and harsh family planning policies. I have argued that adoption is not that simple. Once adopted and brought to the United States, unique issues of assimilation, racism and belonging emerge. The narratives complicate adoption through questioning the dominant narrative of adoption as being purely “good.” Adoptees are stuck in a system that perpetuates global inequality and injustice through upholding the racist and colonial ideal of the west as being a superior “savior” to the impoverished, backwards 3<sup>rd</sup> world. Adoptees become caught in the “borderlands” between the United States and China, both nations fighting to culturally and racially claim their identity. Through their removal from and rejection by China, and then their forced assimilation into a white American culture that never fully recognizes their membership, adoptees have shown resilience in their multiple subtle forms of resistance.

They try to find belonging within the Asian Pacific Islander community which is their racial affinity group and the white American community they have grown up in. Adoptee's experiences have shown that both communities do not fully accept the adoptees. The API community has an essentialized idea of what it means to be "authentically Chinese" and adoptees often lack the cultural experiences that they need to feel welcome within this community. Adoptees struggle to find complete belonging within the white community that they have been socialized in due to racism and microaggressions directed at their difference and racial minority status.

This research examined how adoptees cope with these feelings of marginalization and exclusion. The significant findings found that adoptees seek to redefine their experience through the use of different terms that better explain their unique experience. The terms "none/zero generation" and Chinese diaspora came up in conversation as ways to explain the adoptee experience. Some adoptees also felt that they needed to create their own space of belonging by forming their own affinity group. Another finding of this study found that as adoptees come of age they start to question the dominant adoption narrative as being completely "good." While they remain thankful they were adopted, they start to do their own research about adoption independent of the filtered stories their adoptive parents provided them with. This leads them to have a more complex view of adoption and to criticize the system of adoption. Another major finding was that as Chinese adoptees grew older, they were able to use their Chinese/Asian identity to benefit them in getting even if they did not identify completely with it. Adoption also impacted adoptees identity by making them more empathetic and understanding of people's different experiences.

The limits of this study were: the short timeline, the limited range of a sample, the limited sample size, and the use of only one method of data collection. This study was limited by the short timeline of only one semester (4 months). This meant that data had to be collected rapidly so the sample of this study was a convenience sample and relatively small. This means that the data collected can only be representative of that sample and is in no means representative of the larger adoptee community. The method of data collection was in-depth interviews which were later transcribed. Due to the short timeline, there is not a full transcription of a couple of the longer interviews and the non-sequiturs are left out. The arbitrary decision to leave out sections of the interview that did not seem to be of an importance to this study, influenced the accuracy of this study because these sections were left out of the analysis. Another limit to this study was the inability to directly compare the results of the interviews with each other because each interview was unique. A combination of a survey and in depth interviews would be more comprehensive.

Further research could be done on how to make adoptees feel more welcome in the API community especially on college campuses. Also, further research needs to be conducted on the complex issue that parents of adoptees face when it comes to exposing their child to their Chinese heritage and how that impacts the adoptee's decision to become more connected or disconnected to their roots.

## **Annex:**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Assimilation**

How old were you when you were adopted?

Do you have any memories from before you were adopted?

- If so, what memories do you have before you were adopted?
- Do you have any memories of the adoption process?

What would your life be like if you were still in China?- do you wonder/what do you think

Do you/have you tried to find your birth parents?

What was that experience like?

When did you realize that you were different from your family? was there ever a time when you felt different

Did you feel comfortable discussing this feeling with your family?

- If so, what are different ways your family helped you explore this difference?  
(different conversations you had, celebration of different cultural events etc)

What are your feelings towards being adopted?

What does being adopted mean to you in terms of who you feel like you are in the world?

What are your thoughts towards China?

What are your feelings towards China?

Do you have a relationship with your Chinese Heritage?

How do you relate to being Chinese?

Has your family been supportive of your cultural heritage/cultural identity? If so, in what ways have they been supportive?

**In-betweenness?**

Often times we talk about having multiple identities. Do you feel like you have multiple identities?

Can you describe what it is like to have multiple identities? (Chinese, adoptee, daughter/son, American etc.)

- How has this impacted how you view yourself?
- I was wondering if this impacts your sense of self. If so, In what ways has having multiple identities impacted your sense of self?
- How has this impacted how you view others?

In my experience, people sometimes comment aloud when they notice that I am different from my family. Do you ever experience this? If so, what are different comments that people make when they notice your difference?

How did/do you react when you get comments from strangers and friends and family about being different?

Have you been asked, "where are you really from?"  
What emotions does that bring up?

**How has your understanding of your identity changed throughout each period of your life? (as toddler, elementary school, middle school, high school, college)**

Have different stereotypes affected you? In what ways have they affected you? (Model minority, yellow fever etc)

**Family life?**

How do your own parents identify? (Racially, culturally)

Do you have siblings?

How do your siblings identify?

Has this impacted how you see yourself? If so, how?

**Social life?**

Do you have different friendship circles?

Can you describe your friendship groups?

High school?

College?

Have you ever been in affinity groups? If so, what type?

What does your dating life look like?

Tell me more about how race has played a role in your dating life?

I'm curious how about how adoption has influenced your dating life?



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