

Maternal Orientalism: Chinese Transracial Adoption, White Motherhood,
and the Construction of the Chinese Birth Mother

A Master's Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Departments of English and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Dr. Yuri Doolan, Advisor

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Lianne D. Gallant

May 2021

Copyright by
Lianne D. Gallant

2021

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to acknowledge the faculty and staff in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department and Asian American Pacific Islander Program at Brandeis University. I am especially grateful to my advisor, Yuri Doolan, whose support has been indispensable. Thank you for putting up with my panicked emails at three in the morning. I also want to thank my mentors from my undergraduate institution, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts: Jenna Sciuto, Amber Engelson, Victoria Papa, Zack Finch, and last, but not least Hannah Haynes, without whom I would not have pursued Asian American Studies. Thank you to my friends who have stumbled through graduate school with me, especially Liyanga de Silva, a member of my pandemic cohort and esteemed colleague. Lastly, thank you to my aunt Michelle who has cheered me on since the day she met me in China.

ABSTRACT

Maternal Orientalism: Chinese Transracial Adoption, White Motherhood, and the Construction of the Chinese Birth Mother

A Master's Project presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Lianne D. Gallant

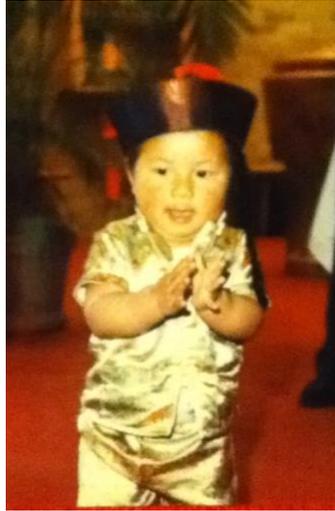
This article examines three documentaries about transracial adoption from China to the United States: *Adopted*, *Found in China*, and *Somewhere Between*. In each film, familiar patterns of white saviorism, colorblind racism, and American exceptionalism combine to create and sustain a sentimental image of transracial adoption. In response, I develop the term “maternal Orientalism” to describe the racialized and gendered ways in which the white adoptive parents construct the Chinese birth mother. Section 1 explores *Adopted* and draws out the often-overlooked continuities between Korean and Chinese adoption. In Section 2, I discuss *Found in China* and *Somewhere Between*, both of which document heritage trips, in tandem. Together, they demonstrate how adoptees often internalize mythical narratives of war and rescue that dominate the white American imagination. Furthermore, I demonstrate how, in order to protect the structure of the white adoptive family, adoptees themselves may inadvertently reify problematic constructions of the Chinese birth mother. By listening to and centering the voices of adoptees, rather than their white adoptive parents, this paper advances the field of critical adoption studies and expands our understandings of transracial adoptees who embody a complicated intersection of race, gender, nation, and kinship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Part I: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Wartime Legacies of Korean and Chinese Adoption in Barb Lee’s <i>Adopted</i>	11
Part II: White Motherhood and The Heritage Trip Documentary.....	18
Conclusion.....	26
References.....	27

PREFACE

Clapping for myself after my Catholic baptism.



Trying on a traditional qipao from Chinatown.



When my maternal grandmother was still alive, my parents and I would go to visit her over Mother's Day weekend. She lived a good three hours away, if we didn't stop along the way, and as I grew older, the journey became less and less tolerable. In retrospect, I wonder how much of my irritation actually had to do with the travelling and how much was because of the holiday. I remember one year, I was particularly upset. As soon as we got to my grandmother's house, I locked myself in the bathroom so that no one would see me cry. I felt ridiculous; I did not know why I was upset—only that I felt a visceral emptiness I couldn't place.

Later that night, I called my childhood best friend. As I paced around my parents' car, walking in circles, I found myself talking about my birth mother. *Who was she? Where was she? Was she even alive? Why didn't she want me?* Our conversation was intimate; I was candid with her in a way that I couldn't be with my own parents, even though—perhaps because—they were much closer to the situation. I remember taking yet another turn around the car when I saw my father standing out on the porch, listening. *How long had he been there? How much had he heard? And why did I feel so guilty?*

It wasn't as though my parents never talked about the adoption. But I have always been a cynic and I supposed I didn't quite buy their version of events. At one point, they told me that the adoption was God's doing and left my birth mother out of it completely. Another time they told me that I had a birth mother but she was too poor and couldn't take care of me. "China was figured as a place where... and Chinese birth mothers as..." Of course, later, I would find out about the One Child Policy and the narrative shifted yet again; in this version, my birth mother was forced to give me up because of a "backwards," patriarchal Chinese culture that doesn't appreciate girls. The conflicting messages were confusing as a child and even now, I am unable to reconcile the multiplicity of narratives surrounding the figure of the Chinese birth mother. And so the question remains: Why didn't she want me and how might I begin to understand?

INTRODUCTION

The interdisciplinary field of Critical Adoption Studies emerged out of a growing body of literature by and about transracial Korean adoptees—many of whom came of age during the late 1990s and early 2000s and later went on to become important cultural producers and commentators on the institution of international adoption themselves¹. Works by adoptee scholars and diasporic Koreans, such as those of Eleana Kim, Jodi Kim, Kimberly McKee, Kim Park Nelson, Arissa Oh, and Soojin Pate, represented a welcome and critical shift from adoption studies prior—conducted mostly by social welfare professionals and focusing almost entirely on psychological adjustment and the process of assimilation for transracial and transnational adoptees. While the sheer number² of Korean adoptees that were placed with American families since the 1950s helps to explain their current dominance in the field, the disproportionate focus on South Korea means much of what we know about transracial adoption from Asia has been mediated through the story of Korean adoption.

Although such scholarship is important and laid the groundwork for adoption studies as a field, the specific conditions through which adoption emerged in the Chinese context have been left underexplored.³ While the emergence of Korean adoption has been understood in the context of Cold War geopolitics and U.S. empire, transnational Chinese adoption emerged specifically as a result of China's One Child Policy combined with preexisting cultural, legal and institutional

¹Notable examples include Jane Jeong Trenka's *The Language of Blood: A Memoir*, Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir*, Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom's graphic memoir *Palimpsest: Documents from a Korean Adoption*, and three documentaries by Deann Borshay Liem: "First Person Plural," "In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee," and "Geographies of Kinship."

² The number of Korean adoptees sent to Western nations since the 1950s is estimated at 200,000. Of the 200,000, approximately 75% (150,000) were sent to the United States while the other 25% (50,000) were sent to Canada, Australia, and Europe.

³ Some exceptions include Laura Briggs and Catherine Choy, both of whom have researched the history of transracial adoption generally in the United States which often includes Chinese adoption but does not focus solely on it. Other experts such as Kay Ann Johnson and Leslie Wang have published works focusing on Chinese orphanage care and the economics of Chinese adoption, but there is little information about what happens after they leave China.

structures that have facilitated international adoption in the United States. Between the years 1979 and 2015, China shifted from a two-child policy to a one-child policy⁴ in an effort to slow population growth. Failure to comply with the law resulted in severe punishment creating an incentive for Chinese families to relinquish surplus children, usually girls. As the number of adoptable Chinese orphans ready to be sent to the United States and other Western nations for adoption grew, they traveled along the same sentimental and legal circuits first traversed by Korean adoptees, despite varying historical context.

Much like their Korean predecessors who were assumed to have been saved from the ravages of war. Popular discourse has rendered Chinese girls rescued and saved from a barbaric, backwards, and patriarchal society that relegates women and girls to the lowest rungs of society. These Orientalist constructions emphasize a white savior perspective all the while ignoring the ways in which Americans have relied upon international adoption to promote dominant ideologies and perform American identity in the twenty-first century. Between 1999 and 2016, over 78,000 Chinese children were adopted by US families. In 2016 alone, 2,231 children were adopted from China while only 260 were adopted from South Korea (Black). Given recent trends, China is expected to surpass Korea as the primary sending nation of international adoptees in just a few years. The United States remains the largest receiving country of these Asian children. These numbers indicate that international adoption from Asia is not solely a response to a single historical event whether it be the Korean War or China's One Child Policy, but something more intimately tied to American identity—the desire for adoptable Asian children.

⁴China announced a return to the two-child policy in 2015 which was then extended to a three-child policy in 2021.

In focusing on Chinese adoption to the United States during the One Child Policy era (roughly 1979-2015), this project aims to make clear how discourses around international adoption from China not only converge with those from South Korea but also produce new kinds of knowledge about the birth mother. Sociologist Sara Dorow begins the work of connecting the Chinese historical context to American racial politics with more consideration for the lived experiences and identities of Chinese adoptees. Like Dorow, this work aims to center both Chinese adoptees and their birth mothers. In particular, I am interested in complicating the white savior narrative that dominates Western discourse surrounding Chinese adoption specifically and relatedly, the construction of white motherhood against the Chinese birth mother. In this paper, I introduce the term “maternal Orientalism” to describe the ways in which the Chinese birth mother is constructed in opposition to adoptive white motherhood.

First coined by Edward Said in 1978, the concept of “Orientalism” was initially used to refer to the ways in which European nations have exoticized and essentialized the Middle East, creating a false dichotomy between the East and the West in which the “Orient” is constructed in opposition to the Occident. Since then, other scholars have expanded upon Said’s work.

Cultural historian Mari Yoshihara has furthered our understanding of Orientalism in an American context or what she terms “American Orientalism.” She argues:

While most studies of Orientalism that have been produced since the publication of Edward Said’s pivotal book in 1978 focus on European discourse about its colonial territories in the Middle East, in this book I use the term Orientalism *specifically in reference to U.S. discourse about China and Japan during the period of U.S. empire-building in Asia-Pacific.* (Yoshihara 7, emphasis mine)

Here Yoshihara applies Said’s framework, initially specific to Europe and the Middle East, to the United States and Asia, particularly countries such as China and Japan with whom the United

States has fraught histories. Like Said, Yoshihara is interested in the ways in which American Orientalism employs a particular racialized image of the Other—in this case, the ways in which Americans construct Asians through a distinct lens informed by a complex history of U.S. immigration policy and the Korean, Vietnam, and Cold War. Additionally, Yoshihara makes a distinct argument about the role of white American women in constructing and upholding American Orientalism. She writes:

As gender became an increasingly effective tool with which to understand, negotiate, and represent the complex and intensifying U.S.-Asian relations . . . white women often used Orientalism not only to make their interventions in American ideas about Asia per se but also to assert, address, and/or challenge women’s roles in American society. (Yoshihara 8)

In other words, American Orientalism is not only about United States foreign policy, but also the changes in American gender politics that emerged concurrently during the late nineteenth century through World War II. As white American women gained access to education, the ballot, and the workforce, middle to upper-class white women were able to move beyond the role of Orientalist consumer and became producers and performers of Asia which, in turn, reinforced their own identities as white American women.

Cultural critic Christina Klein has also written extensively⁵ about Orientalism and the ways in which early (mis)representations of Asians in popular culture were shaped by the Cold War in the United States—or what she calls “Cold War Orientalism.” Specifically, Klein argues that Americans imagined their relations with Asians in familial terms to further the foreign policy objectives of the nation in the early Cold War era. In the 1950s, organizations such as the

⁵ Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. University of California Press, 2003.

Christian Children's Fund (CCF) featured the young, "starving victims of poverty and war" (Klein 154) in their advertisements and encouraged, through sentimental imagery, Americans to sponsor Asian orphans through symbolic adoptions. In this configuration, abandoned war orphans are the result of military conflict and communism. Therefore, "adopting" a child becomes an act that allows for ordinary citizens to participate in the foreign policy objectives of the United States in the larger Cold War standoff against the Soviet Union and its allies.⁶

Typically, when Orientalism is put in familial terms, we focus on the paternalistic tendencies of the West—and rightfully so. However, this paper centers "maternalism" (Weiner) and the unique position that white adoptive mothers hold. Historian Lynn Weiner offers "maternalism" as a potential framework for analysis. She defines the term generally as "a kind of empowered motherhood or public expression of those domestic values associated in some way with motherhood" usually related to "either state-building or to feminism" (Weiner 96). With the case of transracial and transnational adoption from Asia, it is both: The transracial adoptive family unit becomes representative of a gender-equal and multicultural America. As such, my concept of "maternal Orientalism" is not only about Orientalist constructions of mothers and motherhood. It is also an intentional language choice and feminist intervention that aims to center women in direct response to the dominant discourse of paternalism.

Building off of Yoshihara and Klein's expansive definitions of Orientalism as well as Weiner's maternalism framework, I will demonstrate how white American adoptive mothers rely on Orientalist narratives about the figure of the Chinese birth mother in order to legitimize their own identities as white American adoptive mothers. To do so, I will analyze the narratives that

⁶In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, social historian Elaine Tyler May explains how the formation of the white, middle-class, American nuclear family was encouraged and upheld as a way to contain communism (9, 16).

emerge from three documentaries about transracial adoption from Asia, all released within the past 15 years, when adoption from China began to take off in earnest: Barb Lee's *Adopted* (2008), Carolyn Stanek's *Found in China* (2010), and Linda Goldstein Knowlton's *Somewhere Between* (2011).

Documentaries have consistently been the medium of choice for telling stories about both Korean and Chinese adoption. What makes the documentary format (as opposed to other forms of storytelling such as a memoir) so compelling? Asian American studies scholar Kimberly D. McKee argues that the “documentary [form] allows adoptees to fully participate and engage in a form of knowledge production that validates and honor the various truths and realities of their community” (128). While it is true that Korean adoptee-authored documentaries might be a site of truth-telling, most documentaries about Chinese adoption are directed and produced by white adoptive mothers—not adoptees. This allows white adoptive mothers to control the narrative and tell the story of transracial adoption through the white female gaze. They may frame the documentary as being for, by, and about adoptees when in reality, it serves as a way for white American adoptive mothers to process their own emotions and experiences. In addition, the documentary genre relies on creating a sense of (false) objectivity. In other words, narratives that, told in any other form, would be viewed as strictly subjective, are presented as factual and unbiased in the documentary genre. Such false objectivity, when combined with narrative control, creates the perfect medium for white adoptive mothers to perform maternal orientalism.

Maternal orientalist narrative framings are evident in all three films that I explore: *Adopted* is filmed in such a way that leads the viewer to believe that the adoptee is also the filmmaker, but the credits reveal that that is not the case. Rather, it is directed by Barb Lee, an Asian woman who does not seem to have a personal connection to the content material, but who

has co-opted and reproduced maternal orientalism in her own iteration of transracial and transnational adoption. More obvious, both *Found in China* and *Somewhere Between* are directed and produced by white adoptive mothers of young Chinese girls. *Found in China* even features interviews with Tai and Kai, two adopted Chinese daughters of the director and producer, Carolyn Stanek. One crucial question emerges when considering the narratives put forth by adopted girls in this film: How honest could they really be in front of a camera under the close watch of their adoptive parents? To be clear, I am not suggesting that these girls were filming under duress or were being dishonest about their emotions and lived experiences. Rather, I am interested in the ways that their responses inadvertently reflect the values and beliefs of their white adoptive parents, especially mothers, and then how that narrative gets used to reify the dominant American ideologies that hold up international adoption as an institution.

In putting these documentaries in conversation with each other, this paper answers three main questions. First, how is Chinese motherhood being constructed in the white American imagination? Second, what ideological work does this do and who or what might benefit from such a construction? And lastly, is it possible to create a critical narrative of Chinese adoption that does not simply reify the white savior narrative and Orientalist constructions of Chinese birth mothers?

Organized chronologically and thematically, in what follows I begin with a close reading of *Adopted*, the earliest of the three documentaries which notably includes both a Chinese and Korean adoption story. Part I examines the ways in which Korean adoption and Chinese adoption are inextricably linked through the aesthetics and sentimentalities of war. At first glance, Chinese adoption seems unlike international adoption from other Asian countries in that it cannot be directly tied to a history of war, but rather a result of China's strict reproductive

policies. However, given the history of Asian transracial adoption in the United States and because “war orphan” imagery persists even in the post-Cold War American imagination (Klein), nearly all adoption from Asia, including Chinese adoption operates by employing the same racist logic of rescue. The ways in which Korean and Chinese birth mothers are figured in the American imagination reflects the same Orientalist war orphan/white savior narrative initially used to justify adoption from Korea in the 1950s and the ways in which Korean adoption continues to shape how Chinese adoptees and birth mothers are coded within the American psyche.

I then move into *Found in China* and *Somewhere Between* which, due to their similarity in both theme and format, I discuss in tandem. Both documentaries feature a group heritage trip of white adoptive parents and their transracially adopted Chinese daughters. My close readings of the adoptee interviews in these films reveal an internalized white savior narrative passed down by their adoptive parents. In Part II, I demonstrate how adoptees minimize their own thoughts and feelings about their birth families in order to protect white adoptive parents and preserve the adoptive family structure. However, in doing so, they inadvertently perpetuate narratives of rescue that are predicated on the racialization—if not complete erasure—of the birth mother. Together, these three documentaries exemplify the ways in which the validation of white American motherhood relies upon the Orientalist construction of the Chinese birth mother—or, in other words—maternal Orientalism.

PART I:

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same:
Wartime Legacies of Korean and Chinese Adoption in Barb Lee's *Adopted*

"If people adopt now, I expect them to do better." –Jennifer Fero

Directed by Barb Lee and released in 2008, the documentary *Adopted* follows the story of the two families on opposite ends of the adoption journey. First, we are introduced to Jennifer Fero, a 32-year-old Korean adoptee living in Milwaukie, Oregon. We learn that her white adoptive mother has recently been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Although Jennifer has had a difficult time bonding with her adoptive mother in the past, she decides to try one more time before time runs out. Next, we meet the Trainers, a white heterosexual married couple who are just beginning the process of adopting from China. *Adopted* is the first documentary to feature the intimate details of Chinese transracial adoption and so introduces adoption from China through the lens of Korean adoption, a context with which Americans are likely more familiar.

The documentary juxtaposes the two, making it seem as though the Korean adoptee, Jennifer, had to undergo a negative experience so that the Chinese adoptee can have a positive one. In doing so, the film sets up a false progress narrative, implying that we have learned from our past mistakes and are no longer ignorant. Jennifer even states at the beginning, "If someone adopts now, I expect better" and the Trainers are supposed to show us what "better" looks like. From the start, the film treats adoption from Korea as separate from adoption from China—different motives from different time periods—however, I argue in this section and through a close reading of the documentary that the two are inextricably bound together. Although Chinese adoption cannot be directly tied to war, the racial logic used to justify it can be traced back to

Cold War geopolitics. In both cases, transnational and transracial adoption is figured in terms of white saviorism in which Asian birth mothers are viewed as weak and unfit.

Such Orientalist constructions of the Asian birth mother are evident through *Adopted*, particularly in the conversations between Jennifer and her adoptive mother. Jennifer tries to talk to her mother about her experiences growing up as a Korean adoptee in a largely white suburb, but she is not particularly receptive and instead becomes defensive, even hostile. Jennifer says, “I’ve been thinking about my birth mother for a few months and I wanted to see what you thought of this woman who was pregnant with me and gave birth to me. What do you think that was like for her, as a mother?” (33:05) Her mother replies, “You know, honey, not everyone was meant to be a parent or a mom. They don’t have the mentality for it” (33:35). It is clear that Jennifer’s adoptive mother believes that her daughter’s birth mother was simply not “meant to be a parent” and views the birth mother as emotionally or psychologically unfit in some way.

When Jennifer patiently asks her mother to reevaluate and consider other possibilities, her mother adds, “Maybe she *was* married, maybe she had other children and couldn’t take care of you, maybe she came from the group of people who thought that girls were worthless and only boys so you were a girl so let’s get rid of her.” Although seemingly brief, this response speaks volumes to how she is imagining the Korean birth mother. The fact that, after being pushed, Jennifer’s mother concedes to other scenarios such as the birth mother being married reveals that her original assumption was that Jennifer was born out of wedlock, likely to a single woman who “couldn’t take care of you” (read: did not have the financial and emotional ability to raise a child). Lastly, she refers to “the group of people who thought that girls were worthless.” Jennifer is a Korean adoptee, but here the mother groups all Asian cultures together into a homogenous, patriarchal Other.

But Jennifer continues on and tries to explain how important her birth mother is to her, saying “I have as much of a connection to her as you do” (34:37) and is met with a long silence. Eventually her mother says, “I appreciate that she gave you up and I appreciate that I have you. But as far as anything else, I have no...I don’t care about her.” Clearly, Jennifer’s mother only thinks about the birth mother in terms of abandonment and how the relinquishment has served her own interests. Despite this harsh response, Jennifer perseveres and calmly expresses her desire for her adoptive mother to be more open about Jennifer’s curiosity about her birth mother and life prior to her adoption. Her adoptive mother bluntly states, “But I don’t want to be curious about it. I want you all to myself” (36:00). In her mind, she is Jennifer’s “real” (and only) mother. Then she becomes defensive, asking Jennifer “Have I ever held you back from anything you wanted to do?” (36:22). Then the adoptive mother starts to cry and says “I’m doing the best that I can do. Enough. I can’t do anymore.” (36:32). They sit in silence and the conversation is over. In an interview afterwards, she adds, “I really don’t understand what it is that [Jennifer’s] upset about and angry about. I’ve loved her unconditionally.” In her willful ignorance and selfishness, she completely erases Jennifer’s birth mother from the narrative and recenters her own identity as a white American adoptive mother.

We return to John and Jacqui Trainer, a white heterosexual married couple who, unable to have biological children, are just beginning the process of adopting from China. When we first meet them, they are impatiently awaiting a phone call from the (white) social worker handling their case. The call comes and they are told they will have a daughter named Min Xin Pei. Excitedly, Jacqui writes down the name. Yet, when they go to meet with the social worker and get to look at photos, Jacqui asks her husband, “So does she look like the name we had picked out?” (18:26-18:28) They go back and forth about potential names, maybe Sylvia or Ivy. To her

credit, the social worker mentions that up until that point, she had been called Roma. The Trainers decide that they like the name⁷ and keep it at which point Jacqui says, “Now she’s part of our family. She’s a person. Not just a bunch of papers and names and numbers and notarized documents” (18:49-18:54). While this comment initially reads as an attempt to personalize their adoptive experience, it also indicates that for Jacqui, it is the act of naming that makes Roma a person. Or, to put it another way, Roma was not worthy of personhood prior to adoption.

Such definitions of personhood and motherhood are indicative of larger narratives surrounding both the adopted child and their birth mother. The child is always framed as an orphan regardless of their actual status. This revises time and resets temporality, effectively erasing the child’s life prior to adoption, including the woman who gave birth to them. Adoption studies scholar Jodi Kim argues that the “condition of possibility for transracial adoption is the conjoined ‘social death’ of the adoptee and the birth mother” (Kim 857). In other words, the social death of the birth mother is necessary in order for white parents to impose their own culture and values upon the child, usually without acknowledging the loss of language, culture, and of course, biological ties.

Once the social worker gets their papers in order, Jacqui says, “now I sit here and bask in the mommyhood” (19:10-19:16) before cutting to footage of her baby shower, an American ritual typically reserved for women who are about to become mothers, usually for the first time. At this point, Jacqui still has not yet met Roma yet already she feels comfortable claiming the “mommy” title. In line with Kim’s argument, the social death of the birth mother, facilitated by the re-naming and legal paperwork, is key in the process of adoption for both adoptee and adoptive mother. Now that Roma has attained personhood, though a person without a past,

⁷ This interaction begs the question: if they had disliked the name Roma, would they have kept Min Xin Pei or gone with one of their preselected Anglicized names?

Jacqui can fully take on her new role; the birth mother is erased from the narrative and the adoptive mother steps in to take her place. In a comment that was likely an attempt to normalize adoptive families, Jacqui says, “The normal way to do things is the man and woman get together and they make a baby. Well then if that doesn’t happen you fill out paperwork and talk to social workers and that’s how you make a baby. And we’ve *made* her” (45:20, emphasis mine). Here, it is the Trainers who named, legalized, and therefore created or “made” Roma, ignoring the biological reality that at least physically, it is birth parents who created Roma and her birth mother who gave her life. But Roma’s Chinese birth mother is erased from the narrative and replaced with Jacqui’s story of white adoptive motherhood.

As the documentary goes on, the Trainers become increasingly comfortable in their new roles of mother and father. Jacqui even says, “I’m just absolutely loving being a mom. I really thought it was gonna be harder actually” (45:25). But then she mentions having good daycare, flexible work hours, and supportive husband, privileges that not every mother has or can afford and make “being a mom” significantly easier. The exaggeration of ease, assumed here to be universal maternal experience, also implicitly suggests that Roma’s birth mother was somehow deficient because she could not handle the alleged easiness of motherhood.

Likewise, John comments, “[Roma’s] made it so easy. She’s healthy, she’s beautiful, she’s smart, intelligent. She’s adjusted so well. She just seems like she’s been with us forever” (45:43). The adjectives he chooses (“easy,” “beautiful,” and “smart”), whether consciously or not, perpetuate racialized stereotypes about Asian women that date back to early U.S.

immigration policy⁸ and the first Asian American women in film.⁹ The characterization of Roma

⁸The Page Act of 1875 specifically excluded Chinese women, working under the assumption that all Chinese women were sex workers (Rotondi).

⁹*The Wrath of the Gods* (1914), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), and *The Good Earth* (1937) are some of the earliest films depicting Asian American women.

as passive, exotically beautiful, and naturally more intelligent is the result of two common tropes: the lotus blossom (Mok) and the model minority (Hagedorn). The lotus blossom stereotype refers to an Asian woman whose sole purpose is to cater to the white male gaze; she is hypersexual and romantic, yet also passive and subservient. According to the model minority myth, Asian people are inherently smarter and more successful than other racial groups. In reality, the concept of a model minority is a fiction disguised as a compliment and used to propagate antiblackness. As such, John's seemingly innocuous, even complimentary descriptions of Roma indicate that he is subconsciously mapping his racialized and gendered preconceptions onto her.

John also seems to be defining easiness in terms of Roma's ability to "adjust" to her new environment, the implication being that showing obvious signs of emotional trauma would make her difficult. Like John, Jacqui observes that, "She seems pretty well-rounded . . . if she has an underlying issue, she's not making it known" (48:00). Roma was born in 2006 and this documentary was released in 2008, so Roma can be no more than two years old in the film. A toddler is just learning to speak; she is not going to be aware of her trauma, much less be able to communicate it to her adoptive parents. Moreover, it is not Roma's responsibility to educate her parents about adoptee mental health.¹⁰

The Trainers' efforts to educate themselves frequently seem half-hearted. For example, Jacqui explains that she purchased three books on attachment, but only got through two because "it started getting a little depressing" and wanted to "wait until I'm in the mix of it to really read up on it so if I need to know this stuff I'll know where to look" (47:13). While it is good that she has these resources on hand, her comment seems overly dismissive: if she can't read about

¹⁰According to a 2013 study, adoptees are four times as likely to die by suicide compared to non-adopted children in the United States (Keyes et al).

attachment (or lack thereof) in a book, how is she going to handle it in real life? And John did not read any books at all. He half-jokingly says, “I guess that makes me ignorant, doesn’t it?” (47:45) but makes no attempt to resolve the issue.

At least the Trainers, unlike Jennifer’s parents, do seem to have some awareness surrounding the trauma of adoption. Jacqui expresses her concern, “It worries me about how much trauma she’s gonna go through at such a young age. It’s not fair. Babies are supposed to be happy and secure and know that they’re cared for” (38:56). Of course, outside of relinquishing Roma, there is no evidence that she was not happy, secure, or being cared for with her birth mother or in her foster home. The assumption that her past was bad is only mildly better than erasing it altogether and reveals the negative lens through which Jacqui is imagining Roma’s birth mother and country.

While *Adopted* may have set out to highlight the differences between Korean and Chinese adoption, I am more interested in the similarities. Although the Trainers do a better job than Jennifer’s parents, it is clear that neither couple has been prepared for the difficulties associated with adopting across both international and racial boundaries. In the two cases, the white adoptive mothers employ maternal Orientalism—that is, they construct the Asian birth mother as unfit in order to validate their own identities as white American mothers. The same Cold War ideologies of race and rescue that undergird Korean adoption continues to influence Chinese adoption. When considering the similarities, it becomes clear that despite the director’s impulses to construct a linear narrative of progress moving from South Korea and transitioning to China, the dominant narratives surrounding transracial adoption from Asia have not significantly changed since it emerged as a major practice in U.S. society and culture in the 1950s.

PART II:

White Motherhood and The Heritage Trip Documentary

“Should I be mad because [my birth mother] gave me up? Should I be sad because she was in a position where she had to give me up? Or should I be happy to see her?” –Kai

The documentary film *Found in China* was released in 2010 and directed by Carolyn Stanek, a white adoptive mother of two Chinese girls, both of whom are featured in the film. Stanek documents a group of six Chinese adoptees and their adoptive parents as they embark on a group heritage trip back to China. The six girls—Lily, Amelia, Eva, Emma, Tai, and Kai—range from age nine to thirteen at the time, just on the cusp on adolescence. Prior to returning to China, the girls had varying levels of excitement about the heritage trip.¹¹ While several of those featured in the film had always wanted to go back, others were curious (but apprehensive), and the remaining had never felt particularly compelled to travel back to their birth country.

Just one year following *Found in China*, another documentary film entitled *Somewhere Between* was released in 2011. Like its predecessor, *Somewhere Between* is directed by a white adoptive mother, Linda Goldstein Knowlton. In fact, the documentary begins with a home video

¹¹As the number of Asian adoptees in the United States grows, heritage trips are becoming increasingly common. Among adoptee experts, it is generally agreed upon that heritage trips have the potential to be incredibly beneficial—sometimes even crucial—to racial and cultural identity formation. Adoption agencies and social workers alike encourage adoptive families make a return trip, ideally when their child reaches the pre-teen and teenage years. Despite frequently being promoted by professionals, heritage trips can also be emotionally troubling in a way that strictly recreation travel is not (Wilson); yet the two often feature similar rituals such as taking photographs, collecting souvenirs, and visiting famous landmarks. To address this uncomfortable overlap, anthropologist Frayda Cohen coins a more apt term to describe transracial adoptee heritage trips, “kinship tourism,” which she defines as “a process through which parents travel to build their family by utilizing transnational networks, agencies and the state, all of which employ an understanding of kinship to forge familiar and similar legacies of ‘home’” (Cohen 50).

recording of Knowlton adopting a 10-month-old baby girl named Ruby. Like Stanek, Knowlton documents a heritage trip, but whereas the girls in *Found in China* are still in their pre-teen years, *Somewhere Between* focuses on four girls who are already teenagers. Ranging in age from thirteen to fifteen, the four girls—Fang, Ann, Jenna, and Haley—have varied levels of interest in their birth parents much like the slightly younger group of girls in Stanek’s film.

Though many adoptees claim to feel indifferent about their birth parents, the detailed and nuanced nature of their interview responses indicate that they have, in fact, all thought about their biological family to some degree, but may be hesitant to discuss it in the presence of their adoptive parents. Close readings of the interviews in both documentaries reveal that most adoptees have internalized the myth of American rescue and so, while there are fleeting moments of resistance in which they begin to push back against such narratives, ultimately, their responses largely reify white saviorism and the Orientalist constructions of China on which it relies.

For example, Kai, one of Stanek’s adopted daughters, begins to talk about her birth mother, but stops herself partway through:

I would want to meet [my birth parents] because I would like to know who were my parents and what they looked like, what they lived like (53:13) . . . I sometimes do [think about my birth mother] but when I do, I just think of how *happy* I am here and how *happy* she would be to know that I’m in a good place and I’m very *happy*” (1:08:32, emphasis mine).

Though Kai is initially open about her feelings towards her birth parents, she concludes by reiterating how “happy” she is to be adopted. She briefly refers specifically to her birth mother, but then is immediately followed by a reassurance to her white adoptive mother (and all the adoptive mothers who may be watching) that she is “happy” now. In fact, the word *happy* is

repeated three times in the same sentence—almost as if Kai is overcompensating for making the “mistake” of admitting that she thinks about her birth mother.

Likewise, in *Somewhere Between*, Ann also finishes her thoughts on a “happy” note, mirroring Kai’s response. She says, “It’d be nice to know what my birth parents look just to say ‘I got this from my mom, I got this from my dad’ and so on *but it’s not this huge quest in my life to find them. I’m happy with my parents now*” (45:25, emphasis mine). In other words, Ann feels that there is no need to find her birth parents because she is happy with her adoptive parents.¹² Even by the end of the film, Ann’s mind has changed only slightly, not significantly. After the trip to China, Ann says she is somewhat interested in finding her birth parents, but only to gauge physical resemblance which could be accomplished in a photograph and does not require an in-person meeting. Ann is comfortable disclosing her interest in a picture because photographs are silent, still images, less likely to disrupt the adoptive family than an in-person meeting, thereby protecting the feelings of her white adoptive parents, particularly the mother. Laura Briggs reminds us that international adoption and, by extension, the white adoptive family depends upon the ideological erasure and destruction of the birth family. As such, Ann’s desire for a photograph is being tolerated, but only because it does not undermine or threaten the white mother’s maternal authority. In this way, both Kai and Ann have been enlisted to preserve the harmony of their adoptive families and are careful to maintain their performance as “happy/grateful adoptees” even in documentaries that supposedly center adoptee voices.

The only adoptee in either film who does not tailor her words to fit a particular narrative is fifteen-year-old Fang. Unlike the other girls, Fang was older when she was adopted. Therefore,

¹²The reality is that adoptees may begin a birth parent search for a multitude of reasons unrelated to their happiness or lack thereof.

she still remembers her birth parents and feels a deep connection to them. She recalls her early childhood in China:

I remember my Chinese *mom*, my birth mother. I remember she had long, gray hair and it was always braided and my dad, he chopped firewood for a living. We lived in the countryside in a little shack with one bed. I remember my *mom* piercing my ears. I think I was about one or two. I guess other than myself it's the only proof that she—my *mom*—and my father ever existed . . . The decisions everybody made, especially my *mom* and from the memories I have of her, I knew that she wanted me. If nobody else wanted me, she did" (19:33, emphasis mine).

While early childhood memories can be traumatic, for Fang, they are a positive influence. She is secure in her dual identity as an adoptee, comfortable to the point of using both “mother” and “mom” to refer to her biological mother. Throughout both films, the biological mother was almost always referred to as the “birth mother” while the more intimate title of “mom” was reserved for the adoptive mother. In this configuration, only one woman can be the “real mom,” implying that the other is “fake,” somehow artificial. By using “mother” and “mom” interchangeably, Fang challenges the false dichotomy and implied power imbalance of real and fake motherhood.

Fang’s memories of her birth mother affirm that she was wanted by at least her birth mother “if nobody else,” something that every adoptee wonders about and many hope for, but few can confirm. In this way, Fang is uniquely positioned. Most transracial and transnational adoptees are too young to remember anything at all—not the land, the language, and least of all their families. Unfortunately, without their own memories, they have no choice but to rely on whatever narrative their adoptive parents tell them, at least until they are old enough to think critically about it for themselves. Though well-intentioned, white adoptive parents often

perpetuate the narrative of rescue, an account in which they become the heroes who save children from an impoverished Asian country and generously give them a shot at the American Dream—a story that is more difficult to maintain if the child is old enough to remember otherwise. In other words, adoptee memories of their birth mothers complicate a simplistic framing of adoption as a rescue. Fang, and adopted individuals like her who were adopted later in childhood,¹³ pose a threat to the formation of the white adoptive family. In this way, Fang’s story serves as a counternarrative that resists “white documentation” (Hartman) by the adoptive parents.

The white savior narrative is evident in *Found in China* as well. When asked about her birth parents, eleven-year-old Lily responds:

I think my birth parents might wanna know if I was okay and stuff like that but it would be kind of hard for them I think” (51:25) . . . I mean I’d wanna find out why they gave me up and if it was for a good cause *I’m pretty sure right now that they probably gave me up because they didn’t have enough money or they knew it was going to be the best thing for me*” (56:00) . . . I think they might feel kind of sad that they gave me up and stuff but if they didn’t really want to talk to me all I would wanna know . . . if they’re okay because for me it’s just important to, you know, know if they’re okay and how they’re doing. I mean, they don’t have to talk to me *I just wanna help them*” (1:00:15, emphasis mine).

At first, Lily admits that she does wonder why she was given up as a baby, but then pulls back the same way Kai and Ann did. It is almost like she suddenly remembers what she has been told, likely by her adoptive parents: Her birth parents were too poor to care for her so her adoptive parents came to the rescue. While there may be some truth to the poverty narrative, the frequency with which it is cited as *the* primary reason behind child relinquishment is an

¹³While included in this film as an exceptional case, it is important to note that few adoptees are actually adopted at Fang’s age precisely because adoptive parents much prefer infants and younger children whose memories (or lack thereof) cannot disrupt the narrative construction of adoption as rescue.

oversimplification—a continuation of the narrative we see in Korean adoption—that relies on an Orientalist construction of China as a Third World country,¹⁴ unable to care for its own people.

Such Orientalist rhetoric can become so deeply internalized that some adoptees then turn around and tell what they believe to be “their story” to other adoptive families. For example, when we meet fourteen-year-old Ann, she is speaking with a white adoptive mother (not her own) at a social event for adoptive families. When asked if she would want to go back to China, she answers, “I would want to go back [to China] to see the orphanage but I’m not really sure I’d want to see my birth mother. There’s a possibility it’d be kind of interesting. If I had the preference, I probably wouldn’t meet her but I’d like to go back anyway” (14:17). The white mother nods, seemingly comforted by Ann’s reply. She is clearly relieved that there is a chance her adopted daughter might not even want to meet her birth mother, as if acknowledgement of her daughter’s birth mother somehow takes away or invalidates her own role as mother.

Of course, there is no way to predict an adoptee’s interest (or lack thereof) in their origin story. For example, Stanek’s thirteen-year-old daughter, Tai, simply expresses that she would “feel weird and I’d wanna see the house so I could see how they live...or if I had any brothers or sisters” (53:40) but for her younger sister, Kai, it is a bit more complex. Stanek recalls that in the days after they returned from the trip, Kai asked her, “Mom, what if I ever met the woman who gave birth to me in China? . . . Should I be mad because she gave up? Should I be sad because she was in a position where she had to give me up? Or should I be happy to see her?” (52:45). To her credit, Stanek responds appropriately by asking Kai what she thinks and provides a space in which she can feel all three. It is interesting that Kai asks how she “should” feel as opposed to “is

¹⁴China has since risen as a global economic power, but in the early 2010s, it was still viewed as part of the poor, undeveloped East.

it okay if I feel X” or “why do I feel Y.” The use of “should” indicates that at this stage, she still turns to her white adoptive mother for emotional direction.

Though a bit older than Kai, Haley in *Somewhere Between* demonstrates a similar reliance on the emotions of her adoptive parents for guidance. At first, she pretends to be ambivalent about finding her birth parents, but later we learn that she has always wanted to find her birth parents, but “wouldn’t want to make either of my moms feel [slight pause] unwanted” (Haley, 32:32). In what emerges as a pattern, Haley tries to protect the feelings of her adoptive parent while also navigating her identity as a Chinese adoptee. She pauses before she lands on the word “unwanted,” an interesting word choice given the circumstances; she does not want either of her mothers to feel unwanted because she knows how that feels.

Haley’s story is additionally complicated by religion and her relationship to Christianity. She claims that “even as a Chinese girl growing up in China, if it was meant to be, I would’ve found a way to being a Christian. God does everything for a reason so there must be a reason that this happened and now I’m here” (18:10). When we are introduced to her mother, this begins to make more sense. Haley’s mother is heavily involved in missionary work and clearly views herself as a white savior. She says, “We don’t go in preaching the Lord. If I do, the government might throw me out and then I can’t help these little children who are hungry and naked. That’s what I want to do is help those kids and I can’t if I’m not in the country” (17:44). Though she frames her work as purely humanitarian (feeding the hungry and clothing the naked), she is participating in a long history of Western dominance over the East and the use of religion as justification.

Interestingly, Haley is both the only adoptee who grows up in a religious home and also the only one who actively seeks out and finds her birth family. Yet, even in the moments before

she meets them, Haley still feels conflicted. She says, “When I found out they were my birth family, I was kind of torn. Should I go back and see them or not because they didn’t want me in the first place . . . I’m nervous to see my birth mother . . . she gave me up a long time ago and so she might not want to see me” (Haley, 1:05:52). This turns out not to be the case and she is able to meet her biological father, mother, and even siblings. Haley’s successful reunion with her birth family directly refutes the assumption that adoptees were unwanted and unloved prior to adoption. Even the white direction of the documentary could not stop an outcome that deviates from expected white empire norms.

The white savior narrative has a gendered component as well. Though not explicitly discussed in either film as much as race, it is always in the background. Jenna, age fifteen, brings it to the fore at an adoption panel. She says “I think I’m always searching for a way to compensate for the fact that I’m a girl . . . I’ve always tried to be the best that I can to compensate for that” (Jenna, 48:05). In contrast, Ann is unbothered by the gendered aspect of Chinese adoption. She says, “The fact that I was probably given up just because I was a girl doesn’t really bother me. That’s back in China . . . In America, it’s more like ‘I’m a girl, I can do what you can do, and I can do it in heels so deal.” Ann’s flippant commentary reveals that she, like many white adoptive parents, have bought into the narrative of American exceptionalism—progressive, feminist, and multicultural—as opposed to a backwards, patriarchal China.

Though *Found in China* and *Somewhere Between* both attempt to center adoptees, they end up serving the interests of the adoptive mothers/directors rather than their children. Close readings of the adoptee interviews reveal that, even when asked to share their emotions surrounding adoption, they tend to fall back on an internalized white savior narrative in the interest of protecting their adoptive parents’ feelings. If they do mention their birth parents,

adoptees will often reframe their interest as humanitarian work, inadvertently reifying the Orientalist construction of the Chinese birth mother as unfit, China as a Third World country, and the United States as a neoliberal haven from the poverty and misogyny of the East.

CONCLUSION

Despite the false progress narrative Lee attempts to set up, *Adopted* does (perhaps unintentionally) illustrate the ties between Korean and Chinese adoption; it is clear that the Cold War Orientalism (Klein) and “war orphan” imagery that propelled Korean adoption in the 1950s continues to inform how Americans imagine China and its citizens—poor, backwards, and patriarchal. Such Orientalist constructions of China, when coupled with American exceptionalism, results in white savior narratives that, as seen in *Found in China* and *Somewhere Between*, adoptees then inherit and internalize. Both the documentation of Jennifer’s adoptive journey and the heritage trips were highly curated to demystify transracial adoption and prove that Asian transracial adoptees are just as American as their white adoptive parents. Instead, all three films exemplified the ways in which Orientalist constructions and erasure of the Chinese birth mother remains central to the validation of white adoptive motherhood—or what I call “maternal Orientalism.”

REFERENCES

Books:

- Briggs, Laura. *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Choy, Catherine. *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America*. New York University Press, 2013.
- Chung, Nicole. *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir*. Catapult, 2018.
- Dorow, Sara. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*. New York University Press, 2006.
- Johnson, Kay Ann. *China's Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One-Child Policy*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Kim, Eleana. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Lee, Na Y. "The Construction of Military Prostitution in South Korea During the U.S. Military Rule, 1945-1948." *Feminist Studies (print)*. (2007): 453-481. Print.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. Basic Books, 2008.
- Nelson, Kim Park. *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*. Rutgers University Press, 2016.
- Oh, Arissa. *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Pate, Soojin. *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Sjöblom, Lisa Wool-Rim. *Palimpsest: Documents from a Korean Adoption*. Ordfront, 2016.
- Trenka, Jane Jeong. *The Language of Blood: A Memoir*. Borealis Books, 2003.
- Wang, Leslie. *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*. Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Yoshihara, Mari. *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Articles

Cohen, Frayda. "Tracing the Red Thread: Chinese-U.S. Transnational Adoption and the Legacies of 'Home.'" *Anthropologica*, vol. 57, no. 1, p. 41, 2015.

Hagedorn, Jessica. "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck." *Ms. Magazine*, Jan. 1994, pp. 74-78.

Keyes, Margaret A et al. "Risk of Suicide Attempt in Adopted and Nonadopted Offspring." *Pediatrics*, vol. 132, no. 4, 2013, pp. 639-46. doi:10.1542/peds.2012-3251.

Kim, Jodi. "An Orphan with Two Mothers: Transnational and Transracial Adoption, the Cold War, and Contemporary Asian American Cultural Politics." *American Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2009, pp. 855-880. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27735028>.

McKee, Kimberly D. "Rewriting History: Adoptee Documentaries as a Site of Truth-Telling." *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 119-130.

Mok, Teresa A. "Getting the Message: Media Images and Stereotypes and Their Effect on Asian Americans." *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1998, pp. 185. doi:10.1037/1099-9809.4.3.185.

Weiner, Lynn. "Maternalism as a Paradigm." *Journal of Women's History*. vol. 5, no. 2, 1993. doi:10.1353/jowh.2010.0143.

Wilson, Samantha L., and Laura Summerhill-Coleman. "Exploring Birth Countries: The Mental Health Implications of Heritage Travel for Children/Adolescents Adopted Internationally." *Adoption Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3/4, July 2013, pp. 262-278. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10926755.2013.790865.

Films:

Adopted. Directed by Barb Lee. Point Made Films, 2008.

First Person Plural. Directed by Deann Borshay Liem. New Day Films, 2000.

In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee. Directed by Deann Borshay Liem. Mu Films, 2010.

Geographies of Kinship. Directed by Deann Borshay Liem. Mu Films, 2019.

Found in China. Directed by Carolyn Stanek. Tai-Kai Productions, 2010.

Somewhere Between. Directed by Linda Goldstein Knowlton. Ladylike Films, 2011.

Websites:

Black, Kelly. "6 Statistics about Chinese International Adoption." *International Adoption*, 26 Apr. 2018, <https://internationaladoption.org/6-statistics-china-international-adoption/#:~:text=A%20total%20of%2078%2C257%20children,China%20came%20home%20to%20America>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2021.

Rotondi, Jessica Pearce. "Before the Chinese Exclusion Act, This Anti-Immigration Law Targeted Asian Women." *History*, 19 Mar. 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/chinese-immigration-page-act-women>. Accessed 04 May 2021.