"Do you have to be biologically related to be family?" Chinese international transracial adoptees defining family

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INTRODUCTION

Adoption literature in Sociology focuses on adoptive parents and explains their desires around constructing family or the issues that adoptees face adjusting to a new country and family (Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo, Stevens 2006; Dorow 2006; Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater‐Deckard, and Petrill 2007; Raleigh 2012; Khanna and Jillian 2015). Sociology scholars have recognized adoption as a formation of a family (Kirk 1984; Raleigh 2012) but lack the inclusion of adoptees' perspectives. Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, Steelman (2010) noted that social scientists have often imposed the definition of family onto the general public rather than seek to understand how people define family for themselves. In order to highlight adoptee voices and expand on the definition of family, my research focuses on how Chinese international transracial adoptees form their own definition. I ask: How do Chinese adoptees define family?

This research focuses on Chinese adoptees because China was the number one sending country to the U.S., accounting for 29% of the international adoptions between 1999 and 2023 (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025). I argue that Chinese adoptees broaden the definition of family offered by Powell et al (2010) by moving beyond structural descriptions. Powell et al (2010) reasoned that quantitative surveys would provide a glimpse of the boundaries that Americans use to distinguish between family and nonfamily (19). Qualitative interviews in the present study allowed Chinese adoptees to reveal specific qualities that they identify when considering someone as family such as love, support, and consistency. Additionally, I make connections between the transracial adoption paradox (Lee 2003) and the double consciousness (Du Bois 1903) to make sense of how transracial adoptees are raised by white families and perceived by others due to their race/ethnicity. This study contributes to the

literature in Sociology by including adoptees in the conversation on how Americans define family.

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Defining international transracial adoption

The term “international transracial adoption” highlights the international aspect of adoption from one country to another and the racial difference between the adoptee of color and their white adoptive parents. The "international" aspect of the term aligns with the U.S. Department of State’s definition of intercountry adoption, which is “...the process by which you adopt a child from a country other than your own through permanent legal means and then bring that child to your country of residence to live with you permanently (2024).” International adoptions often result in transracial families where the adoptee and the adoptive parents are different races (Dorow 2006). Transracial adoption is defined as “…the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families (Silverman 1993:104),” with the adoptive parents typically being white (Lee 2003). When understanding transracial adoptees being a different race than their adoptive parents, the transracial adoption paradox (Lee 2003) identifies a complexity adoptees face. The issue transracial adoptees face is being perceived and treated as members of the culture or race similar to the white adoptive families they grew up in due to their upbringing (Lee 2003).

In previous studies about Chinese adoption, researchers have focused on adoptive parents and commonly refer to the adopted children as “Asian child” (Dorow 2006; Ishizawa et al. 2006; Khanna and Killian 2015). In addition to referencing the adopted child’s race, their ethnicity was also used to refer to them as “Chinese child” (Dorow 2006; Khanna and Killian 2015). Wing and

Park-Taylor (2022) called their participants "Chinese transracial adoptees" and omitted "international" even though they were talking about Chinese international transracial adoptees. The current study will refer to participants as "Chinese adoptees" since both the international and transracial aspects of the adoption are implicit.

Statistics, laws, and policies: informing the "ideal" family

Between 1999 and 2023, the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs (2025) tracked a total of 284,088 international adoptions of children under the age of 18. 82,674 adoptions, approximately 29.1% were from China, the highest number of any country. In comparison, South Korea accounted for 21,498 adoptions (7.6%) during the same time period (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025). Historically, the largest wave of international adoption from Asia came from South Korea (Wang, Ponte, and Weber Ollen 2015). However, China is a significant country to consider due to the fact that more than 130,000 children from the People's Republic of China were adopted into different countries in the past two decades (Wang et al. 2015).

The rise of international adoption from China to other countries was attributed to the development of a robust international adoption program and the one-child policy (Rynzar 2016:39). In 1979, China introduced the one-child policy, a policy that penalized families for exceeding a birth quota of one child (Zhang 2017:141) and in the early 1990s, China established international adoptions (Kay 2002:387). The one-child policy underscored the preference of having sons over daughters (Ryznar 2016). Dowling and Brown (2009:354) noted that female babies tended to be abandoned in China because the country historically discriminated against women and considered them subordinate to men. Additionally, sons were expected to carry on

the family name while daughters were married into other families and it led people to favor keeping their sons (Kay 2002; Ryznar 2016). From 1999 to 2023, 84.18% of the international adoptees who came from China to the U.S. were girls (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025). While China ended all international adoptions as of September 2024, (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025), the gender disparity of adopted girls reflects China's cultural preference and value for sons, highlighting the significant role gender plays in what constitutes an ideal family in China.

Laws surrounding sexuality in China and the U.S. are also important when considering adoption. When China had international adoptions open to other countries, the China Center of Adoption Affairs did not identify prospective adoptive referrals from same-sex parents (English.gov.cn 2020). The People's Republic of China only recognized marriages of families between opposite sexes and foreign same-sex couples were not allowed to adopt children in China (English.gov.cn 2020). This exclusionary policy adds a significant layer to the discussion about what constitutes a family. By not recognizing same-sex couples and excluding them from adopting, China's international adoption policy reflected societal views on sexuality and the preferred heterosexual family structure.

Under U.S. federal law, American parents are eligible to adopt children from abroad if they meet specific requirements, such as; hold U.S. citizen status, be at least 25 years old if unmarried, file joint adoption with a spouse who is also a citizen or of legal status in the U.S., and fulfill other requirements such as a criminal background check, fingerprinting and home study (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025). There are also requirements for adoptive parents based on age, income, education, and marital status (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025). In addition to federal requirements, both the state of

residence and the child's country of origin have specific regulations, further shaping the adoption process (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2025). In regards to same-sex couples, the U.S. did not provide encompassing rights for them up until 2017. When two married, same-sex couples conceived a child through sperm donation, the Arkansas Department of Health issued a birth certificate that only displayed the birth mother's name (Pavan v. Smith 2017:1-2). The state law in Arkansas required the name of the mother's male spouse on the certificate of the child (Pavan v. Smith 2017:1). However, that rule was deemed inapplicable to same-sex couples because the Arkansas Supreme Court considered how *Obergefell v. Hodges* applied to the issuance of birth certificates to married women and committed to providing same-sex couples the benefits that come with marriage (Pavan v. Smith 2017:2). The adoption requirements for U.S. and China and the U.S. supreme court case *Pavan v. Smith*, reveals how both countries underscore the importance of sexuality and gender shaping the family.

DEFINITIONS OF FAMILY

The nuclear family

George Murdock (1949) defined the nuclear family as a social group consisting of two adults of opposite sexes involved in a sexual relationship and their children (biological or adopted). He argued that the nuclear family had four essential functions: sexual regulation, reproduction, economic cooperation, and socialization of children (Murdock 1949). Another version of the nuclear family was the Standard North American Family (SNAF) (Smith 1993) which consists of a heterosexual couple and biological children. The structure of heterosexual parents with biological children can be viewed as a model for a family unit. For example, messages about family such as family night, family vacation, or "pro-family" advocacy groups

refer to a specific structure of family and exclude other definitions (Powell et al 2010:2). Powell et al. (2010) also noted the importance of defining family because:

> [h]ow families are defined has far-reaching policy implications, including… who makes decisions about the end of life,…who has medical proxies, who is eligible for family benefits, who is entitled to alimony and child support, and who is to receive assets upon an individual's death (17)

Those who are considered family are given certain rights and responsibilities that are not given to others who do not fit the "correct" model. Although not representative of all types of family, the nuclear family provides a structure to compare to the definitions of family provided by the participants of this study.

Biological vs adoptive family in sociology

In *Shared Fate*, David Kirk (1984) brought attention to adoption in the field of Sociology through his studies on childless parents and how adoption served as a means to form a family. Although Kirk (1984) did not include international transracial adoption or the race of the parents at the time of the publication, it spurred critical discussions around families and adoption in the context of births out of wedlock and infertility. Fisher (2003) was critical of sociologists for not devoting more attention to the topic of adoption because it offered a site to explore how race, ethnicity, social class, and gender inform how families form and how they function. Fisher (2003) reviewed literature across disciplines and found that while adoption seemed to work well for the adoptee, adoptive parent, and birth parent, it still appeared as a devalued status due to the discrepancy between American parents' attitudes and actual behaviors regarding adoption. Fisher (2003) urged for sociologists to bring more critical analysis to adoption. Similar to Kirk (1984), Raleigh (2012) recognized adoption as the formation of a family and defined adoption as a process that creates a family out of legal and social bonds rather than biological ones. However,

Raleigh (2012) did not expand on how family was defined beyond how it is formed. While Raleigh (2012) strayed from the biological bond being an indicator of a family, the definition lacked qualitative data that could include more explanation behind defining a family. While several scholars brought adoption into a conversation regarding family, they focused on adoptive parents and did not include adoptees. Adoptive parents offer a valid perspective to study, but it needs to be balanced with studies like this paper, that include adoptee voices. In order to include adoptees in Sociology research and expand on the definition of family, I ask Chinese adoptees broad questions about family so that they define the term for themselves.

METHODS

After obtaining institutional review board approval, I conducted 18 qualitative interviews with Chinese adoptees. Qualitative interviews are useful for in-depth analyses of identity and personal experiences as this technique allows for probes and follow-up questions (Alimahomed 2010). Refer to Appendix 1 for the interview questions.

Recruitment and participants

I recruited participants through purposive sampling using social media posts, email announcements from organizations, and snowball sampling. The criteria for participants were: they must be internationally adopted from China and brought into the U.S. to live with white adoptive parent(s), reside in the U.S., speak English, and be at least 18 years of age.

Since I am a Chinese adoptee and share the same identity as my desired participants, I used my own profile and network to help me recruit. Throughout the summer of 2025, I posted a recruitment flyer on my personal profiles on Instagram and LinkedIn. In May and June, I shared

the flyer with two nonprofit organizations run by adoptees, *BIPOC Adoptees* and *China's Children International* (*CCI*). *CCI* consists of Chinese international adoptees and their adoptive parents, which made it a desirable organization for my recruitment. *BIPOC Adoptees* is an organization that arose in 2021 and gained attention in the adoptee community through its annual conference. During May 2025, I posted the recruitment flyer to a facebook group, *Asian Adoptees in Graduate School*, which specifically asks people to confirm their status as adoptees from Asia to join the group. In hopes of reaching more Chinese adoptees, *Sisters of China* was another Facebook group I shared the flyer with in July 2025 because of the specificity of adoptees from China. Both Facebook groups established a welcoming and supportive online space for Asian adoptees and their platforms helped me get the word out to over 1,000 people.

18 Chinese adoptees were recruited. Ages ranged from 19-34 years old (26.8 years average age) and the majority identified as female. At the time of the interviews, eight participants were single, seven had a partner, two were married, and one was engaged. None of the participants had children. In terms of education, Seven participants earned their bachelor's degree, seven earned their master's degree, and four were close to finishing their undergraduate degree. Growing up, 14 participants had married parents (a mother and father), two participants' parents divorced, and two participants were adopted by single mothers. Including Chinese adoptees of different genders and those who are mothers could add different experiences and perspectives regarding children within the family. The exploration of siblings, both biologically related and not, surfaced in some interviews and could be investigated more thoroughly in future studies.

Procedures

The recruited participants were instructed to read an informed consent form, notified of voluntary participation, and assured that their information would be kept confidential. Participants' names were redacted and pseudonyms were used. The semi-structured interviews took place online using Zoom and the duration of interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes with the average interview lasting 22 minutes and 13 seconds. The participants were interviewed about their family background, thoughts about what makes a family, and their ideal family.

Otter.ai was used to record audio and transcribe interviews. After the interviews were transcribed by the software, I listened back to the recordings to review the accuracy of the written transcription. When reading through the interview transcripts, I discovered themes that did not appear in the literature review, which allowed for inductive coding (Khanna and Killian 2015). Inductive coding allowed flexibility to explore the data directly from the interview responses and avoid limitations to pre-defined categories. I conducted open coding in the first scan of the data to identify themes and assign initial codes from the interviews (Neuman 2014). This allowed codes to emerge naturally from the data. I used axial coding in the second pass through the data where I analyzed initial coded themes to organize ideas more concretely to create categories (Neuman 2014) such as biological family, definitions of family, experiences with race, and family structures. I utilized stakeholder checks (Thomas 2003) to enhance reliability by reaching out to participants to verify the quotes I included in the paper and allowed them to comment on the accuracy of what they said.

FINDINGS

Rather than provide a specific structure of what family is, Chinese adoptees challenged the nuclear family by emphasizing non-biological and non-raced definitions of family despite society imposing their racial identity onto them. Their definition of family was constructed around love, support, and consistency.

Family is not the nuclear family

Many participants voiced that families could come in many forms. Iris, a 34 year old who grew up in Wisconsin with two other adopted siblings, offered various examples of what constituted a family.

> …I think that, you know, like a person by themselves can be a family for themselves. You know, I think if some people would prefer to live by themselves and then meet their friends, sometimes… they can have family with that. You know, they can have family with their community. I don't think there's like a one type way to have a family.

Iris represented a pattern among interviewees who referenced varying structures of family and how there wasn't one particular way to have a family. Harris (2024) argued that having one model of family is problematic because it risks being put on a pedestal, shaming other forms of family, and creating ineffective policy that excludes people. In this case, Iris avoided one structure of family and thought that an individual could constitute their own family. Many participants provided an unspecified family structure which conflicted with Murdock's (1949) nuclear family characterizing two adults of both sexes and one or more children. Most participants opposed needing children to define a family. Odette (they/them), a 30 year old adopted to Seattle, Washington, adamantly opposed the idea of children defining a family.

> Because you can still be a family without necessarily having offspring. I mean, even just a couple can be a family. Why do you need to reproduce to be considered a family? I mean, even people who have pets, even

> someone who's single and has a dog can be a family…why should I exclude those people who just don't want to have kids for whatever reason that may be? It doesn't mean you're any less of a family.

Odette expressed disbelief when imagining a couple without a child being considered as if they were not a family. They used the term “offspring” instead of “children” and even criticized needing reproduction to define a family. Their language illustrated a pushback against qualifying a family solely based on their ability or desire to have a child. In contrast, SNAF emphasizes biological children and argues that a family consisting of a married couple with biological children serves as an "ideological code,” a model that is seen repeatedly in different settings like legislation, television, and advertising (Smith 1993:51-52). Odette challenged the idea that children served as a part of an ideological code by not having their own children and dismissing the need for people to reproduce and have their own children. Odette also described multiple forms of family beyond one specific structure and recognized a variety of families such as people with pets, couples without children, and a single person, overall showing flexibility in what family can be.

A couple of Chinese adoptees suggested that children could be an addition to a family, but overall, were not the definitive factor that defined a family. Bailey, a 27 year old adopted into Alaska and raised as a single child, speculated that having children would change a family’s dynamic. She said, “I think children can change a family, but I don't necessarily think you 'need' a child to make a family. Basically family is not synonymous with children but children can be a critical part of a family.” While Bailey recognized that a child could change a family dynamic, she disagreed that solely the presence of a child defined a family. It is important to note that when Bailey talked about children's role within a family, she wasn’t talking from her own experience of having children because she was single and did not have her own children. Her

understanding of a child changing a family dynamic may have stemmed from her own experience as a single child.

Similarly to how children were not viewed as essential for family, the attitudes towards marriage painted it as nonessential. Participants acknowledged privileges and economic stability in regard to marriage, but opposed defining marriage as a factor that defines a family. Angelica, a 27 year old adopted into Massachusetts, spoke about marriage in terms of benefits.

> …I think [marriage] is helpful in, like, the economic sense for like, when you need, like, health insurance stuff. That's how my parents actually went about it ironically…But I think you don't need to have, like, a marriage between two people…to necessarily be considered a family.

Angelica drew from her own experience with her parents and recognized the benefits marriage could provide, in this case it was health insurance. However, she pushed back on marriage being the component that defined the family. Angelica grew up around friends whose parents divorced and her own adoptive parents eventually divorced when she turned 18. When it came to marriage, Angelica could see its perks, but not deem it a necessity for family.

There was one participant who believed that marriage was essential for the reasons of showing commitment and certainty in a relationship. However, the main message about marriage across interviews opposed marriage as a determinant of family. Melissa, 27 years old, adopted into Pennsylvania and married, pushed back against the idea of needing marriage to consider someone family.

> No, I don't. I don't think marriage is essential for a family. Because I think at least for me, like, I've grown up creating my own family, like, I have a ton of friends that I see as my family…I think it's kind of like asking, like, you know…do you have to be biologically related to be family? Like, no, I don't think so.

Even though Melissa was married, she did not express marriage to be essential for a family. She talked about how she built her own family and considered friends as her family which doesn't include marriage. Melissa also compared having marriage within a family to needing a biological relationship to define the family and dismissed both marriage and biology as

necessary qualifiers for family. From her perspective, those components were not what makes a family.

Chinese adoptees' definitions of family challenged Murdock's (1949) nuclear family's characterization of a hetersexual couple with children and opposed the idea of Smith's (1993) SNAF that prioritizes biological children. Out of all participants, only one mentioned how a biological connection to her hypothetical child was a big factor in her wanting her own children. Similarly to views on children, marriage was not considered crucial for defining a family. Rather than assuming the nuclear family the best form, it may be better to describe it as an optional form of kinship (Harris 2024:7). Many participants referred to their own families or friends who were not married or did not have children who they still considered having a family.

Growing up and forgetting about race

Some participants expressed that race was not something they thought of with their family until someone outside of their family addressed their race. Angelica admitted that she generally did not think about being a different race than her parents until she was in situations where someone would try to figure out her relation to her adoptive parents.

> …typically, like, I'm just, like, with my parents, I forget about it. Um, unless you know, I'm like, with my dad, and someone's just, like, very actively trying to figure out how we're connected…then I do the thing. I'm just like, No, this my dad… so I think typically, I don't really think about the transracial adoptee piece that much unless, like, there's some…external force reminding me of the fact that…we don't necessarily look connected or related…

Angelica talked about how she would ultimately forget about her race with her adoptive parents and only thought about it when confronted by someone outside the family. Angelica revealed a common pattern among interviewees where treatment from outsiders reminded them that their race differed from their adoptive parents. In a more extreme case, Isadora, a 20 year old

adopted into West Virginia and completing her undergraduate degree, spoke about a confrontational interaction during COVID-19 and her self-reflection about being Asian.

> ...I remember vividly my junior year, I was sitting on a bus and this freshman girl, she had her mask under her nose…So I told this girl, I said, pull up your mask. And she's like, well, if it wasn't for your country, we wouldn't be in this mess. And so I kind of realized, I was like, that's what's happening. I'm like, that–this isn't okay. So.

Isadora noted how being targeted during COVID-19 due to being Asian made her step back and think more about her racial identity. Her experience reinforced how she felt about being a different race than her adoptive parents was more apparent outside of her family. More broadly, Asian Americans have been historically viewed as perpetually foreign, no matter their residency status or history in the U.S. and that makes it relatively easy for people to treat Chinese and Asian Americans as a physical embodiment of the disease (Tesla, Choi, and Kao 2020). In Isadora's encounter, she was perceived and treated based on her race.

In another scenario, Isabelle, a 25 year old adopted to Alameda, California and earning her master's degree, described an incident at her workplace in the Bay Area. At work, she was surrounded by other Asian women and came to understand the treatment she received in contrast to them. She shared a realization that made her step back, acknowledge her race, and how others perceived her.

> ... like a lot of Asians that were hired, ended up being sort of like stereotypical model, minorities, quiet… very smart, you know, not combative. And so I was this short, Asian girl, very combative, very loud. And it wasn't until I started getting pushback from a lot of people that I was like, 'whoa. What is this pushback I'm getting? I've never gotten this before…' And I think I–it was like the realization that, one, I'm a woman, and two, that I'm an Asian woman, that that really hit me, like, Oh, this is why I'm being received the way I'm being received.

Through the pushback she received at work, Isabelle realized that she didn't match the quiet, smart stereotypes associated with Asian women. She came to understand that her physical appearance paired with her personality traits were opposite of her Asian coworkers and made her reflect inwardly about how others saw her. The experiences that Angelica, Isadora, and Isabella

explained suggest that race was not made apparent in Chinese adoptive families and the racial differences with their family could be temporarily forgotten until pointed out by someone else.

The transracial adoption paradox describes transracial adoptees being perceived and treated like members of majority culture by themselves and others due to being adopted into a white family (Lee 2003). The transracial adoption paradox also mentions that transracial adoptees are racial/ethnic minorities in society, but does not thoroughly expand on the fact. The interviewees' encounters elaborate on the aspect of the transracial adoption paradox that is less explored where people interact with transracial adoptees based on perceptions about their race The double consciousness, coined by Du Bois (1903) in the discipline of Sociology 100 years prior, helps make sense of interactions where transracial adoptees are perceived and treated based on their race. The double consciousness focuses on the first aspect of the transracial adoption paradox that points to the fact that transracial adoptees are seen as minorities in society, not the same as their adoptive families who are racially and culturally white. The double consciousness is in the context of black American men and how treatment from society pushes them to view themselves as only black (Du Bois 1903). The key part of the double consciousness applicable to the transracial adoption paradox is the idea of seeing oneself from the viewpoint of others. Interactions with people outside the family that emphasize a Chinese adoptee's racial identity challenges them to see themselves through the lens of others. Although the double consciousness was written in a different context regarding a different racial group, it is able to thoroughly address the fact brought up in the transracial adoption paradox that acknowledges transracial adoptees as racial/ethnic minorities in society.

Even though some participants shared moments that made them reflect on their race, some Chinese adoptees also expressed that they felt similar to their white adoptive family.

Isabelle admitted that she didn't understand what it meant to be Asian because her parents didn't talk about it growing up and she behaved similarly to her friends and family in a way that made her feel white.

> …I didn't have this understanding of being Asian, because my parents never would like, "Oh, you're Asian." They didn't make it a point to be like that… But also that meant that I sort of just think of myself as white, like I just behaved the way my family behaves, and I behave how my friends behave.

Isabelle admitted that her adoptive parents did not point out her racial identity growing up. She grew up thinking of herself as white since she shared the behaviors of her white family. Isabelle represented the pattern where Chinese adoptees would consider themselves white and view themselves similar to their white family members due to race not being discussed within their families. In a similar way, Hannah, a 21 year old adopted into Rainsville Alabama and current graduate student, talked about an instance where her mom teased her about starting a relationship with someone Asian in college. Hannah countered and said that her child would be half Asian, implying that she saw herself as white. Later on in the interview, Hannah reiterated about how she saw herself no different than her white adoptive family.

> I guess growing up white. I don't know how to put this, but I just, I didn't really think about my race. I just felt like I just fit in with the family… I'm really, like, culturally, like… not different from [my family] at all. So I don't think race really plays a part into [family].

Within our conversation, Hannah struggled to explain how she racially identified herself. She described feeling culturally similar to her white adoptive family. Her struggle to articulate her race showed a layer of complexity about how to self identify when considering her upbringing with white adoptive parents. Both Hannah and Isabelle talked about how they felt the same as their white family members and had a disconnection with their racial identity. The conflicting thoughts about their racial identity illuminate the main part of the Transracial Adoption Paradox (Lee 2003). The issue being that transracial adoptees are treated and viewed

as members of White culture due to their adoption into a white family and even identify themselves with the culture of their family.

When it comes to transracial adoptees as a group, it includes more than Chinese adoptees. When considering black transracial adoptees, Butler-Sweet (2011) noted that black people cannot choose whether people are aware of their race. When examining racial socialization, Butler-Sweet (2011) interviewed 32 young black adults who grew up in upper middle class families who came from monoracial, biracial, and transracial adoptive families. All of the black transracial adoptee participants indicated race as a secondary trait when describing themselves (Butler-Sweet 2011). When considering how others would view them, half of the transracial adoptees thought their race would be secondary and the other half noted that race would be important to an outsider's description of them (Butler-Sweet 2011). The mixed response from black transracial adoptees when ranking race as an important trait for outsiders' perceptions of them was similar to my Chinese adoptee participants who experienced racialized encounters with outsiders and were unsure how to racially self identify. Butler-Sweet (2011) also found that all black participants emphasized identities that de-emphasized their race, regardless of their family structure. Similarly, my Chinese adoptee participants did not center their racial identity within their families. Overall, race appears to be a flexible trait that is more apparent in different situations.

What family is not and what family is

Family is not equal to blood

For Chinese adoptees participants who were not in reunion with any biological family members, it was common for them to not identify their biological parents as family. Two of the

main reasons given were that they did not have any connection to their biological family and did not know them. Dispersed throughout their definition of family, many participants stated that family was not defined by blood. The blood relation to their biological family was acknowledged as a connection, but not a compelling reason to consider them family. Melissa explained her understanding of sharing biology with her biological parents, but did not identify them as her family.

> I–No, I don't consider my biological parents or whoever a part of my family…I think it has a lot to do with that emotional piece. Like, I just have, I mean, I literally have no emotional ties to them at all, not even really physical. I mean, not even like physical ties. And I think the only thing we really have is, like biology. That's the only thing we really share so.

Melissa pointed out a lack of emotional and physical ties with her biological parents and dismissed biology as a reason to consider them family. Many other participants also mentioned how the lack of connection to their biological parents made them not consider them as a part of their family. Several participants expressed an openness to considering their biological family members as their family if a connection was made and a relationship was cultivated. That openness suggests that the consideration of seeing someone as family can grow and change through a mutual connection. Odette talked about how they began to consider their partner as family over time.

> For instance, my partner, I consider him family because, well, he's consistently in my life, and has been for many years, and also shows up, supports me, loves me, accepts me for who I am. So I guess it's that consistency over an extended period of time.

Odette's inclusion of support and love from their husband mirrored several other responses that noted the presence of support, love, and acceptance that determined if someone was considered family. For most Chinese adoptee participants, blood relations did not automatically associate someone as family. There were five participants who considered their biological family as their family. Even though their biological family did not have a connection

with them or saw them grow up, they still considered them a part of their family. Some participants were unsure how to explain why they thought of their biological parents as family. Sasha, a 31 year old, self-identified trans/nonbinary person who grew up in Boston Massachusetts, was able to articulate their thoughts about their biological parents. Sasha talked about how they ended up claiming their biological family as their own family over time.

> Growing up like I literally didn't consider myself growing in another human until I was like, 28 … and so if you had asked me this question when I was 20, sure I'd probably be like, 'eh maybe, I don't know', but now I feel like although I don't know them, they are the people that I'm related to. I think for me individually, also, because I'm not in communication with the people who adopted me…it starts getting a little painful, because it's just like, 'oh, well, what family do I have? So, you know, I'm gonna claim them [biological family] as family for right now'...when I think about like my birth family, it's just kind of like, 'well, you know, of course, you're my family. I haven't had you for 31 years.'"

Sasha shared a change in perspective about how they chose to claim their biological family as their own family. They described how they were able to fulfill their own desires to have a sense of family after ending contact with their adoptive family. When Sasha referred to their adoptive parents, they didn't use common language such as mom or dad, they referred to them as "ex adoptive people." Since Sasha was estranged from their ex adoptive family, it made sense for them to claim their birth family as their own since they had no one else to fill that role. However, it was more common for participants to describe their biological parents as "technically family" or as a "predecessor" to their family. The responses suggest that defining family is not contingent on blood relations and able to change over time.

Biological siblings: family "adjacent?"

When it comes to China international adoptions, the unknowns revolving around locating birth parents has created an assumption that searching for birth families may be too difficult (Wang, Ponte, Weber Ollen 2015). However, two participants informed me that they found a

biological sister through 23andMe, a genetic testing company in the U.S. Hannah learned about the whereabouts of her biological sister living in the U.S. and expressed feeling "weird" about telling people she had two sisters instead of just the one she grew up with. Hannah admitted that she considered her biological sister more as family "adjacent." In a similar way, Lauren, a 27 year old adopted into Bucharest, Ohio, spoke about finding her biological sister and was unsure how to categorize her. Lauren admitted, "I kind of just see her as in a different category." Despite meeting her biological sister in person, Lauren shared that she only mentions her with people she fully trusts. White two participants found a biological sister, they did not automatically consider them as their family after their discovery. These relationships underscore how blood relations don't automatically make someone family.

Family is consistency, support, and love

Three main components that were consistent across several interviewees' definitions of family were the ideas of consistency, support and love. Those three factors were commonly interspersed together in interview responses and revealed that the participants considered not one, but multiple qualities when thinking about how they define family. Bailey and Odette mentioned the act of adoption when considering the people they grew up with as their family, but highlighted the importance of the shared love and consistency they received from family members. Ryan, a 19 year old undergraduate student, included her grandfather in her definition of family because he was a consistent support in her life and played an integral part in raising her.

> Family, for me, is also just being there for each other and putting in some kind of effort to help everyone out. While my mom early on in my childhood couldn't always be there 100% in the morning, she still put effort and my grandfather helped fill in...Like [he] was the one who would often… take me the bus and... check on me before I go to school, or, like, help me pack lunch. My mom wasn't able to because she worked... interesting hours, like in the night...sometimes she wouldn't even be up at like, six, because she

> ...just came home. [My family] fell into routines but also were willing to change our dynamics. When my mom was diagnosed with cancer and was in the hospital for weeks, my dad, brother and me had to learn more about cooking. So I guess I would add that family is being there for each other and being able to adapt when needed or wanted.

For Ryan, her grandfather supported her consistently when getting ready for school and taking her to the bus, filling in for when her mother was not able to. In another time of need when her mom was diagnosed with cancer, her family came together to cook and support one another. Those moments of support Ryan received from her family members were what made her consider them her family. The qualities of support and consistency were common for participants to bring up when defining family and so was love. Isadora explained her definitions of family when talking about the people she worked with and the relationships she cultivated.

> I think family is the ones that you can like, laugh with, and like, rely on and love. I think that really is what makes a family. I mean, I've worked at several different places, but the most I've ever felt a family was my college's recruitment department…The same goes for my boxing team. Like we call our coach dad, and then they're all like, I feel like–I call some of the younger girls. I'm like, Yeah, you're my kid and everything like that. So I feel like it's just truly, if you love someone enough, and you know you can rely on them, and if you like, you're able to have fun with them and be like in your happy place, if that makes sense.

The relationships Isadora had from her workplaces with her recruitment department and boxing team were rooted around love and showed how family extended beyond her adoptive and biological family. In relation to literature, Gheaus (2018) noted that people who aren't blood related are able to see themselves as family through their relationships centered around commitment. Isadora's definition of family touched on that aspect of commitment when mentioning the ability to rely on people she considered family. In Powell's et al. (2010) survey asking people how they defined family, a group of participants also emphasized love, care, and support. Those responses show how specific qualities are identified in people who are considered as family.

Another example of love, consistency, and support arose in Melissa's experience with her husband. Drawing from her marriage and other relationships, Melissa, described the relationship

she built with her friends, husband, and his family.

> …my definition of family is, like, people in your life that… support you, they love you unconditionally, like they'll be there for you…that sort of thing…and that's how I definitely see…my friends. That's how I see my husband… that's how I see my husband's family. Like, I also consider his side…my family, sometimes, honestly, more than my own family…I think that really like what the thing that's missing from my actual family is that emotional piece… So to me, it's really about that, like emotional connection.

Melissa talked about how her relationship with her adoptive parents was strained due to the lack of emotional connection. Although she struggled with the relationship with her adoptive parents, the love she shared with her husband and the support she received from his family and her friends, helped her form her understanding of family.

CONCLUSION

This study asked: how do Chinese adoptees define family? I argue that Chinese adoptees' definitions of family challenge non-biological definitions and include non-raced definitions despite society imposing their racial identity onto them. Adoptees broaden the definition of family offered by Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, and Steelman (2010) by moving beyond structural descriptions and constructing their definitions around qualities such as love, support, and consistency. Even when participants discovered biological siblings, they regarded them as family "adjacent," signaling that biology alone did not constitute family. Participants mirrored an aspect of the transracial adoption paradox (Lee 2003) where transracial adoptees saw themselves as racially and culturally white and would refer to themselves as white. However, when confronted by people outside the family as a person of color, participants would describe seeing themselves in the eyes of others. Encounters with outsiders revealed a connection to the double consciousness where Du Bois (1903) described how black men saw themselves in the eyes of others. I combine the transracial adoption paradox and double consciousness to fully address

transracial adoptees experiences of being brought up by white families and being people of color. Participants' definitions of family included grandparents, coworkers, friends, spouses, and in-laws because those relationships were built with shared love, consistency, and support. Interviews with Chinese adoptees broaden perspectives on family in Sociological research and point future studies towards including a diversity of voices when seeking to understand how family is defined.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions

Participant's background:

1. What is your gender?
2. How old are you?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Questions about family structure growing up:

1. (5) How would you describe your family growing up?
    a. How many adoptive parental figures did you have?
        i. If they had two parents, were they married?
        ii. Do you think marriage is essential for a family?
    b. Did you grow up in a family with any siblings?
2. (6) What made you a family?

Questions about family:

1. (7) Generally, how do you define family?
2. (8) When would you say someone becomes part of a family?
    a. When does a couple become a family?
    b. When does a child become a part of a family?
    c. Do you have an example?
3. (9) What is the ideal family?
    a. Did you have one growing up? Do you have an example?
    b. Did it change from childhood to adulthood? Explain

Questions about current family:

1. (10) Do you have any partner(s)?
2. (11) Do you have any children?
    a. Do you want to have children?
    b. Do you think children are essential for a family

3. (12) What makes you a family? Is the tie same as the family you grew up with?

Questions about biological parents and children

1. (13) Tell me about how you think about your biological parents. Do you consider them family? Please elaborate.
    a. Are you in reunion?
2. (14) What does biology mean to you when thinking about your children or future children?

Questions about how being a transracial adoptee affects their perception of family

1. (15) Do you think that race has anything to do with family?
    a. Does race play a role in families ?
2. (16) Since you are a different race than your parents, does that impact your perception of family? Please elaborate.

Extra Question

- Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think is important when talking about family?