
Wesleyan University

ETHNIC IDENTITY IN CHINESE AND KOREAN ADOPTEES:
EXPLORATION, COMPONENTS, AND EXPRESSION

By

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Abstract

In the context of ethnic identity, Chinese and Korean adoptees with White, American families are an understudied population. Yet this group is of interest given their unique cultural positioning in relation to America, China or Korea, and Asian America. In this study, 20 Chinese and Korean adoptees (17 women, 3 men; 17 Chinese, 3 Korean; 20-25 years) were interviewed in a semi-structured format to gauge their experiences exploring, defining, and expressing their ethnic identity. Findings indicated that while there were some universals among adoptees such as a) parents that discussed racism in an indirect and reactionary way, b) being given opportunities to learn about their birth culture, c) thinking that returning to China or Korea was a valuable experience, and d) viewing their ethnic identity as enriching, experiences, opinions, and attitudes varied considerably. Despite this variation, adoptees have a distinct experience from White Americans, Chinese or Koreans, and Asian Americans because they are Asians brought up by White, American parents and negotiate their relationship with their birth country while lacking direct cultural ties. As a result, they explore and express their identity in a variety of ways that involve social exposure as well as more formal, educational settings. Future research will track how ethnic identity, exploration, and expression may shift as adoptees pass through later developmental stages.

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Me, as a Chinese American Adoptee

My motivation for this thesis comes from a desire to better understand those who share the identity of Chinese or Korean adoptee raised by an American, white family. My research began with reviewing the literature on this population and found, as touched upon in my literature review, that popular areas of study included Asian, transracial adoptee status and its links to negative psychological outcomes, attachment issues, and well-being or self-esteem. My interests, however, had to do with the Chinese or Korean adoptee experience.

I have always enjoyed conversations with fellow adoptees and learning about their lives. Although we are remarkably different, perhaps seeking a career as a professional baseball player or a graphic designer, I feel that there is something common to our experience, something that can not be pinned solely on our minority status, our Asianness, our being adopted, or our upbringing in white families, but a combination of these that is as unique as we are.

My relationship with race and ethnicity always felt unclear. Coming to Wesleyan, I realized that while the labels of American, or Chinese, or Chinese American, or Asian American might fit in some way, the sum of those identities still did not seem to capture my experience. From my studies in psychology, I learned about ethnic identity and my curiosity was piqued. I wondered if I even had an ethnic identity, because in my head, my adoption from China was a relic of the past. I soon realized that for me and my life, I was mistaken. So I had to ask others about it too—

how they felt about their ethnic identity, reached their conclusions, and expressed their experience, their story, if they chose to at all. This is my attempt to tell the stories of other Chinese and Korean adoptees.

History of Transnational Adoption in China and Korea

The earliest East Asian adoptees brought to the United States were mixed-race children, born from interracial relationships between United States soldiers and Korean or Japanese women in the 1950s. The United States military was in East Asia to keep an eye on Japan, a former Axis power during World War II, and to help South Korea in the Korean war, an act that was an extension of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and Russia.

At first, mixed-race children were marginalized and rejected by the American, Korean, and Japanese communities. They were outcasts, often the targets of prejudice and discrimination. Their low status and mistreatment in Korea and Japan became motivation for Americans to change their prejudice and begin to “rescue” these poor children.

American opinion towards mixed-race East Asian adoptees shifted as the Cold War progressed. During this period in the 1950s and 1960s, communist governments questioned the legitimacy of American democracy and freedom when racial prejudice and violence were so blatant in the United States. Thus there was a shift in opinion encouraging the American public to view the mixed-race children of U.S. soldiers

more favorably. There was a “moral urgency” (Choy, 2013, p. 26) to take responsibility for and renounce these prejudices in American society.

In particular, a sense of guilt was intensified by American media, which portrayed bureaucratic officials as unsympathetic when considering the future of mixed-race children. These children were empathetically rebranded as “war babies” (Lobsenz, 1956, p. 22). Other efforts to arouse the American public’s sympathies began to appear. For example, in the “Have Jacket, Will Travel” episode in the anthology series the *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, the conditions in Korea and Japan were exaggerated as especially dire for mixed-race children. Movies like *Sayonara*, which was released in 1957, presented an integration of the East and West by portraying a favorable interracial relationship between an American soldier and Japanese woman. Many other projects and publications like these were used as propaganda to encourage American citizens to adopt. In fact, even the International Social Services (ISS) played their part in this campaign, conducting studies which concluded that international adoption was the best option for mixed-race Japanese and Korean children. Americans who adopted these poor, neglected East Asian children became heroes.

And yet the circumstances behind the placement of mixed-race children in orphanages were sketchy. In the late 1950s, ISS workers further investigated why Korean and Japanese mothers were placing their children in orphanages. The post-war conditions were brutal, and often left these mothers impoverished and on their own. U.S. soldiers returned home once they had finished serving their time in the

military, and the mothers' families and communities severely stigmatized them for involving themselves with U.S. soldiers. The ISS also found that mothers were not given a sufficient opportunity to consider the "range of legal and psychological consequences" (Choy, 2013, p. 35) of giving a child up for adoption, a crucial precursor to deciding to give a child up for adoption in the eyes of ISS. In another report, social worker Susan Pettiss described a Korean pediatrician who discussed witnessing mothers who were physically forced to give up their children. Other ISS workers noted the increasing acceptance of mixed-race children in their birth countries.

Indeed, the relinquishing part of the adoption process was not as simple and morally unambiguous as the United States made it seem; the opinions of the Korean and Japanese regarding mixed-race children were varied. In Japan, the children were rejected *as well as* accepted, and evidence of this existed as early as the 1950s; the Ministry of Education released a statement supporting integrated schools, and the Ministry of Welfare professed governmental support to encourage the development of mixed-race children into good Japanese citizens. Similarly, in the 1960s the Korean government encouraged integration of these children into middle and upper schools. Choo Chung-II, the director of the Women and Children's Bureau of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, in an ISS report said "Korean society must eventually change attitudes towards these children" (Choy, 2013, p. 39).

The ISS similarly increased its efforts, working with local social service agencies to integrate mixed-race children in these countries, decrease societal racism,

and improve conditions. For example, in the 1960s, the ISS created the Han River Project, which supported and encouraged Korean families in this poor area to foster mixed-race children who were about to be adopted by Americans. In 1976, a Five Year Plan for Adoption and Foster Care was instituted nationally to promote domestic adoption.

Yet the narrative of rescue and heroism within international adoption persisted. American adoption of Chinese babies started in the 1950s, as refugees escaping the Communist regime abandoned their children in Hong Kong due to dire living conditions. At first, the ISS in collaboration with Hong Kong agencies worked to connect Chinese Americans with these potential adoptees. Later, white American families also expressed a desire to adopt them.

Domestic factors at this time especially influenced the popularity of international adoption from China and Korea by Americans. Individuals' efforts, such as that of Harry and Bertha Holt, impacted adoption. They famously campaigned to have the Bill for Relief of Certain War Orphans passed in 1955, which allowed them to adopt eight children from Korea; the limit at the time had been two children. They formed Holt's International Children's Services, whose mission was to save Korean children through placement in born-again Christian homes, but controversially circumvented the protocol of ISS without fully considering the subsequent effects on Korea and the children themselves. By garnering public sympathy for their cause, the couple enabled a number of mass adoptions from Korea. Large, systemic and social changes such as increased access to birth control in the 1960s, the legalization of

abortion in 1973, and rising acceptance of single-parent families also meant fewer white babies were put up for adoption. As domestic adoption decreased and because adoption of African American or Native American children was controversial given these communities' tumultuous history with the white majority, adopting from China or Korea was an attractive option.

Much like with the mixed-race babies from Japan and Korea, American interest in Chinese adoption was capitalized upon through propaganda. For example, a February 1959 ISS newsletter showcased a picture of seven Chinese babies and a description reading "WAITING—thousands of children like these are growing up in orphanages in Hong Kong because not enough American families will make homes for them" (ISS World News, 1959, p. 66). Adopting from China quickly became popular, and this was evident from events such as the "Chinese Babylift," a highly publicized flight in 1962 of forty-eight Chinese child adoptees landing in Los Angeles, and a joint celebration by the ISS-Hong Kong and ISS-USA for the arrival of the five-hundredth adoptee into the United States (ISS World News, 1958, p. 56).

American Adoption in China and Korea During the Past Thirty Years

Following China's century of humiliation—the time period between 1839 and 1949 marked by western and Japanese imperialist interference in the country— and the subsequent creation of the People's Republic of China, the population in China boomed. Communist Chairman Mao Zedong especially supported this growth, quashing political support for birth control measures with movements such as the socioeconomic Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1962 and the sociopolitical Cultural

Revolution from 1966 to 1976. After Chairman Mao's death, however, the government was forced to confront the reality of large, unprecedented population growth; consequences had already begun with the Great Chinese Famine from 1959 to 1961 and were predicted to spread into other areas such as education, healthcare, land resources, and employment (Scharping, 2005). Thus, the One Child Policy was born.

The One Child Policy lasted from 1979 to 2016. It started as a collection of measures to incentivize families to have only one child, including economic benefits such as monetary allowances, paid maternity leave, property allotments, and the promotion of birth control via IUDs and sterilizations. At its most extreme, reports from various districts indicated that forced sterilizations, mass abortions, property damage, and caps on water and electricity access took place as a way of enforcing the One Child Policy. In one report, the city of Dalian assigned 60,000 part time members of the Public Security Committees at the local level to be birth-control informants, and this type of surveillance was not uncommon (Scharping, 2005). Up until the early 1990s, however, there was no national legislation for this policy; provincial officials depended on the Communist party for authority, but enforcing it was at their discretion. They were also under special pressure because upholding of the One Child Policy was a collective responsibility shared by communities and their leaders.

The new national regulations proposed in the 1990s made official policies involving contraceptives, birth-planning, and tightened population tracking. In 1993,

a reassessment of population demographics and the discovery of egregious sex differences prompted the illegalization of infanticide and sex determination before birth. In 2016, the One Child Policy was discarded in favor of the Two Child Policy.

The One Child Policy influenced American adoption from China in a number of ways. First, it was primarily female babies who were put up for adoption. Boys were given precedence because of their ability to carry on the family name, make money, and support the family. Second, adoption in China was more likely to be less complicated in the eyes of Americans. Chinese adoptees were more likely to come from healthy parents who were forced to give up their children by the government, as opposed to parents from other countries who might be prostitutes, or addicted to drugs or alcohol. Additionally because of the nature of the punishments under the One Child Policy, adoptions were closed, as any identifying information linked to the mother or father would be incriminating. Adoptive parents were inclined to believe that this would lead to a cleaner break for their adopted children as they came to the United States.

Adoption in South Korea peaked during the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the country persisted in its efforts to limit international adoption. Criticism of its international adoption practices arose during the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, and subsequently there has been a decrease in adoptions from South Korea as it has become a greater economic power.

In the United States, a number of procedural changes related to adoption resulted from the spike in transnational adoptions from China and Korea. The

international Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-Country Adoption was held in 1993 to reach an agreement on how to protect and organize international adoptions; for example, it mandated transparent procedures to prevent human trafficking, as well as determined that each country should have a central authority for adoption. In the U.S., states were given this power rather than the federal government. In 2000, the Child Citizenship Act gave American citizenship to foreign adoptees of United States citizens. Since 2004, however, the overall number of international adoptions has fallen because of America's as well as other countries' stricter adoption policies.

Literature Review

Overview.

Searches for "asian transracial adoptee", "asian international adoptee", "Chinese adoptees", and "Korean adoptees" on PsychINFO and PsychARTICLES revealed three main areas of study on Asian transnational adoptees in the U.S., including psychological outcomes of adoptees, cultural socialization of adoptees by parents, and adoptees' ethnic identity. Another search on "adoptee ethnic identity" on PsychINFO and PsychARTICLES with Asian adoptees as the main subjects resulted in a combined total of fifty-six studies on Korean and Chinese adoptees. Korean adoptees were studied nearly three times as much as Chinese adoptees, and the majority of the literature investigated the development of ethnic identity over time, potential factors that foster positive ethnic identity, the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem, well-being, and adjustment, and the potential moderating

effect ethnic identity has on experiences of racism. There were five studies that focused on the adoptee's perception of their ethnic identity (Kim, 2009; Knight, 2013; Rienzi, 2013; Mattingly, 2016; Tuan & Shiao, 2011), and all except one (Tuan & Shiao, 2011) were dissertations (Kim, 2009; Knight, 2013; Rienzi, 2013; Mattingly, 2016).¹

My study will attempt to add to the literature on Chinese and Korean adoptees' relationship with their ethnic identity by asking a few questions. How do these adoptees view themselves in terms of ethnicity? What has caused them to be interested or disinterested in their ethnic identity? How do they choose to explore or express their ethnic identity, if at all? Throughout adolescence and into early adulthood, adoptees gain more agency and autonomy as they separate from their parents (Larson & Richards, 1994). As they reach emerging adulthood, identity becomes even more salient (Arnett, 2000), which is plausible given the exposure to new places, people, or situations that mark this transitional period (Phinney, 2006). Determining how adoptees navigate this aspect of their identity in terms of their opinions, choices, and actions, has crucial implications for other minority populations with similarly complex ethnic identities.

In order to address these questions and situate my study, my literature review first considers the construct of ethnic identity as a whole: how it is defined, measured, explored among non-adoptees and adoptees. I then look at how adoptees treat their

¹ These dissertations were excluded from the literature review because they were not peer-reviewed studies.

own adoptive status, which is critical to how they treat ethnic exploration and thus ethnic identity. Another study that overviews ethnic identity in international and transracial adoptees raises a few key contextual factors that affect ethnic identity development. An interview study on Korean and Chinese adoptees that is most similar to my topic of interest identifies precursors and modes of ethnic exploration. Finally, I touch upon expression of ethnic identity by these adoptees using recent work on the use of blogs by transnational Asian adoptees to connect with each other and share their unique experiences.

Relevant Studies.

Phinney's (1990) work was pivotal in laying the foundation for study of ethnic identity. Her observations helped standardize how ethnic identity is defined, conceptualized, and measured, and improved efforts to study more minorities that face the complexity of ethnic identity formation.

Seventy studies on adolescents and adults from 1972 to 1990 were reviewed in total, coming from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, and education. This review showed that most studies had been conducted on White ethnic minorities such as Greek and Italian Americans or French Canadians, followed by Black, Hispanic, and Asian groups. Continued investigation on the lesser studied populations as well as widening the range of ethnic groups in general were discussed as critical for understanding the variety of experiences of ethnic identity.

Historically, there has been much more theoretical work involving ethnic identity rather than empirical research. The most commonly used definition was the

ethnic component of identity as situated within Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory, "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). Thus, ethnic identity only has meaning in a population with at least two distinct ethnic groups.

Three main approaches to ethnic identity were identified and described by Phinney (1990). Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory raised whether or not minority groups are inherently disadvantaged because their self perception is directly related to the views of the majority group. Should a majority group regard the minority group negatively, Tajfel (1981) asserted, the minority group may demonstrate behavioral responses such as development of a negative self-concept, attempts to pass as a member of the majority, or on the other hand, reinterpret the group's negative assessment or cultivate strong group pride. A final issue that was raised was the notion of conflict that results from an individual being a part of two cultures. Clashes in fundamental values and beliefs would be likely, thus raising the question of whether individuals choose one culture over the other, or integrate the two into a bicultural identity.

The second framework for ethnic identity is acculturation and culture conflict. Acculturation encompasses the array of differences in cultural attitudes, values, and behaviors that come from contact between two distinct cultures (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986). The relationship between the minority group and the majority group

is the culture conflict. Acculturation tends to deal with groups, so ethnic identity is the individual's relationship with their own group as a part of the larger society.

There are two models to understand ethnic identity within this framework, one linear and the other two-dimensional. Within the linear model, ethnic identity is on a sliding scale, with either end being one of the two relevant cultures. Thus, a strong relationship with one culture necessitates a weak relationship with the other. In the two-dimensional model, however, the relationship with each culture is treated separately, and so four possible ethnic identities exist: *marginalized*, which indicates weak identification with majority and minority groups; *dissociated*—weak identification with the majority group and strong identification with the minority group; *assimilated*—strong identification with the majority group and weak identification with the minority group; and *bicultural*—strong identification with majority and minority groups.

The last major approach to thinking about ethnic identity is ethnic identity formation. In this conceptualization, ethnic identity is an ongoing process of decision making and self-evaluation (Caltabiano, 1984; Hogg, Abrams, & Patel, 1987; Simic, 1987). It derives from Erikson's (1968) ego identity formation, which centers on the achieved identity that is obtained after a period of exploration and experimentation that results in a commitment or decision within another area of life such as work, religion, or political orientation. Marcia (1966, 1980) built off of Erikson's theory and proposed four identity statuses that measured how much individuals had explored or committed to their identity: no exploration or commitment would indicate a *diffuse*

identity; no exploration combined with a commitment would indicate a *foreclosed* identity; exploration with no commitment would indicate that the person is *in moratorium*; exploration with commitment would be an *achieved* identity.

In a final approach to ethnic identity, Phinney (1990) developed her own theory. Three stages comprised her conception of ethnic identity formation: the unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity exploration, and ethnic identity commitment. The unexamined ethnic identity is characterized by beliefs learned from the majority culture, parents, or other adults. The ethnic identity search may begin with some event that makes ethnic identity particularly salient, and might continue through various interactions with the culture, such as talking with people, going to museums, and attending cultural events. The final stage, ethnic identity commitment, occurs once the person has more deeply contemplated their ethnicity and its components, for example confrontation or recognition of the majority's negative view of the minority group. This commitment does not equate to participation in the cultural group or its associated activities, but rather a concrete understanding of what ethnic identity means to the individual although it may continue to evolve over time.

Components of ethnic identity were discussed. First, it was acknowledged that most studies treated ethnic identity as a "state" (Phinney, 1990, p. 503) of the individual's current identification, that is their response given at a particular time, and fewer studies looked at "stages" (Phinney, 1990, p. 503) of ethnic identity, or how the individual's ethnic identification might change over time. Studies that measure the state of ethnic identity asked about ethnic self-identification, or the label that one uses

for oneself; sense of belonging; positive and negative attitudes toward one's ethnic group; and ethnic involvement through social participation and cultural practices. The measures used to gauge these components of ethnic identity were generally inconsistent and unreliable, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .35 to .90. When factor analyses were conducted to determine whether the components of ethnic identity were interrelated, there was a large discrepancy in findings, with some studies finding one factor (Garcia & Lega, 1979) and others finding four or more (Caltabiano, 1984; Driedger, 1975; Garcia, 1982; Makabe, 1979; Rosenthal & Hrynevich, 1985). This result may be explained by how components are interrelated, or perhaps certain pieces of ethnic identity such as language or cultural activities may be more salient for particular groups.

The less common empirical studies on ethnic identity have measured ethnic identity in relation to a host of other variables. These included self-esteem, self-concept, and adjustment, acculturation of the minority group in relation to the majority group, gender differences, immigration status, and generational and contextual factors.

Phinney's (1990) review was critical in establishing the current state of ethnic identity research, urging future research that develops more reliable measures of ethnic identity, and identifying common factors and stages of ethnic identity.

While Phinney (1990) importantly discussed ethnic identity for minorities, the transracial adoptee subset of that population and their unique experience was not mentioned. This is significant because being adopted affects ethnic identity. Penny,

Borders, and Portnoy (2007) proposed a framework on identity formation specific to adoptee status.

Although all the participants were White, the conclusions of this study are generalizable to adoptees of minority status. The main potential problem would be the high prevalence of closed adoptions from China and Korea compared to those in the United States. However, there were participants in this sample that discussed their reactions and opinions on their adoption or biological family's records being closed or sealed which is highly parallel to closed adoptions. Additionally, Chinese and Korean adoptees who have closed adoptions mention searching for foster parents or orphanage caretakers similarly to how the participants of this study refer to searching for their biological families.

There were one hundred White, domestic adoptee participants aged between 35-55, with an average age of 42.7 years ($SD = 5.6$), and adopted in the 1940s and 1950s. They were mostly female (78%), married (70%), and had children (78%). Middle-aged adults were of particular interest because of their developmental stage, which may trigger reflection on their lives because of loss, decline, and change. Participants responded to a survey that measured their current view of life, intimacy, connectedness, emotional/psychological functioning, and adoption-specific questions. These questions asked for information about the participants' adoption (e.g., "How old were you when you learned of your adoption?"), the adoptive family (e.g., "When you were growing up, could you talk about your adoption in your family?"), the extent to which they felt being adopted affected who they were, and whether or not they had

searched for and found biological parents or wished to do so in the future. All of these questions had anchored responses as well as space to elaborate on their answers, and a final open-ended question asked adoptees to share whatever else about their experience they thought might be useful to researchers (e.g., “Please write any comments that you think might be helpful to us in understanding adoptees at midlife”).

Coders were trained to identify five phases of how adoptees viewed their status as adoptees: (1) No Awareness/Denying Awareness, (2) Emerging Awareness, (3) Drowning in Awareness, (4) Re-emerging From Awareness, (5) Finding Peace. Except for five participants whose narratives were too brief, the five phases were able to be identified in the participants’ responses (Phase 1: 22%, Phase 2: 29%, Phase 3: 25%, Phase 4: 17%, Phase 5: 6%). Themes from adoptees in Phase 1 were characterized by adoptees recognizing the positive influence being adopted had on their lives, being unaware of issues or problems with adoption, and not having explored their adoption. Those in Phase 2 also revealed adoptees felt positively about their adoption, but were curious and initiated exploration in regards to their birth family or culture; they also had mixed feelings about what they might discover. Adoptees in Phase 3 did not regard their adoption in a similarly positive light, more often were not close with their adoptive family, and in fact attributed their negative feelings and problems (e.g., fear of rejection, insecurities, feelings of inadequacy) to their adoptee status; their search for information surrounding their adoption was more emotionally charged. Phase 4 adoptees were typified by their recognition of both the

positive and negative effects of adoption and discovery of information about their birth family, but they had not completely reconciled or accepted all aspects of their adoption (e.g., records being sealed, information being lost). Phase 5 adoptees generally felt peace towards their adoptee status after they had finished exploring, recognized and accepted how their adoption impacted them in mixed ways, and were close with their adoptive families.

This study reaffirms that adoptee experiences and perceptions vary widely. What remains unknown is how adoptees arrive at each phase—Penny, Borders, and Portnoy (2007) emphasize that these five phases are not sequential, although the dimension of exploration may seem to be—and how individual, familial, and other contextual factors may come into play.

Friedlander (1999)'s review of ethnic identity honed in on transracial, international adopted children and adolescents. Her primary goal was to help therapists address issues common among adoptive families. Her tracing of this population was novel and useful.

Ethnic socialization by parents was found to have an impact on adoptees' relationship with their minority status, or being a person of color. White parents' attitudes towards diversity and choice of diverse neighborhood to raise their children in were shown to influence a child's ethnic self-identification and racial pride in studies on African American (Grow & Shapiro, 1974; McRoy et al., 1982) and Hispanic (Andujo, 1988) adoptees. White parents of Mexican American adoptees also tended to educate their children about their heritage but minimized the impact of

racist, discriminatory, or stereotypical incidents by giving significance to the child's "human identity" (p. 533) rather than teach them how to directly respond to racism, as Mexican American parents did (Andujo, 1988). Indeed, these adoptees were often confused about race and ethnicity, and were unprepared to face bias and discrimination (Triseliotis, 1993). As a result, while adoptees may have high self-worth, they may struggle to authentically feel like a person of color or relate to that experience (Taylor & Thornton, 1996). Thus, they are more likely to have assimilated rather than bicultural identities (Bagley, 1993; Kim, 1977).

These findings highlight how components of ethnic identity, such as sense of belonging and ethnic socialization practices, develop in transracial adoptees differently from other nonadopted or even bicultural individuals because of their complex relationship with birth and adopted cultures.

Sociologists Shiao and Tuan (2008) conducted semi-structured life history interviews with Korean adoptees to identify how much adoptees explored their ethnic identity, what activities they engaged in to do so, and the conditions that encouraged or discouraged their exploration. There were fifty-eight adult participants, aged 25 or older in 2000, when the interview was conducted. Almost half (44%) of the subjects were traditional college students during early adulthood, or early to mid-twenties. Early adulthood was chosen as a critical age group because adoptees' status as people of color becomes more salient as they start to gain autonomy and experiment with their identity (Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005). The interview questionnaire used was modified from Tuan (1998)'s study of the salience of race and ethnicity for

multigenerational Chinese and Japanese Americans to include items that measured the experience of Asian adoptees more appropriately. Interviews were placed into three levels of ethnic exploration via ethnically related activities: none, modest, or substantial. Two types of exploration emerged, which Shiao and Tuan (2008) identified as social exposure and cultural heritage “tracks” (p. 1035), which consisted of mingling with other Asians or Asian Americans, or learning and gaining knowledge about their birth culture.

Twenty-six “non-explorers” did not engage in ethnic exploration. The three primary reasons for their lack of exploration were an absence of opportunities, inability to partake in existing opportunities, and disinterest. Adoptees may not have attended schools that provided explorative offerings, or were unable to afford or travel to opportunities that existed outside of school. Strained familial relationships or other personal circumstances also made exploration difficult. Some adoptees did not find race and ethnicity salient because of the homogenous communities they were situated in, or even found other Asians and Asian Americans aversive, and thus were not interested in exploring their ethnic background.

Thirty-two “explorers” did so at what Shiao and Tuan (2008) described as “modest” and “substantial” (p. 1035) levels. Modes of exploration included: pre-existing social immersion, open-ended school assignments, as well as social exposure and cultural heritage tracks. Social exposure was comprised of college-related programs and activities, employment by Asians and Asian coworker friendships, and

other social interactions. The cultural heritage path included learning Asian languages, studying abroad, and serving in the military in Asia.

Findings indicated that precursors of exploration were personal freedom from family responsibilities and significant personal problems, accessibility to opportunities for exploration, and a combination of two attitudes: the sense that their minority status made them feel different and an open mind to interacting with Asians. In general, exploration via social exposure and cultural heritage was much more likely within an educational setting. Ethnic exploration either reinforced or complicated the salience of feeling socially different and thus either encouraged or stopped further exploration.

This study provided a framework for Korean adoptees' ethnic exploration that extends to other Asian transracial, international adoptees. Of particular interest was a suggestion for future research on how availability of ethnic explorations, such as via the Internet, might affect "persistence of ethnicity" (Shiao & Tuan, 2008, p. 1061).

In a similar vein, Ho (2015) in her book *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture* studied how Asian American adoptees have used blogs to express their thoughts on their experience as an Asian adoptee brought up in a White American family. Asian American adoptees have also used memoirs, personal essays, and films to convey their experience, but blogs are a unique tool because of how interactive they are. In fact, Ho (2015) discovered the network of Asian American adoptee blogs through a comment left on Ho's own blog, *Mixed Race America*. Blogging not only helps the individual adoptee process their experience for themselves, but connects

them with other adoptees who share similar experiences, and provides a space for further dialogue. Communities develop in such a way that transcends some of the boundaries to ethnic exploration that Shiao and Tuan (2008) mentioned, such as eliminating cost and therefore making explorative opportunities available to anyone that has access to the internet.

Adoptee bloggers had different reasons for blogging. Some such as The Original Helping (<http://littlewing04.wordpress.com/>) and Heart, Mind, and Seoul (<http://heartmindandseoul.typepad.com/weblog/>) do not mention a purpose and simply discuss their thoughts, whereas the blog Bitter Angry Ajumma (<http://jytrenka.wordpress.com/>) is an extension of the author's published work. Others like Harlow's Monkey (http://harlowmonkey.typepad.com/harlows_monkey/) explicitly say that they want to find a community of like-minded adoptees or Ethnically Incorrect Daughter (<http://ethnicallyincorrect.wordpress.com/>) want to process their confusing thoughts. Common in these blogs are the Asian American adoptees' "ambivalence with racial and ethnic identities, and the struggle to position themselves within white mainstream culture, Asian American culture, and the families in which they were raised" (Ho, 2015, p. 45). Thus it is important to survey the mediums through which Asian American adoptees choose to express their ethnic identity, why they choose certain mediums over other options, and the content of these expressions.

Conclusion.

Ethnic identity in transracial, international adoptee lens is generally held to be the relationships individuals have both with their minority group and the majority group, and is a crucial, complex part of their self-concept. Ethnic identity develops over time, especially during adolescence and early adulthood, in the stages of unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity exploration, and ethnic identity commitment. Adoptee identity similarly changes, and can be characterized by the acknowledgment of negative and positive aspects of their adoption, degree of search for information about their pre-adoption background, and level of acceptance.

There are many factors critical to ethnic identity formation. Ethnic socialization by parents affected transracial adoptees' ethnic identity and was shown by their choice of diverse neighborhoods to raise their adopted minority children in and how they discussed, felt, and taught about race. A study on Korean adoptees' ethnic exploration found conditions that necessarily precede exploration, such as freedom to explore in terms of resources and personal relationships, available opportunities to explore, the feeling of being different because of their Asianness, and openness to interacting with other Asians. This ethnic exploration primarily took place through social exposure or learning about their cultural heritage. Looking at how Asian American adoptees express or negotiate their ethnic identities through blogs revealed that this act is not only beneficial for the individual, but for other adoptees as well because of the community and conversation that is fostered. Investigating ethnic identity expression more broadly in this population is needed to

comprehensively record the various forms ethnic identity expression takes, why certain channels are chosen over others, and identify common themes of ethnic identity development specific to Chinese or Korean adoptees.

This study aims to find how Chinese and Korean adoptees with White, American families explore, consider, and express their ethnic identity by gauging: (a) their relationship with their birth culture and America; (b) how they view their own adoption and ethnicity in general; (c) the ways in which they process their ethnic identity for themselves or choose to share their experience with others.

Methods

Participants

Participants of this study were twenty Chinese and Korean adoptees (17 women and 3 men) that grew up and reside in the United States. There were seventeen Chinese adoptees (16 women, 1 man) and three Korean adoptees (1 woman, 2 men) between the ages of 20 and 25; the mean age was 22.45. Seven of the participants were current or past students of Wesleyan University.

Measures

Interview.

The interview drew from and elaborated on similar studies' questionnaires. It took a semi-structured format that broadly probed the lives and experiences of participants but also gave them the opportunity to discuss whatever they desired for as long as they wanted. Thirty three items not including follow-up questions were used. Some topics that were asked about include the participant's adoption, early experiences and schooling, family dynamics, ethnic exploration, ethnic identity, and societal perceptions.

Items were taken from Tuan's (1998) work on the ethnic experience of Asian Americans. Because these questions focused on Asian Americans who were immigrants or descendants of immigrants, they were adapted for adoptees. Shiao and Tuan's (2008) findings on ethnic exploration tracks such as cultural-heritage or social exposure were the basis of ethnic exploration items. Ethnic expression questions were inspired by work on Asian Americans adoptees' sharing their experiences through

writing and film (Ho, 2015; Choy, 2013). Adoption-specific and other follow-up questions were created specifically for this study. A complete list of the interview questions is included in Appendix A. Items taken directly from Tuan's (1998) questionnaire are italicized.

Procedure

Recruitment.

Participants were recruited through poster advertisements at Wesleyan University and posts on Wesleyan's WesAdmits Facebook pages for the classes of 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022, as well as the personal Facebook page of the primary investigator. Chain sampling was used to reach a broader population of Chinese and Korean adoptees by asking those that were interested to reach out via email or phone, and all others to let any Chinese or Korean Adoptee friends or acquaintances know about the study. Once those who were interested reached out, they were sent more information about the study as well as a link to a Qualtrics questionnaire that included the consent form.

Survey.

Before completing the interview, participants completed a survey on Qualtrics to report their demographic information (i.e., age, sex, gender, ethnic identity label, hometown). Additionally, they provided data on where they were born, where they grew up, the age at which they were adopted, and the high school and college(s) they attended. The survey was designed to take about five minutes.

Interview Process.

Interviews took place wherever was most convenient for the participants. A few interviews were conducted at Wesleyan, but also in cafes, homes, offices, and libraries throughout Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York City. After meeting participants, they signed a physical copy of the consent form, and were given an opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the study or interview process. Interviews were recorded on the interviewer's mobile device and ranged from twenty-three minutes to an hour and forty-nine minutes for an average of forty-four minutes in duration. Participants were again given the chance to ask any questions they had after the interview was completed. Finally, they were provided with a debriefing form.

Analysis.

The audio recordings of the interview were uploaded to [Otter.ai](https://otter.ai), a private, secure voice note service which generated a rough initial transcription that I then edited within the program. The transcripts were exported into Word documents. My process from there is based off of the step-by-step guide outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2006) article on thematic analysis. I first familiarized myself with my transcriptions by rereading them, and then uploaded the documents into MaxQDA, a coding software. If there were any questions left unanswered by adoptees, they were emailed and asked to provide a written or audio recording response.

Codes were assigned to statements; in some cases multiple codes were assigned to a single statement. I completely coded a single interview before moving

on to the next one and completing all twenty. I then went back through the transcripts and further refined the codes. Using the responses from all of the participants, a list of codes was generated for each question. Similar codes were organized into groups, and these groups were labelled with a theme.

Questions 1, 2, 9a, 22ab, 28a, 29a, and 30a were excluded from final analysis. Question 1 was intended to gauge open or closed adoption status, but all adoptions were closed. Question 2 eased participants into the interview. Questions 9a, 22ab, 28a, 29a, 30a, were determined to be too loosely related to Chinese and Korean adoptees' ethnic identity exploration, definition, or expression for the final analysis.

Ethical Considerations.

My status as a fellow Asian American adoptee raises a few considerations for how this thesis unfolded. There were definite advantages to having this connection to my participants.² In combination with the chain sampling method used, my shared experience with these participants created a level of familiarity and comfort that may have existed even before we met each other. My role as interviewer was unique because interviewees may have felt they could trust me with personal experiences and thoughts that in other contexts may not feel socially acceptable to share. Being an Asian American adoptee also served to validate my genuine interest in this research for participants.

² My status as an adoptee was never made explicit, but there are clear reasons why the participants would have assumed I was also an adoptee, such as: my picture on the online advertisement poster with some of my family, all-English name and Asian appearance, the nature of chain sampling.

Because I, the researcher, am a part of the participant population, concern about how my experience may affect the interview process and interpretation of data is warranted. I acknowledge that my own experience being a Chinese American adoptee has undoubtedly affected the development of this thesis in ways I can not control, but it is not reason to discount my findings. I have no agenda to discover certain themes or trends; my only goal is to share the array of experiences perhaps similar, perhaps different, to my own.

Additionally, the body of work on Korean and Chinese adoptees has largely been authored by people who are *not* Asian American adoptees. Parents, counselors, and social workers can only contribute pieces of the complex experience of the adoptee, but ultimately we are the authors and experts in our own lives.

Write Up.

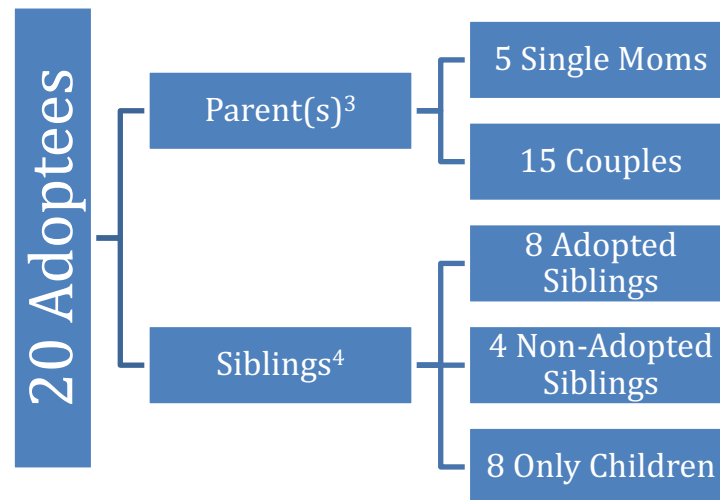
For ease of reading, “parents” was used throughout this thesis to generalize to two parents as well as single mothers. In descriptions that precede narratives, “parent” or “mother” is used.

Results

Background on adoptees' early experience taken from the Qualtrics demographic survey provides context for the following sections. The main themes from the twenty interviews are organized by ethnic identity exploration, components, and expression. Each of the themes are discussed and further illustrated with narrative quotes.

Adoptees' Early Experience

Family Structure and Parents' Reasons for Adopting.



Eleven adoptees were adopted when they were less than a year old, and nine adoptees at one to two and a half years old. The most common reason for adopting was that parents were unable to have children; the couples had trouble conceiving or

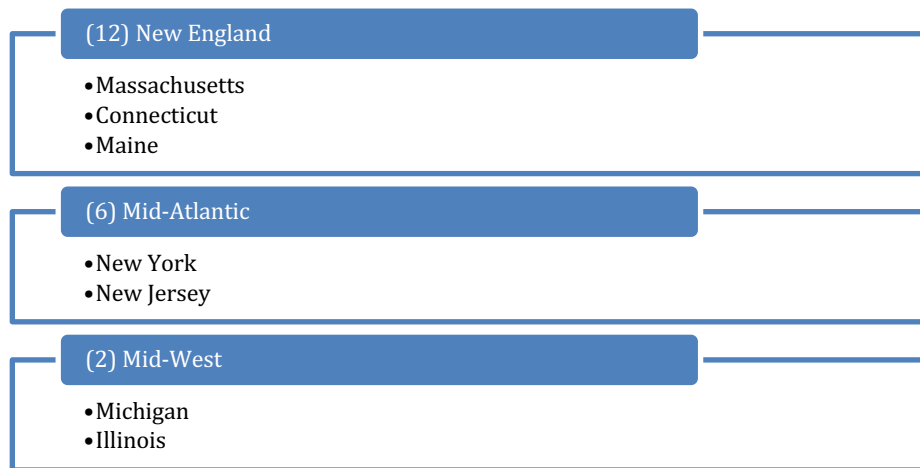
³ One adoptee had gay parents, the rest were heterosexual couples. Three single mothers got married after adopting their child. One adoptee's father passed away when she was young. Two adoptees' parents got divorced, and one adoptee's parents remarried.

⁴ Four adoptees had half-siblings, one of which was adopted. Two adoptees had step-siblings, but one of them considered herself an only child because her mother remarried when she was older.

the pregnancy was too dangerous for the mother. Another reason, four adoptees with single mothers mentioned, was the strong desire to be a parent. Other reasons included religious beliefs, having family or friends that had also adopted, awareness about the One Child Policy in the case of Chinese adoptees, and previous experience with Chinese or Korean culture. One adoptee's mother did not want to adopt domestically and possibly have to fight for custody of the child, and chose China because she knew the babies were healthy.

Two adoptees were married at the time of the study, and one was a mother.

Hometown and Education.



Fifteen adoptees described their hometowns as not diverse, and the five others thought their hometowns were diverse.

Primary	Secondary	University
• 11 Private • 8 Public • 1 Homeschool	• 14 Private • 5 Public • 1 Homeschool	• 17 Private • 3 Public

Adoptees were homeschooled and attended public, charter, private day, private boarding, and single sex schools.

1. Ethnic Identity Exploration

This section provides a broad overview of how adoptees explore their ethnic identity. These explorations occur in person and online and are guided by parents, friends, organizations, acquaintances, and the self. Adoptees learn about their minority status, languages, history, traditions, travel, and food. Additionally, they share their attitudes on how they would parent transnational adoptees.

Parental Teaching About Birth Culture.

All adoptees said that their parents had provided them with opportunities to learn about their birth country's traditions, language, or history.

Theme: Language.

Nine had learned the language, with two adoptees choosing schools to attend because they offered Mandarin:

"I think it was like a big thing for me when deciding high school. So I decided to go to [redacted - high school] because they had a program for me to learn Chinese. And

so that was like, a big deciding factor for me. And my parents definitely encouraged that.” - Alice, 22

Theme: Holidays.

Another nine celebrated Chinese or Korean holidays with their family:

“Every year in Chicago, where I grew up, they would do a big Chinese New Year festival. And they have the dragon and all that, like the cabbage that you feed it. And like, my mom was always having me participate in that, like, I had the whole Chinese New Year gown. I had, she'd, she learned how to say Happy New Year in Chinese, so she could give me then the little money. And we try to do all the traditions, Chinese New Years and, and like the moon cake stuff.”
- Chole, 22

Theme: Culture Camps, Classes, and Lessons.

Eight had attended cultural summer camp, classes, or lessons:

“But I remember we went to, like, a legitimate um, it was like a Chinese culture camp...And I was young, I think I was like 10, um and they had um, like, flag dancing, but I totally am not saying that correctly...And it also it, they also had, like, classes um, for Chinese writing.” - Carly, 22

Theme: Adoptee Camps and Conferences.

Four went to camps or conferences for Chinese or Korean adoptees:

“Yeah, we actually went to an adoption camp. I believe it was mainly Koreans called [redacted] up in, I want to say New York. So we did that for summer until probably around like 9 or 10 years old.” - Julie, 20

Theme: Food.

Three explored Chinese or Korean food:

“I mean, I'd say probably mostly over like food and just general you know, celebrations whether it's going to Chinatown for you know, like a parade or celebrating Chinese New Year with their Chinese friends or something like that.”
- Kevin, 25

Theme: Other Ways of Learning.

Other ways adoptees were exposed to their birth culture included reading, watching Chinese or Korean films, working on projects, attending adoptee reunions, visiting Chinatown, volunteering in orphanages, going to museums, and viewing art. Three also mentioned travelling back to China or Korea with their parents, and this will be discussed later in the section on “Returning to China or Korea.”

Theme: Parental Involvement.

Three adoptees recalled that their parents did not push or force them to learn about their birth culture:

“I don't think they ever like pushed me to like, do anything, or like, pursue it and learn about it.” - Alice, 22

Four more said that their interest dictated how much they learned:

“Like them, trying to expose (me) to the Chinese culture, and that I wasn't having it....they weren't trying to, like, make sure that I didn't get any exposure to it in this instance. They just realized that oh, she doesn't have any interest in it, there's no point in like, forcing her to, like, expose herself to something which she's not gonna, you know, be interested in.” - Casey, 21

Although five noted that they were not interested at all in China or Korea as a child.

Seven discussed how their parents encouraged their child to learn about their birth country and were supportive of whatever level of interest they had:

“I think she definitely kept it like, open and wanted like us to be involved with it. Like, she never like hid our adoption or anything. Like she wanted to include us in the culture.” - Maura, 21

Two noticed that once they got older, they had more freedom to choose whether or not they had to participate in these sorts of activities:

“So she did initially, I would say, was the one who instigated getting us involved in activities. But I think as we got older, we had more of a say in if we wanted to

participate or not. And as we just got older, kind of started fading and doing less and less, and not because anyone made a choice, it was just other priorities.” - Megan, 23

Theme: Parental Participation in Groups.

Seven adoptees mentioned that their parents kept in touch with the other families that had adopted with them:

“So she, I think, just to adopt, she had to join one of the Christian groups or whatever, local like Boston group I think she went through to get my youngest sister. And it's kind of a community, you know, and so we do keep in touch actually with one family that was when we got [redacted - sister's name] back in 2004; they were the two babies from [redacted] so we got to know the family really well. And they adopted a little boy, and they were best friends.... And to this day they're still really good friends, which is actually really sweet so. While it's not an official group, it's just like that kind of special bond you form with people through, you know, the most natural way possible.” - Nadine, 22

Four others recalled that their parents were on a mailing list, and one said that their parents took part in a charity that helped children in Chinese orphanages.

Parental Treatment of Racism and Discrimination.

Thirteen adoptees reported that their parents had discussed racism or discrimination with them; the other seven parents' had not. Although participants explicitly answered yes or no, the same parenting approaches were mentioned by both groups. For example, a parent who reacted to their child being subjected to racism by comforting them was interpreted as discussing racism by one interviewee and not discussing racism by a different interviewee.

Using the responses of nineteen adoptees that were categorized as yes and no, two common approaches to parents discussing or handling racism and discrimination emerged: indirect and reactionary. Fourteen adoptees mentioned indirect parenting

and eleven mentioned reactionary parenting, so the two were not mutually exclusive. Five participants elaborated on their parents' indirect, reactionary, or lack of discussion on these topics as justified because the adoptees had not encountered any problems that needed to be addressed. Two others, however, were frustrated and found their parents' approaches inadequate.

Theme: Indirect.

Fourteen adoptees thought that their parents discussed racism and discrimination with them in an indirect way:

"Not really directly. Yeah, I think it was like, not necessarily like about... I mean I think the conversation about race and discrimination... Yeah, I don't think really there was a direct conversation." - Christine, 22

A direct conversation, for example, might include an age appropriate but honest definition of racism, a warning that the adoptee might encounter it, and advice on how to handle the situation.

One example of indirectly handling racism and discrimination was parents' choice to place their child in inclusive, diverse schools and relying on them to teach the adoptee about racism and discrimination. If parents did any teaching, it was to reinforce an appreciation of all cultures, embrace diversity, or simply be a good person:

"Not like prejudice against like myself, or because I was different. They just, you know wanted me to you know, accept everybody else for who they were. Growing up Christian, that's how my parents saw it. So I don't think they really like focused on like, racism or anything like that."
- Matt, 25

If parents did mention racism, it was in the context of other minorities being the recipients of this maltreatment, not the adoptee:

“But not in the context of, I don't think... Me being an adopted child. So she would, we'd talk about racism in the historical black and white racism and discrimination, and she talked about sexism, as you know, discrimination. But she never said anything like how adopted people would be discriminated in any form...” - Chloe, 22

Theme: Reactionary.

Eleven participants detailed how their parents were forced to discuss racism and discrimination when adoptees were subjected to it, or the adoptees themselves brought it up to them:

“No, not until it actually happened to me, which was a really traumatizing moment. I remember because it was like third grade. And this girl that I wasn't really close with, but we were fine, we were just like playing on the ground, like third graders... But she just started interrogating me, being like, you know, how does it feel to be you know, adopted by a mom who just felt bad for you, and doesn't like, love you? Very aggressive, you know? And at first, I thought she just was asking me like a gateway to like, what's it like to be adopted? Because I'd gotten that before. And I'd just be like, it's fine, I'm Chinese. My mom's like, Irish. Right? It's like whatever. So I had a mantra pretty much built up about that. Being asked targetedly by this snobby little white third grader from a conventional white family I remember breaking down in tears... When I got asked if I could speak English on the soccer field I remember breaking down crying. So it's just like these episodic moments where my mom had to address the fact that I'm a POC. Otherwise she kind of just, you know adapted and saw us, her children, as her own. And honestly I came from a pretty liberal, safe, wealthy neighborhood. So you know it wasn't uncommon seeing like you know... We were non-threatening POC (People of Color) by white standards in Michigan... And so, it wasn't until I was actually like, called out, and my mom had to jump to action. Which is something interesting because she's obviously so out of her league because she's never had to think about it personally. She's never personally been targeted, none of her family has, so that it's weird when her kid is.” - Nadine, 22

“I think I talked to her more about it. She is a white privileged woman who has had roots in New York City for decades or even centuries. So I think for her, it was more me pointing them out and also especially since like growing up a lot of my friends or my best friend was black. And so like the culmination of us two like I think we faced or also noticed it more. And so in which case, I would bring it to my mom. And I think I opened her eyes to see it more clearly than she would not have otherwise. I'm still

working on my dad, but it's okay. So I think it's not that she didn't talk to me, she was so open about the conversation, but she didn't bring it to me, like, hey, this is what you might face.” - Rebecca, 24

Theme: Justified.

Five adoptees saw the rationale behind their parents' indirect, reactionary, or absent handling of racism and discrimination. They never felt excluded:

“I never felt like, even growing up in like, like the area that I did, like I still came from like a fairly like wealthy family. I still have like, never felt like really discriminated against in general. And I kind of just grew up like kind of thinking about like, oh, like, this is kind of like I'm just like, special like I had to just and... Like I see a lot of like, white kids and like things like that and I never felt... I don't know, it's kind of... I never felt like I was like excluded or anything like that. I just kind of felt like that was like reality, you know?” - Tina, 23

They also believed that they had not experienced racism at all, or if they had, it was not a significant issue:

“Um, luckily, I never really experienced that much growing up though. Of course I was in an environment where it didn't really happen, but it, like I knew it was a thing and I would see it more toward people who might be of other colors like say, black people. I would see it towards them. But it never really was directed toward me. And it actually, I didn't really experience it until I was working in retail. I worked in American Eagle Outfitters in [redacted], the mall for five years and, like, every I could count maybe, maybe even only once, where someone would say something that was racist. And it was... It very, very rarely happened to me.” - Megan, 23

Theme: Inadequate.

Two adoptees were dissatisfied with how their parents handled racism and discrimination. They did not blame their parents for being ignorant to their experience or not knowing how to handle these types of situations, but nonetheless they were frustrated:

“And so she went in like guns a blazing every time that I like, you know, was severely traumatized. But again, there's only so much a white voice can do to other white people that are calling you out on your racist ways... So it was really wonderful

seeing her be so offended for me, but at the same time you're like what gives you the right? You know what I mean... You're part of the privilege or you're part of the majority, and yet you're now infuriated for me because I lost my voice to other white people? Like it just seems... Off to me... So it was difficult. And I felt again like a voiceless POC in those situations where, you know I was so damaged, so hurt, so caught off guard, I didn't have any good rebuttal, have any you know, preparation for racism that I would face in America. Because I'd always been coddled and bubble-wrapped by white people. So... It just like shakes your world a little bit. And I've learned to advocate for myself, of course. I think growing up, it was stunted having to depend on white people to defend you, the white savior right?" - Nadine, 22

Another three adoptees observed that microaggressions were particularly difficult for parents to understand. Four adoptees observed that their parents wanted to offer comfort when their child was treated badly, but unintentionally minimized their child's experience instead. Examples of minimizing were parents telling their child that they should just ignore the racist and brush it off, that the hateful person was just jealous, or that the adoptee misunderstood and the person was not actually being racist:

"So like, she, I don't think she ever really talked about it. And like, I... Like she, even like now it kind of frustrates me because I had a multicultural class last semester. And she was like, people aren't racist to you and I was like, yes they are, mom, are you kidding? She's very kind of blind to it. And like, that kind of frustrates me... But she's just, she's just very naive to it. And like, she'll think like, if I explain the situation to her, she's like, no, but like, they're just, they're just interested and they're asking this question. Or like, they didn't mean it or something. Like, they didn't mean it like that, so I think because she's never received it she doesn't really know what to look for. Like, she doesn't recognize it. Because maybe it's like... a microaggression." - Maura, 21

Attitudes: Transnational Parenting.

When asked what they would do the same or differently from their own parents in raising a child from a different country, adoptees' thoughts had two foci. The first was various styles of parenting such as never forcing cultural learning on the

adoptee, pushing the adoptee to learn about their birth culture, and providing opportunities for the adoptee to learn while supporting whatever level of interest they have. The second included recommendations on how to treat culture, race, and adoption.

Theme: Forcing an Adoptee to Learn About Their Birth Culture Is Wrong.

Four adoptees emphasized that adoptive parents should never force their child to learn about their birth country:

"I'm really happy that my parents... They obviously knew me better than I knew myself. And I was like, probably, like, four or five. So if they knew that I wasn't interested in the Chinese heritage, or culture, and they didn't... Like, I don't blame them for doing that. So I wouldn't want to do that to my children. And also, I'm actually kind of happy that my parents went that route, because then it gave me time to learn more about it on my own, kind of thing, and that's what got me interested."
- Casey, 21

Theme: Pushing Adoptees to Learn About Their Birth Culture Is Good.

Six adoptees thought that parents should make sure that adoptees learned about their birth culture. Although the adoptee might not enjoy the process as a child, as an adult they would appreciate having this knowledge related to their background, and would not have to start from the beginning if they wanted to learn more:

"Um, I guess like growing up like, maybe there was a part of me that wanted to know a little bit more about like you know my Korean heritage. So they did you know, maybe like force something so I learned a little bit about Korea a little bit more. Maybe that would have been, maybe now I would appreciate it more than I did if I was a child. So maybe I'd like you know, force my, my adopted child to like learn more about their like, were their birth country was from and stuff like that."
- Matt, 25

"Oh, I would definitely teach them about whatever culture they came from, I would want them to have an understanding of yes, like, you have this other like identity that technically you didn't inherit through your genes, through me, like... And make sure

that they really felt, I guess, like, they still have like a piece of their culture, especially for when they get older.” - Julie, 20

Theme: Provide Opportunities to Learn and Let The Adoptee Decide.

Twelve adoptees supported the parenting style of providing the adoptee with opportunities to learn about their birth culture and then letting them decide if they wanted to stop or continue after trying it for awhile:

“Um, yeah, I do appreciate, like, how my parents like, exposed me like, as much as they could to Chinese culture, like, obviously, being aware, like, that's not their experience. Just trying to be like, oh, like, this is where you're from, and isn't this great and trying to, like, try to show me like, the good things about being Chinese and like, the great things about the culture and things like that. I don't necessarily think I would do anything like, significantly different, like, I do think my parents like, the level of involvement was good. Like, trying to, like, point me in these directions and be like, oh, like here, are things like about China's own culture, but kind of also letting me discover it for myself. Because as much like, as great as my family is, and were like, when I was growing up, like, it's obviously not their experience. It's like singularly mine.” - Tina, 23

Being encouraging, supportive, and open were key traits:

“I may make it a little bit more like an open discussion about like, what happened and stuff. Because, like, I know, my parents would talk about if I asked, but I think that like, sometimes I feel weird, bringing it up. So if I might, kind of like approach that conversation that leans like... Open it up for conversation, and like, initiate it more than just like, let them come to me, in case they did have any questions.” - Alice, 22

Theme: Exposure to People That Look Like You.

If the transnationally adopted child was a minority in America, four adoptees thought it was important that adoptees had exposure to other people of their birth culture or people of color:

“I remember when I was growing up, like I grew up in...a very not, like not diverse area. It's a lot of like white Irish Catholics and things like that. And I know my parents definitely tried to put me in more environments where I did see like Asian women and Asian people in general. So they put me in a lot of like music classes. I

also like, liked music, but like put me in those environments, to like, see people like me, which I think was important, especially growing up in such a white area. So I remember my parents being like, saying like, when I was like little, like, six or seven and taking ballet classes, and taking like piano classes, like I literally would follow this one instructor around, like this other Chinese woman...which I think is kind of funny. But yeah, I think trying to put, if I were to adopt, like a child from China, like putting them in environments where you do see people like you and trying to expose them to that culture, but also like letting them kind of do it for themselves as well."

- Tina, 23

Theme: Normalizing Adoption.

Five adoptees talked about how parents should make their child aware early on that they were adopted and help them understand that adoption was one of many ways to make a family:

"Well, I really appreciate how honest my mom was with the whole thing and she never tried to... She's like, she herself is a very kind of blunt like, this is the way the world works. This is how... She always, she would always say, like, there's many ways to make a family. This is how I made mine, like, we're a family. So I think I'd probably maintain that of, kind of there's, it shouldn't be kind of secret that you're adopted or I shouldn't make it this big deal, because at the end of the day, like, you're my family. Like, we're, our relationship, like, you can't, I don't want you to feel like you have to question our relationship because you're adopted. So I think I would try to keep that and be very open like that they are adopted. And that, that, I don't know if that makes sense, to just keep communication really open, which I appreciate she did."

- Susan, 21

Theme: Handling Race.

Three adoptees talked about how parents should make sure that their children did not feel overwhelmed by the white majority and were prepared to face racism, discrimination, microaggressions, or stereotypes:

"Having, like, my mom be a completely different race than I am, and then growing up in like, very small town white, rural [redacted] was pretty hard. And I don't really know if she knew what to do. And I think, like we've talked about, we've had conversations about this after, like, [redacted - University], and me being able, like I love studying, I got my American Studies, like, race and ethnicity major, so like I really latched onto this when I got here. And so we just talked about how, you know,

as a white parent, she kind of wasn't aware of kind of the more subtle forms of racism that really kind of ate away at me when I was growing up, that I don't think she really knew how to deal with. So I think that's one thing that I'd probably try to address with my kid. If they were, I mean, either way, my child... If the child is white, like I'm gonna have to really kind of deal with it and deal with it in different ways, depending if they're the same race as me or not, and I think that's one piece that I maybe I would have changed." - Susan, 21

The Diversity of Adoptees' Friends.

Fourteen adoptees described their friends as diverse, and six described them as not diverse. Of the ten participants who did not mention having Asian, Asian American, or adoptee friends growing up, four wished they did have friends that looked like them growing up and six did not. Twelve adoptees described the diversity of their friends changing over time; for the eight that did not, seven said that their friends had always been diverse, and one that their friends had always been White. When discussing diversity of friends and how it may have changed over time, three themes emerged: factors that limit the diversity of adoptees' friends, reasons for not seeking out Asian friends, and advantages of having Asian friends.

Theme: Limiting Factors.

Nine adoptees said that the diversity of their hometowns and schools was related to how diverse their friends were. Universities, however, were a common place for adoptees to meet friends from all over the world:

"There wasn't so much when I was growing up, because my options weren't diverse. So my friends weren't. But it I mean, yeah, it definitely changed especially in college, because it's college. And we had some many like, international kids, and you've got kids from all over the country and the world. So my friends in college are definitely pretty diverse, but from home, no. Because you just didn't have anyone." - Rose, 23

Theme: Reasons For Not Seeking Out Asian Friends.

Eight adoptees discussed why they did not seek out Asian, Asian American, or adoptee friends growing up. It never occurred to three of them because they were accustomed to growing up in mostly White neighborhoods and it did not seem necessary:

"To be honest, I was fine being "the Asian girl" amongst my friends. I never struggled with bullying, and I always had people who were fine with me. So I was fine with me too." - Megan, 23

Three adoptees recalled not wanting to be outcasted or stereotyped for hanging out with Asians:

"I actually didn't, I don't know, I think because I didn't identify as Chinese, and I grew up in a school system that was primarily white, I didn't want friends that looked like me because then I thought I'll be stereotyped even more. There's that perception all the Asian kids hangout with each other, and I didn't want that to be what people thought of me." – Rose, 23

For two adoptees, the potential Asian friends were international students and there was a clear cultural divide:

"My high school decided to, like...bring in more like, international students from specifically China and Korea. So then there were a lot of East Asians at my high school, like, from freshman year it went from, like, five to like eighty by the time I graduated. So I had a lot. I, I yeah, I think at first, I was like, oh, my gosh, this is great. I finally have people that look like me. But then, like, very clearly, like, I was not one of them. And I think there's that huge cultural divide, regardless of like, racial, so." - Susan, 21

Theme: Advantages of Having Asian/Asian American Friends.

Five adoptees thought there were advantages to having Asian or Asian American friends. They appreciated the diversity and shared experience:

"Sometimes after, like not that any of my friends would do this purposely, but kind of say things that are kind of like, white privilege-y. Like, not, like, really mean anything

by but I think... Yeah, so like, after like those experiences, I think was also nice to have, like, a friend group that kind of, like, get it like, kind of get being a minority and more of a whatever community we're in.” - Tina, 23

One adoptee in particular sought to connect and learn from her Asian friends:

“I think there was validation in that, definitely. And I think that there was something like contagious about it. Like I was like maybe I could catch more of your Asian-ness if I hung out with your family, learned what red bean paste was, you know ate the food, listened to the language. I think there was something calculated about that. Just wanting to know what K-pop was, wanting to like you know, talk about your summer in Thailand. Because I was always, I feel, growing up lusting for that connection to Asia that I didn't have that at home necessarily, or what I thought was authentic. So by having friends that did have, I think, you know genetic access points, I was kind of seeing through my desire through their lives.” – Nadine, 22

Returning to China or Korea.

Ten of the adoptees had returned to their birth country, and the other ten had not. The ones that had not been to China or Korea all wished to return someday; a few already had plans to do so within the next year. Of the ten who had returned to their birth country, four had been back more than once. The range of ages at which the adoptees returned was nine to twenty three years old, with the average age being fourteen. Among all the trips back to China or Korea, three individuals had gone with their parents on a heritage tour, two went alone with their parents, another two accompanied their parents to adopt a younger sibling, two travelled with their own and another family, and two were a part of a study abroad program their high school or university offered.

All of the twenty thought that returning was or would be valuable for four reasons: to see where they came from and what their lives might have been like if they had not been adopted, to learn more about their birth country and its culture, to

be surrounded by people who looked like them, and if possible, to briefly reconnect with their caretakers at the orphanage.

Theme: An Alternative Life.

Seven of the twenty adoptees thought returning to their birth country would allow them to see what their life could have been if they had never left China or Korea:

“I think it would be a valuable experience to go back for sure. Just to kind of see, like, a little bit more of where I came from, and, like, potentially, like, the life that like, was so close. Like, it definitely could have been, like, the life that I would have lived.” - Alice, 22

“Um, well I've never seen where I was born. So like, I think that would be really cool. Just because, like, so many people are so used to it. Because they're just like, oh, yeah, like, I was born in this hospital at this time. And like, blah blah blah. I mean, even just to know like, if I ever got to meet my parents, like, what time was I born? Like, because that's just like something like, so many people know, and I just don't know. And then yeah, I just, it would be just cool to, like, see what it's like. And like, where my roots came from, like how they, how their lifestyles so different from my own, and like, the life that like, I probably could have lived being over there. But I don't honestly think I would choose it over being here. So I think, yeah, it would just be interesting to see a different possibility.” - Maura, 21

Theme: Learning About China or Korea.

Six adoptees wanted to return to their birth country to learn about the people, culture, and customs in a concrete, immersive way:

“Yeah, definitely. Um, a lot of my like, idea of like China, like where I'm from, are kind of, like, just molded from you know, like media, like movies, and documentaries I've watched and things like that. So I think like, just going in person would be like, really...yeah, I think it's just like, because it's kind of like very, like, abstract and kind of just like an idea in head, it would be interesting to see it like and have like, more of a concrete thing to think about. But I think it would be valuable but only more of like a curiosity thing again. Like not really like a soul searching or soul finding thing.” - Tina, 23

"I think just to learn more. So like, I feel like the best way to like learn about a culture is to immerse yourself in it. So I feel like that would be great. And just to like, guess, not feel... I don't know. Just probably like one more about the culture, the language, the food, everything." - Julie, 20

Theme: "To Be Surrounded By People Who Look Like Me."

Four adoptees were particularly interested in being surrounded by people who looked like them since they were not able to experience the same thing in America:

"Yeah, I definitely think so. Also, because I haven't been in a place where I mostly see Asian people. I mean, I guess you can count Chinatown in New York City. But that's not the same because you're in New York, you know, you're in New York City. So I feel like if I went to like a country where there are a lot of Asian individuals, which I haven't, I haven't been. Yeah, I haven't been to Asia. Since I was adopted, no I haven't been to Asia. Um, so I, I would really like that experience, to go back and see, like, people and like to see if I look like them or like, they look like me, or, you know, whatever, because..." - Carly, 22

"I only returned to Hong Kong last year. I had a great time. It was definitely a valuable experience for me and I really enjoyed being in China, even though Hong Kong is different from mainland China. I mostly just had fun with my friends and experienced something new...It was refreshing to be around mostly Asian people though. I really liked that for some reason." - Sarah, 24

Theme: Reconnecting With Past Caretakers.

Three adoptees who had returned to their birth country discussed their experience at the orphanage and how they were fortunate to meet the workers who took care of them. Reconnecting with them allowed adoptees and parents to be personally assured that they were well taken care of during their time there, and to let their past caretakers know they were happy:

"I think [redacted – name] and I were sort of just neutral emotions, sort of just taking it in. Just you know, just happy to be in a position where we can go back and show the others that we're, you know, we're happy and doing well. And the people there I mean, th-they had pictures of us as well, you know at the orphanage. So they recognized us in some regard and, yeah to see their smiles, to see them rooting for us is a very nice thing." - Kevin, 25

“The actual orphanage I lived at wasn’t there when we visited. It had been remodeled...The same people worked there, though, so when we visited, they hosted a huge beautiful traditional banquet. The people were so kind, and I think that’s what really mattered to both me and my mom. I know it comforted my mom to see that kind and caring people were taking care of me when she couldn’t, and because it comforted her, it made me happy too. The experience was overall very valuable because it brought both of us peace of mind that my early months of life were well taken care of, and that the people at the orphanage are doing the same great job for many other babies.” - Chloe, 22

Adoptees’ Cultural Involvement: Food.

Nine adoptees said that they ate their birth country’s food or other Asian food frequently. For one adoptee, food was the primary way they were interested in learning about their birth country:

“I do often find myself trying to explore my birth country of South Korea through food. I tend to watch cooking videos on Youtube every now and then about how to make popular Korean dishes, or a personal favorite of mine, which is BuzzFeed’s Worth It on BBQ ribs when they traveled to Korea. I drive to Queens to go to a restaurant called Tang, which is on the Michelin guide as being top rated for Korean cuisine, and one that I highly recommend. It is known for having more ‘authentic’ Korean dishes.” - Matt, 25

Besides seeking it out themselves, a few adoptees said that they would go along with what their Asian or Asian American friends or significant other wanted:

“Actually, I mean, just, I just made some like close friends who have like a grill and they’re Korean as well. So this past like, these past couple of weeks, I’ve been hanging out with them we’ve had Galbi like two three times like a week and it’s just ridiculous. Because like they’re always just like you guys want to grill? And we’re like, sure. And they’ll just like pull it out of the fridge and just cook it up. So probably a lot more now, I guess, then like I have been in the past.” - Julie, 20

Eleven described themselves as eating it only occasionally or rarely. Besides some who preferred other cuisines, or were allergic to foods commonly found in Asian food, a few felt limited by their restaurant options:

“Um, not super often. [Redacted - university] doesn't have a ton of good Asian restaurants around. When I, whenever I have the chance to go, whether, whether I'm visiting the city or anything like that, I always opt to try to go to different Asian places, but it just, [redacted - university]’s not a great spot for that.” – Evan, 22

To a couple of adoptees, it was clear that the Asian food they had consumed was Americanized:

“I mean realistic Chinese food, like real Chinese food, probably not that much.” – Victoria, 24

One of the eleven felt that it was too late for her to learn about authentic Chinese food, and wanted an acquaintance or friend to show her what she was missing:

“I mean, growing up we would get (it)...every once in awhile. But I mean, that's not like, real Chinese food. And, like, I still don't think I've had real Chinese food. When I went to [redacted] though, like my roommate...was from China. And she was just there studying and she like, is like, oh my gosh, I have to show you all these things, and all the like, amazing food and all the places to go. And like, of course, like, our schedules never matched up that like she could like, take me out. But I would definitely like wish I had been more like immersed in it. Or, like, had someone who could show me because now I feel like it's too late for me to just go in myself, or like know what to order.” – Maura, 21

Adoptees' Cultural Involvement: Holidays.

Ten adoptees had recently celebrated one of their birth country's holidays. All of these adoptees mentioned celebrating Chinese New Year, and two also talked about their adoption or homecoming day. Six of the ten celebrated with friends; the adoptees often were not active planners but just went along with whatever the group was doing:

“I don't go out of my way to celebrate these holidays. But yes, some of my other friends do and I'll attend their house parties or we'll all go out to dinner or something on the day. Usually prompted by, usually I'm just following my other friends' leads.” – Kevin, 25

The other four celebrated with their families, usually in an informal way:

“It's funny, because, um, I do celebrate Chinese New Year, and then quotation marks, because that entails just me eating Chinese food with my parents.” – Casey, 21

Ten did not currently celebrate any of these holidays. Some mentioned that they had celebrated Chinese New Year when they were younger, but it stopped when they got older or their families got busier:

“Yeah, like when I was little my parents would give me like the red little packets and things like that, but not really anything now. Yeah, it kind of just fell like fell to the side like when I went to boarding school, and things like that.” – Tina, 23

One adoptee explained further that celebrating something like Chinese New Year was not something that her mother thought about; she had no cultural claim to Chinese holidays:

“Honestly I think that would be something that would be important to me raising my own kids. But I think that, you know my mom is so stressed, that that's not on her mind. She has no control, claim to that, so it's fallen off the radar, it's not like Christmas.” – Nadine, 22

Adoptees' Cultural Learning: Languages.

Nine adoptees had learned their birth country's language at some point. Six of them recalled that their parents put them in Mandarin lessons as children, whereas the other three had sought out the language on their own:

“But I think it was like a big thing for me when deciding high school. So I decided to go to [redacted - high school] because they had a program for me to learn Chinese. And so that was like, a big deciding factor for me. And my parents definitely encouraged that.” – Alice, 22

However, seven of the adoptees stopped maintaining their knowledge of Mandarin.

There were a number of reasons for this, such as busy schedules, dislike of their

teacher, the difficulty of Mandarin and keeping up with it, and wanting to learn another language instead.

Eleven adoptees, including all of the three Korean adoptees, had not learned their birth language. There were not opportunities to learn the language at the schools some of these adoptees attended, for example:

"I have not. That's also just another thing I was thinking about. Because I took Spanish in high school and a little bit of middle school. But they didn't, they never offered Chinese. Some other towns around me did, but like we never had that."
- Zoe, 20

A couple of adoptees thought it would be difficult and effortful to learn the language:

"Yeah, I haven't learned Chinese and to be honest, I don't have an interest. I think part of it is it's supposed to be really hard and I like don't have an interest, so I don't really want to do it...Because I don't like think I'll use it and I don't think it sounds great. But it would be very useful honestly." - Carly, 22

Or saw themselves as bad at learning languages:

"No, I'm really bad at languages. Just in general, like that part of my brain just doesn't work. Like the longest language I took was like, Latin. Which is not a speaking language at all... No, I haven't honestly even tried." - Tina, 23

One adoptee recalled not wanting to learn when she was younger because she wanted to speak English, like her mom:

"But I was definitely out of it and about not learning it when I was younger, like in those prime years, because I think even though my mom wanted me to learn it, I had a Chinese babysitter who, my mom was like oh you can talk to her in Mandarin. I was like, so adamant about being more like my mom at that point. That I was like no, I only want to talk in English, and things like that. So I think that hindered it. Looking back it would be awesome, but that didn't happen." - Rebecca, 24

Of the eleven adoptees, five were interested in or had plans to learn Mandarin or Korean. The six others did not want to for some of the same reasons mentioned

earlier—perceived difficulty or effort required to learn the language or genuine disinterest.

Adoptees' Cultural Learning: Asian American/Asian Studies.

Nine adoptees had not taken Asian American or Asian Studies courses while they were in school. Two of them did wish they had, however.

Eleven had taken at least one of these courses. For most, they elected to take these classes as a slightly more interesting option to fulfill curricular or major requirements:

"I think I took two. I took one class, I'm an econ math major, so I did one class on topics in like Asian economies. Like it like it was within like my course like within courses I could take for my major and kind of just like align my schedule. But I mean, obviously I was a little more interested than any other course. So yeah, so that would kind of like... lined up... And then I took another one, that was actually a film/environmental science one. [Redacted - college]'s a liberal arts school so you have to take classes like all... Um, so yeah, I did that to fulfill my art requirement. So I think I didn't necessarily like purposely mean to take these classes, but it was kind of just like an option. And I had like, a little bit more of piqued interest in something else. It was... Both of them were really interesting." - Tina, 23

For two adoptees, however, discovering and taking Asian American classes changed their understanding of themselves and their lives:

"I took Asian American history at [redacted – university], which was one of the most enlightening classes ever that gave me the historical context and vocabulary to be outraged. Before I could not articulate why I was upset, being a model minority. Why I was upset, being appreciated, but also like, condemned, I don't know. I hated that, I didn't know why I could be like that. Like my family's like, you lived, grew up with a cushy lifestyle, why are you mad? I was like, I still face microaggressions that you never have to... And I think that's what, honestly, the Asian American history class, going back to that, was like the very class that finally like kickstarted my realization that my identity isn't just like, oh I'm a Chinese adoptee brought into a white family. That's not like a personal identity to me anymore; I think I outgrew that. And now I do confidently identify as Asian American, specifically not Chinese American, but that is maybe important for my ethnicity. I don't feel in my skin that I am Chinese

American; I think that...I am part of that umbrella. I think there is like a problem when it comes to throwing a bunch of different people from different diasporas under one kind of umbrella, but it's a shared burden, and finally being a part of that burden I think alleviates some other people's at the same time. There's like, a power in, kind of like in that identifying. So, I do identify as Asian American now, and I do thank [redacted - university] for giving me the resource and the knowledge to get there. Because otherwise, I don't know what my identity would be.” - Nadine, 22

“I don't know if this is helpful but, I think like my senior year of high school especially, like I probably missed like a third of it. But I think...a lot of it was kind of depression. And like, looking back now, I think it was kind of to do with racism, and like, not really knowing how to figure myself into where I was growing up. And being Asian American, I just, I had a really hard time. And then coming to [redacted - university], I took like, intro sociology, intro anthropology, like a mixed in America, like race theory class. And I just fell in love with all of it. And like all three required like memoirs, it's like, the easiest for me was to talk about being not white in a really predominantly white area...I just absolutely loved every second of it to the point where then I took quite a few [redacted - name] classes on like Asian Americans and pop culture, Asian American history as much as I could, to the point where I was just drawn like, and kind of still am thinking about trying to go into Asian American Studies. It's like a field and like I'm writing my undergraduate thesis on like Chinese immigration.” - Susan, 21

Adoptee Camps, Classes, or Conferences.

Nine adoptees had attended culture camps, classes, or conferences. Four recalled that they were young, about elementary school age, and their parents had made the initial decision for the adoptee to go. Eleven had not been to any camps, classes, or conferences; when they were asked if they wished that they had those opportunities in the past, or whether they would be interested in a conference in the future, six answered yes and five answered no.

Theme: Learning About Identity With Other Adoptees.

The six that expressed interest and the nine that went to these types of programs discussed the value of attending. Three of the fifteen felt that they had just

started or were in the middle of exploring their identity and had an appreciation for meeting other adoptees that they did not have when they were younger:

“I think it would be very cool now. Just because I'm in a place where I'm more mature emotionally. So I feel like and I, in that sense I have a greater, would have a greater appreciation than if I was younger and just would've been like, oh, this is cool I'm going, and I may meet a bunch of people who look like me. It's kind of, now it would be like, I'm going to go and connect with a bunch of people who are like me, and who share similar experiences and who maybe have a share of different values and different tastes and everything, but it's just like cool.” - Megan, 23

Ten others globally discussed their desire to learn about their identity by meeting other adoptees:

“I've never definitely like in the past, like ten years, I've never, like actively sought out to like, go to a camp or like a conference or anything. But now I think I would, especially like as I enter maybe like the professional world and kind of start leaving the school environment. I think I would be like, super interested in like getting, I think, more involved in talking with other adoptees and how they're navigating, like how they've made it to this, up to this point in their life and how they like it, like how they look for the future if that makes sense.” - Susan, 21

Theme: Not Salient.

Five adoptees did not see their being adopted from China or Korea as a point of connection. Two felt that it was something personal or special about themselves and thus felt little or no desire to reach out or connect with others because of it:

“Again, I think this is a little egotistical of me, but like I think I do like feeling that, I'm like, super unique and look like, oh, no one has this, like, same backstory as me. And like, I like have a super cool like, international family. And I was like, adopted and I grew up in like, in like, an interesting way. And like, going to boarding school and everything like that. And like, I like being like, interesting and unique.” - Tina, 23

Three felt that shared adoptee status was not enough to be a shared point of connection:

“But like as just like a connection point, like the only connection point you have with someone else, it's actually not that big, I feel like.” - Victoria, 24

"I do not wish that I had attended any, only because I feel like that, I don't know. It's not exceptionalizing, but I feel like it's trying to make adopted individuals to be a lot different than what they are. Because I feel like that's getting at the core of like the family unit, and almost suggesting that the family unit's different when there's an adopted child versus when there's a biological child? And I would argue, no, it's not. Because it's really the social interactions, and I'm sure genes have a role. But I don't think that, I think when we talk about the family unit, it's more of a social description, right? It's not just like, oh, it's who...shares which genes and chromosomes. So I don't care about, I don't think I, I don't wish I had attended any." - Chloe, 22

Adoptee Involvement with Groups.

Fifteen adoptees were involved with groups, online or in person, that connected Asians, Asian Americans, or Asian American adoptees. Twelve were a part of in person groups and seven were a part of online groups. In "Other Interactions With Birth or Asian Country," dyadic or larger group relationships that adoptees did not consider formal groups are discussed.

Theme: In Person Groups.

Twelve out of the twenty adoptees had been a part of an in person group. One was in an organization that raised funds to foster children in orphanages. Three mentioned being close with the girls they had been adopted with:

"Um, so when my parents adopted me, they, um, they were going with a group of other grown-ups are also adopting girls from the same orphanage that I came from. And, you know, it just so happened, my parents got along really well with those other grownups. So as a group, the parents decided, oh, we have to have like reunions or something once a year, just because something so important to us, you know..." - Casey, 21

"My 'gotcha-group,' which I think I might have mentioned, which is like the five people who I was adopted with the same time." - Carly, 22

Twelve had participated in an Asian, Asian American, or Asian American Adoptee group while in high school or university. However, nine of the twelve said

that they were no longer part of the group or were inactive. Their reasons included being busy, not feeling connected to the people in the group, or not agreeing with how the group was organized:

"I think I've always... Not... It's kind of weird being adopted, because you're not like, full. I never fully felt like, I was like, entitled to, like.. I obviously am Asian, but I really haven't had like, the full Asian experiences like other international students and things like that...So I never really felt like I could truly like...take ownership...I don't know, it's kind of a weird thing. And like, obviously, this is more of like, a me thing than anything else. But I never like, truly had that like, full Asian experience. And like, the people who did go to those clubs and things like that. So it's kind of like this weird, like in-between. I mean, I also was just busy and didn't necessarily always have time to, like, go to clubs and things like that. But I always kind of, felt like a little weird going to events and things like that." - Tina, 23

"I did in high school, I think I was in the ASA, Asian Students Association, there. It was all Korean people...and it was really fun...And then I also was in it at [redacted - college] at the end of my time. But actually, I went for some reason to a lunch with [redacted - college president] and the other people. And I actually thought the way that they were running it was very unsuccessful, very ineffective, because everyone was just yelling basically...and was blaming him for all these problems. And I just thought the way they approach it was so ineffective and ridiculous, so then I didn't really feel bad that I hadn't been part of it...So I was rather disappointed actually, in their organizational skills and just I don't know, their communication skills." - Sarah, 24

The eight adoptees who had not participated did not recall their school offering these sorts of groups:

"Definitely not in college. Um, I'm trying to think if we had anything in like primary school... I don't think so." - Matt, 25

And one purposefully chose to separate herself so she would not be stereotyped and lumped in with other Asians:

"No, and actually I made, I tried to make a point not to do it. Because I was like, I'm just gonna be stereotyped. So I remember like at [redacted] there was like a group of girls. There were like, four of them or maybe three that all hung out together. And they were all Asian and...I was like I'm not going to be friends with them because I don't want to be part of like. Because everyone around me was like, oh, it's like the

Asian clique. And I was like, I don't want to be like part of that, because I don't want like that to be how I'm judged and how I'm seen. And so like, I don't think we even had many like clubs or sports about like ethnicity, but I, if they did I wouldn't have joined them because I was like, I don't want to be stereotyped like that.” – Rose, 23

Theme: Online Groups.

Seven adoptees mentioned being a member of online groups such as Facebook or YouTube. Most described their participation as inactive, primarily viewing content and commenting only occasionally. The one adoptee that brought up YouTube videos watched content produced by an Asian American duo:

“I mean, I don't know if this counts or anything, but like when I used to, like love watching, like YouTube videos and stuff like that, like, I used to love like, Wong Fu and all that type of stuff. And that's not so much a community, but it was just more like a media group that I felt like I could relate to a little bit more. But yeah.”
- Evan, 22

The six others were members of Facebook groups, which ranged from an online platform for the cohort of people they had been adopted with to a massive group that hosted memes by and for Asian Americans:

“It's very interesting, first of all, it's a very big group. Second of all, it's just full of all these people mostly predominantly Asian obviously, self degrading themselves. It's kind of weird. It's, it's actually, I was literally just talking about this to a friend like right before this interview. And it's just weird because, I don't know, I guess just being me, being brought up in like a white community. And then seeing all these like Asians kind of making fun of themselves; it seems like why are you doing this yourself? But at the same time, I can't relate. Because a lot of the things they post whether it's memes, videos are obviously like, you know, what it's like to grow up with Asian parents are like, whatever, boba is life, like apparently. Like I'm just like, I can't relate to this at all.” - Casey, 21

Another group attempted to connect adoptees with their birth families:

“My aunt was showing me this one like Facebook page though recently, that was like it's supposed to be for, I forget what it's called. And it's like, adopted kids, to try and help them find their like birth families, so they post pictures of them as like a baby

and a kid. But I don't know how, I don't think that really works. Like a person has to be looking like on this Facebook page and be like oh that's my kid, so.” - Rose, 23

Two adoptees mentioned wanting to learn more or become involved with these types of communities connecting Asian Americans or Asian American adoptees. Another two, however, were not interested in seeking out these groups because they did not view this commonality as something to connect over, or generally did not see the value in doing so.

Other Explorations in Birth or Other Asian Country.

Thirteen adoptees raised other ways they explored their relationship with their birth country. The two most popular methods of learning were through social relationships and by consuming media. Two adoptees brought up travel and cultural immersion, although it was touched upon earlier in “Return to China or Korea.” One adoptee brought up how he had always wanted to travel to his birth country and play in their sports league, or even represent his birth country in an international sports competition:

“Um... I mean it was always, it was always kind of kind of a goal of mine to play, play baseball for Korea in the Olympics, that was kind of like a big goal for mine, for me, even more so than like playing professionally or anything like that. Like I thought it would've been really cool to, to, to play for like their national team for like an Olympics or something like that. And it's, I find it really cool that Korea like, that baseball's like a big sport there, and I've even considered like if, like professional baseball doesn't work out or anything like that, hypothetically. But like, like potentially playing in like the Korean Baseball League, or something like that.”
- Evan, 22

Theme: Relationships.

Eight adoptees discussed how their relationships with others allowed them to process their own experience by sharing with others. The relationships were with cousins, siblings, significant others, friends, and other Chinese or Korean adoptee acquaintances:

“When I am with, like, with more of my Asian friends, like, who actually are from or, like, grew up, or like whatnot. And, like, I think just by being like, friends with them, like, they’ll bring back like, certain foods, and like tea, and like, whatever, from home and just talk about their experiences there. And I like ask them a lot of questions about like, kind of, like, their experience and things like that. But it never was like a purposeful thing. It was just like, something I tried to learn more about, like, just because we were friends. And it was like, a little more like, interesting and personal to me, but never in like a purposeful way. Like, I think a lot of me interacting with like, Asian countries is more just a kind of, like, lined up.” - Tina, 23

“I’d say that I’ve also learned about China through meeting other adoptees. There’s usually a significant indicator that someone, typically a female, is a transracial adoptee much like myself: her name. I’ve found that our Western names typically give it away, and I’m not shy of asking them point blank if they, too, are adopted and raised in a Western family. From that open conversation, we usually go into discussing our relationships: to our adoptive family, to our homeland, to our American culture. It’s really quite a rewarding experience being able to share openly and without fear our experiences. I’ve learned countless things of the vast expanse that is China simply by word of mouth.” - Nadine, 22

A few were interested in how, if at all, this connection ranging from similar appearance to shared cultural experience affected the development of these relationships:

“I wouldn’t say it’s something that I thought out. But I would say that in the past year, for example, like all my new friends are Asian art collectors and yeah, it’s very interesting. They’re on another level, it’s like Crazy Rich Asians, but like a step down. They’re still like crazy. Yeah, so that’s something new. And that’s not something I necessarily sought out, but a lot of them are Chinese, actually. And sometimes I, and sometimes I just wonder how that happens. Because I mean they’re very international cosmopolitan people and they have travel, they’re well traveled, they’re very cultured and blah, blah, blah. But sometimes I wonder like, we’re both Chinese, you know, and

I just wonder how we became so close so quickly. And I don't think that would happen with, that hasn't happened to me with other people. So it's interesting, it's something I'm curious about too, because I don't know if it would happen with me and a white person. I don't think it ever has and I don't know if it ever, that means I don't know if it ever would too. But it ha, I don't know. It's weird.” – Sarah, 24

Theme: Media Consumption.

Four adoptees talked about how they consumed media to directly and indirectly learn about their birth country or another Asian country. Adoptees listened to music and watched television shows, films, and YouTube videos:

“Honestly the only really exposure that I have in Chinese culture, right, is just my laptop. So, like, sometimes, this is so bad, but I’ll listen, you know, to like Chinese music or I’ll watch some Chinese films, Chinese dramas, those are awesome. Acting sucks, but like it's so, it’s so good. And I also love, I know this sounds really weird. But like, I always find, like, weddings to be interesting in different cultures. So I’ve watched, I watched like, several different Chinese, like traditional, like weddings, or like, what it's like, and it's so freaking cool.” - Casey, 21

2. Ethnic Identity Components

This section starts off with adoptees’ attitudes towards meeting their birth parents, adopting, and adopting from their own birth country. Facets of adoptees’ ethnic identity such as perceived advantages and disadvantages, feeling un-American, resembling adopted parents, looking like the majority in America, and the relevance of ethnic identity are considered. Finally, labels and descriptions of ethnic identity as well as attitudes towards whether or not ethnic identity is burdensome, enriching, or important are explored.

Attitudes: Meeting Birth Parents.

Of the twenty adoptees, two did not want to meet their birth parents, two were unsure, and sixteen did want to meet their birth parents if given the chance. Seven adoptees came up with reasons that they or others might be reluctant to meet their birth parents such as concern about hurting adopted parents, not wanting to learn information that would upset them, needing adequate time and preparation, and genuine disinterest. Eighteen identified what they would be most interested in learning about: family medical history, birth parents' lives, siblings, family resemblance, and why they were put up for adoption.

Theme: Reluctance.

Seven interviewees talked about why adoptees may not want to meet their birth parents. Two acknowledged that their adopted parents might be affected negatively by it:

"I tell my adopted parents that I'd love to meet my birth parents...But I know that I get scared when I say that sometimes, because maybe I hurt them a little that sense. Yeah." - Casey, 21

Another three were hesitant to learn information that might affect them negatively:

"I think for a while, I was like, no, I don't want anything because it's more like... When you don't know at least you don't know. So like, if it's bad, you don't know that." - Rose, 23

"Absolutely not. Holy shit no. People ask me that question all the time. Um, I don't think I could have done any better than I did now with my parents. So like, anything, like it would just be a complete disappointment." - Carly, 22

Two others said they would need time to prepare for such a life event, both in terms of clearing their busy schedules and wanting to be emotionally ready:

“Yeah, so yeah, I mean that being said, of course, I have thought about that, at least a little bit. And I think it's something that I'd be interested in, but I would want to be able to commit emotionally to, I guess, just being in that moment, and feeling the weight of what that would mean.” - Kevin, 25

Theme: Curiosity.

Eighteen adoptees pinpointed what they were most interested in learning from their biological parents. Eight wanted to know more about their birth parents, for example if they were alive, what their lives were like, and if they were content:

“I do want to just know that, I think I would want to know if they're happy. I think that like some part of me wants to think that they want to know I'm happy, so like, how can I not want to know if they're content?” - Nadine, 22

“I mean, as much as I could, honestly, if I could read their autobiographies, I would. But if I just knew what they looked like, then that would be enough too. Because anything is more than I have now.” - Maria, 23

Three of these eight adoptees wished to thank their birth parents for giving them a chance at a better life:

“If anything, like, like, I would just want to be like, thankful for them. Like, I know, I can only imagine like how hard it would, to give like, leave a child, like give up your child. And I like kind of just come to peace with the fact that like, oh, like, they probably just did that to me, like they wanted me to have a better life, and like the political climate...China is obviously like, really challenging. Especially for like, girls.” - Tina, 23

Seven adoptees wanted to know why they were put up for adoption, to answer an unknown in their lives:

“Absolutely, yeah. Because it was, it's more, it's more...Dissatisfied with the idea of the unknown. You want to know and...I always kind of contemplated it. There's really no hope for me ever, for me to figure out who they were based on the information of the orphanage. Actually let me rephrase, the orphanage is not even there anymore, it was like demolished. But even if it was, it was, it would... I would just want to know because, more along like why did I get given up. Because there's many different areas, like yes I could have been stolen and human trafficked. I could have been given up because your parents couldn't keep, your mother could have been illegally

pregnant. Like there's, there's a million different ways it could have gone. So it's just kind of knowing what that was." - Megan, 23

Five adoptees were interested in learning about their family's medical history:

"I mean, I guess so. But probably more so from like, a health perspective, I guess just to figure out if I am at risk for any types of like cancers, or if I'm at risk for like, any diseases or something that could have been like, passed down or like if there's like a history of like alcoholism or drug abuse in the family that I could find out about that would be nice to know." - Julie, 20

Another five wondered what their birth parents looked like and if there was any resemblance between biological parent and child:

"I probably would say yes. And it like might sound superficial. But I think a lot of it's like, I want to know what you look like. Or do I look like you? Or like, oh, you're however old now, because that may be how I'll look at that age." - Susan, 21

Finally, four were curious about their biological siblings:

"Or if I have siblings, I think it would be cool to find like, even like a foster sibling, I think would be cool to find. Because I know [redacted] found she has like a half-brother, or like a foster brother, who was at university when she went and visited. And like, I think that's cool to know that you have like a brother out there, or a sister." - Maura, 21

"But I think another part I would be most curious about too is just knowing if I had siblings, if they're older or younger, because I know like by the time like I was born, it was still, the one child policy was in place. And so then I'd always just wonder like, if I had an older sibling and that's why? Even if I was like a firstborn, or something like that, and whether like, for whatever reason, whether it's like, if they couldn't take care of me, or like financially, or just like certain situations, I want to know about." - Zoe, 20

Attitudes: Adopting.

Seventeen adoptees were open to adopting. Seven of the seventeen clarified that they wanted biological children and would either adopt more children or adopt if they were unable to biologically reproduce. Two adoptees were unsure if they would

consider adopting, and one adoptee did not want to adopt a child. She already had her own biological child, had not fully considered the possibility, and was deterred by her own experience being adopted:

“Um, no. I don't think I'd adopt a child. I feel like, I mean... That's like a difficult question. Because I haven't thought a lot about that, but I like personally, don't feel like I want to like take on that... I don't know. Like as an adopted child I like, I feel like it would be a benefit because, like we could relate on that level, but at the same time, I already have a biological child. And I feel like, to... I don't know. I feel like just my personal experience as an adoptee makes me not want to. I like, I don't know I just haven't thought, yeah.” - Christine, 22

Theme: Adoptees Are More Aware of Adopting.

Three interviewees thought that being adopted would increase awareness of adoption as a pathway for creating a family, and would uniquely prepare them to parent a child that was also adopted:

“Um, yeah, I mean, I definitely would consider adopting. I mean, I don't necessarily think... I think being adopted, like, doesn't just only like I think purely by awareness, like about their like, you can adopt increases your chances of adopting.” - Tina, 23

“Yeah. I mean, I think if, because then I would be able to, like relate more to the kid, like having gone through that process.” - Maura, 21

Theme: Altruism.

Two supported adoption for altruistic reasons. They knew there were plenty of children in the world that needed good families:

“There's just so many kids that have already been born and like, need homes, because people give them up for, you know, various different reasons which are valid, so there's already kids in the world, I would totally be willing to take one or two.”
- Rose, 23

However, one adoptee specifically opposed adoption for altruistic reasons, and instead valued that their adopted mom was “selfish” and wanted to be a parent more than anything else:

“So, you know, um, but I, I like my mother would not do it for an altruistic cause in the sense of there are so many people that need to be adopted and need to be raised, I would do it because I want a child for that for me and it doesn't matter how I get the child, so.” - Chloe, 22

Theme: Avoiding the Pain of Childbirth.

If they chose to adopt, three adoptees pointed out, they would avoid the pain of childbirth:

“I think I would, especially since I don't like pain. And thinking about birth sounds horrible to me.” - Rebecca, 24

Theme: Adoptees Adopting From Their Birth Country.

Sixteen of the adoptees were open to adopting from their birth country for the reasons discussed above. Two were unsure, and two did not want to at all. The adoptees who answered in these ways believed the family dynamic would be weird:

“I don't know, it's like, yes, I would, but it seems like a little too on the nose, I don't know. I'm like, I'm obviously very grateful for being adopted and I think about it a lot like, where my life could have been, like, if I didn't get adopted, and how lucky and like how lucky I am and how appreciative I am. But I don't know is like, is that a cliché? Like, I like, you know, it just, it seems like, just like, a little too... I don't know, I definitely would consider it. It's just, it's kind of like a weird thing to think about.” - Tina, 23

“Probably not, maybe, I guess it would really depend. See, that's weird. Because I feel like it would be like... Yeah, I don't know, it would just be such a weird dynamic to like, adopt a girl from China, or a boy. Because they would technically, everyone obviously would assume that like, they're my biological kid and they're not. And then, like, I don't know, I guess, that'd be weird.” - Rose, 23

One adoptee was aware that the orphanages in China most likely had children with physical or mental disabilities, and did not want to take on that responsibility because of personal experience; she was, however, interested in adopting a child from another Asian country:

“The orphanages are pretty empty, except those with physical and mental disabilities. Like most of them have CP, cerebral palsy. A lot of them have autism, um, to other severe mental disabilities...I was considering Korea or Vietnam, because I would still want a child of Asian, or East Asian, or Southeastern Asian descent. Because I think that then it would be relatable. It's kind of like, then, I would say, it's a transferable heritage, although it wouldn't be, the child wouldn't necessarily be Chinese ethnically. There's that, I think, unshirkable, unmistakable like semblance, which is finally something that I can concretely give someone.” - Nadine, 22

Components: Advantages and Disadvantages

Nineteen adoptees felt that being adopted was advantageous or disadvantageous to themselves in some way; one was neutral. Fourteen adoptees described primary advantages as loving parents that gave adoptees opportunities to succeed and a unique identity that encouraged personal growth. Fifteen adoptees pinpointed disadvantages of being adopted, which were struggling with their identity and feeling like an “other.”

Theme: Parents/Opportunities.

Ten participants discussed how their parents had directly and indirectly provided them with opportunities for success. Six adoptees mentioned that having good parents was advantageous because of the healthy relationship between parent and adoptee:

"But the positives is, I love my family so much. I feel super grateful, going back to that being grateful part, that I was adopted by such loving people. And that my mom has been so supportive. I think we are extremely close." - Rebecca, 24

Adoptive parents often had the ability to support the adoptee not only relationally, but financially as well:

"...there are a lot of advantages, just like in terms of love, because I don't think I could have better parents or, like, better... I was given, like, I think, I think I was given pretty much everything I wanted. Like, I was very, very fortunate. I went to a private school in New Jersey, and then to [redacted - college] and then now I live in the city with my parents. This is my, we live here now. And it's like, they provided like everything for me, because they really wanted to have a child and they love me, and I'm very grateful and thankful for that. So like, an advantage would just be like, who I, who turn, who turned out to adopt me. I was very lucky in that aspect." - Carly, 22.

Three adoptees specifically elaborated on this by discussing the privilege they had received:

"And so being raised by that privilege, I definitely gain access into a world I think most other POC (people of color), if not other East Asian people in America, would... Wouldn't get. So I was definitely given a lot of privilege. So, I was afforded private school my entire life. I deigned to play violin and piano. The next week I was signed up for both. I could take infinite art classes and they're just things that I took for granted, until realizing that that's not, fucking, you know... Accessible to everyone. And so that's something that was interesting to me, now looking back. Thinking that, every kid gets to grow up in this beautiful suburban bubble. There's never, there's no crime. Everything's protected; I was very bubble-wrapped. So that was one of the advantages of being adopted into the white American household, especially the white American household in the 2% of America. That's another factor. Being raised by a doctor, you know she knew all my medical ailments, we never have to go to anyone else. So I was, again, really bubble-wrapped and set for I think what my mom wanted to see, was a successful life. She set me up for doing whatever it is I wanted to on her dime, of course, until like, right now, I'm now independent. But it was just, it's kind of a fairytale." - Nadine, 22

Five adoptees recognized that in coming to the United States, they had opportunities they may not have had in China or Korea:

"Well, overall, I would just say one of the biggest advantages is having opportunities here in this country. Because who knows where I would have ended up really?"

- Megan, 23

Theme: Identity - Positive and Negative.

Twelve adoptees mentioned identity as an advantage or disadvantage of being adopted. Six of the interviewees discussed developing a positive identity. Five of the six adoptees felt that being adopted contributed to a distinct identity:

“The advantages are what I’ve developed from, that in developing a very strong personal identity that I, that I’m not sure I would have gotten had I not been adopted, and just a very unique and fulfilling experience exploring all like, kind of like the multi layered facets of my identity.” - Evan, 22

Two noted that their unique identities enabled personal growth and perspective:

“Yeah, the main one is perspective. So being...I think that being adopted is sort of one of the defining characteristics like of my life and the way that I look at my life. So it really forces you to think about your perspective. But your like, my perspective, and then it also forces you to think about how other people are thinking about you as well. So what I mean by having had this whole... Yeah, just adoption situation affect my whole life is, you know, I’ve always been forced to...Yeah I’ve always been thinking about, yeah, both like, how I feel about myself, but how others feel about me.” - Kevin, 25

Nine participants mentioned identity as a disadvantage because of complications with accepting and understanding their identity. Five specifically mentioned how not knowing, and not being ever able to know, about certain parts of their lives was a difficult experience:

“I think it’s, can be difficult in terms of like, trying to figure out your like identity, because there is a part of you that you don’t know, and you don’t know technically came from. And so that’s always going to be like, a blank space. And there is like, a part of me that always like, wishes, like, I just wish I knew, just like, so I had an answer.” - Rose, 23

“But I do think that there are like, some disadvantages in terms of like, just like, you always, like, wonder what happened and why it happened. And like, you’ll wonder how it shaped you and kind of like... I don’t know, wonder how you would have been different or your life would have been different if it hadn’t happened.” - Alice, 22

Five also described negotiating identity in general as a confusing process, such as struggling to come to terms with differences between themselves and White families and peers:

“There, there have been some points where, where, where I've questioned my, questioned my culture in the sense of like, okay, like, I don't look like my parents, I don't necessarily feel the same way about certain things as like my peers growing up, growing up around a lot of white people. So it was, it was difficult to... Yeah at some points, to feel like I've been raised in a white family but look different than that.”
- Evan, 22

Theme: Being the “Other.”

Eight participants mentioned how they felt being the “other” was a disadvantage. Feeling like the “other” occurred in a number of contexts. Three adoptees identified their minority status in the United States as a disadvantage:

“I mean, obviously, growing up in a culture that doesn't reflect the way is a (clear) difficulty.” - Christine, 22

“But this is more of a personal thing. But growing up in...a very small town. And I want to say there's seven Asian people, and my siblings and I make up three of them. So it did feel like in some ways, be- having a different, different was a disadvantage because you were you were not like most of the population, but that was about it.”
- Megan, 23

Yet one adoptee noted how upon returning to her birth country, she was rejected:

“One disadvantage, which is super annoying because I wanted to reclaim my Chinese identity, so I took Chinese, right...But anyway, we traveled back to China. And it was really weird because they got really mad at me because I didn't know how to speak Chinese and I was clearly Chinese like, as in well, right? So it kind of felt like a rejection then. And that was kind of sad. So like, it was like, cool, you kicked me out. I tried to, like, re-assimilate, and you guys still don't like me.” - Victoria, 24

Two detailed the uncomfortable and frustrating situations that resulted from their family structure not being the norm:

“And so then just I would say difficulties with awkward situations that can't be helped, just because as humans, like, we're used to pairing people that look together or look similar. And so if I'm out and about like, at art galleries or whatever and my mom sees an acquaintance, and I'm with a friend who's Caucasian and my mom's like, oh yeah and this is my daughter, they'll go shake my friend's hand. And my mom will have to do that awkward like, oh, no, like, this is my daughter and that's my daughter's friend. And now that, that phase has passed of me getting upset about it. Now it's just more uncomfortable for them, because then they feel bad that they've made this mistake. But as an acquaintance like you wouldn't know, unless you knew my mother well, that she has adopted a girl from China. And so those difficulties come up in that regard where... Not difficulties I guess, like the nuances of being adopted not looking like your parents when you're traveling. And we do have a lot of close Asian friends so if we go travel with them, people will presume that I'm with that family, which then makes me feel like less apart, but not like a constant, just like in that moment.” - Rebecca, 24

“But yeah, in terms of disadvantages, I think like, it's kind of frustrating always having to kind of justify that your family is just as much of a family as anyone else's, regardless of how your parents came to having their children. So I think like a disadvantage, is like sometimes you're seen as less kind of real, like your relationship with your parents is less real, or maybe... Yeah, I think that'd be a big one.” - Susan, 21

Four noted how other people had misunderstood their identity and background in the past:

“But then it sucked obviously like going through school because you're stereotyped as Asian and like, kids are bullying you and for me I'm like, no, I'm more white than you like in a lot of ways. It was like conflicting, so.” - Rose, 23

“I feel like it can be a little bit disadvantageous when you're like, younger, like in middle school, because you get different reactions when you're like, oh, I'm adopted. And people don't really know how to respond to that. Like, whether it's sad or good or something. So I feel like, that's a little weird.” - Victoria, 24

Components: Feeling Un-American.

Nine participants never felt un-American. For four of them, this was despite being bullied, subjected to stereotypes, receiving racist comments, and being degraded because of race. Adoptees proposed reasons for this negative treatment such

as *context*, for example, everyone was bullied about their identity at this school; *separation*, in that racial insults and race were not related to feeling American; if race was related to feeling American, *resilience* might account for why the adoptees remained unaffected. Eleven participants, however, did describe feeling un-American. Often, this was because they were offensively categorized by others who were racist or they felt like an “other.”

Theme: Offensive Categorization.

Seven mentioned that they were stereotyped, bullied, called racist names and were the subjects of racist jokes:

“So the only time I necessarily feel like less American is like, those weird interactions you have like, on the street. Like, I remember, like walking down with like, my other friend who's Asian, and like, literally, this stupid, stupid kid was like, literally yelled "chopsticks" at us...Or like, I was literally walking with my parents and someone like walked by and he like, just like yelled like 'bok choi' at me. Literally just makes like, no sense.” - Tina, 23

“Sometimes like when I was doing like college applications, and like going on like job interviews and stuff like, I know that obviously, like I am stereotyped to be a certain way. And like you could tell like, I'd be in like a college interview and he'd be like, oh, we had a great math program. And I'd be like, I'm terrible at math, like I don't like math.” - Rose, 23

Three recalled the experience of being asked “where they were from,” a question that for Asians in America, often insinuates that they are not from the United States and not American:

“So like you'll constantly get like oh, where are you from? Like no, like where are you from? Or like, do you like America so far? Like what do you, what do you mean by that comment? Or just like random people coming up asking me like what's your nationality, just like not even realizing that like nationality...what that means at all.” - Susan, 21

Theme: Being the “Other.”

Five participants associated feeling un-American with feeling like an “other”, excluded, or alienated:

“I remember like being little and wherever I would go with like my family they'd be like, oh, like, where are you like, where did you adopt her from or like, like, I felt like I was like, some, like weird other.” - Christine, 22

“Um, when I did dance classes, I did, I was a dancer for 13 years. There was definitely people I think like that, I could tell. You, they don't, they'll never say anything to you directly. But you can tell you're just different. It's not because you're the quiet person. Or maybe you didn't go to their school, it's also that you, like also you looked different. So it was never again, never spoken. But it was just kind of you could tell there was a barrier.” - Megan, 23

In contrast to not feeling American, three participants said that they didn't feel Asian:

“Because I feel like if anything, I've been more discredited on how Chinese I am, because they'd be like, you're Chinese, but yet, you can't speak Chinese. You can't write Chinese. You don't know anything about your culture. I'm like, yeah, I don't. Sorry. Like, also, a lot of Americans don't know who like our third president was. So you know, you pick your battles?” - Chloe, 22

This often occurred when visiting China or Korea for the first time, or socializing with other Asians or Asian Americans.

Components: Resembling Adopted Parents.

Two participants were unsure if they had ever wanted to look like their adopted parents. Eight adoptees never had this desire, mostly because it did not make sense to them, but ten others did recall instances, usually when they were younger, of wishing they resembled their adopted parents more.

Theme: “Doesn’t make sense.”

Four of the eight who had not wanted to look their adopted parents said
contemplating that possibility simply did not make sense:

“And my dads always said, I’m from China. Okay, that makes sense, I’m from China so I look like this. And like, we’re not, and the adopted thing, you know, so we’re not blood related...Their genes had (not) been passed down to me. Yeah, yeah, they made that clear as well. They didn’t, I don’t think they said genes. But they made clear that adoption was when another family gave up their kid for whatever reason...So, so, yeah, I think just very clear and transparent descriptions of what it means, like what the definition of adoption is, you know, just how people look in different regions of the world, led me to not ever have any of that, you know that desire.”

- Kevin, 25

Theme: Enhancing or Proving Familial Connection.

Nine of the ten that recalled wanting to look more like their adoptive families elaborated on their desire. Three of the ten regarded physically looking more like their parents as a way to further connect with their adoptive families:

“Oh, totally. Just because I’m like, I think my parents are the best, but not because, like, I didn’t like how I looked. I think there’s just like, I love my parents. And that’s just something I always know, whenever I go into, or I meet whomever, like, my friends’ parents or whomever, I’m always just like, it’s so cool that you guys look alike, like it’s so cool. Or like, siblings or whatever. I’m like, oh that’s so cool!”

- Carly, 22

“Um, there was actually a moment when I was like taking a bath when I was young, I would say four or five, and realized I had a birthmark on like my, right upper, like right below my shoulder. And my mom had one like that too. And it was like this, like epiphany like, What? We have like the same kind of birthmark. And that was a beautiful moment for me growing up, being like, oh I have something in common with my mom, even though that’s obviously not something that I think by like our visual standards were like, oh they’re related, and she has a birthmark like her mom, no, but that was something that really I thought brought us together when I was young.”

- Nadine, 22

Four felt separated from their adopted families:

“Um yeah, I mean I think I definitely did. I mean, I don't anymore. Like I'm very comfortable now. But I think like obviously I didn't really feel part of my extended family at all. Like, I felt part of like, my immediate family to an extent, but I still felt sort of, like, temporary.” - Christine, 22

Three wanted to look more like their adopted parents so that others would not think they were separate from their adopted families:

“Or like when you go to like a hotel, and they would get confused that you were like, you were with them. Like going to Prince Edward Island one summer, and they have like, a lot of, I think it's Japanese tourists specifically. So like, I went with my...it was like a mother daughter trip. And it was my mom and two aunts with their kids, with their like, daughters. And so there was like, seven of us. And like, I would always, they would think that I was with the Japanese family...and then just get like, really confused when I'm like, no, I'm with them. So yeah, I think at times, often, I just wished I could be white and just fit in and fly under the radar.” - Susan, 21

Components: Looking like the Majority in the U. S.

Although themes between wanting to resemble adopted parents and wanting to look like the majority in America overlap, they are not equivalent. The first gauges the adoptee's relationship with adopted parents and how they think about the family unit; the second examines how American culture more broadly may or may not affect the adoptee. Seven participants had never wanted to look more like the majority in the United States. This was because they loved looking different from the majority, or, while they desired certain traits, they did not necessarily want to look like White people. A few individuals found the idea unimaginable. Thirteen participants had wanted to look like the American majority at some point in their lives, however, because they wanted to fit in, did not want to look Asian, and thought life for the majority was better compared to minorities.

Theme: Love Looking Unique.

Four of the seven loved looking different or unique from most people in America:

“Um, sometimes I wish that my parents looked more like me. But once I’ve gotten older, I like being one of the few people that, that just have kind of like a more unique upbringing. And I never wanted to look like the majority. I, I kind of I love being different. And I’ve kind of just always embraced that. So it’s, it’s always been to me, like one of my greatest things, that I’m not part of the majority culture.” - Evan, 22

“I’ve never necessarily felt like oh, like, I want to look like all my friends, just like fit in or something like that. Because like, I like that I’m a little, like, more like, interesting. Like, just a little different than my friends. I think the only thing would be like, oh, like, because of like, the beauty standards are very specific and I don’t fit that, like defying like, beauty standard like, oh, like... Not... I don’t know, it’s kind of weird because I like the way I look. And I like that I’m interesting.” - Tina, 23

Theme: Wanting Certain Traits But Not Wanting to Be White.

Another four specified that while they may have wanted a certain body shape or particular features, they did not want to look like their white friends or family:

“I think I’ve definitely been influenced by pop culture and the media in the sense of like, being tall, small, dress size, and like light skin I never really cared about. Skin color I never cared about, but in terms of like, body shape, and proportion, I definitely have found myself wishing I looked more like the models, or at least even the Asian models like on that... And the Asian models have like, white characteristics, right? Like they’re tall, where are you going to find a tall Asian? Anyway. Um, so I’ve found myself desiring that, but never explicitly I don’t think I’ve ever explicitly been like, oh, wow, I wish I looked like ‘x’. But I think I’m more so just expressed a desire to have certain features.” - Chloe, 22

Theme: Wanting to Fit In.

Eight wanted to look like everyone else around them, or not feel different:

“Yeah, sometimes I guess I’d say I would, you know? Definitely not now. But like, more back, you know, like primary school, high school even like... Man, maybe if I was, you know, different looking then I’d be, I’d fit in a little better... Here is 30% Asian so, so it’s like a big presence. So, it’s not like I stand out now. But back then, I kind of stood out as like this big Asian kid, so.” - Matt, 25

“Yeah, I think I just remember, like, I never wear makeup, and I always kind of dismissed it as ugh, I don't want to, like, get up and take like, 20 minutes to put on makeup. But I think like, if I admit to myself, like, my earliest memories of makeup were like, people not knowing how to put makeup on my eyes, because they weren't like the typical creased eyes. So I would just like, end up looking like a clown. Because they just, they'd just, like, put blue eyeshadow all over my eyelid. And I'm like, I hate this. And like, that's like...the earliest memories of like, being with friends and being like, I don't look like you. And like, I'm different.” - Susan, 21

Theme: Asianness as Ugliness.

Two considered their Asian appearance aversive and unattractive:

“Yeah. And I think I tried to, like, minimize, like my Asian-ness. Like, you know in obvious ways, like, whether, the way I dressed, my interests; like I would reject things that were seen as like, super Asian. Um I would try to wear makeup or something to look less Asian or something. Or I don't know, like that kind of stuff. And I think like as an adult I'm like, why are you like so weird...But yeah, I think it definitely amplified it, the fact that, like, everyone around me looked so different. I felt like super unattractive or like, super ugly or something.” - Christine, 22

“And so there have been times where I just wish like, I used to criticize myself so much harder than I do now. And I was like, my nose is too flat. My face is too round like, I just kind of wish like, I look like everyone else sometimes. And I've had countless talks with my mom about like, how I just feel like I guess? And the way that I just didn't like the way that I look.” - Julie, 21

Theme: Life as the Majority is Better.

Two others thought that being a part of the majority would mean an easier or safer life:

“Oh, totally. Absolutely. I feel like one hundred percent. I don't think anyone would be stupid enough to deny this, but it's just you so much, you have so, it's so much easier if you're white, one hundred percent.” - Carly, 22

“Yes but now that I've moved to [redacted], everyone's Chinese here! So I pop out and I'm like, oh my god, they all look like me! I like, I actually feel safer in a weird way, moving here. And that wasn't even a concern or question or like, why I moved to this area. But like, I love getting in and out of the subway station that I do because everyone looks like me. And so I think until I moved here in September I, that would never have crossed my mind. But now talking about it, I think yeah, I wish I were white. Not even to be like everyone else, but to feel more protected in the areas that I

go to and not to have a second glance, which I don't get here because everyone's Asian.” - Rebecca, 24

While most adoptees who wanted to look like the majority discussed past experiences, two adoptees still felt this way at the time of the interview. Although the feeling was less acute compared to when they were younger, they wished they did not feel that way at all.

Components: Salience of Ethnic Identity.

Sixteen participants identified situations in which their ethnic identity felt particularly relevant. Timing in their lives, categorization by others, periods of conflict, reminders of Asian group membership, and positive attention received from others were identified as reasons why ethnic identity was of high relevance. Four adoptees could not recall their ethnic identity being especially relevant.

Theme: Timing.

Eight mentioned timing when discussing high relevance of ethnic identity.

Age marked a time of transition, increased exposure to diversity, and identity exploration:

“I think it, I feel like it became most relevant when I was in college...it was then that I really, I felt different but in a good way. And there was more diversity at colleges, so you felt like less like the 1% who looked different. But that was the time I feel like I was able to embrace it the most and be like wow, I'm really happy to be Asian.”
- Megan, 23

“I think that right now, I value my ethnicity in like that culture more than I ever have. And it seems, it seemingly just continues to grow and in... Which has been really fun for me, just kind of exploring that.” - Evan, 22

The general sociopolitical climate in the United States also made ethnic identity feel more relevant:

“I think now growing up, it is more important to me, especially the Trump regime in power and just talking about cultures in general and cultures being shoved down, and when will you be next and questions like that. Um, that's when it was more important to talk, discuss the fact that I'm Asian American.” - Rebecca, 24

Theme: Categorization by Others.

Nine participants related instances in which they were being categorized by others because of their ethnic identity. The most frequent example was the college admissions process, which had two main interpretations. A couple felt that their ethnic identity may have given them an advantage:

“I think it's almost like a superpower being Chinese American. Because you have like, you can not play like your race card or play like the adoption card, but I have friends who are like, for college apps, they were like, oh my gosh, like as an adopted student I just, or struggled with blah, blah, blah. And when I know in person, they do not care about being adopted. So I never did that.” - Chloe, 22

But most others felt that their ethnic identity could have been used against them in the admissions process:

“Well, I mean, the, the one that comes to mind that's most obvious is like, getting into college is way, as I mean, I, as I understand, it's, like, way more difficult if you identify as an Asian American or Asian because, I don't know, some weird SAT scores are higher....But like, identifying, I think, I guess would be a disadvantage if you're applying to school.” - Carly, 22

“Yeah, like in applying to schools and all that, it's kind of like with the whole affirmative action thing happening. And like the thing against Harvard, I think...then something I did kind of think about being like, how like, what does it look like, or how like, how other people perceive it as like, if I'm Asian and I'm applying to these schools. Yeah so I guess colleges, like college process is one aspect.” - Zoe, 20

The other common example of categorization was being subjected to stereotypes associated with adoptees' ethnic identity:

“Probably like when we were doing, we were doing um...auditions for like plays in middle school. It kind of made me realize that some of the roles I couldn't be because I was Chinese.” - Victoria, 24

“When I watch a movie, and when they make the adopted joke, or whatever they make, it's always like some older brother or whatever saying, you know, you're adopted to the younger sibling as an insult. And I don't take things to heart like that so much. But, but certainly, that doesn't make me feel good, right...It definitely makes me feel a little bit bad, at least. So yeah, in terms of media, Hollywood, for whatever reason, there's lots of those...I mean, those jokes also always I think stick for me, I can think of, I can think of movies in, but not too many, I could think of like Dodgeball, you know, like funny movie, and there's like, an adoption joke in there. And like, that stuck with me for whatever reason, even though I saw dodgeball when I was ten years old, or whatever.” - Kevin, 25

Theme: Conflict.

Three participants mentioned periods of conflict or struggle as times ethnic identity felt more relevant:

“Yeah, I think when I was younger, and maybe going through puberty or something, it's more difficult or was more difficult. Because I didn't... I just feel like sometimes I didn't have the tools to understand, or like tools to deal with being my race instead of white. Or like, I didn't know that people would treat me differently. So then my race was more significant to me because it was more like a problem or it wasn't a problem but it was something that made me feel different from other people.” - Sarah, 24

“They had like an awesome counseling program at my college. So I went because it was free and it was fantastic. Just to talk about myself for an hour every week, but just talking to them and learning that like there are a lot of things that come with adoptions and mental aspects that you have to get over that I never realized that were, probably stem from my adoption.” - Maria, 23

Theme: Asian Groups.

Five adoptees said that their ethnic identity felt more relevant when they were with other Asians, Asian Americans, or Asian American adoptees:

“But like, when I was with my Asian friends, I would feel so kind of, like, self-conscious and aware of it being like, we're all eating at the table and be like, oh, like, we're the Asians, you know, at the table. I think that's also just because that's how growing up when I view as like, okay, all the Asians all sat together in a place that's

like, mainly white, like, it separates you more and isolates you. So last year, it's like, I'd always be so self-conscious, and, like, self-aware of it. But now it's like, I don't mind it. It's like, because these are who my friends are like, it's nothing to really think about, and yeah.” - Zoe, 20

This also happened when they were reminded of their membership to one of these groups in some way:

“But if it could be one of the most subtle things, like a friend shows me a meme that's targeted towards like Asian Americans. Or if I'm even just seeing a film or something happens to someone that is of the same, you know, race, that's when it definitely kind of like becomes relevant to me.” - Casey, 21

Only one adoptee had experienced becoming a parent:

“And especially when I gave birth to my baby I thought like it was super relevant, um. It was really... It was really like a cool experience, like meeting someone that I was like genetically related to.” - Christine, 22

Theme: Positive Attention From Others.

Three adoptees recalled receiving positive attention from their teachers or peers because of their ethnic identity:

“When I was in sixth grade or something like that, I was in like a world history class with everybody. And my teacher before we started like the Asian unit, like stop-sat me down, like before we started. She's like, if anything's like, more, like, personal to you or like, you feel uncomfortable talking about like, let me know. I remember thinking like, oh, like, that's like nice, but like, kind of weird. I was like, oh, I'm just learning about like China, just like everyone else, you know? ...So yeah, just like sometimes, like, extra attention I would get because I was Asian and like, maybe feel a little bit more different than everyone else.” - Tina, 23

“Um, but I think in all honesty it's, it's in my personal opinion with my friend group, it's actually been beneficial for me to identify as a POC, because... Because it makes me not as basic is how I would describe it. Because I think like, there's this now this like, weird turn of the Tiber. It's like, you don't want to be basic. But you also don't want to be like, really Asian or whatever. So I have, for some reason people have said that I'm like um, you know, not basic, but I'm still POC so I'm like, chill. I'm like, good and stuff. And I'm just like, okay great, glad that I satisfy your weird, warped identification.” - Carly, 22

Theme: Lack of Salience.

Four adoptees could not recall an instance in which ethnic identity felt especially relevant. Although they valued their ethnic identity, it was not something they actively thought about or experienced as notably affecting them:

“It's just, is important to me, but at the same time, it doesn't affect my day to day behavior...I'm not consciously doing things due to my ethnic identity.” - Sarah, 24

“I don't really ever think it like makes a difference to me. But I guess I think like, because that's also like, from like, inside out. Like people, I'm not looking at myself all day compared to like everyone else...I don't think there's any one time that like, it's more or less.” - Maura, 21

Description of Ethnic Identity.

Except for the two adoptees who were not sure of how to name or describe their ethnic identity, eighteen provided labels of ethnic identity. Eight identified as Asian American, four as Chinese American, two as twinkie/banana (i.e., “yellow on the outside, white on the inside”), one as Americanized Chinese, one as Adopted Chinese American, one as White and Asian, and one as not Chinese or American. Adoptees explained that their ethnic identity acknowledged the roles of their birth country and country of adoption, and a few discussed how they felt different from Asian American immigrants.

Theme: Incorporating Birth Country and America.

Fifteen adoptees voiced a need to describe their relationship to China or Korea and America. Adoptees specifically mentioned growing up in America, looking Asian, having ancestral or biological ties to China or Korea, and not feeling purely American, Korean, or Chinese:

"I would say that the first part is, like, obviously, I'm Asian, I'm Chinese, so there's that. But then growing up in America, and having the American culture and then no matter kind of, like, what level that might be, or like, what it means in terms of like growing up, if you had like the Asian culture, or things like that. I feel like Asian American is like a very broad term, where it's like it can mean a lot of different things for people. But I think definitely part of it is having to have like, but you're Asian, but then also like growing up in America." - Zoe, 20

"Um, I always make a joke that I like to describe myself as a Twinkie. Like, yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Yeah, I just always feel I like I more identified as like a person of white, um... I got referred to, me and my friends, like, call us white people, and like joke around, but it's weird because I'm not. But yeah, I don't really see myself as like Korean. Except for like, you know, physical appearance." - Matt, 25

Theme: Not The Typical Asian American.

Although participants identified with the labels of Asian American or Chinese American, three made clear that their experience differed from that of the "typical" Asian American or Chinese American. This was primarily because they lacked an Asian family that immigrated to the United States and thus the associated experiences:

"So like, from the outside (being) treated like Asian American, and that people see my face and then they apply whatever that means to them, oh this person's Asian American; that includes like Asians themselves or other Asian Americans. But then I also like don't really have the histories that, or like the personal stories that other Asian, like that so typical Asian Americans of having you know maybe parents that don't speak perfect English, or having parents that you pack your lunch that isn't like, normal food that your other classmates have. Or dealing with, like, uh there's a lot of mobility...like immigration in like, personal like, familial stories that like I just completely don't have. And so I think it's hard, for on one hand you very much treated like you're Asian American because you are Asian in America. But at the other time, like there's a whole lot of cultural stuff that I don't real- I didn't grow up with and didn't wasn't huge and yeah, if that makes sense." - Susan, 21

Thus, two participants added the label "adopted" to their ethnic identity:

"Yeah, I usually will say that I'm adopted, because if I say, Chinese American, then I feel like I am... I mean, I don't feel bad saying that. But yeah, I like just being clear

with people. And yeah, I feel like there might be some misunderstanding if I only say Chinese American, just because then they're gonna think that my, my parents are Chinese. And, yeah that I know a lot about Chinese culture and language. And if I say adopted, usually they sort of realize you probably don't know that much about speaking Chinese or Chinese culture. Yeah. Well, which is not to say that I wouldn't know, because lots of, yeah a few of my adopted Chinese friends know, you know more than your Mainlander would know. But-but yeah, I do like to sort of preface: adopted Chinese American." - Kevin, 25

Attitudes: Ethnic Identity as a Barrier.

Four participants named ways in which they thought their ethnic identity acted as a barrier to participating in American society, and attributed it to not fitting a norm and thus feeling separate or apart. All other participants did not feel that their ethnic identity prevented them from participating in American society in any way.

Theme: Being the "Other."

Specific examples of being "othered" included being unable to run for president,⁵ that their family was not the norm, and that they did not appear truly American:

"So like access like how, like the cultural citizenship that I was talking about. Like, I'll never be seen as like, truly American like, good old, like especially where I grew up, like good old like, country girl native Mainer." - Susan, 21

"You know, just typical, oh, navy Joe, and looking like the exact photo of like, ideal sailor or American soldier." - Matt, 25

Although this participant did not view their ethnic identity as a barrier, she did mention feeling uncomfortable attending student of color events:

⁵ Another participant that responded "no" to ethnic identity preventing them from participating in American society also mentioned being unable to run for president; both "yes" and "no" respondents qualified their answers by specifying that this particular barrier did not personally affect their lives.

“I went to...this SOC (Student of Color) barbecue and I went with my friend who is Asian, and there were a couple of us, but like when we were first there, and it was like for the first half of it, it was just me and that one friend. Having, it was weird, it was like being, feeling like the minority, feeling like the odd one out in a minority like place. So it was really kind of strange. But yeah, I don't really hesitate at all when it's like, thinking about like, the white kind of like spaces or things like that. But then when I go to like other like POC, SOC events then that's where I feel just like weird. Because I told one of my friends that—he's an international student, he's from the Philippines and he's Asian—and I told him that and like, he thought it was interesting, because he didn't have that feeling. Like he didn't feel like hesitant about going to stuff like that.” - Zoe, 20

Theme: Idea of America.

Three of the sixteen did not feel their ethnic identity hindered them from participating in American society because they considered America to be a broad, diverse place full of opportunities:

“I would say not at all. That's, and that's due to the way my parents encouraged me and people around me. Telling me, it was kind of... This is America, this is the melting pot, if you want something go for it. And don't be intimidated.” - Megan, 23

Attitudes: Ethnic Identity as Enriching.

All twenty participants thought their ethnic identity had enriched their lives in some way. The five modes of enrichment included a connection to the adoptee's birth country as well as America, being a minority, gaining perspective, having a unique and strong identity, and being given a variety of opportunities.

Theme: Connection to Birth Country and the U.S.

Three participants talked about how their connection and exposure to their birth country, China or Korea, and adopted country, the United States, was enriching:

“I'd say it enriches my life because I am able to get the best of both worlds....I think like my mom, or what my mom fed me growing up is that, you know, I-the Chinese people are a good society, hard workers. And I'm happy to say that I have that, if not

you know, genetically coded, like I have that relationship with those people. But then I also have I think the culture, the majority culture in America is still very good. And I think there are many appreciable values that America holds. So I'm happy to say that I have a combination of both, and I can kind of if I need to pick and choose. Or if anything, I can try to find a nice middle ground between the value systems...So I think it is only helped me. Plus if I ever want to go to China, you know, I was born there. So." - Chloe, 22

Theme: Being a Minority.

In the opinion of eleven adoptees, being a minority enriched their lives in a number of ways. Three mentioned specifically that their ethnic identity helped them to cultivate empathy and treat others with respect:

"And like just, I mean, obviously, I don't think if I was white, and like, not adopted, that, I would think about, like, China or um, like the facts of the One Child Policy, which I think about a lot, and my artwork and just personally and like... I think it's given me like, a greater sense of empathy with other people. And that idea that, like, things are a lot more complicated than like they might have been. I don't know."
- Christine, 22

Relatedly, another three believed they thought about or valued diversity more:

"I think it makes it easier for me to, like, interact with people and, like, interact with like, a broader set of people than maybe my friends necessarily would. I, I feel like this weird like in-between because like, I'm not like fully one thing or the other, which you know, it's kind of just like the way things are. I do think growing up the way I did like, I think in general, it's made me more like, interested in diversity and inclusion, even just seeking environments in which I meet a lot of different people...and learn from them." - Tina, 23

Two more said they enjoyed adding diversity to a group:

"I just think it's really exciting that I get to shed insight into kind of my experience with adoption. And it's fun to see, like photos of my family, and that it's not just all white, like it's been for generation after generation. And I know that my kids won't look white." - Maria, 23

Another four discussed how being a person of color allowed them to connect with and support people of color in a specific way:

"I also think that being Asian American has enriched my life in that, I don't have to sit on the sidelines in fear of like, my privilege as a white American, you know over-shrouding or over-shining another POC (Person of Color)'s voice or another marginalized voice in any discussion forcefully. I'm very cognizant of the power I've had and access in terms of being raised by white privilege...I think being Asian American in particular, it makes me so relatable. Like I'm able to forge ties, I think, because of my exterior, with people in China; there's a safety net in like familiarity, again. So they're not treating me like any differently like they treat my white mom, as someone above or someone to beholden, they treat me as an equal...And in America, I have a voice of legitimacy, even though white America is my mom, of being like no, this is my experience as one of the least effective POC (People of Color) in America. And it's not great, and I think that there's some ways that it can be done with that power. I'm not saying I'm speaking for other marginalized voices because of course that would be inappropriate, but I'm trying to say that knowing how to command a room full of white Americans or people of privilege, because I was raised by that, is in my toolkit." - Nadine, 22

Two of them went on to discuss that while they were minorities, they were not recipients of "harsh" racism:

"But I'm like, not seen as an aggressive or... I don't know, stereotype? So that I guess has been enriching because I understand like and I understand like what like my friend [redacted] has to deal with, and it's awful, so I feel like that is good, but I'm also not one of them. So I feel like that also has been good that I'm also not one of them, like I'm not one of the people who get the brunt of the racism. So I feel like that's been enriching, because you're close to it. But it's like you're close to the sun, not touching the sun, is how I'd describe it." - Carly, 22

Theme: Perspective.

Ten adoptees thought their ethnic identity contributed to their perspective in terms of reflecting on their own and others' experiences:

"I think I learned to access like society and learn, like, think about and reflect on American life and what it means to be an American like, in a different way, because I haven't been able to kind of get that. So I think like in one way I completely lose, but in the other way, like, I think I'm able to have a different perspective on it that like other people might not have, which I'm kind of thankful for."⁶ - Susan, 21

⁶ This was an elaboration on a "no" response to a question asking if ethnic identity had ever hindered an adoptee from participating in American society.

"I was at [redacted] and one of the workers was getting yelled at, reprimanded...And I'll never forget, I was with my friend who just so happens to be Chinese...The worker that got yelled at came up to both of us and asked, "Did you get that on camera?" And, you know, we both looked at him and said, "No, sorry, we didn't." And I'll never forget my friend said, "Oh my God, just like all Americans who just want to like, you know, post the video and like, you know, try to get that other guy fired." ...Part of me was thinking like, I kind of hope that guy does get fired, because he was, definitely did not deserve to be yelled at like that, and treated that way in that disrespect. And my friend goes, "That happens all the time in China...It's just, that's the way of like, you know, they have to humiliate them. So they learn kind of thing." And like, it's moments like those that I kind of, like, what I mean by learning from two perspectives. Like, I feel like because I know I'm Asian, because I know I'm Chinese, I should be able to like see their point of view too. So it's kind of moments like that I kind of like being Asian, or like that's like the advantages of having that kind of like dual identity in a way." - Casey, 21

Theme: Enhancing.

Three participants saw their ethnic identity as making their lives or identities more interesting:

"I think that it's made me a more interesting person and complex person." - Sarah, 24

Three more participants believed that their ethnic identity enabled them to fully embrace their identity:

"So I know that my family has only been, it has been the most amazing catalyst for just me being a good and constantly developing, improving person. Because it started at the core, I had to first embrace myself and describe myself as being adopted and from, from China and you know with two dads. I had to embrace that within myself first, because if I wanted others to embrace me, for who I am truly, who I was and am truly, like, I would need to describe to them honestly, who I was, and you know, things that I guess define me." - Kevin, 25

Theme: Opportunities.

Three adoptees mentioned their ethnic identity or the factors that contributed to their ethnic identity as providing them with opportunities. Examples included being

part of a loving family, access to good education, and a chance to have a better life than would have been possible in China or Korea:

“I mean I got extremely lucky. I got incredibly good parents and had, kind of had every opportunity like, more so than I would have had in China.” - Rose, 23

Attitudes: Importance of Connecting to Ethnic Identity.

The twenty adoptees had many opinions on whether or not it was important to connect to your ethnic identity. Common themes were preconditions of connecting to ethnic identity, the value of connecting to one's ethnic identity, how connecting to ethnic identity was an individualized process, and reasons why adoptees would not or should not seek out that connection.

Theme: Preconditions to Connecting with Ethnic Identity.

Four adoptees named factors that might hinder or encourage the process of connecting to one's ethnic identity. These were related to parents' open attitude and active support in regards to the adoptee exploring their birth culture:

“Yeah, I think definitely. I think like, if I'd ever like, tried to suppress, or like my mom was like, oh, you can't express yourself or something, I think that I would have been very wrong.” - Maura, 22

“I think that what my mom gave me, which was ample opportunities to go back to China, the gift of learning the language throughout the private schooling she afforded me, and her attempts of celebrating large Chinese holidays with me, was indispensable to my growth as a transracial adoptee. It showed she wanted me to have some kind of a relationship with China, and that she didn't want me to wholly assimilate to white Anglo-American norms. And to further this, I think that this type of upbringing, in a way, conditioned me and liberated me to actually want to interrogate my identity and what it meant to me to be biologically Chinese in a white American family. But I also want to stress that not every adoptee has this upbringing, has the privilege to afford this upbringing, ever feels the need to reconnect with a homeland that was taken away from them.” - Nadine, 22

Theme: Value of Connecting to One's Ethnic Identity.

Eight adoptees talked about why connecting to ethnic identity might be important. The two main reasons were to understand one's self fully and realize how others may treat you because of your identity.

Six adoptees said connecting to one's ethnic identity was important because it was a part of them and affected who they were:

"I still feel like, it's really important to understand where you came from, I guess, and be able to at least respect it. And part of respecting it is like understanding it and knowing about it." - Victoria, 24

"I'm going to say yes, because while I do feel like a banana, a lot of times, it's what sets me apart and what makes my experiences different from other, other people, like, members of my friends who aren't Asian. And it's important also just because knowing that it's something that makes you unique; it sounds so cliché, and I hate clichés like that. It's, you know what I mean? It sets you apart and it makes you different." - Megan, 23

Three noted that connecting to ethnic identity would help people understand how they would be treated by others:

"I think it's important in a sense that other people will constantly like, make judgments about me based on my ethnic identity. So I think if I didn't think about it, or... Not like deal with it, but like, you know what I mean, like actually, like think carefully about it, then I think I would be like angrier or something." - Christine, 22

Theme: Connecting as an Individual Process.

Fourteen adoptees emphasized that connecting to ethnic identity was an individualized process over which the adoptee had agency. The adoptee's freedom to choose how and why they wished to connect with their ethnic identity and their authenticity in doing so were crucial:

"An individual can connect their ethnic identity in so many different ways. So I think there's, I think it's definitely important, but I think there's just... Because I think there

are just so many different ways to do it, there's not one way. Because each person has a different experience, yeah, the way they connect. Like, I feel like I do connect with my ethnic identity, even though on reflection of your other questions, I feel like maybe my actions, or not joining clubs and stuff seems like I'm perhaps not, but I actually feel very connected with it.” - Sarah, 24

“As an adoptee, I think that it's important to try and connect to your ethnic identity, but if you've tried to connect and don't feel the connection, it is important that you've tried...Also in other ways of connecting with your ethnic identity through things such as food, or performance arts, I think that ultimately if you enjoy doing it and feel that it helps you connect to your identity it is beneficial. However, if you were to do that just for the sake of trying to connect to your identity, it isn't necessarily the right reason to be doing so. Ultimately, I think it comes down to the individual adoptee. If you feel like connecting to your ethnic identity is valuable, than it is important, but it is also important to do what you feel is right.” - Zoe, 20

Three adoptees stressed that negotiating ethnic identity should not hold a person a back:

“And I think that, like, I think you can have varying, very wide varying degrees of connectedness. I particularly fall on the low end of that, but I know people who like they really identity salience is strong with them, and that is equally great. What I think is that it just should not be a hindrance to who you are, or make you feel less of who you like want to be. So I don't think, I don't think um being an Asian American adopted person should ever hinder you or be viewed as a negative, if that's allowed.” - Chloe, 22

“I think it's great to embrace who you are and important to not fault who you aren't.” - Kevin, 25

Theme: Reasons for Not Seeking Out Connection.

Four adoptees provided reasons why they personally or others they knew may not have sought out connection to their ethnic identity. Three detailed how their ethnic identity did not feel like an important or especially salient part of their life:

“I feel like if you want to be, then it is. Like for me, because I didn't really grow up like really caring and that's just kind of who I am. Like, it's not really that important for me in my life. If it were, I know like then it would be... It's not really like a huge part of, like I don't view it as part of my identity. And when I first think of myself, I

don't think like, okay, I'm like, I'm Chinese. Because like, yes, I am, but like it has not been at all like a part of my life growing up really." - Rose, 23

"I think it would, it would have a stronger pull if I was one of the few people in that ethnic identity where I live, because I think that I'd have a stronger urge, but because it isn't brought up a lot, it's not that I forget or am colorblind, but I just don't think about it as much, it's not the forefront. But for example, for those people in my college who in the adopted group who, like had horrible experiences of being adopted or are still having... For them, I think it is on the forefront of their mind and kind of questions. For them. It may not pertain to me, but they could if I had that experience." - Rebecca, 24

One other adoptee discussed how connecting to ethnic identity by interacting with other Asians or Asian Americans was unlikely because of the cultural gap between by her and them:

"I definitely am not like the type of like Asian American that like, brings rice to every meal and...just like only hangs out with like, Asian, other Asian Americans or something. But like, I'm in like, in a good middle. Like, I like I'm not to the point where like, would feel super comfortable like hanging out with them. But like, maybe at some point I would and like, accept them for that. And like. But I don't think they would want to hang out with me because like I'm too Americanized for them."
- Maura, 22

3. Ethnic Identity Expression

Ethnic identity expression is defined as an attempt to reflect on or represent a piece of one's ethnic identity. Seventeen adoptees had engaged in ethnic identity expression; ten of which had done so more than once. The three that had not either planned to in the future, would be open to it if an opportunity arose, or would not do it unless they had made some commitment to someone else. This section explores under what circumstances adoptees' expressions occur and gives an example for most of the forms mentioned in the interviews. In order of most to least common, expression in this population took the forms of writing, academic projects, college

essays, art, tattoos, dance, and research. There were a few others that were mentioned by only one participant, and those will be discussed in “Other Ways of Expressing Ethnic Identity.”

Context and Content.

The context of expressions varied: two adoptees were given assignments in which they were told to discuss their families and thus being adopted in some way, twelve were given open-ended projects and used the opportunity to discuss their ethnic identity, and six decided to express their ethnic identity entirely of their own volition. The intended audiences for adoptees’ expressions also ranged: adoptees expressed their ethnic identity solely for themselves, other adoptees, teachers and peers, admissions committees, the general public, a specific niche community in which they were involved, or some combination of these. Six adoptees explicitly went into detail on the parts of their ethnic identity they were trying to convey. They included: expressing the large number of people affected by transracial adoption from China, stressing that they did not want to be stereotyped or put into a box because of others’ evaluations of their ethnic identity, emphasizing the importance of a healthy family dynamic in their life, instilling the fact that a part of adoptees’ lives will always remain unknown, or voicing that being adopted does not make a difference in family relationships.

Forms - Writing.

Eight adoptees wrote journal entries, essays, papers, or poetry about their ethnic identity:

"Recently, I wrote a paper about... I don't remember... It was analyzing someone... But it was, it basically prompted me to start talking about how I really, really didn't want Mulan to be my favorite Disney princess because that's what I felt like everyone expected of me. So it was like an analysis of my identity and how much I guess just like American culture had affected it and pressured me to feel like I should be this singular role and try to avoid looking like the classic stereotypical Asian person." - Victoria, 24

"Yeah so for like other writing classes I've done mini, micro versions of things where I like interview other transracial adoptees, um, about their experiences, I kind of formed them into an Op-Ed, like kind of piece, where like this is an important unspoken, unheard voice; so yeah I've done that." - Nadine, 22

Forms - Academic Project.

Five adoptees completed specific or open-ended academic projects relating to their ethnic identity:

"I've done a lot of econ or math projects about the One Child Policy and how that's changed population dynamics and gender ratios, fertility ratios, like the different, like how China's has more of like an aging population, and how those dynamics like affect economy. Like so that has taken a lot of different like forms in like my academic work. I did a Stats project on it at [redacted - college] like senior year. I also do like an Econ paper about it, like, sophomore year. So I mean, it's interesting, I like learning about it. And yes, like those, I've done so many different academic stuff about it, so. It also like lines up with, like, what I'm studying and things like that. It's always been interesting to me." - Tina, 23

Forms - College Essay.

Four adoptees wrote their college admissions essays on being adopted from China or Korea:

"So many of my papers were about being adopted, like my personal like essay for like college was about being adopted. I've had so many different... Honestly that paper has gone through like so many iterations. I probably wrote my first one about it when I was in fourth grade. And I just like at different stages of my life, I'm like, oh, like this is a great topic to talk about. It's like, unique to me. So it's gone through so many different stages and ended up being like the paper for college admissions." - Tina, 23

Forms - Art.

Three adoptees created pieces of art that expressed a part of their ethnic identity:

"It...was like an attempt to connect to other adoptees, because I feel like a lot of the adoptees are making, doing projects, and like, research, and trying to, like better understand their experience. And I think it's really easy to think about it on the individual level, like everyone's personal experiences are so different that it's hard to like, blanket them all together, obviously. And, like, I wanted to be able to create a visual, just like a visual of like, just the magnitude of like, people affected by adoption, like, specifically in China, just because of like, the One Child Policy and um, like, sex preference... But also in a way that wasn't angry, or looking down kind of thing. I don't think my interaction with adoption comes from, like, a hostile place at all like, I feel a lot of empathy towards like, families in China. And like, the effect that it has caused there, like it's obviously not, like it's obviously not on the individual level in that there's such a huge impact, like, it's such a huge scale that girls were left or adopted that I just felt like, I wanted to create a visual that used like many different experiences. And like, the best visual for that I feel like would be like, using faces just because it's like very individual characteristics, people and what they look like. But I'm like, taking a break from it. Because I just felt like it wasn't going where I wanted it to go...I wasn't like, going about it the way that like felt right in my art so like, um, I think I'll come back to it...My new project is um, very much like, it's like, it's based off of a series of writings that are like, communications to my birth mother, that like... I mean, like, they're not real communications....they're pretty short, but um. So I'm working on that series of writings with paintings, and that just goes more personal. I think a lot of like the adoptee experience is like, being able to, like deal with it on a personal level, but also like, on a level of like, it wasn't just individual, you know, like, it's such a huge scale that like dealing with like, those two in balance is really difficult to think about. And I think that's like, where my work goes back and forth, where it's like, is this universal or individual?" - Christine, 22

Forms - Tattoo.

Three adoptees got tattoos, which included words that related to their ethnic identity, coordinates of birth places, birth names, and symbols that related to their birth country and culture:

"I mentioned getting a large tattoo on my leg of Chiwoo Cheonwang's shield who is supposedly a Korean folk war hero but is often disputed with the Hmong people. I got it based on my background in the military and tried to celebrate my Korean

heritage. A large silver coin was recently minted featuring this image of the shield he carried of a dokkaebi, a goblin of sorts which is used for good luck and to ward off evil spirits just to give you a better idea of the image. That is the most in-depth I got into my Korean heritage because I actually sat down and did some research into the exact tattoo I wanted and why I wanted to get it.” - Matt, 25

Forms - Research.

Two adoptees conducted research or wrote a thesis that related to their experience as Asian American adoptees; another two had plans to do so in the future. For example, one did a project for her psychology class and interviewed another adoptee:

“For a research methods class, I researched like international adoptees and their experiences...I interviewed over the phone. But then after that it was funny because we had the poster session. And then there's some people...they're interested in the poster. And they want to know, kind of like what the research was or what I did, because they said that they were actual, they're actually Chinese adoptees or like adoptees, so then that was really neat.” - Zoe, 20

For her thesis, another wrote an autobiographical account of her experience as an Asian American adoptee while analyzing the political and social factors in both China and the United States that contributed to the phenomenon:

“For the majority of my studies it's been like typically white Americans or white... white people from any part of the world that were adopting Asian babies for geopolitical reasons, and other racial dynamics. But I think that in America, in the landscape I grew up in, being raised by white people wasn't a far step in the racial spectrum, as in East Asians are contiguous to white privilege...And so being raised by that privilege, I definitely gain access into a world I think most other POC, if not other East Asian people in America, would, wouldn't get...I was very bubble-wrapped. So that was one of the advantages of being adopted into the white American household, especially the white American household in the 2% of America...So I was...set for I think what my mom wanted to see, was a successful life...But it was just, it's kind of a fairytale...At the same time, there are of course cracks in the system that aren't as apparent and that's something that I've explored in my thesis as well which was you know, there's a savior myth. There's a savior narrative when it comes to transracial adoption...Yeah, so I was putting pressure on myself to succeed, you know, nearly killing myself and like really being in my head...And that's because it

was kind of, like, ingrained into me, not because my mom was telling me that. Because it was kind of just like a coping mechanism handling the fact that like, at the end of the day, you know, my mom loves me, just like any other mother, biological or not, but I mean I cost money...\$500,000 on me for education alone, I calculated for my own thesis...I think there's another conversation about just cost of like pressure. Yes, I have had all these advantages but with the cost of those advantages comes guilt, comes unshakable guilt to the system, to knowing that you weren't destined, you weren't destined, I mean, I wasn't destined to be born into this life. It just happened to me. And so, not being able to take advantage of all of the advantages is another guilt...So it's just this constant teeter-totter. And I think that it's a problem. It's a cycle and you can't really break it.” - Nadine, 22

Forms - Dance.

Two adoptees had choreographed dances that were about or inspired by their ethnic identity, and one considered doing so in the future:

“I have not made a dance about it. And I have not considered seriously making a dance about it, because I don't understand it yet. And what I mean by that is like, I think I would need to do a lot of research and a lot of soul searching before I make a dance like that...And I think I'm not in my current state of mind, like mature enough, and have enough like, foresight and insight to like, be like, what do I really think about Asian Americans, Asian Americans in America, my Asian Americanness, my adoptedness, and like, be able to distill that into like, a ten minute piece- definitely not equipped for it...I don't know, I don't, I just think like, you need to really understand it, and, like, really identify with it and really love it, and, like, be proud of it...And that takes not a year, that takes more than one year, in my opinion. So I'm pursuing dance choreography, and I would definitely consider it, but that would be one hundred percent a long term thing. Like, I would be very also particular about the dances I choose, because like, I don't know, if you choose all Asian dancers, they all have different sides of the story, versus if you choose like white or any other type of ethnicity, because Asian dancers, they like, are getting a new perspective and they're getting your perspective versus like, them bringing their own in and, you know, you have to consider their feelings versus yours, and which one you want to actually portray, and like, which one's more important, so that project in itself is very scary. And something long term will, would definitely, and have definitely considered it.” - Carly, 22

Other Ways of Expressing Ethnic Identity.

Adoptees discussed a few other ways they expressed their ethnic identity. One participant mentioned that they incorporated their ethnic identity in ideas for fashion and design:

"I mean, it's something I've played around with, because I'm, I'm very interested in design and I have to work in fashion and clothing and I've always been, I've always wanted incorporate some of my identity into that. So I like whenever I sketch or anything like that I always try to incorporate some stuff like that." - Evan, 22

Another mentioned participating in interviews such as this study:

"Doing stuff like this, cuz' that's why I did it. Like, I know, it's like, it's just nice to be able to talk to other people and to help other people who are doing similar stuff. And like, just for the sake of other people, and giving back. So that's where the most comes in for me when it comes to connecting. Because yeah, I work in an office and it doesn't get all that exciting, so. I take opportunity when it comes." - Megan, 23

Five mentioned meeting and talking to other adoptees. One had an adopted sister with whom he discussed their ethnic identity; the others met fellow adoptees by chance—none of them purposefully sought out adoptees—and found meaning in sharing experiences with people who could empathize with them:

"Usually I just like will talk about it with other people that I know that are adopted to like, not compare experiences, but it kind of like helps each other when we talked about like, how one of us feel. But I don't have that many friends that are adopted. Because I haven't met that many people that are." - Rose, 23

Two adoptees specified that this was not always the case when they met fellow adoptees, and if they did happen to get along with the other person, the topic arose naturally:

"I am very happy to always talk about it and be a supporter of adopting. And I think that's the strongest way that I can support it. But I never, I'm also, it's only if they bring it up or something. I'm never like, hey, tonight, we're going to talk about

adoption. I'm going to sit you down and we're going to have a chat, no. So out of just like random, I don't have any, like, desire to or need to." - Chloe, 22

"It's weird having that commonality with someone doesn't necessarily bind you to them. I mean, I was saying, I know some people might think that I'd be close to adoptees just out of shared experience. Again, that's not always true. Again, shattering expectations of white people being like, oh, you're alike. So, ergo..."
- Nadine, 22

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Chinese and Korean adoptees with White families explore, define, and express their ethnic identity. The main items of interest were (a) their relationship with their birth culture and America; (b) how they view their own adoption and ethnicity in general; (c) the ways in which they process their ethnic identity for themselves or choose to share their experience with others.

Perhaps the most notable finding was that experiences of Chinese and Korean adoptees and how they negotiate their ethnic identity varied widely. Understanding that, however, there were a number of common responses to questions about ethnic identity exploration, components, and expression as well as themes that recurred in questions across the interview.

Ethnic Identity Exploration

Adoptees' descriptions of their parents' attitudes and behavior regarding their ethnic identity, that is being adopted and Chinese or Korean, were consistent with literature on White, American parenting of their adopted children of color. Most adoptees were brought up in non-diverse areas. All adoptees recalled their parents providing them with opportunities to learn about their birth culture. Parental involvement, which was supportive, not forceful, and emphasized the child's interest indicated that a combination of direct and indirect enculturation (Andujo, 1988; Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar & the Minnesota International Adoption Project

Team, 2006;) and child choice (Lee, 2003) cultural socialization strategies were used. All except one adoptee described their parents' discussions of racism or discrimination with them as largely indirect and reactionary; parents' preference for modeling positive behaviors and attitudes towards diversity and inclusion demonstrated indirect racialization parenting (Andujo, 1988; Lee et al., 2006). The greater number of adoptees reporting birth culture learning opportunities compared to discussions of racism supported the finding that parents engage in cultural socialization more than racial socialization (Berbery & O'Brien, 2011). Although adoptees' attitudes on parenting an internationally adopted child endorsed the child choice and enculturation strategies their parents used, specific recommendations such as exposing adoptees to people that looked like them and being more proactive when handling race emphasized increased cultural and racial socialization.

The two most frequent kinds of ethnic identity exploration were returning to China or Korea and joining groups. About half did at least one of the following: learned their birth country's language, celebrated its holidays, attended cultural camps, classes, or lessons, and took Asian American or Asian Studies classes in high school or university. Adoptees also explored in ways that varied according to their personal interests: one hoped to represent his birth country on a sports team, and others used technologies available to them, such as streaming music or even watching reality shows made in China or Korea. These examples fit Shiao and Tuan's (1998) proposed cultural-heritage and social exposure tracks as well as increased use of the internet for ethnic exploration.

Ethnic Identity Components and Expression

Despite positive or negative experiences being adopted, adoptees were largely open to meeting their birth parents and adopting in general as well as from their same birth country. Thus, while adoptees have specialized knowledge about being an Asian American adoptee with White parents, their attitudes do not necessarily reveal anything about their experience.

All except one adoptee thought being adopted was advantageous or disadvantageous; most adoptees reported both. The most prominent themes were mentioned by about half of adoptees and included: healthy familial relationships and opportunities provided by parents as an advantage, and having trouble negotiating identity and feeling like an “other” as disadvantages. Some of the sub-themes of the disadvantages, such as being a minority and having trouble reconciling differences between themselves and White peers, were characteristic of being a minority in America. One of the sub-themes of disadvantages, which was not ever being able to know about parts of one’s life, and the two advantages of having a good family and being given opportunities to succeed, were specific to the experience of adoptees. The sub-themes of feeling “othered,” which were people not understanding adoptees’ families or identities, was an occurrence unique to transracial adoptees.

Most adoptees recalled an instance when ethnic identity was especially relevant to them. Almost half felt that their ethnic identity became more important to them as they went through transitions such as puberty or entering university. Half also thought about their ethnic identity when they were perceived themselves being

categorized positively or negatively by others (e.g., during the college admissions process, or when stereotyped). A few others associated their ethnic identity with periods of conflict, Asian group membership, and receiving positive attention from others.

Although some adoptees made it clear that they were more connected to America than their birth country, the majority felt the need to include the roles of both in their ethnic identity. The role of United States was their home, where they grew up, but their relationship to their birth country varied slightly in description— adoptees looked Korean or Chinese, or had biological ties to Korea or China. Yet a few emphasized that there was a difference between their experience in America and other Asians' whose families were also Asian or had immigrated to the United States. This echoed how some adoptees felt out of place in their schools' Asian American or Asian groups as they explored their ethnic identities. As a consequence, they viewed themselves either as separate from or a distinct sub-population of Asian Americans.

All of the adoptees thought that their ethnic identity was enriching and that connecting to it was important. A majority believed that connecting should be an individual process and authentic to the adoptee. These results were consistent with the majority of adoptees finding advantages in being adopted. That only four adoptees saw their ethnic identity as a barrier to participating in American society, however, was surprising given that a majority of adoptees also identified disadvantages to being adopted, and half of adoptees recalled feeling un-American at some point in their lives. This bias towards positively interpreting ethnic identity is consistent with

Tajfel's (1981) theory that minority groups cultivate strong group pride to combat the majority's negative views of them; adoptees may be even more incentivized to engage in this behavior given their convoluted relationship with the White majority.

All but one of the adoptees had engaged in ethnic identity expression or had plans for the future; half had done so more than once. More than half had completed at least one expression that was an open ended project or assignment for a class. Yet representations of ethnic identity did range widely and were related to adoptees skills and interests.

Recurring Themes Across the Interview

Three themes that were raised throughout interviews by adoptees were access to opportunities dictating ethnic identity exploration, being othered, and embracing a unique identity.

Adoptees discussed how their access to opportunities determined the nature of their ethnic identity exploration. Adoptees who lived in areas that were not diverse did not have the option to make friends with other Asians or Asian Americans, try Asian food, and if not learn Mandarin or Korean, practice with others around them; this may have affected their ethnic self-identification and racial pride (Andujo, 1988). When asked if they had attended adoptee camps or conferences, many were unaware that they existed. Attending university, exploration opportunities and thus exploration increased as Shiao and Tuan (2008) discussed in their study on Korean adoptees. Adoptees sought out opportunities on their own to join student groups, make friends, or study abroad in China or Korea, but adoptees that may not have been as proactive

also explored because they were given the framework to do so, (e.g., major or curriculum requirements, open ended assignments) and chose to learn about their birth country's history, language, or culture among other options because of their increased interest. This structure also made the time or effort adoptees expended more worthwhile since they were required to take a class or complete an assignment. Once they left school, adoptees were often busy focusing on careers and relationships among other priorities.

Because opportunities affect exploration so significantly, there are a couple of implications for parents, organizations, and schools. First, parents should prioritize living near a diverse area to give their adoptees more chances to connect with their birth culture. Adoption agencies or adoptee parent networks should also increase awareness of camps or conferences among other opportunities. Lastly, schools should understand their crucial role in ethnic identity exploration and continue to support it.

Another notable theme was how adoptees were othered. Being othered, or engaging in behavior to avoid being or feeling othered, was mentioned in responses to nineteen questions across exploration, components, and expression sections. This occurred frequently because adoptees have multiple parts of their identity that were able to be confronted; their Americanness, their Asianness, their unique family structure, and even their adoptee status were targets. A few reacted to being othered by rejecting their Asianness: they avoided befriending or associating with other Asians, wished they had not been adopted, wished they were not Asian, or thought their Asian appearance was ugly. Others fully embraced being Asian or Asian

American. Thus while being othered was a common occurrence, it affected adoptees to varying degrees and elicited different responses.

The final theme was that adoptees embraced and rejoiced in their unique identities. A few adoptees loved their Asian appearance and were glad they were not White; they really enjoyed being complex, interesting, and unlike everyone else. Being an Asian American adoptee also drove some to understand the perspectives of others because they realized how different their lives could have been if they were not adopted. Others saw themselves in a special position to support and advocate for fellow people of color because of their White, American upbringing. Many mentioned that they enjoyed meeting and conversing with fellow Asian American adoptees.

Strengths and Limitations

This study makes a few significant contributions to ethnic identity in Asian American adoptee literature. First, ethnic identity expression has not been investigated in a psychological study. Forms of ethnic identity expression such as open-ended assignments have been included in studies on ethnic identity exploration, but this interview identified novel forms of expression. Additionally, adoptees provided rich descriptions of their goals and thought processes when representing pieces of their ethnic identity.

Second, Asian American adoptees have not been asked for their opinions on a number of items that this study included. For example, they were asked to comment on how their parents discussed racism or discrimination, how they would parent an

internationally adopted child, if they were open to adopting, and if so, whether or not they would also adopt from their country of birth. Adoptees were also directly asked to comment on whether they viewed their ethnic identity as burdensome, enriching, or important. Additionally, this study gauged how adoptees felt about being adopted to find whether or not they thought being adopted factored into their ethnic identity; ethnic identity was never defined for participants, so their responses built off of their own understanding. As a consequence, a few participants equated ethnic identity to racial identity, but overall adoptees' responses showed that being adopted did affect their definitions and experience of ethnic identity.

A final strength is the demographics of the participants. Many of the adoptees were from New England or the Mid-Atlantic; past studies on Asian American adoptees have typically recruited from the Mid-West. Additionally, this sample was mostly Chinese adoptees, which offsets the large amount of studies using Korean adoptees. This imbalance exists because Korean adoption by Americans started in the mid-1950s, and Chinese adoption popularized with the onset of the One Child Policy in 1979.

Participants are also representative in terms of gender, and close to representative in terms of country distribution for the particular years during which they were adopted. For example, in 1999, when the youngest participants were adopted, 97.9% of Chinese adoptees and 48% of Korean adoptees were female (United States Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019). Of Chinese

and Korean adoptees in this same year, 32% were Korean and 78% were Chinese (United States Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019).

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, this cohort is among the last generation of Chinese and Korean American adoptees. American adoption from China and Korea has been rapidly declining and is at an all-time low because of Korea's economic prosperity and efforts to halt international adoption as well as China's banishment of the One Child Policy. This study presents this group's unique experiences.

There were also a few limitations to this present study. The small sample size of twenty participants is the most critical since a larger number may have provided experiences or opinions that were not represented; additionally, a greater amount of subjects would have given more validity to the study. Despite the small size of this study, there were notable findings that can inspire future research and have important implications for adoptive parents and adoptees.

Although the population of this study was very representative and Korean adoptees have been highly represented in Asian American adoptee research, not having more Korean adoptees was a limitation. Greater numbers of Korean adoptees would have increased the likelihood that some participants had open adoptions; their responses to questions about meeting birth parents would have been more feasible than Chinese adoptees, who have closed adoptions and thus significantly lower chances of ever meeting biological family. Nevertheless, Chinese adoptees still responded to that specific question as if it were possible.

Future Research

There are a couple of avenues for future research on ethnic identity exploration, components, and expression in Asian American adoptees. Expression is still a widely unknown part of ethnic identity, so studies might look at how expression and exploration overlap, what kinds of people engage in completely voluntary, unprompted expression, and what other forms exist that this study did not uncover.

Following this cohort as they age and pass through various developmental stages would also be valuable. Studies could investigate how exploration, definition, expression, and related attitudes change over time as adoptees develop their careers and create families. Discovering if exploration ever stops or when ethnic identity solidifies may contribute to research on ethnic identity development as a whole.

Conclusion

While adoptees' experiences range considerably, adoptee status nevertheless serves as an added dimension to being Asian American that creates its unique social group and ethnic identity. This is because they have a distinct experience from people who identify as White American, Chinese or Korean, or Asian American because they are Chinese or Korean adoptees brought up by White, American parents and negotiate their relationship with their birth country while lacking direct cultural ties. As a result, they explore and express their identity in a variety of ways that involve social exposure as well as more formal, educational settings. Given that international adoption from China and Korea is and will remain low in the foreseeable future,

follow-up, longitudinal research is needed for this unique cohort to gauge how their ethnic identity, exploration, and expression may shift as they pass through various developmental stages.

Appendix A

Adoption-specific

1. What do you know about the circumstances of your adoption?
2. Will you share some of your thoughts and feelings about being adopted?
 - a. What have been the difficulties of being adopted? Advantages?

Family Structure/Family Socialization

3. Tell me about your adopted family.
 - a. I'd like to know about the family you were raised in.
 - Who was/were your caregiver(s) as a child? Their genders? Race/ethnicity?
 - Do you have brothers and sisters? Cousins? Was/were any of them adopted?
 - Why did your parent(s) choose to adopt?
4. *Did your family provide you with opportunities to learn about *birth culture's* traditions, language, or history?*
 - a. Can you give me examples? (*Food, holidays*)
 - b. How involved were they in your learning?
5. If you were to have children, would you consider adopting? Would you consider a child *from same birth country*?
 - a. Now, if you adopted a child from a different country other than the U.S., would you do anything the same or differently from you parent(s)?
6. Were/are your caregivers members/a member of any adoptee parent groups, organizations, or mailing lists?
7. *Did your family ever talk to you about racism or discrimination?*

Early Experience/School

8. How diverse was *Qualtrics: Where did you grow up*?
 - a. Were there people around who looked like you?
 - b. *Were their diverse identities in your friends/friend group(s)?* Has this changed over time?
 - c. If there was/is not a lot of diversity in your friend group, did you ever want to have other friends that looked like you?

9. *What kind of schools did you go to growing up? Public, private, parochial, charter?*
- a. *How big were the schools you went to?*
 - b. *How diverse were they?*
 - *(If no) What was the dominant group?*

“We’ve talked about your adopted family, your life growing up, now I want to return to your current thoughts about your adoption.”

Ethnic Exploration

10. Would you like to know about your birth parents?
- a. Why? What would you be most curious to learn?
11. *Have you returned to your birth country?*
- a. *(If yes) Did anyone accompany you? How old were you?*
 - *(If no) Were you a part of a study abroad program? Military?*
 - b. *(If no) Do you wish to return?*
 - *(If yes) Do you think you will? Why or why not?*
 - c. Was it/do you think it would be a valuable experience?
12. *How often would you say you eat *birth culture* food nowadays?*
13. *Do you celebrate any *birth culture* holidays?*
- a. *(If yes) Which one(s)?*
 - *With whom?*
14. *During your schooling...*
- a. *Did you take any Asian-American studies or Asian history courses?*
 - *(If no) Did you ever choose to learn about your *birth country* in another class?*
 - b. *Did you study an Asian language?*
 - c. *Did you join any groups based on ethnicity?*
15. *Current grasp of Asian language:*
- a. *(If yes to 14b) Are you still keeping up with your *answer to 13b*?*
 - b. *(If no to 14b) Have you attempted to learn any Asian languages on your own?*
16. Are there any other ways you have interacted with *birth country* or another Asian country?

“Now I’m going to ask you more about your specific identity.”

Ethnic Identity

17. *How would you describe your ethnic identity?*
 - a. *What does that mean to you, to consider yourself *ethnic identity label*?*
(Only ask if they don't elaborate.)
18. Have you ever been made to feel that you weren't American or as American as the people around you? How did that feel?
19. Have you ever wished you looked more like people in your adopted family?
20. Have you ever wished you looked more like the majority in the U.S.?
21. *Can you think of any times in your life that being *ethnic identity label* has been more or less relevant to you?*
22. *Occasionally, newspapers or television will run stories on Asian Americans.*
Asian Americans also appear in film, television, and novels.
 - a. Can you recall instances of this?
 - b. *To what degree do you feel connected to Asian Americans in media?*
23. Have you attended any adoptee camps or conferences?
 - a. (If yes) Was it your decision? Did you find it to be a valuable experience?
 - b. (If no) Do you wish you had attended one? In case of conferences, would you wish to attend in the future?
24. Are you currently or have you been a part of any adoptee groups, organizations, or mailing lists?
25. Are you currently or have you been a part of any communities, online or in person, (Internet: blogs, YouTube channels, social media, etc. | Physical: movies, books) that connect Asian Americans? Asian American adoptees?
 - a. How active have you been in these communities? In what ways?
26. On your own, have you ever written something, completed an academic project or assignment, composed a song, made a video, podcast or piece of artwork about your experience being adopted?
 - a. Do you think you ever will?
27. Are there any other ways that you've tried to convey your experience as an Asian American adoptee or connect with other Asian American adoptees?

"For the final few questions, I'm going to ask you about your opinions on American society."

Societal Perceptions and Influences

28. *Do you believe there is racial discrimination in the U.S.?*

- a. *Who are the victims?*
29. *Asian-Americans have been subjected to discrimination in the past.*
- a. *In your opinion, do they still experience discrimination today? Can you give any examples?*
30. *If any, tell me about a time you experienced racism and/or discrimination. How did you react?*
- a. What is the earliest instance you can recall someone making a judgment based on your skin color/appearance?
31. *Have you ever felt that being *ethnic identity label* adoptee has prevented you from fully participating in American society?*
32. Have you ever felt that being *ethnic identity label* adoptee has enriched your life?
33. Do you think being connected to your ethnic identity is important?
34. Is there anything you would like to elaborate further on or generally return to?
- This is your time to discuss anything you'd like.
35. Do you have any questions for me? Feel free to ask me anything.

Recruitment

Do you know of any other East Asian Adoptees who might be interested in participating in this study?

- (If yes) Please pass my contact information on: email (tleclair@wesleyan.edu), phone number (508-521-3881).

“Thank you for taking part in this study!”

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