University of New Hampshire
University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

Honors Theses and Capstones | Student Scholarship

Spring 2023

An Exploration of Self-Identity in Transracial Adoptees from China

Aliya Dejun Sarris
University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/honors

 Part of the Asian American Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Sarris, Aliya Dejun, "An Exploration of Self-Identity in Transracial Adoptees from China" (2023). *Honors Theses and Capstones*. 710.
https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/710

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses and Capstones by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.

An Exploration of Self-Identity in Transracial Adoptees from China

Aliya D. Sarris

Honors Thesis & Women's and Gender Studies Capstone

Professor Monica Chiu

May 8, 2023

I. Introduction

It was Spring 2020. UNH students were sent home, borders between countries were closing, and the whole world was gradually learning more about the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). As the chaos began to unfold and more knowledge about the source of the virus was uncovered, a different foe began to take shape for the Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community: many began to blame China for its supposed role in spreading the virus across the world. As a result, AAPI individuals – regardless of their ethnicity – began to face increased instances of both microaggressions and outright acts of violence. According to an NBC News article from January 2022, there was a 339 percent increase in hate crimes against the AAPI community – and these were only the incidents that were reported.[1] As an Asian-American woman, I watched the news and scrolled my social media feed in absolute horror, and two questions came to the forefront of my mind: "Why were people blaming us?" and "Would I be next?" As the pandemic continued, more AAPI activists began to speak about the fear we had been collectively experiencing. Yet, their stories focused themes such as fear for their older relatives and the idea that despite their different cultural backgrounds, they were American too. I found myself disconnecting from this rallying cry. As a transracial adoptee from China, my white family members did not face these same fears of racial discrimination, nor have I experienced a cultural dissonance between my home and my predominantly white community. Not seeing my identity as an adoptee reflected in this new wave of AAPI activism – a movement that was supposed to represent safety and solidarity – quickly resulted in feelings of disillusionment and disappointment.

---

[1] Yam, K. (2022, February 14). *Anti-asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says*. NBCNews.com. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-339-percent-nationwide-last-year-repo-rcna14282

At the time this was happening, I was a research apprentice for the Seacoast NH LGBTQ+ Oral History Project working under UNH professor Dr. Holly Cashman. My work with Dr. Cashman focused on the individual stories of older LGBTQ+ folks in the context of the Stonewall Riot and overarching LGBTQ+ rights movement. Upon reflecting on my apprenticeship with Dr. Cashman, I realized that the oral history method is one that I could use to express my feelings of isolation and frustration in the context of the rise in hate crimes against the AAPI community. I then decided that my exploration of my adoptee identity would be the focus of my combined Honors Thesis and Women's and Gender Studies Capstone. To this day, I'm amazed at the forethought I had to plan this project all those years ago. Yet, given the emotionally charged – yet disappointingly underreported – nature of the topic, I am not surprised at my unrelenting motivation to share my story with whoever will listen.

I have always known that I was adopted, yet my emotions regarding the issue have constantly ebbed and flowed as I learned more information and delved deeper into self-exploration. This essay is an accumulation of and reflection on that exploration, and, hopefully, a warm embrace for those who have ever felt left behind.

I. Background

According to a 2021 NPR article, more than 2000,000 Asian adoptees currently reside in the United States.[2] The majority of Asian adoptees are from South Korea, yet until around 2019, a staggering 92,202 children were adopted from China, the country with the second highest

[2] Westerman, A. (2021, March 27). *'am I Asian enough?' adoptees struggle to make sense of spike in Anti-Asian violence*. NPR. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.npr.org/2021/03/27/981269559/am-i-asian-enough-adoptees-struggle-to-make-sense-of-spike-in-anti-asian-violenc.

number from which American parents adopt Asian children.[3] The common denominator between a majority of Asian adoptees, regardless of nation of origin, is the racial background of their parent(s); according to a 2012 survey, 95% of parents who adopted internationally were white.[4] This statistic references two types of adoption: (1) transracial adoption, or "the adoption of a child of one race by parents of a different race," and transnational adoption, or the adoption of a child from another country.[5][6] The two phenomena are highly linked and often overlap, yet are not synonymous. For the purposes of this study, the term transracial adoption will be used, yet it is implied that due to the subjects' country of origin that the adoption is transnational.

A unique and complex phenomenon, transracial adoption is a highly understudied occurrence. This study seeks to shed light on transracial adoption – both from Asia in general and specifically from China – not only as a literal exchange of children, but also as a representation of "questions about race, culture, and nation; about genes, kinship, and belonging."[7] This study will explore the idea that the transracial adoptee experience is one that is distinct from that of non-adopted individuals, as well one that has greater socio-political implications. Overall, this study will explore the nuanced experiences of adoptees in the broad topics of self-identity, family, friendship, and community.

---

[3] Luo, Y. (2021). "Outcasts to Princesses": U.S. White Adoptive Parents' Fairy-tale Narratives of Adoption from China. *The Lion and the Unicorn 45*(1), 103-123. doi:10.1353/uni.2021.0006.

[4] Geisert, S. (2019, September 13). *Asian American Transracial Adoptees: Identity Development in college*. Student Affairs in Higher Education & The School of Education. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://sahe.colostate.edu/asian-american-transracial-adoptees-identity-development-in-college/

[5] ibid

[6] *International adoptions*. Justia. (2022, October). Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.justia.com/family/adoptions/types-of-adoption/international-adoptions/#:~:text=International%20adoptions%20occur%20when%20someone,children%20than%20any%20other%20country.

[7] Volkman, T.A. (2003). Introduction: Transnational Adoption. *Social Text 21*(1), 1-5. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/41639.

II. History

From 1948 to 1953, 2,418 children were adopted from Asian countries, and roughly two-thirds of those children were Japanese.[8] This era was the first time in history when adoptive parents began to "reach across perceived racial and cultural boundaries."[9] As a result, the first particularly large group of transnational adoptees from South Korea entered the United States in the 1950s.[10] Predominantly as a result of the violence of the Korean War, this wave of South Korean children further normalized transnational adoption. This study acknowledges that AAPI adoptees as a whole provide a unique perspective regarding the intersection of various identities including, but not limited to, race, gender, and nationality. However, this study will specifically focus on the history and current experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees due to the drastically different catalyst for adoptions in South Korea and China. Unlike China, the adoption of Korean children was spurred by war – a war in which the United States played a significant role. Thus, Korean adoptee scholars have called themselves a "militarized diaspora" that represents the deeply rooted "militarized relations" and "war economy" that exists between the United States and South Korea.[11] Furthermore, the violent history behind the massive wave of adoption from South Korea has caused many Korean adoptees to feel more negatively about their adoption than adoptees from other countries.

On the other hand, adoption from China came as a result of an internal political decision that was intended to create social and economic gains. Thus, Chinese adoptees have not had the

---

[8] Cohen, F. (2015). Tracing the Red Thread: Chinese–U.S. Transnational Adoption and the Legacies of "Home". *Anthropologica 57*(1), 41-52. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/581026.
[9] ibid.
[10] Luo, Y. (2021). "Outcasts to Princesses": U.S. White Adoptive Parents' Fairy-tale Narratives of Adoption from China. *The Lion and the Unicorn 45*(1), 103-123. doi:10.1353/uni.2021.0006.
[11] Kim, J. (2015). "The Ending Is Not an Ending At All": On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War. *positions: asia critique 23*(4), 807-835. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/602305.

same experience of violence and war as central topics of their adoption story. The mass adoption of Chinese children did not come until the late 1980s. In 1979, the One Child Policy was created in China, which limited parents to one child to both temporarily slow population growth and facilitate the country's economic growth.[12] By the 1990s, this policy was enforced through "steep fines, sterilization, and the threat of forced abortion."[13] From 1988 to 2004, a total of 47,501 U.S. immigrant visas were issued to newly adopted Chinese children.[14] Additionally, from 199 to 2013, nearly 90% of the Chinese children adopted were girls.[15] The boys that were adopted typically had a birth defect, such as "cleft palates, missing limbs, heart defects, or other special needs."[16] As a result, transnational adoption began to transcend its original intention as an act of good and quickly became an inherently racialized and gendered transaction.[17]

Another key difference between the adoptions that took place in South Korea and China is the timeframe. Adoptions from Korea began to take place quickly, yet the idea of transnational or transracial adoption was so novel that there was no formal support for adoptees as they grew older. Therefore, as a result of the lack of cultural sensitivity of the majority of adoptions, Chinese adoption practices sought to improve. This new support begins as early as the time of adoption; the Chinese government requires that prospective parents travel to China and stay for

---

[12] Ziv, S. (2016, April 29). *China's one-child policy and American adoptees*. Newsweek. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.newsweek.com/what-if-chinese-adoptees-and-end-one-child-policy-390130

[13] (2007). Babies Across Borders: Problems for Women's History in the Study of Transborder Adoption: Introduction. *Journal of Women's History 19*(1), 105-106. doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0023.

[14] Andrew, A.M. (2007). China's Abandoned Children and Transnational Adoption: Issues and Problems for U.S.-China Relations, Adoption Agencies, and Adoptive Parents. *Journal of Women's History 19*(1), 123-131. doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0001.

[15] Ziv, S. (2016, April 29). *China's one-child policy and American adoptees*. Newsweek. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.newsweek.com/what-if-chinese-adoptees-and-end-one-child-policy-390130

[16] ibid

[17] Volkman, T.A. (2003). Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America. *Social Text 21*(1), 29-55. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/41640.

two weeks in order to complete the adoption process.[18] Parents must not only formally promise to the Chinese government to provide their newly adopted child with "love and care," but must also promise to "impart respect for 'Chinese culture."[19] As a result, it is common that prospective parents read and study about China and Chinese culture prior to the adoption.[20] After the adoption takes place, many adoptive parents of Chinese children are encouraged from very early on to construct a feeling of "Chineseness" for their child. This experience for many adoptees included Chinese-themed "play groups, dance troupes, Culture Days and camps, reunions, Web sites, listservs, and publications intended for the adoptive community."[21] Previous to this era, there has never been such a large cohort of transnational adoptees from the same country, "in so few years, and of roughly the same age and mostly the same gender."[22] Furthermore, these new support mechanisms for Chinese adoptees began a new chapter for the legacy of transnational adoption and thus warrants an investigation into these individuals' experiences.

III. Literature Review

This study utilizes a variety of academic works related to race, nationality, and adoption status, amongst other identities and themes. The following academic articles were the most salient to this study's topic and will be discussed later alongside various primary sources.

---

[18] Andrew, A.M. (2007). China's Abandoned Children and Transnational Adoption: Issues and Problems for U.S.-China Relations, Adoption Agencies, and Adoptive Parents. *Journal of Women's History 19*(1), 123-131. doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0001.

[19] ibid.

[20] Andrew, A.M. (2007). China's Abandoned Children and Transnational Adoption: Issues and Problems for U.S.-China Relations, Adoption Agencies, and Adoptive Parents. *Journal of Women's History 19*(1), 123-131. doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0001.

[21] Volkman, T.A. (2003). Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America. *Social Text 21*(1), 29-55. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/41640.

[22] ibid.

“China's Abandoned Children and Transnational Adoption: Issues and Problems for U.S.-China Relations, Adoption Agencies, and Adoptive Parents” is a journal article by Anita M. Andrew. Published in 2007, the article focuses on not only the historical background of adoption from China, but also adoption as a political linkage between China and the United States. Andrew elaborates on the extensive adoption process that adoptive parents must go through, including but not limited to traveling to China, participating in educational classes, and taking an oath to expose their adopted child to Chinese culture. However, Andrew also acknowledges that the resources available for parents are by no means perfect, and thus recommends that both the United States and Chinese governments – as well as other entities – work to create a stronger support system for both adoptive parents and their Chinese children.

“ ‘The Ending Is Not an Ending At All’: On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War” is a journal article by Jodi Kim. Written in 2015, the article centers on Kim’s analysis of two recent films, Deann Borshay Liem’s “In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee” (2010) and Jane Jin Kaisen’s “The Woman, the Orphan, and the Tiger” (2010). Utilizing these two films, Kim seeks to prove that the Korean adoptee diaspora is one that is both gendered and that has been severely impacted by the US military presence in South Korea. Although this article primarily discusses South Korean adoptees rather than Chinese, Kim’s analysis still supports the main idea of this study that adoption is not an ending; it is the “middle of an ongoing narrative” that often sparks more questions than answers.

“Tracing the Red Thread: Chinese–U.S. Transnational Adoption and the Legacies of ‘Home’” is a journal article written by Frayda Cohen. Written in 2015, Cohen discusses the idea that Chinese adoptees experience “Chineseness” differently due to their unique position as ethnically Chinese but raised in a different culture. Cohen also asserts that the process of

adopting children from China has changed largely due to the issues that Korean adoptees – who are often older – faced. Transnational and transracial adoption were fairly new subjects during the adoption boom from South Korea, thus Korean adoptees had very weak support systems to learn about their heritage, if any at all. As a result of that struggle, Chinese adoptees were more formally supported through children's culture classes, online groups, etc. Cohen also emphasizes the role that race plays in adoption, particularly the problematic dynamic of children from underdeveloped countries being adopted by predominantly wealthy white families. Cohen's argument that adoption entails various ethical issues is one that, although not discussed in depth in this study, supports this study's discussion of race as a key factor that impacts both the process of adoption and the experiences of adoptees throughout their lives.

"Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America" is a journal article written in 2003 by Toby Alice Volkman. Like other authors mentioned in this study, Volkman details the history of adoption from China, specifically the One Child Policy in 1979 that resulted in the mass wave of adoption. Volkman also asserts that the cultural celebration of Chinese heritage, although beneficial for adoptees, can quickly become detrimental. By focusing only on cultural features, adoptees may fail to realize the origins or long-term impacts of their racialized experience in the US. Thus, Volkman encourages both adoptees and adoptive parents to remain open to exploring adoption together through both the cultural and socio-political lens.

"Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee–Parent Discrepancies" is a journal article by Morgan Langrehr, et al. Written in 2019, Langrehr details the potential harmful consequences of transracial adoption. White individuals in the US often hold a "colorblind" belief that racial differences do not matter. Thus, raised with this mentality, transracial adoptees often do not have the language or tools to

describe their racialized experiences. Additionally, Langrehr describes the phenomenon of transracial adoptees being treated as conditionally white within the familial sphere.

IV. Methodology

This study utilizes both primary and secondary sources to explore the complexity and nuanced nature of the Chinese adoptee identity. The secondary sources include a variety of academic articles related to culture, race, and adoption. These sources are supplemented by the primary sources, which consist of both news articles that include adoptees' quoted perspectives, as well as seven interviews I conducted personally. All seven interviewees grew up in the New England area and identify as women or non-binary. These interviews were conducted throughout February and March 2023, and those that were interviewed were recruited using personal connections. Each interview was conducted over Zoom, during which I asked a variety of questions regarding the interviewee's experiences with family, community, friendship, and activism in relation to their identities as Asian, as well as specifically Chinese, transracial adoptees.

V. Discussion

The following sections will discuss the findings of this study based on both the primary and secondary sources. These findings will be divided into three subcategories: images of self, family, community, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I acknowledge that these very rigid subcategories are arbitrary due to the interconnecting nature of these themes throughout the subjects' lifetimes. However, for the purposes of organization, the findings will be divided as such.

A. Images of self

The primary finding related to images of self was the discovery of attributes that differentiate adoptees and other Asian first- or second-generation immigrants. Jodi Kim, author of "The Ending is Not an Ending At All," does not shy away from the devastating origins of adoption; she boldly states that transnational adoptees are "an immigrant without an original home, exiled from nowhere, uprooted in the most total way imaginable, without the memory of what it is she has lost."[23] Kim explains that transnational adoptees raised by white parents, due to the lack of exposure to their birth country's culture, are a "modern diaspora that has been marginalized even within diaspora discourse."[24] As a result, transracial adoptees cannot relate to other archetypes of diasporas from Asian countries, such as "the immigrant, exile, expatriate, refugee, or labor migrant."[25] Thus, the very nature of adoption – even pre-dating the lived experiences of adoptees themselves – is an alienating experience that leaves adoptees without guidance towards a particular culture or homeland to which to feel allegiance. Frayda Cohen, author of *Tracing the Red Thread,* also specifically extends this idea to Chinese adoptees and the research of Andrea Louie, who developed a more well-rounded idea of "Chineseness" in her ethnography, *Chineseness Across Borders*. Louie explains that many adoptive parents falsely consider "Chineseness" as simply a matter of "citizenship and genetic descent."[26] On the contrary, Louie states that "Chineseness" is a "a fluid and contested category that encompasses a diversity of political, 'racial' and ethnic meanings within shifting and varied contexts."[27] This

[23] Kim, J. (2015). "The Ending Is Not an Ending At All": On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War. *positions: asia critique 23*(4), 807-835. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/602305.
[24] ibid.
[25] ibid.
[26] Cohen, F. (2015). Tracing the Red Thread: Chinese–U.S. Transnational Adoption and the Legacies of "Home". *Anthropologica 57*(1), 41-52. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/581026.
[27] ibid.

fluidity that exists when adoptees shift their identity throughout their lifetime result in multiple "negotiations" of that identity, causing adoptees to face confusion, anger, and isolation amidst that renegotiation.

Many interviewees expressed a nuanced perspective when asked about their current relationship with their "Chineseness." Interviewee Lily describes her position as "living between Chinese and American." Despite her knowledge of Chinese culture, Lily believes that a majority of that information has been distorted by the American lens from her parents or education. Lily also related the concept of identity to the dangers and challenges of perception. When asked how she self-identifies, Lily described that she would like to answer "American," yet when asked about her place of origin, people are often curious about her ethnic background. This line of questioning typically results in an explanation related to her adoption. Given that the inquirers do not stop until they reach an "acceptable" answer, Lily has felt pressured to explain the dissonance between her physical features and her stereotypically American personality, mannerisms, etc. – so much so that it has become a subconscious habit. Interviewee Mylee expressed similar feelings, stating that she "doesn't have the right to defend Chinese culture" due to the fact that she didn't grow up with those cultural traditions.

Another discovery in relation to the difficulties of identity is the divide between cultural and socio-political experiences of adoptees. As previously stated, 95% of parents who adopted internationally are white.[28]According to *Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee–Parent Discrepancies,* "transnationally adoptive parents make minimal effort to address adoptees' lived experiences

[28] Geisert, S. (2019, September 13). *Asian American Transracial Adoptees: Identity Development in college*. Student Affairs in Higher Education & The School of Education. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://sahe.colostate.edu/asian-american-transracial-adoptees-identity-development-in-college/

with racism and place more emphasis on fostering adoptees' ethnic heritage."[29] This sentiment is further supported by researcher Anna Anagnost, who states that "celebratory representations of cultural difference, which are often detached from immigrant histories in the United States, may make it difficult for adopted children to understand their racialization."[30] These sources make the collective conclusion that the experiences that constitute Asian-ness are not only one's culture, language, etc. but also one's categorization based on the racialized hierarchy of American society. This nuanced dynamic is what presents a complicated relationship with identity and how adoptees self-identify. Interviewee Caitlin brought up an intriguing sociology concept called symbolic interactionism. She described the concept as "acting according to what she believed those around her expected from her, regardless of whether or not it's what they truly expected." In terms of how this phenomenon manifests in her own life, Caitlin spoke to the stereotypes that are associated with Asian women and how she believed that she could "capitalize off of the fetishization, while still keeping a sense of [her] own self." Caitlin elaborated by saying that she believed that she could "receive that temporary satisfaction that [she] missed out upon because [she] had been so targeted as being different." Thus, by utilizing harmful stereotypes against Asian women to her "advantage," Caitlin wanted to reclaim control of the "renegotiation" of her identity by attempting to counteract the previously negative experiences she had regarding her appearance. Caitlin's experience not only encapsulates Andrea Louie's explanation of renegotiation of "Chineseness" according to social contexts, but also the gendered nature of both adoption and the experience of Asian-ness in the US. As previously mentioned, nearly 90% of

[29] Langrehr, Morgan, S. K., Ross, J., Oh, M., & Chong, W. W. (2019). Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee-Parent Discrepancies. Asian American Journal of Psychology, 10(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000128

[30] Volkman, T.A. (2003). Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America. *Social Text 21*(1), 29-55. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/41640.

children adopted from Asia are girls.[31] However, in the adoption process, adoptive parents rarely pay attention to the "social and historical contexts" that come into play. In the US, "Asian girls are seen as obedient, smart, and beautiful," whereas in China, they are "abandoned for not being able to inherit the family's wealth, not being able to raise a family that carries on the family name, and not being able to provide eldercare."[32] Yet again, Louie's theory of "renegotiation" is clear, demonstrating that despite parents' good intentions to adopt Chinese girls to "save" them from the Chinese social context, there are unintended consequences in the US social context.

B. Family

According to several studies, transnationally adoptive parents have the tendency to promote "colorblind racial attitudes" and "minimize the significance of race" in the lives of their children.[33] As a result, parents often "underestimated [their children's] racialized experiences."[34] Researchers contribute this phenomenon to the idea that white Americans are "less inclined to consider themselves as having a racial identity or belonging to a racial group."[35] Furthermore, parents' lack of racial awareness negatively impacts not only the ability of their children to understand their own racialized experiences, but also the role that race plays in the parent-child adoptee dynamic. The findings from my interviewees indicate the wide spectrum of experiences – which range from open discussions to outright denial – that adoptees have with their families in relation to culture, race, and identity. According to interviewee Molly, her parents "never swayed

[31] Ziv, S. (2016, April 29). *China's one-child policy and American adoptees*. Newsweek. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.newsweek.com/what-if-chinese-adoptees-and-end-one-child-policy-390130
[32] Yu. (2020). Making adoptable children: A case study of the child assessment programme for Chinese–US transnational adoptions. Area (London 1969), 52(2), 298–305. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12570
[33] Langrehr, Morgan, S. K., Ross, J., Oh, M., & Chong, W. W. (2019). Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee-Parent Discrepancies. Asian American Journal of Psychology, 10(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000128
[34] ibid.
[35] ibid.

[her] away from learning more about culture, but they didn't exactly provide the tools [she] would need to actually do it." Molly's experience, although on the side of the spectrum that has more acceptance, still represents adoptive parents' ill-preparedness to handle conversations related to racial differences with their child. Interviewee Li adds to this sentiment, stating that she has been able to openly have conversations about race with her mother, but that these conversations did not come until later in life and were preceded by conversations predominantly related to Chinese culture. Tying back to Andrea Louie's idea of "Chineseness," Li's experience perfectly illustrates the idea that parents' understanding of their children's cultural and racial experiences often do not happen concurrently.

According to *"Outcasts to Princesses": U.S. White Adoptive Parents' Fairy-tale Narratives of Adoption from China*, another phenomenon in the familial sphere for transracial adoptees is their temporary status as almost white or white-passsing. Author Yanli Luo elaborates that transracial adoptees are viewed as "assimilable members of white families and of the U.S. national body."[36] As a result, this dynamic allows adoptive parents and family members to believe that racial differences with their child either do not matter or do not exist. Langrehr, et al. (2019) elaborates on this idea, stating that adoptees "have gained admittance into these communities where they are treated by others (and sometimes themselves) as members of the majority."[37] Yet, unlike their white adoptive parents, adoptees still maintain their "out-group" status within this community, and thus must constantly face the challenges that come with this dissonance in a family setting.[38] Interviewee Li supports this idea, stating that her extended

---

[36] Luo, Y. (2021). "Outcasts to Princesses": U.S. White Adoptive Parents' Fairy-tale Narratives of Adoption from China. *The Lion and the Unicorn 45*(1), 103-123. doi:10.1353/uni.2021.0006.
[37] Langrehr, Morgan, S. K., Ross, J., Oh, M., & Chong, W. W. (2019). Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee-Parent Discrepancies. Asian American Journal of Psychology, 10(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000128
[38] ibid.

family treated her as an "exception" to the broader Asian community, and as a result, believed that she didn't fit into Asian stereotypes. Li elaborates that as a result, the individuality that white people are permitted under white supremacy is then transferred to adoptees in the minds of their relatives. However, in reality, adoptees do not have this privilege due to their position in the racial hierarchy outside of family settings. A more extreme example of this dissociation is illustrated by Mylee and her experiences with family members. Mylee described situations in which multiple relatives have made mocking or demeaning comments about China, during which she felt that they clearly did not understand how their comments impacted her. She elaborated by stating that she feels her family "doesn't see her as Asian." The collective experiences of this study's subjects illustrate that white adoptive families are capable of a strong color-blind mentality that – no matter how well-intended – erases and denies the racial experiences of their child. Ultimately, this dynamic has the power to cause a deep internal struggle between who adoptees are and who their families believe them to be.

C. Community and Friendship

According to the *Time* article "The Realities of Raising a Kid of a Different Race," there are four myths that white adoptive parents often believe. The third myth focuses on the idea of education as a pivotal experience, stating that "no matter what, a 'good' school is the best thing for a child."[39] The article makes the argument that the term "good school" is usually used by white parents for white children. However, parents should not use that term with transracial adoptees because "good" does not encompass the resources a child of color may need in order for their racialized experiences to be understood. According to Langrehr, et al. (2019), the

[39] Valby, K. (n.d.). *The Realities Of Raising A Kid Of A Different Race*. Time. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://time.com/the-realities-of-raising-a-kid-of-a-different-race/

majority of transracial adoptees are raised in predominantly white communities that limit their contact with other Asian Americans or other people of color.[40] As a result, this lack of exposure could unintentionally "compromise adoptees' psychosocial development, sense of belongingness, and ability to mitigate stresses" related to their racial identity.[41]

When asked about their first understandings of race, all seven interviewees noted that they first realized race through racist aggressions at the elementary school level. More specifically, multiple interviewees cited their peers pulling back their eyes, pretending to "look Asian/Chinese" and other acts that targeted their physical appearance. However, there were various reactions to these realizations. Interviewee Mylee cited her first experiences of racism as the catalyst of her insecurities related to her appearance. On the other hand, interviewees Molly and Caitlin stated that although these forms of racism did also happen to them, their reactions were much different. Caitlin explained that she didn't want to fully acknowledge her physical differences, attributing her reaction to not wanting to accept "the fact that [she was] never going to be similar to her peers." Similarly, Molly recalls her younger self being very unbothered, given that any racist acts against her were microaggressions and did not occur at the same frequency as other interviewees. These reactions, although seemingly contradictory, both align with the idea that adoptees – despite being well aware that they are physically different – often do not yet fully grasp the deeper significance of their racialized experiences at a young age. This reaction is only further amplified by the previously mentioned phenomenon of family members of adoptees disassociating them from other members of the adoptees' racial group.

---

[40] Langrehr, Morgan, S. K., Ross, J., Oh, M., & Chong, W. W. (2019). Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee-Parent Discrepancies. Asian American Journal of Psychology, 10(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000128

[41] ibid.

In relation to community, an additional challenge for adoptees is their relationship with non-adopted Asian American students. Langrehr, et al (2019) elaborates that "establishing same-race connections is considered adaptive for adolescents of color…particularly when their relationships are based on shared experience with marginalization."[42] However, all seven interviewees had mixed opinions of the AAPI community that both supports and challenges Langrehr, et al's statement. In regard to their college experiences, both Chloe and Mylee expressed growth and overall positive feelings around other Asian peers. Chloe continued to say that although she has the "fear in the back of [her] mind" that she won't be accepted by non-adoptees, she has had an overall supportive and welcoming experience with Asian student organizations. Conversely, other interviewees have had less positive experiences with their Asian peers. Mia and Lily both spoke about their desire at the beginning of college to reconnect with their Chinese heritage, yet feeling isolated in their respective efforts to do so. These efforts included both joining Asian student organizations and frequenting spaces predominantly for Asian students. Lily elaborated that there is a "danger" that comes with organizations that focus on one particular identity because they create a specific narrative that can isolate people who – although they are of that identity – still do not feel included. Ultimately, both Mia and Lily withdrew from these spaces, stating that they had a desire to focus on other passions, rather than hyper-focus on their Asian identity. Of all interviewees, Li presented a very nuanced perspective; she spoke about becoming more involved in the Asian student organization on campus and feeling more unified in the wake of the COVID pandemic. However, Li also noted that the adoptees involved in the organization seemed to be "more considerate of intersectionality." She

[42] Langrehr, Morgan, S. K., Ross, J., Oh, M., & Chong, W. W. (2019). Racist Experiences, Openness to Discussing Racism, and Attitudes Toward Ethnic Heritage Activities: Adoptee-Parent Discrepancies. Asian American Journal of Psychology, 10(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000128

continued to say that she attributes this phenomenon to adoptees being forced to reckon with the dissonance between their identity and that of their parents, thus creating an increased racialized lens from a young age. Furthermore, the wide range of experiences that this study's interviewees presented represents the impact that one's environment has on their social development and understanding of racialized experiences.

D. COVID-19 Pandemic

As the catalyst of this study, the pandemic is deeply connected to all of the previously mentioned themes of images of self, family, and community. However, in order to highlight the pandemic as a moment of reckoning and "renegotiating" for each one of these themes, I have chosen to discuss it separately. According to Iris Chin Ponte, a professor at Lesley University, both the pandemic as well as the spa shooting in Atlanta, Georgia have been catalysts causing adoptees to wonder where they fit in.[43] Many interviewees spoke about a general increased anxiety and fear of violence or confrontation from those who believed the idea that China was responsible for the pandemic. Molly, Li, and Chloe particularly mentioned how the rhetoric of then President Trump calling COVID "Kung flu" and "China virus" created an overall tense atmosphere that they had never personally experienced previously. Chloe, Mylee, and others also described the pandemic as an "awakening" and "realization" that uncovered the deeper roots of anti-Asian hate that had existed before, but were predominantly expressed through microaggressions. Overall, adoptees have been facing the first period of their lives where

[43] Mitchell, R. (2021, April 16). *'I'm not allowed to feel those things': How adoptees experience anti-Asian hate*. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-04-16/asian-adoptees-and-their-experiences

physical violence was a legitimate threat, yet perhaps lacked the tools and language to express that challenge as a result of their upbringing.

An additional facet of the pandemic that highlighted the unique adoptee experience was the lack of familial understanding and solidarity. Interviewee Mia framed the COVID pandemic and the increased fear of violence as a double-edged sword, emphasizing that "[adoptees] don't have the burden of worrying about [their] family, but [they] also feel the burden of having to face it alone and not having someone who truly understands." Interviewee Li provided an example of this isolation, describing that when telling her mother about a COVID-related microaggression, her mother's first reaction was to console Li by saying phrases such as "oh, I don't know if it was that." Li described that incident as a moment when, although well-intentioned, her mother invalidated her experience and feelings related to the incident. Unfortunately, both Mia and Li's experiences highlight the reality that despite their parents' good intentions or attempts to understand their unique situation, it is an almost impossible task. Furthermore, as the pandemic is still ongoing, the lessons that it has highlighted, and the dynamics that it has exacerbated, and the existential questions that it has raised persist for adoptees in their journey of healing and self-reflection.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, this study's primary conclusion is that more research needs to be done on the topic of transracial adoption. The sparse number of primary sources, as well as the dated nature of the secondary sources, illustrates that the topic of transracial adoption is a blind spot of recent academic studies. However, I recognize that this blind spot is not simply a lack of will from adoptees – it is also related to the intense marginalization from multiple "directions" that adoptees face from a very young age that discourages and makes them believe that their

narratives don't matter. Thus, I hope that as more adoptees grow older and become more conscious of these dynamics, they are able to hear their voices and complex experiences.

The second major conclusion is that the AAPI community is not a monolith. In order to address these differences, I believe that the topic of intersectionality must be taken more seriously within the community. Marginalized identities such as adoptee status, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status have been historically excluded from the popular narrative of the "Asian American Experience," which I believe contributes to our further marginalization. Therefore, increased representation both in media and in literature is absolutely necessary.

The final conclusion and recommendation is that adoptees would benefit from increased cultural and socio-political support. I believe that this support needs to come from all areas discussed in this study (family, friends, broader community) in order to support adoptees' growth and "renegotiation" of their identities. As demonstrated by this study, downplaying or denying the racialized experience of adoptees in the US has incredibly harmful, life-long consequences. Thus, it is best that these supports are implemented at an early age in order to facilitate the development of adoptees' understanding of the roles that culture and race play in their lives.

VII. Ending Notes

This study, which I am calling a prime example of "me-search," has been incredibly eye-opening and cathartic. At first, it was difficult to understand how individuals could have completely different takeaways from very similar identities and experiences. However, in the end, I realized that all of us had one goal: to survive. Survive the strange, non-traditional conditions that lead to our lives here in this country. Survive the "renegotiation" of our identities. Survive the painful awareness of this renegotiation as we grew older. Survive a new wave of hate against bodies that looked like ours. Survive yet another renegotiation (and most likely many

more after this). If I had one wish for all of my interviewees, it is that I don't want us merely to survive – I want us to *thrive*. I wish for us a life free of confusion and existential questions of belonging, free of expectations of what others think or want us to be, free of the pain that comes with living in such a gray area. But until then, I can only wish that each of us finds our way to happiness and healing from the rifts that brought us here.

Bibliography

Andrew, A.M. (2007). China's Abandoned Children and Transnational Adoption: Issues and Problems for U.S.-China Relations, Adoption Agencies, and Adoptive Parents. *Journal of Women's History 19*(1), 123-131. doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0001.

Cohen, F. (2015). Tracing the Red Thread: Chinese–U.S. Transnational Adoption and the Legacies of "Home". *Anthropologica 57*(1), 41-52. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/581026.

Kim, J. (2015). "The Ending Is Not an Ending At All": On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War. *positions: asia critique 23*(4), 807-835. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/602305.

Luo, Y. (2021). "Outcasts to Princesses": U.S. White Adoptive Parents' Fairy-tale Narratives of Adoption from China. *The Lion and the Unicorn 45*(1), 103-123. doi:10.1353/uni.2021.0006.

(2007). Babies Across Borders: Problems for Women's History in the Study of Transborder Adoption: Introduction. *Journal of Women's History 19*(1), 105-106. doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0023.

Valby, K. (n.d.). *The Realities Of Raising A Kid Of A Different Race*. Time. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://time.com/the-realities-of-raising-a-kid-of-a-different-race/

Westerman, A. (2021, March 27). *'am I Asian enough?' adoptees struggle to make sense of spike in Anti-Asian violence*. NPR. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.npr.org/2021/03/27/981269559/am-i-asian-enough-adoptees-struggle-to-make-sense-of-spike-in-anti-asian-violenc.

Yu. (2020). Making adoptable children: A case study of the child assessment programme for Chinese–US transnational adoptions. Area (London 1969), 52(2), 298–305. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12570

Ziv, S. (2016, April 29). *China's one-child policy and American adoptees*. Newsweek. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from https://www.newsweek.com/what-if-chinese-adoptees-and-end-one-child-policy-390130