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### Unique Features of Identity Development in Transnational Adoptions

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Unique Features of Identity Development in Transnational Adoptions

BY

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B.A. Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston, 2009

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

in

Human Development and Family Studies

May, 2015

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	viii
ABSTRACT .....	ix
	PAGE
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	6
Identity Development and Ethnic Identity Theory .....	6
Emerging Adulthood .....	6
Ethnic Identity .....	7
Adoptive Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Parental Relationship and Support .....	8
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY .....	13
Current Study .....	13
Hypotheses .....	13
Adoptee contact with birth parents .....	13
Adoptive parental support of adoptee identity exploration .....	13
Influence of community .....	14
Adolescence crucial but not always positive .....	15
Participants .....	15
Sample .....	16
Measures .....	17
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS .....	19
Analysis Strategy .....	19

Experience Learning about Being Adopted .....	19
Exploration of Ethnicity and Culture .....	20
Adoptive Family Support of Adoptee Identity Exploration .....	22
Incorporating culture in the home .....	22
Participation in cultural celebrations .....	22
Ethnic Identity Formation .....	23
Root identity versus adoptive whiteness .....	23
Higher education and being critical .....	25
Racial categories .....	26
Other Contextual Influences .....	27
Contact with birth family and relatives .....	27
Influences from community .....	28
Ethnic Identity Measured Quantitatively and Qualitatively .....	30
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION .....	32
Evaluating the Hypotheses .....	32
First Hypothesis: Adoptee Contact with Birth Parents .....	32
Second Hypothesis: Adoptive Parental Support of Adoptee Identity Exploration .....	33
Third Hypothesis: Broader Contextual Factors .....	33
Fourth Hypothesis: Adolescence is Not Always a Positive Period .....	35
Strengths of the Current Study .....	35
Suggestions for Further Research and Application of Findings .....	37
Limitations and Future Work .....	38
REFERENCES .....	40

APPENDIX A SURVEY .....	45
APPENDIX B INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	50
APPENDIX C INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER .....	53

## LIST OF TABLES

	PAGE
Table 1. Descriptive Data on Study Participants .....	43
Table 2. Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) of transnational Chinese adoptees by degree of association with root culture .....	44

## ABSTRACT

# UNIQUE FEATURES OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTIONS

by

Minori Haga Stefon

University of New Hampshire, May, 2015

Identity formation has been defined as the process by which an individual develops a coherent self-definition of one's uniqueness (Erikson, 1968). Arnett (2000; 2014) proposed the concept of emerging adulthood (between ages 18 and 29) as the developmental stage of later adolescence at which an individual is both cognitively and psychologically best suited for identity formation. Emerging adults who had been adopted transnationally as children often struggle to articulate their ethnic identity as a dimension of their broader individual identity (Schwartz et al., 2013) because they have characteristics that do not fit into those of the majority (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1998), this mixed-method pilot study seeks to demonstrate how family environments, contact with birth parents, community context, and culture (Grotevant et al., 2000) influence the ethnic identity development of emerging adults who have been adopted transnationally. It employs the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) proposed by Phinney et al. (1999) in order to investigate the influence of age at adoption, adoptive parental support of adoptee exploration of identity and cultural roots, and adoptee contact with birth parents upon the

ethnic identity formation of eleven emerging adults who had been adopted from China. It then suggests that adoptive parental support of their child's exploration of her birth culture is a positive influence, that contact with birth parents may be both a positive and a negative influence, and that belonging to an adoptee support group may not only be a positive influence but also may foster the formation of an identity as an ethnic adoptee in the adoptive country—in the case of this study's participants, of being Chinese adoptees in America.

## INTRODUCTION

Identity formation, considered the central developmental task of adolescence, has been defined as the process by which an individual develops a coherent self-definition of one's uniqueness and can answer the questions "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to become?" (Erikson, 1968). Acknowledging that modern society extends the time between childhood and adulthood, Arnett (2000) introduced the stage of later adolescence, between ages 18 and 25, and called this period *emerging adulthood*. In 2014 Arnett extended the ages included in this stage of later adolescence to ages 18 and 29 based on continued changes in our society that extend the period before adulthood. Arnett (2000) has argued that emerging adulthood is both a unique developmental stage and is actually the stage most suited for a focus on identity formation. Arnett emphasized that emerging adulthood is one of the most influential periods of an individual's life because she has the cognitive and psychological ability to focus realistically on the future and the freedom to truly explore and experiment with identity. Identity exploration involves focusing on individual interests, skills, abilities, and values and beliefs. Successful identity formation also includes developing a sense of belonging and connection to others and the larger cultural context (Adams & Marshall, 1996). For some adolescents, the process of identity formation involves unique opportunities and challenges because they have characteristics that do not fit into the characteristics of the majority. This study focuses on the unique experiences of individuals who had been adopted transnationally. These individuals likely face unique experiences both from being adopted generally and from being adopted from another country specifically.

Ethnic identity exploration is an important part of the broader identity formation process for some adolescents. Ethnic identity is defined by Schwartz et al. (2013) as a set of strategies for “mak[ing] sense of themselves within a large society” by minorities (p.350). For adolescents in ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States, this means the process of understanding their own ethnic and racial identity as it fits within the larger American society. Identity and ethnic identity formation are complex processes for most adolescents and emerging adults, and they are likely even more complex for adolescents and emerging adults who were adopted transracially or transnationally as children (Schwartz et al., 2013).

According to recent statistics (<http://www.statisticbrain.com/adoption-statistics/>), 444,000 children (25% of total adoptions) were adopted through international adoption in 2013. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2007), 92% of International adoptions are to non-Hispanic white families. According to the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents, the best estimate is that about 40 percent of all children adopted by Americans are either a different race or a different nationality from their adoptive parents. Since it is crucial for adolescents in ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States to understand their sense of their own ethnic and racial identity as it fits within the larger American society, these adoptive white parent(s) play a crucial role in guiding adoptee children to explore their own ethnic and racial identity as well as their own nationality. The focus of my qualitative thesis project is the process by which transnational adoptees, specifically from China, explore and develop their ethnic identity both before and during emerging adulthood. It is important for any scholar of adoption to be aware of the various factors that influence the formation of ethnic identity

in adoptees. Yet in so doing, a scholar must first consider adoptive identity more broadly; however, this is often overlooked in the research on ethnic identity formation by adoptees, with implications both for subsequent research and also for the practice of human service professionals focusing on adoption.

This study's exploration of processes influencing the identity formation of emerging adults who were adopted as children into families of different ethnicities and different nationalities is guided by the ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1998). Schweiger and O'Brien (2005) mention that Bronfenbrenner's (1998) ecological systems theory is a useful framework in the design of research and intervention approaches that address complex issues (p.513). Ecological systems theory argues that individual development is influenced by the interaction between characteristics of the individual and aspects of their environmental context. Bronfenbrenner's description of contexts within the ecological systems theory includes five levels of environmental influences: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem accounts for those environmental influences closest to the developing individual. These are the contexts that the adolescent interacts with regularly, such as family, peer group, and school. Bronfenbrenner referred to the settings in the microsystem as proximal processes and argued that they likely have the strongest impact on development. The mesosystem describes the interaction between two or more contexts in the microsystem, for example a parent's relationship with a child's school. Exosystems are contexts that impact a developing individual but he or she does not directly interact with these contexts. For a developing adolescent, this would include settings like the local school board and a parent's work environment. The macrosystem accounts for the

broader cultural influences in one's developmental environment, and the chronosystem accounts for the developmental and historical time influences the developing individual.

This study employs an ecological perspective to explore influences on the ethnic identity development in emerging adults adopted transnationally. Specifically, this study focuses on two levels of the ecology: that of the *microsystem* (the personal, or individual, level) and that of the *macrosystem* (the level of religion, culture, or ethnicity). At the *microsystem* level, the focus is on the parent-child experiences. Adoptive parents may help their adopted children to explore their root cultural identity as well as that of their adoptive family's culture. At the *macrosystem* level, adolescents form and explore their racial identity in the context of broad cultural features. It is important for any scholar of adoption to be aware of the various factors that influence the formation of ethnic identity in adoptees. Building from the ecological perspective mentioned above, my thesis focuses on the role of family environments, contact with birth parents, community context, and culture. In work on adoptees, Grotevant et al. (2000) included in the definition on common influences on ethnic identity (1) "family environment [and] contexts beyond the family," (2) "culture," and (3) "community." Considering these aspects, this study seeks to answer the overarching research question of how these three factors influence the ethnic identity development of emerging adults who have been adopted transnationally.

The literature review provides a description of the extant research on what is known about identity and ethnic identity development for adolescents and emerging adults who have been adopted with a focus on what is known about the experiences of adolescents and emerging adults who have been adopted transnationally. Empirical

research on ethnic identity processes in adolescents and emerging adults adopted transnationally is fairly limited, but the following review of the literature focuses on findings related to age at time of adoption, contact with the birth family, and adoptive parental support of ethnic identity exploration.

## Chapter I: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Identity Development and Ethnic Identity Theory**

Erikson (1950, 1968) is one of the most important theorists for any researcher or professional who considers the process of identity development. According to Gonzales-Backen (2013), Erikson (1968) was one of the primary scholars who mentioned the importance for adolescents of forming an identity. Once formed, an identity is thought to serve several functions in an individual's life, including providing (a) an understanding of who one is; (b) meaning and direction in life; (c) a sense of personal control over behavior; (d) a framework to work toward consistency between values and beliefs and one's commitments and behaviors; and (e) a sense of one's potential and what is possible in the future (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Failure to successfully navigate one's identity can result in a negative psychological outcome such as depression (Gonzales-Backen, 2013) and can hinder the transition to adulthood.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

When Arnett introduced the period of emerging adulthood, the key feature of emerging adulthood was that it is the period of life in which individuals have the greatest opportunities to explore their individual identity. Adolescents and emerging adults often explore their identity in the areas of values, beliefs, love, work, and general worldview. Compared to adolescence, emerging adulthood encourages more serious commitments and more exploration of emotional and physical intimacy. It is also the case that emerging adults feel more serious about work and future life decisions than adolescents do. This is because they invest more of their time and abilities toward planning for the

future. They are also more concerned with building a career and more serious about money than adolescents are. Finally, it is important for emerging adults to expand their worldview. According to Arnett (2000), worldview often plays a central role in cognitive development during emerging adulthood. Arnett cites Perry (1999) in saying that “emerging adults often enter college with a worldview they have learned in the course of childhood and adolescence. However, a college education leads to exposure to a variety of different worldviews, and in the course of this exposure college student often find themselves questioning the worldviews they brought in” (p.474). It is therefore important for adopted emerging adults to have a sense of who they are, and for many emerging adults this includes who they are in terms of their ethnic or racial identity and their national origin.

### **Ethnic Identity**

Schwartz et al. (2013) defined ethnic identity as “[t]he ways in which individuals from ethnic or cultural minority groups make sense of themselves within large society” (p.350). Its significance in adolescent development and emerging adulthood lies in the fact that “it allows individuals to connect with their cultural heritage” (p.351). In addition, Phinney and Ong (2007) emphasize that “[e]thnic identity is distinct in some ways from other group identities, such as racial identity, but it also shares aspects of both personal and group identities” (p.271). Both sets of researchers state that ethnic identity plays an important role in defining the connection between personal and group identity. Schwartz et al. (2013) in particular indicate a “link between ethnic identity and self-esteem” and suggest “that individuals with a stronger sense of ethnic identity (i.e., those who have considered the meaning of their ethnicity and who have come to regard their

ethnic group positively) generally report [a] high level” (p.351). In addition, Kiang and Luu (2013) address the fact that much research “has linked the simple use of ethnic labels to a variety of [positive] outcomes including academic achievement and motivation, psychological adjustment, and social relationship quality” (p.93). In fact, some studies (Brown, Decatur, & Ling, 2012; Shek & McEwen, 2012; Wei et al., 2013) have given especial attention to these issues in studies of adolescents and emerging adults of Asian descent. On the other hand, the literature on ethnic identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood does not always indicate a positive relationship. Some research on Hispanic adolescents and emerging adults in the U.S.A. suggests that a stronger ethnic identity can be associated with a higher level of risk-taking. Evidence suggests that Hispanic adolescents and emerging adults may reflect a defensive, rather than proactive, manifestation of ethnic identity (Schwartz et al., 2013). Research has not yet demonstrated a similar link between ethnic identity and risk-taking in adolescents and emerging adults of Asian descent.

### **Adoptive Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Parental Relationship and Support**

Any scholar of ethnic identity in adoptees must first consider adoptive identity. Grotevant et al. (2000) identifies five factors that are important as adoptees develop an adoptive identity. They are (a) the interpsychic component of adoptive identity, (b) the family environment, and contexts beyond the family, (c) relationship with friends, (d) connection to community, and (e) culture. Researchers who investigate the ethnic identity development of adoptees have tended to focus on many different aspects that influence ethnic identity, but most of them agree on four: (a) age at adoption (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996), (b) contact with their birth parents (Koff & Grotevant, 2011; Wrobel et

al., 2013; Gonzales-Backen, 2013), (c) adoptive parents support of exploring their identity (Johnston et al, 2007), and (d) exploring ability to explore cultural roots (Vonk, 2011; Haymer & Simon 2003).

In order to investigate how age at adoption impacts ethnic identity formation, Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1996) compared four groups. The researchers compared the children in these groups based on 12 factors of emotional and behavioral adjustment and family functioning. Findings suggest a directly proportional correlation between adoption age and behavioral emotional adjustment and indicate that as age at adoption increases, behavioral and emotional adjustment decreases. In addition, among adolescents who were adopted above age 10, there is an increased risk of engaging in illicit drug use and antisocial behavior. On the other hand, those adopted between 6 and 10 years of age have a higher chance of having negative emotionality issues. A concern driving the study that is undertaken below is that if adoptees are from overseas, age of adoption may have an impact upon their adjustment to the U.S. that is greater and even more developmentally significant than it has upon domestic adoptees. This impaired adjustment may continue into early adulthood.

Some researchers have also mentioned that adoptee contact with birth parents is an essential factor for adoptees during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Korff & Grotevant, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2013; Gonzales-Backen, 2013). Korff and Grotevant (2011) address the importance of family conversation about adoption in mediating the connection between an adolescent's contact with birth relatives and his or her development of adoptive identity (p.393). Also, Wrobel et al. (2013) study "[h]ow, for emerging adults, barriers and facilitators (contexts) influence adoption-related curiosity

(motivation) for seeking out unknown adoption-related information (behavior)” (p.441).

The researchers used the Adoption Curiosity Pathway (ACP) measure to explore the relationship between adoptees’ curiosity about their birth family and information-seeking.

The researchers found that “[i]mportant to the ACP is the recognition that curiosity develops and information-seeking takes place within a unique individual context”

(p.449). From these two articles, it becomes especially clear that it is important for emerging adults to explore their birth origin because it helps them to learn about their own self-images.

A third major influence upon the ethnic identity formation of adoptees is the extent to which their adoptive parents provide support in their ethnic and national identity exploration. Studying Asian adoptees, Johnston et al. (2007) stress that the relation between the mother’s racial, ethnic, and cultural socialization, mother’s connections to Asian Americans, children’s age and birth country and between ethnic and cultural socialization and psychological adjustment could be important for targeting interventions. As it is crucial for adolescents from ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States to understand their sense of their own ethnic and racial identity as it fits within the larger American society, it is important to consider the unique process that adoptive children experience as they explore their own ethnic and racial identity and their national origin.

The ability of adopted adolescents to explore their cultural roots is a related fourth major influence upon their ethnic identity formation – socialization of ethnicity, race, and nationality by the adoptive family. Vonk (2011) and Haymer and Simon (2003) suggested a three-part definition of cultural competence for transracial or transnational adoptive parents. Such cultural competence comprises (1) racial awareness, (2)

multicultural planning, and (3) survival skills. Racial awareness concerns sensitivity to racism and discrimination. Multicultural planning refers to development of opportunities for child to learn about and participate in his or her cultural of birth. “Survival skills” refers to the ability of parents to prepare their children to cope with racism.

The studies mentioned in the above literature review demonstrate the unique features of identity development in adoptees as a complex phenomenon. They also show that emerging adulthood is a particularly important period of life in the formation of an adoptee’s individual identity. Yet it is significant that none of the research studies compared how adoption statuses influence adoptees’ ethnic identity, which factors influence the formation of ethnic identity, and which factors influence strong and weak influence comparing adoption status. In its articulation of the unique features of identity development in transnational adoptees, this study will benefit adoptive families, social workers, and mental health practitioners.

This qualitative pilot study embarks upon subject matter that has not yet been a focus of study: the influence upon transnational adoptees’ ethnic identity of age at adoption, adoptive parental support of adoptee exploration of identity and cultural roots, and adoptee contact with birth parents. Even though the focus here is upon the “family environment,” “contexts beyond the family,” and “culture”—all of which are especially related to the definition of ethnic identity provided in Grotevant et al. (2000)—three other factors (intrapyschic component of adoptive identity, relationship with friends, and connection to community) may also have influence. The researcher plans to extend her research subsequent to this thesis to an investigation of how these three adoptive identity factors may influence adoptees’ ethnic identity. If this anticipated finding fits with theory,

then, as Schweiger and O'Brien (2005) suggest, it could spotlight which aspects of the developmental environment particularly influence adoptees' ethnic identity development. The findings of this thesis will be useful for adoption agencies (*exosystem*) to have increased knowledge about what major factors influence both adoption status when they assign youths to their adoptive family.

## Chapter II: METHODOLOGY

### Current Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore the ethnic identity experiences of emerging adults who were adopted transnationally as children. There are four hypotheses undergirding this study.

#### Hypotheses

**Adoptee contact with birth parents.** The first hypothesis is that adoptee contact with birth parents has both positive and negative impact on ethnic identity formation. There is a positive impact because learning about their cultural roots helps adoptees to explore their own identity. At the same time, contacting birth parents can be a very stressful process, especially for adoptees who do not know their birth parents' language and about their culture.

**Adoptive parental support of adoptee identity exploration.** The second hypothesis is that adoptee ability to explore cultural roots and the support of adoptive parents in identity exploration will have a positive influence on the ethnic identity development of transnational adoptees. This hypothesis emerged because some of the studies emphasize that both the ability to explore cultural roots and parental support of exploring their child's identity were major influences upon ethnic identity development (Johnston et al, 2007; Vonk, 2011; Haymer & Simon 2003). Based on a review of the literature on identity, ethnic identity, and adoption, this study will explore these two

hypotheses by using qualitative and quantitative methods focused on understanding the four factors mentioned above as they may influence the ethnic identity development of transnational adoptees in early adulthood.

**Influence of community.** The third hypothesis is that the community in which the adoptive family lives has an influence upon the developmental factors affecting transnational adolescent adoptees, particularly their ability to explore their ethnic identity and cultural roots. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory introduces the idea of "proximal process," which helps explain such factors as the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and the risk for psychological and developmental issues. For example, children from financially disadvantaged families quite often have less access to high-quality education, after school activities, and community services than children from families with greater economic status, because their parents cannot afford the tuition or fees. In addition, these children are at a greater risk for psychological damage because they have a greater chance of living in communities that are adversely impacted by violence, substance abuse, and insufficient social services.

Proximal process may have a great effect upon the identity development of transnational adoptees. First, transnational adoptions are frequently more expensive than transracial adoptions. The cost involved in initiating and successfully undergoing the adoption process is usually greater than that of transracial adoptions that may be completed domestically. But also, providing access to activities that could foster an adoptee's exploration of his or her root culture, such as language lessons or even travel to visit birth parents (should the birth parents be known) may be prohibitively expensive to adoptive parents of low SES. These are the primary ways that such a proximal process

may influence adoptees' development and identity formation.

**Adolescence crucial but not always positive.** Finally, the fourth hypothesis of this study is that although adolescence is a crucial period in the formation of self-identity in the lives of youths from nondominant groups, it is not always a positive period. Moreover, certain events, experiences, or factors of adolescence may impact a particular nondominant group of adolescents positively and another nondominant group of adolescents negatively. A prime example of such a factor is self-esteem. Recent research has demonstrated that it is important for Asian Americans to explore their identity development, so that they have higher self-esteem (Johnston et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2013). Having high self-esteem can benefit Asian American students both academically and also by increasing self-confidence (Kiang & Luu, 2013).

## **Participants**

The initial study aimed to focus on a comparison of ethnic identity development among transnational adoptees and among transracial adoptees adopted domestically. Criteria for inclusion in the study was emerging adults between ages 18 and 29, either currently attending college or graduated from college, and having experienced either transracial adoption or transnational adoption. The researcher employed three methods of recruiting participants for this study. First, the researcher posted flyers in libraries, with the Diversity Support Coalition at the University of New Hampshire, and community bulletin boards in coffee houses and restaurants in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Maine. Second, the researcher requested that departments of Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Human Development and Family Studies, Education, Communication,

and English circulate her flyer via email so that interested students could contact her for further information. Third, the researcher invited each participant to pass on a copy of the flyer to other transnational or transracial adoptees whom they might know and who might be interested in and qualified for the study. All recruitment procedures were approved the University of New Hampshire's Internal Review Board. After recruitment began, one participant connected the researcher with a formal support network for Chinese adoptees in which members communicate with each other and share their experiences being adoptees. This connection led to a sample that was drawn overwhelmingly from this network and from adoptees from China; therefore, a decision was made to only include data from participants recruited from this network.

## **Sample**

The final sample for this study was 11 participants recruited from a formal support network for Chinese adoptees. The 11 participants completed both the survey and interview. For all 11 participants, interviews were conducted via Skype, because the participants lived in various parts of the country, and in one instance a participant was living abroad. All of the participants were ethnic Chinese females born in China and adopted between the ages of two weeks and four years by American parents. The mean age for the participants at the time of the interview was 21.5 years. One of the participants was living in the Northeast, three in the Midwest, three in the South, and three in the West Coast; one participant who was raised in the Northeast was attending school overseas in China (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Also, one participant was a transnational adoptee with adoptive parents of the same race and ethnicity (Asian, Chinese); all others were transnational adoptees with adoptive parents of a different race

or ethnicity (white). Three participants (participant 5, 10, and 11) were adopted and raised by single mothers; all others were adopted and raised by married, heterosexual couples.

## **Measures**

This study employed a mixed methodology. Participation involved 1) a 10-to-15-minute survey via Qualtrics and 2) a semi-structured interview conducted on Skype lasting between 45 minutes and one hour. The survey included demographic questions and a shortened version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure. Demographic information including the adoptees' current age and age at adoption, gender, race and ethnicity, birthplace, adoption status, adoptive parents' race and ethnicity, and adoptive parents' occupation. In addition, all participants were asked to complete a 12-item questionnaire, each item of which was rated on the following four-point likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, or (4) Strongly agree. The questions were based on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) from Phinney et al. (1992). Phinney's methodology is one of the most commonly used measures of ethnic identity. The researcher chose the MEIM because it has been used extensively in the literature. Yap et al. (2014) has noted its effectiveness with individuals in later adolescence and early adulthood. Items measure participants' feelings about the ethnic identity group with which they identify and include statements such as "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs" (see Appendix for full measure). The alpha reliability for this sample was .91. The scale includes three dimensions: ethnic identity search, ethnic identity affirmation, and belonging. There are twelve questions evaluated by the four-point Likert-type scale mentioned above. Of these

twelve questions, five questions measure ethnic identity search (questions 1, 2, 4, 8, and 10), seven questions measure ethnic identity affirmation (questions 3, 5, 6, 7, 11 and 12).

The semi-structured interview asked each participant questions about her family structure and family relationships, ethnic identity formation processes, interaction with adoptive family, and contact with birth parents (see Appendix for full interview). In preparing the interview questionnaire, the researcher drew from questions that had been frequently used by previous researchers (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996; Koff & Grotevant, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2013; Gonzales-Backen, 2013; Johnston et al., 2007; Vonk, 2011; Haymer & Simon 2003). The researcher also composed questions that supported the thesis of Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2002) that adoptive parents' support of their adopted children exploring their identity, adoptee exploration of their cultural roots, and contact with their birth parents are important factors in adoptee identity formation.

## Chapter III: RESULTS

### **Analysis Strategy**

In this study, the researcher employed Grounded Theory to guide the qualitative data analysis. To do so, the researcher follows the recommendation of Charmaz (2012) and employs “[s]imultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis [that] involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis” (p.5). Each interview was transcribed word-for-word. Then the content of each interview was read in order to identify such themes as adoptee experience learning about being adopted, adoptee exploration of ethnicity and culture, and adoptive family support of adoptee exploration of ethnic identity.

The purpose of this thesis was to explore ethnic identity experiences for a small group of emerging adults who had been adopted transnationally from Asia as children. The results section will be organized around the qualitative themes that emerged across the interview transcripts and highlight important influences and aspects of ethnic identity exploration for these adoptees.

### **Experience Learning about Being Adopted**

The participants who are the focus of this study are ethnic Chinese females who were born in Mainland China and were adopted by white Americans when they were infants or toddlers. The mean age at adoption was 17.2 months. None of the 11 participants could recall a specific age in which she was told that she was adopted. Instead each mentioned that she gained awareness of having been adopted because it was discussed with her throughout her childhood. For example, participant 6 said that the fact

of her adoption has “always just been kind of there.” Participant 7 noted that the fact that she looked different from her parents made it obvious that she was adopted and contributed to the open conversations. She stated, “I always knew I was—I looked different from my parents, and they always explained well.” Participant 8 stated, “It was just sort of—always a thing, there’s no particular point at which I noticed anything.” Three were adopted by single mothers. Participant 10 was adopted by a single mother who herself was an adoptee (although not a transnational or transracial adoptee). Her mother always both affirmed that she was her daughters “real mother” and encouraged her to ask any questions that she may have. It is interesting that these emerging adults who had been adopted transnationally and who featured a different physical appearance from their adoptive families, report always being aware of their adoption and not recalling a time in which a specific conversation about their adoption was had.

### **Exploration of Ethnicity and Culture**

It is significant that 10 out of 11 participants mentioned the physical appearance differences that they recognized when they were children between themselves and their adoptive families. Participant 3 said, “I don't remember, but my mom told me that when I was a little, around three or so, I asked her why was I a different color than her.” Participant 7 stated, “Obviously there were physical differences between me and my family.”

There are three main ways that adoptive families helped their children explore aspects of their ethnicity and nationality. First, most of the Chinese adoptees who participated in this study (10 out of 11) explained to the researcher that their adoptive parents enrolled them in Chinese school or sent them to a Chinese camp on the weekends

or during summers as they were growing up. Most were enrolled in these types of experiences around age 5 or 6. Participant 6 mentioned that her parents “took my sister and I to a Chinese school.” Participant 8 stated, “My parents made me go to Chinese school.” Participant 1 said, “My parents enrolled me in Chinese classes.” In addition, participant 10 explored Chinese language, culture and food with enrolling in Chinese lesson with another friend who was adopted. Many participants reported an ambivalent or even negative experience with the classes, and many did not continue past age 6.

Even though many of the participants hated these programs as children, they later came to regret that they had not stuck with them and learned Chinese, and expressed the wish that their adoptive parents had pushed them to stay enrolled. Participant 8 said, “I wish that my parents had made me stay in Chinese school and made me learn Chinese when I was in elementary school—because that’s really the best years for learning a second language.” She then said expressed concern that, at age 18, she was “too old to pick up a second language easily now, [and] it would have been beneficial for my career prospects if I’d stayed in Chinese school.” In addition, participant 5 said, “I wish they (her adopted parents) had me take Chinese early.” She further expressed concern that because she had not started learning Chinese early enough, a “language barrier” had arisen that was “the major problem” with exploring her root culture in China further. Two participants, however, did express little to no interest in continuing Chinese lessons even when encouraged by their adoptive parents. Participant 11 took lessons while young but stopped early; she then “tried” learning it in college at her mother’s suggestion but abandoned it after encountering a “mean” teacher who “thought because I was racially and ethnically Chinese I should be able to speak [Chinese].” Participant 4, who also took

lessons for a time as a young girl, expressed no desire to develop Chinese language skills or to learn much about Chinese culture, which she felt “distant” from.

### **Adoptive Family Support of Adoptee Identity Exploration**

**Incorporating culture in the home.** Another way that adoptive families supported the participants’ exploration of their ethnic and national identity was to bring aspects of the Asian culture into the home. The participants mentioned that their adoptive parents displayed crafts, books, and pictures pertaining to their adopted children’s root culture at their homes. Participant 1 said, “My parents cooked Chinese food, got books, took me to Chinatown.” Participant 3, whose father got his Master’s degree in Chinese, said that her father integrated Chinese culture—particularly language, which was a barrier for many others—into the household well. She said, “I had felt I was good at speaking Chinese” on account of her father’s influence. Participant 11 mentioned not only that her mother provided her with fiction books about growing up adopted but also that her mother “told me a lot about her trip going to get me from China [and] made an album [and] showed it to me a lot when I was little.” In these cases, family support of exploration helped participants to feel positive about their ethnic and cultural identity.

**Participation in cultural celebrations.** All eleven participants also mentioned that their adoptive parents had participated in a holiday or cultural event related to the participants’ native culture to help them to explore their ethnic heritage. Most of the Chinese adoptees noted that their adoptive families celebrated Chinese New Year. Participant 11 mentioned that her mother was “sending me a lucky red envelope” containing a card and money for the New Year. Participant 9 said that her adopted parents took her to “Chinese New Year events twice a year [at which] I would be with

other adoptees.” Participant 7 said, “I was really lucky that even really young, we would always celebrate Chinese New Year.” Many stated that they appreciated the effort and the celebration. The sentiment was not universal, however. Participant 8 mentioned not only that she didn’t enjoy participating in Chinese New Year; she told her parents at an early age that she didn’t want to do it anymore. “It was pretty awkward for me, and I hated it,” she said. “I told my parents I wasn’t gonna do any more. And I quit, and that was sorta the last time they did anything ‘Chinese’ with me.”

### **Ethnic Identity Formation**

All eleven participants reported that they struggled to define their ethnic identity. Two participants shared with the researcher stories of having been bullied and of not being accepted by peers. Six participants also reported being uncomfortable with being born in another country and having adoptive parents of a different ethnicity and nationality. There was a struggle between identifying with their birth nationality and ethnicity and with the white ethnicity of their adoptive parents. All of the participants who were adopted from China fit the classification among three categories of descriptions around their own ethnic identity: Root identity versus adoptive whiteness, higher education and being critical, and census categories.

**Root identity versus adoptive whiteness.** In studying the ethnic identity development of transnational adoptees, it is important to give attention to the influence of the adoptive parents’ racial or ethnic identity upon the formation of the identities of their adopted children. This is especially true when the adoptees represent non-dominant racial or ethnic groups and the adoptive parents represent the dominant racial or ethnic group. All but one of the participants was adopted by white parents (or, in the case of those who

were adopted by single parents, by a white parent); one woman who was born in China was adopted by a Chinese American family.

The impact of living in a context classified by “whiteness” not only of the adoptive parents but also of the community in which adoptees were raised and schooled cannot be underestimated. Among the participants born in China, this has had an ambivalent effect. Participant 8 spoke of her ethnicity as being “performed.” “I think,” she said, “that all of my practice being white has contributed to the fact that I identify basically as being white.” For her, ethnicity was not a matter of genetics but rather was a product, if not a function, of how she thought and, particularly, of how she spoke and acted among others. She drew distinctions between her racial identity as Asian and her ethnic self-identification as “American” because she said that she fit various characteristics of being white and had friends who were white. Participant 11 stated, “It’s weird because what’s reflected back to me is just complete whiteness—in my head I don’t picture myself as anything—just a blob.” This has “definitely had a negative impact,” she said further, “because it’s just negated a whole part of myself and made me not really want to be different.” She then said that she had “felt my Chineseness has made me want to be liked among my peers and want to fit in with ways that are pretty negative” (participant 11). This dominant whiteness has even had an ironic impact given that parents, in particular, have stressed similarities with opposed to differences among themselves and their adopted children. Participant 1 stated that her parents described themselves as “colorblind,” as having a “fuzzy perception of me” as being both “Chinese” and also “the same as or equal to everyone else.” She further associated the “colorblindness” of her white and also wealthy parents with the negative effect of the

“whitewash” attitude from friends in school—particularly her Asian American friends, who “consider me lucky in the sense that my parents had money.” Participant 1 further mentioned that despite her attempts to be “indifferent” to this attitude, she would be viewed by others as “a whitewash privilege,” and as somehow inauthentic or not fully “Asian.”

In addition, the adoptees used any of several ethnic labels to describe their ethnic identification. They used “Asian,” “Chinese American,” “Asian American,” “Chinese,” and “American.” Except for one woman whose was adopted by Chinese American parents, all of the Chinese adoptees’ parents are white, and some of the participants consider some degree of their adoptee parents’ race and ethnicity as their own ethnic identity. One of the participants said that “sometimes [it’s] harder to relate, if they say something you’re like, ‘No, I really don’t know that’, cause I don’t really fit into [white] culture, but then with other Asians they’re just like, ‘Oh, you’re just a fake Asian’” (participant 3).

**Higher education and being critical.** The majority of adoptees interviewed believed that formal education was valuable to their exploration of their ethnic identity. Participants 1 and 8 spoke positively about the role of higher education in their ethnic identity exploration. They said that education helped them to articulate their ethnicity by providing opportunities to study their root cultures and languages and also to meet both with other adoptees and with people from other parts of the world rather than from the ethnically and racially homogeneous communities in which most of them were raised by their adoptive parents. Higher education gave them the ability and the tools to study and think critically about culture and ethnicity and race.

This critical thought in some cases led participants to reevaluate their adoptions and their ethnic labels. Participant 8 spoke of ethnicity as being “performed” and so identified ethnically with her white parents. Participant 10, who mentioned her struggle in getting ethnic Chinese students from China to accept her as being Chinese, studied Japanese language and history in high school and college in part to articulate an “Asian” identity. Participant 11, who was adopted from China, formed a different opinion about the gap about the way her mother raised her and the “literature” she had read about adoption in college. She said, “Mom’s a therapist—a lot of things she’s done [with] really good intentions—but in some ways I wish I was never adopted.” While her adoptive mother has “been helpful in encouraging me to see that having feeling about it and even having bad feelings about it is OK,” her own study in college has helped her to become much more critical about the received interpretation of adoption as a generally good and helpful thing for her and for others like her. “Recently I’ve been reading a lot of literature that’s had me questioning my foundations [because it] says what [Mom] did was wrong,” she said. This was “harder for [my mother] to accept [because] it disrupts her narrative of adoption as pretty much only a good thing.”

**Racial categories.** As mentioned above, the adoptees described facing some difficulty identifying themselves racially. They often come across official documents, especially Census forms and student loan or graduate school applications, requiring them to self-identify by race or ethnicity according to pre-set categories. In her interview, Participant 8 expressed a specific example from her experience of applying for law school, a process she described as “really complicated.” Her online applications “have the ethnicity boxes that you check—like some of the application [bars?] will just say ‘Race,’

some of them will say ‘Ethnicity,’ and some will say ‘Race-Slash-Ethnicity,’ and those are not equivalent terms.” She expressed that the process was “confusing” because it contained the potential to encourage a response that was “dishonest.” “I think I would be not honest if I claimed ‘Chinese’ as an ethnicity entirely,” she said. Yet the form demanded a response, which only compounded the matter. She continued, “If it says ‘race-slash-ethnicity’ and I check the box as ‘white,’ that’s misleading because, uh, the people who created that form in their minds I don’t think accounted for a situation such as mine.” She found herself in the situation of needing to “describe[e] myself in boxes of forms.”

### **Other Contextual Influences**

**Contact with birth family and relatives.** The ability to contact his or her birth family and relatives is a particular challenge that adoptees face. This is true of most of the participants in this study. Two out of 11 Chinese adoptees were adopted under closed adoptions; many had scant information at best about their birth parents or families. Some of the participants shared their experiences in reflecting on and even in trying to contact their birth families with the researcher. Participant 2 said, “I don’t speak Mandarin, so it can be hard to communicate”; in fact, she said that “at first [the experience of contacting birth families] was very awkward, because, like they wanted to apologize.” Yet another participant—Participant 1, who created a YouTube channel geared toward a Chinese-speaking audience in an attempt to gain information—expressed skepticism and even cynicism about one couple she had contacted who had at first appeared to be potential candidates for her birth parents. “Why do they want me to be a match?” she asked. “Probably because I’m American and have money.”

While several participants expressed excitement at the prospect of potentially finding their birth parents, the participants more generally expressed confusion and difficulty. In part this was because of the language difference. There is also the fact that clear information about birth parents did not exist for several adoptees because they had been abandoned by their parents for reasons that were unknown but might have pertained to economic hardship, physical handicap, and even gender (all of the interviewees are female). Participant 1 was born with clubfeet. Participant 10 was found by a man on a street corner in front of a restaurant. Participant 4 mentioned that the knowledge of having been abandoned by her birth parents even affected her view of China and of Chinese culture, “which I associate with abandonment.”

**Influences from community.** One of the most important issues that the researcher found from conducting these interviews was the influence of the communities in which the adoptees lived and were raised. Because the participants lived in so many different communities across the country, it was difficult to compare community experiences; however, some interesting regional differences emerged. One of the participants who grew up both in the Northeast and Midwest explained the different experiences that she had in each region. She went to an elementary school in an affluent community in New York State’s Long Island region where “I think there were only two Chinese in the whole school, and we were both adopted—that was the girl I took Chinese lessons with.” She also was “one of the only Chinese in the whole school” other than two adopted children “who were five [years old] at the time.” After moving from Long Island to a major Wisconsin college town, she said that she “still ha[d]n’t met people who were adopted from China that are my age [though] I’ve met white people who have been

adopted.” This experience was “kind of a change” for her, because it is “where I realized I’m not from China—I thought I wasn’t Chinese because, you know, everyone else was poor and raised by Chinese parents” (participant 10). One of the participants who grew up in the West said, “I think that everybody in the Bay Area where I went to school saw me as Chinese, they didn’t see me as Asian American... they thought I was ‘foreign’” (participant 2). Participants who were raised in the Midwest and West described that “over there,” they label much more specific than East. This confirms the finding of Kiang, Perreira, and Fuligni (2011), who mentioned that Asians on the West Coast preferred either to identify as “American” or to use a “hyphenated” label that reflected both heritage and American status.

In addition, one of the participants expressed an interesting aspect about interaction between adopted Chinese and non-adopted Chinese. Participant 8 said that her “interactions with non-adopted Chinese others [was] a factor starting in high school.” She further observed that “the immigrant community in my area [is] very tight-knit [so] the children of immigrants from ethnic minority communities tend to grow up together, and be very good friends, and they all speak their parents’ mother tongue fluently.” This lack of ability to speak fluent Chinese with immigrants whose families were from China having greater Chinese fluency “made it pretty much impossible [during high school] to join their clique—which contributed to—I would’ve liked to have been friends with them, I think—it wasn’t really an option because uh they were already such a well-established group, and I didn’t speak the language.” The experience resulted in a feeling of being “boxed in” and having to choose “to han[g] out with people who were not of the same racial background” (Participant 8). This is an important reason why Chinese

adoptees feel isolated from the broader Chinese community, because there is a clear distinction between Chinese and Chinese adoptees.

### **Ethnic Identity Measured Quantitatively and Qualitatively**

Table 2 shows the results on the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure by rank order for the 11 participants. The mean of the ethnic identity search scale is 2.49. The mean of ethnic identity affirmation and belonging is 2.33. For all 12 items, the mean is 2.39. Participants 5, 12, 14 scored higher than the other Chinese adoptees. Participant 1 scored highest overall. Participants 7 and 9 scored highest for ethnic identity affirmation. Comparing the results from Phinney et al.'s (1992) work with what the participants of this study reported for ethnic identity search, the way participants scored makes sense because summing up with exploration of ethnicity and culture, and group esteem, most of the participants explained that they have explored Chinese language and Chinese culture when they are young even though they have some struggle with how they identify themselves.

In addition, a comparison between the conclusions of Phinney et al. (1992) and what the participants in this present study reported when asked about group belonging (questions 4 and 9) shows a pronounced clarity about ethnic attitudes and identities among the individuals linked to the Chinese adoptees' network. This is likely because they have a strong feeling toward the association to which they belong. The raw data that the participants from the Chinese adoptees' network provided suggested a coherent influence on their identity formation. The reason for the pronounced clarity about ethnic attitudes and identities may be that the sense of belonging to the association provided a special status as adoptees from China that acts almost as a special subtype of ethnic

identity. In other words, they seem to show a special sense of being “Chinese adoptees in America”—and particularly of being women who had been adopted while very young and raised in the United States. Participant 4 made an observation in support of this finding during her interview, as she stated that “more than anything” her adoptee support group was a vital ingredient of her ethnic identity formation “because it’s such a distinct culture” rather than one that is wholly “American” or wholly “Chinese.”

## Chapter IV: CONCLUSION

### **Evaluating the Hypotheses**

This qualitative study explored the ethnic identity experiences of a group of emerging adults adopted transnationally. Four hypotheses were formed based on the literature.

#### **First Hypothesis: Adoptee Contact with Birth Parents**

The first hypothesis is that adoptee contact with birth parents would have both positive and negative impact on ethnic identity formation. As the researcher mentioned from the result section, several participants expressed general interest in and even excitement about finding their birth family and relatives. This was the primary example of the positive impact on identity formation. But they also expressed difficulty in forgiving their parents for having put them up for adoption. Furthermore, four participants had been abandoned in harsh circumstances, quite possibly owing to the fact that China's so-called "One Child Policy," which limits most households to one child, has encouraged many families in its traditionally patriarchal society to favor sons over daughters (<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912861,00.html>) and abled over disabled children. In addition, a couple of participants wondered whether their birth family and relatives might take advantage of them because they lived in the United States and were assumed to be more economically advantaged. These are examples of the negative impact of adoptee contact with birth parents. Several other participants from the network for Chinese adoptees expressed ambivalence about or even disinterest in contacting their birth parents. As noted above, and despite her active search for her birth

parents, Participant 1 expressed misgivings that her birth family might exploit her economically. Participant 4 expressed the strongest disinterest in finding her birth family, and four others reported having little-to-no interest in finding their biological parents regardless of whether they expressed ambivalent (participant 3, 8, 9, 11) or positive feelings about their adoptive parents.

### **Second Hypothesis: Parental Support of Adoptee Exploration of Cultural Roots**

The second hypothesis was that the adoptee's ability to explore cultural roots and the support of adoptive parents in the process of ethnic identity exploration will have a positive influence on the ethnic identity development of transnational adoptees. A comparison of the participants' MEIM results and their self-reports about exploration of ethnic attitudes and group esteem and the scores provided by the participants of this study bear this out to a point. Most of the participants from the Chinese adoptee network said that they explored Chinese language and Chinese culture when they were young with the encouragement and even insistence of their adoptive parents. Yet while most expressed satisfaction with their adoptive parents' encouragement and intentions, most also reported an experience of at least some struggle with self-identification; Participant 4 in fact took the extreme view of ultimately rejecting self-identification as Chinese and identifying as Caucasian instead. The support received from the adoptee network provided at least one of the strongest positive influences (Participant 4 considered it to be the most important influence) upon ethnic identity formation.

### **Third hypothesis: Broader Contextual Factors**

The third hypothesis focused on the influence of broader contextual factors like the community in which they were raised and socioeconomic status. It was hypothesized

that the developmental factors affecting transnational adolescent adoptees, particularly their ability to explore their ethnic identity and cultural roots, are influenced by both the socio-economic status of the adoptive family and the community in which adoptees live with their adoptive families. The participants were spread across the country, but the results suggest a different experience for the participants living in a more ethnic and racially diverse community and those raised in a more homogeneous community. From the interviews, the researcher found two interesting trends. First, participants who were raised in a high social higher socio-economic status were also raised in a predominantly or entirely white community. Growing up there, people cared more about how adoptees dressed rather than an adoptee's root ethnicity. One of the participants (participant 10) discussed her experience being raised among and going to school with adolescents from a high SES community on Long Island in the American Northeast. Even though she was not as wealthy as her classmates were, she lived in the same environment. She was one of two adoptees in the school she attended, and she was bullied because, for example, she could not afford the expensive designer jeans her classmates wore, but she was not bullied because of her ethnicity. In addition, since their parents have some amount of means (even if they do not self-identify as "wealthy"), they had more opportunities to explore their root cultures, including language lessons and immersion camps. On the other hand, since all but one of these adoptees had been raised as children in a white community, they fit in more with white identity than with particularly Chinese or even Asian American identity.

A related theme is that some of the adoptees raised in a white community, who then come into contact with a larger Chinese community, tended to have some struggle

with not being accepted as “pure Chinese.” Two participants mentioned that even though they externally appear “Chinese,” they were internally “American.” Participant 10 mentioned that before she moved from her wealthy East Coast community to her Midwestern college community in Wisconsin, she had stronger identity as white but had “never had anyone say that I wasn’t Chinese,” but when she moved there, ethnic Chinese students at the local university would say, both because of physical and language differences, that she was not Chinese but was Korean.

#### **Fourth hypothesis: Adolescence is not always a positive period**

The final hypothesis was that although adolescence is a crucial period in the formation of self-identity in the lives of individuals from nondominant groups, it is not always a positive period. As mentioned in the results section and above, most of the members of the Chinese adoptees’ network continued to struggle with how to self-identify. This struggle with self-identification was often amplified by the fact that, as they reported, they had often been told by Chinese or Chinese American peers that they are not “Chinese enough” or by white American peers that they are not “white enough.” But the information noted above suggests that the 11 members of the adoptees’ network derive the strength of their ethnic identity, especially in the light of their ambivalent ethnic attitudes, from the strong feelings they have toward their network and of communicating there with other adoptees and sharing their experiences.

#### **Strengths of the Current Study**

One of the strengths of this current study is demonstrated by the 11 participants in the Chinese adoptees’ network, because they demonstrate the accuracy and validity of Phinney et al. (1992)’s ambivalent ethnic attitude score. Joining the network offered

participants the positive support of other group members that they need to build self-esteem that they are not receiving from their white peers, their nonadoptive Chinese or Chinese American peers, and even, despite good intentions and often satisfactory positive support, their adoptive parents. Yet while this positive support of group members served to counteract negative influences on ethnic identity formation, it also contributed to a more positive self-identification among a majority of the participants as a “Chinese adoptee in America.” Further research is needed to investigate the degree to which support group association articulates preexisting ambivalent attitudes toward root culture and the degree to which support group association creates such attitudes. A second, related strength of this study is that it was conducted with participants who grew up in areas across the United States, providing a wider range of experiences and a chance to begin to explore how different communities impact adoptees’ exploration of their cultural roots and identity.

A third strength of the study is the use of mixed methodology combining a survey questionnaire derived from Phinney et al. (1992) and a semi-structured interview protocol. Since the results from both the surveys and the interviews support each other, the accuracy of this study’s findings is strengthened. On the other hand, all of the participants in this study were members of one Chinese adoptees’ network, were women, and except for one case were all raised by white parents. This has undoubtedly given Phinney’s ambivalent ethnic attitude a higher prominence in the results than the researcher expected. In the future, the researcher is interested in comparing Chinese adoptees’ network to networks for adoptees from other countries. In addition, as this study is a pilot study, it has a smaller sample than would be needed to make stronger

comparisons. However, even as a small pilot study, it provides interesting results that can inform future research and work with transnational adoptees.

### **Suggestions for Further Research and Application of Findings**

In this study, the researcher asked the participants questions about their ethnic identity formation, exploration of their cultural roots, contact with their birth families, and how community impacts their ethnic identity formation. There are four results that have emerged from this study that should be given attention both in future scholarship and by professionals who work with transnational and transracial adoptees and, for that matter, their adoptive parents.

First, it is important for adoptive parents to educate their children in their root language, culture, and cultural roots when the adoptees are young. The results suggest that parents should patiently encourage their children to continue their education even when they lose interest or protest. Most of the adoptees who were interviewed for this study, even if they expressed no interest at all in finding their birth families or in celebrating their root culture, mentioned that they wished they had continued the study of the language of their culture of origin. One participant (Participant 1) stood out from other participants in majoring in Chinese in college.

Second, the researcher is aware that ethnic and racial identity formation is a complicated process for transnational and transracial adoptees to undergo. Some of the participants mentioned during the interview that they had a difficult time because they felt rejected not by the racial or ethnic group of their adoptive parents but also by their group of origin because of physical differences, cultural and economic differences, and language ability. Many prior researchers and adoptive parents make their assumption that

the socio-economic status of the adoptive family and the community in which they live influence the developmental factors affecting transnational adolescent adoptees, particularly their ability to explore their ethnic identity and cultural roots. But it is not always the case that the adoptees themselves have a smooth experience in exploring their ethnic identity and cultural roots. This is why, third, it is important for the adoptees to have access to support groups. The 11 women of Chinese descent who made up the sample for this study joined the same adoptees' network, and being in the network seemed to be a positive influence on their ethnic identity and self-esteem.

Finally, the results suggest that adoptive parents should consider the impact on their children's ethnic identity formation of changing their names away from one reflecting the children's countries of origin. While none of the participants explicitly mentioned name changes, it is telling that Participant 1, who exhibited the most positive conception of her biological ethnic identity, is the only participant out of the eleven who maintained a Chinese personal name (although her legal surname was that of her adoptive family). Although further research is needed, the researcher suggests that carrying an adoptees' name from her birth country is an essential ingredient for positive exploration of her ethnic identity as she becomes acculturated to her adoptive home country.

### **Limitations and Future Work**

There are three limitations of this study that warrant discussion. First, the participants were all Chinese adoptees who belonged to the same Chinese adoptee network; therefore, the results for the ethnic identity affirmation and belonging could be influenced by membership in this network. The researcher would like to expand future research in two ways. First, she will study ethnic Chinese adoptees both in other adoptee

networks similar to the one that was the focus of this study and also ethnic Chinese adoptees who do not belong to an adoptee network. This would help test the finding about the impact of adoptee networks on creating a special sense among their members of being “Chinese adoptees in America.” Next, she will expand her study with research into adoptee networks for adoptees from other Asian ethnicities (e.g., Korean, Vietnamese). Doing so will allow for comparing and contrasting the relationship between ethnic identity affirmation and belonging and being among adoptees of other Asian ethnicities.

Second, in this study, only one of the eleven Chinese adoptees had contact with their birth parents. The researcher plans to expand her research in the future by finding a greater number of transnational adoptees who have made successful contact with their birth parents, so that the researcher can gain a stronger understanding of how this influences ethnic identity formation.

Third, in this study, the researcher explored how broader community factors impact Chinese adoptee’s ethnic identity. Results suggest different experiences based on region and community. For example, it would be interesting to understand different experiences of adoptees living in homogeneous communities versus ethnically diverse communities. This work demands a larger pool of participants recruited more strategically with community in mind. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest the importance of supporting adolescents and emerging adults’ exploration of their origin cultures.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Data on Study Participants*

ID	Sex	Current age	The age of the adoption (months)	Identified Race/ethnicity	Birth Country	Adoption type <sup>1</sup>	Current Location
1	F	24	42	Chinese	China	I	NH
2	F	22	12	Asian American	China	I	CA
3	F	18	9	Chinese	China	I	TN
4	F/ Cis-woman	18	5	White	China	I	CA
5	F	22	48	Chinese	China	I	IL
6	F	19	6	Asian American/ Asian	China	I	China/ VT
7	F	29	0.5	Chinese	China	I	FL
8	F	22	5	Asian/ American	China	I	NC
9	F	18	36	American	China	I	IL
10	F	22	5	Asian/ American	China	I	WI
11	F	22	16	Chinese American	China	I	CA

Note: <sup>1</sup> I = International adoption and D = Domestic adoption

Table 2

*Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) of transnational Chinese adoptees by degree of association with root culture*

ID <sup>1</sup>	Mean of ethnic identity item	Mean of ethnic identity search	Mean of ethnic identity affirmation
1	3.50	3.80	3.29
7	2.92	2.40	3.29
6	2.75	2.80	2.71
9	2.67	2.20	3.00
2	2.50	2.60	2.43
5	2.17	2.40	2.00
8	2.08	2.80	1.57
10	2.08	2.80	1.57
11	2.08	2.20	2.00
3	2.00	1.60	2.29
4	1.58	1.80	1.43

Note: <sup>1</sup> Researcher ordered the IDs according to total MEIM score.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY

**Demographic Information**

**\*About yourself**

1. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ years old.

2. At what age were you adopted?

\_\_\_\_\_ months old.

\_\_\_\_\_ years old.

3. What is your gender?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. How do you identify your race/ ethnicity?

---

5. What was your adoption status? (Domestic adoption: from within the 50 states or U.S. territories. Interracial adoption: refers to the act of placing a child of one racial or ethnic group with adoptive parents of another racial or ethnic group. )

\_\_\_\_\_ Domestic (within the United States)

\_\_\_\_\_ International (adopted from outside of the United States)

6. How do you identify the race / ethnicity of your adoptive parents?

Adoptive Mother: \_\_\_\_\_

Adoptive Father: \_\_\_\_\_

7. In what country were you born?

---

8. What was your adoption status? (Open adoption: You and your adoptive parents know some information about your birth parents. Closed adoption: You and your adoptive parents could not know about your birth parents.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Open adoption

\_\_\_\_\_ Closed adoption

9. Have you had any contact with your birth parent (s)?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

10. What was/is your adoptive mother and father's current occupation/job?

Mother \_\_\_\_\_

Father \_\_\_\_\_

11. What is the highest level of education your adoptive mother and father completed? (Check one)

<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
Completed grade school (Kindergarten-8) or less	_____	_____
Some high school	_____	_____
Completed high school	_____	_____
Some college	_____	_____
Completed College	_____	_____
Graduate or professional school after college	_____	_____
Do not know	_____	_____

**Instructions: I am researching the ethnic identity development of emerging adults who were adopted either transracially or transnationally. The questions that I will ask are based on your identity development, adoptive family, and your birth parents. As this is a sensitive topic, you may decline to answer any question at any time.**

ID# \_\_\_\_\_

Please use the numbers below to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Agree; (4) Strongly Agree

Ethnic Identity

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I am acting in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

<b>I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my association with my ethnic group.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>To learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its accomplishments.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I participate in cultural practices</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

<b>of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.</b>				
<b>I feel a strong attachment toward my own ethnic group.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Instructions: Thank you so much for talking with me today. I am researching ethnic identity development among emerging adults who were adopted transracially or transnationally – meaning adopted into a family who were either of a different race/ethnicity or from a different country. The questions that I will ask are based on your identity formation, adoptive family, and your birth parents. As this is a sensitive topic, you may decline to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. The interview will probably take about 30 minutes to one hour.**

Could you describe your biological and adopted family structures and relationships?

- First, can I ask some general questions about your experiences being adopted?
  - Do you remember when you first learned about your adoption? Can you describe what memories you have?
  - It is fairly common in the United States for families to adopt children from other countries and I would like to learn more about the process by which emerging adults who are adopted explore their identities.
  - How would you describe your own racial, ethnic or identity, and nationality?
  - If you have information, please describe the race or ethnicity, and nationality of your birth parents?
  - Please describe the race or ethnicity of your adoptive parents. What similarities and differences do you notice between yourself and your adoptive family in terms of race or ethnicity?

- When or how did you recognize that you and your adoptive parents are different in terms of race, ethnicity, or nationality? What memories do you have related to this? How do you felt about that difference? Have your feelings changed with age?
- How do you think these differences have influenced your own identity development – meaning the process by which you have defined “who are you” as a person. What about how this has influenced your ethnic and racial identity development, specifically?
- If your adoptive parents are of a different race or ethnicity than you are, how do they help you to explore your own cultural roots, such as learning languages and culture?
- How satisfied are you with your adoptive parents’ support in learning about and exploring your own cultural roots, race, and ethnicity? Are there things that have been really useful to your exploration? Are they things you wish they had done?
- Have you ever been to your birth country? If you have been there, tell me about your experience.

Some emerging adults who were adopted have had contact with members of their birth family.

- Have you ever had any contact with your birth parents or family members? If yes, can you describe what this contact has been like? How often have you had contact with them?
- How has this contact informed your identity or how you feel about yourself, your race, your ethnicity, and your birth culture?

Finally, I have a question related with where you grow up and where you live now.

- How do you describe the ethnic composition of your neighborhood where you grow up?
- How do you describe the ethnic composition of your neighborhood where you live now?

That is the last question I have. Based on the content of this interview, is there anything else that I haven't asked – that you would like to share – about your experiences developing a sense of identity?

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**IRB #:** 6014

**Study:** Unique Features of Identity Development in Transnational and Transracial Adoptions

**Approval Expiration Date:** 10-Jun-2015

**Modification Approval Date:** 08-Jan-2015

**Modification:** Changes per 12/1/14 memo

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved your modification to this study, as indicated above. Further changes in your study must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation.

**Approval for this protocol expires on the date indicated above.** At the end of the approval period you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. This document is available at <http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources> or from me.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or [Julie.simpson@unh.edu](mailto:Julie.simpson@unh.edu). Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,



Julie F. Simpson  
Director

cc: File  
Sharp, Erin