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# Being In-between: Narratives of Identity and Community by Chinese American Adoptees

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Being In-between:  
Narratives of Identity and Community by Chinese American Adoptees

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Prerequisite for Honors in  
the Peace and Justice Studies Department  
at Wellesley College

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## Note on Text

*Transnational adoptions*, also known as *intercountry* or *international adoptions*, are adoptions in which a parent with the citizenship of one country adopts a child from another country.<sup>1</sup> *Transracial* or *interracial adoptions*, on the other hand, are adoptions in which a parent of one race adopts a child of another race.<sup>2</sup> Most, but not all, transnational adoptions are also transracial adoptions. For this thesis, I use the term *transnational, transracial adoption* when discussing Chinese adoptees adopted by white American families.

The three main actors in the adoption process are the *adoptees*, the *birth parents*, and the *adoptive parents*. Many people refer to Chinese adoptees as *people or children adopted from China* and birth parents as *biological parents*. Like most adoption scholars before me, I prefer the term adoptee when discussing children and young adults adopted from China. First, because it is commonly used by the Chinese American adoptee communities. Second, because it is a present noun; though we are adopted, we will always be adoptees. The Chinese American community also uses the term birth parent. I use these terms not to insult those within or outside of the adoption community, but rather use the terms that we use within our community. Additional advantages include clarity and consistency.

I refer to adoptees in this thesis as Chinese American adoptees. Many of the adoptees themselves, however, do not identify themselves in this way. They say they are Chinese, Asian American, or American. I do not use the term Chinese American adoptee to erase their identities or prescribe them a particular identity. I only want to make clear that I am discussing adoptees from China who are raised in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## **Introduction**

### ***A Thesis Written for Chinese American Adoptees***

It took me a long time to summon the courage to pursue this thesis. When researching, interviewing, and writing, I knew I would have to recount experiences and relive memories of my life as a Chinese American adoptee. Though fortunate enough to have grown up in an environment where adoption discussions were encouraged and not ignored, I have only recently become comfortable discussing transnational, transracial adoption and my personal story. In many ways, I still struggle to talk about it. I knew too I would be collecting stories about and from other adoptees, stories that could be both heartbreaking and heartwarming. I did not know how to prepare myself to bear witness to their narratives, as well as my own.

### **Telling the Personal Story**

In 1995, when I was four months old, I was adopted from China by a single, white American mother. Like many Chinese adoptees, I have very little information about my life prior to my adoption. According to my mother, I was found outside an orphanage in July, with no note or other personal belongings. The caretakers at the orphanage took me in and assigned me the name Shen Li. For the next four months, I was surrounded by other children, all of whom had their own uncertain backgrounds and futures. When I was adopted in November of that same year, I was malnourished, covered in scabies, and ran a high fever. Soon after my adoption, my mother brought me to New York, a place I still call home. While I was growing up, I had many friends who were also Chinese American adoptees and I participated in numerous adoptee support groups. Being adopted was, as it continues to be now, an important part of my identity.

In 2013, I arrived at Wellesley College and began to learn about adoption from an academic perspective. I soon discovered the topic was much more complicated than the stories I

heard from my mother growing up. In the spring of 2016, I wrote a paper about how Chinese American adoptees fit within the United States. Though this was not my first paper on adoption and the adoptee experience, I felt for the first time a gaping hole in the literature. The scholars I read, like Kim Park Nelson, Elena Kim, and Jennifer Ho, examine how Asian American adoptees articulate their racial and ethnic identities and experiences. And yet, they are primarily concerned with the Korean adoptee experience. Where were and are the voices of Chinese American adoptees? And what do they have to say? What I wanted, and what I needed, was a theory that could speak to the experiences of Chinese American adoptees like myself. Thus, this thesis is my response to the lack of information about my experience. It takes the first step in amplifying the voices of my particular community and the path ahead.

Moreover, this thesis grapples with the concept of belonging and contests the histories of transnational, transracial adoptees. Transnational, transracial adoptees have crossed multiple borders, including nationhood, culture, race, ethnicity, and class.<sup>3</sup> Even though they have crossed such borders, it remains unclear as to where they fall within the nation-state and the nation's imagination. In particular, Chinese American adoptees—many of whom are female—“complicate the relationships between the national body and the foreign other.”<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, they are formally recognized as legal citizens, detached from their “homeland” and embraced within an American family—a vast majority of them white, well-off, and well educated. On the other hand, as adoptees, they are not often believed by society as belonging to their adoptive families (by blood). As Asian American women, they are perceived to be unassimilable and exotic immigrants. Thus, Chinese American adoptees' identities are imbued

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<sup>3</sup> Toby Volkman, introduction to *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Volkman (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 8.

with multiple contradictions: they constantly have to navigate between the white mainstream culture and Asian American culture.

*Being In-between: Narratives of Identity and Community by Chinese American Adoptees*, as the title suggests, interrogates the ways in which narratives of identity and community are constructed around and by Chinese American adoptees. I seek to understand their explorations of and encounters with their Asian/Chinese and American cultures and identities. I offer a historical overview and ethnographic analysis to answer the following questions: How do young adult Chinese American adoptees and other actors (such as parents and the media) narrate adoptions stories? How do they describe experiences of racial and ethnic differences? How do such narratives shape Chinese American adoptees' identities and communities? How do their experiences complicate our understandings of race, gender, and citizenship in the United States? By asking these questions, I seek to investigate notions of social citizenship, belonging, and community-building in the United States.

### **A Brief History of Chinese-U.S. Adoption**

In 1988, the United States issued 12 visas to children adopted from China. By 1992, after China formally legalized international adoption, the number of visas leapt to 226. In 1995, the year I was adopted, the number jumped to 2,130.<sup>5</sup> The number of visas and children adopted from China continued to rise throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. Today, the United States has nearly 100,000 Chinese American adoptees—most of them girls and young women. Why did China have so many orphans, particularly girls, eligible for adoption?

When discussing Chinese adoption, the most widely accepted reason for eligible orphan baby girls is the One Child policy. The policy, which limited families to having only a single

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Klatzkin, introduction to *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son*, by Kay Johnson (Minnesota: Yeong & Yeong Book Company, 2004), xv.



child, was drafted in order to curb rapid population growth and offered a solution, or respite, to a country with a stagnated economy and in political upheaval.<sup>6</sup> Once in effect, the One Child policy directly and disproportionately affected the number of abandoned baby girls, as sons were deemed more valuable than daughters.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout Chinese history, women have married patrilineally. Once married, they left their families, cared for their husband's family, and assumed their husband's family name, a name passed down to their children. Having a son not only ensured the continuation of the family name and line, but also secured the family's property and wealth.<sup>8</sup> As a result, there was intense pressure to produce a son, rather than a daughter. When the One Child policy was introduced in 1979, pressures to have a son were further exacerbated. Families who did not abide by this policy suffered disastrous consequences. For example, "Having more than one child meant losing your job, your home (which was allocated by your employer), your entitlement to food and clothing rations, your child's entitlement to school and medical care."<sup>9</sup> As a result, during the 1980s and 1990s, female child abandonment increased, allowing there to be an increase of girls residing in orphanages and potentially eligible for adoption.<sup>10</sup>

This, however, is only part of the story. What were the forces that allowed many American parents to turn to China for children? After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China experienced great change in its domestic politics and foreign relations. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, relations between the United States and China markedly improved. And in 1979, the same year as the drafting of the One Child policy, the United States and China established

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., xxi.

<sup>7</sup> The One Child Policy is no longer in effect. In 2015, China introduced the Two Child Policy.

<sup>8</sup> Xinran, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Loss and Love*, trans. Nicky Harman (New York: Scribner, 2011), xx.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> There is evidence that suggest that such practices, which had been in place before the One-Child Policy, declined during the 1950s and 1960s.

full and official diplomatic relations.<sup>11</sup> This coincided with the beginning of China's economic reform and opening, which saw a rapid development of international trade and investment. Tourism flourished, academic and cultural communication flowed, and the international market expanded. One such market that developed was the adoption industry.

After the institutionalization of the One Child policy and the legalization of international adoption, the Chinese-U.S. adoption industry took off. By the mid-1990s, the Chinese government had a "well-developed official apparatus for processing international adoptions."<sup>12</sup> China required adoptive parents to travel to China, complete the two-week adoption process, provide a cash donation to their child's orphanage, and promise the government to take care of the child.<sup>13</sup> At the end of these two weeks, the adoption was complete and finalized, and there would never be an issue dealing with birth parents. Furthermore, unlike the United States and most other countries, the Chinese government allowed many older couples, same-sex couples, and single parents to adopt.<sup>14</sup> Thus, despite the cost of adoption and travel (\$12,000 to \$20,000), American parents flocked to China because it offered opportunities unavailable through domestic adoption.

But it was not just the process that was appealing, the children themselves were perceived as desirable—and to a certain extent, consumable. In order to understand the appeal of the Chinese orphan baby girl, it is necessary to briefly examine the construction of the Chinese female body. Afong Moy, one of the first Chinese women to travel to the United States, was exhibited in museums across the country. Elite whites came to gawk at her "Oriental" garb and

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<sup>11</sup> "U.S.-China Relations Since 1949," *Asian for Educators*, accessed April 10, 2017, url: [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1950\\_us\\_china.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_us_china.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Louie, *How Chinese Are You?* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Anita M. Andrew, "China's Abandoned Children and Transnational Adoption: Issues and Problems for US.-China Relation, Adoption Agencies, and Adoptive Parents," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 1 (2007): 123-131, url: <http://0-muse.jhu.edu.luna.wellesley.edu/article/211693>.

<sup>14</sup> This changed in 2007 when China began restricting applicants by marital status, age, mental and physical health, weight, income, education, and more.

small, bound feet, objectifying her physique.<sup>15</sup> The fetishization of the Asian female body endured throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, there is “an abundance of stereotypes regarding Chinese and Asian women that circulate in the Western media and popular culture.”<sup>16</sup> Tropes, such as the exotic Chinese prostitute, the domineering Dragon Lady, and the hardworking model minority, continue to be projected on East Asian, and occasionally South Asian, female bodies. Within the white imagination, they are seen as docile and mysterious beings, exotic and Oriental “others.” For white adoptive parents, Chinese baby girls were often imagined as beautiful, porcelain-like dolls they could wrap up and bring home. Thus, the discourse of the flexible Asian woman led to the objectification and commodification of the Chinese orphan baby.

The commodification of Chinese babies also has its roots in the history of Korean adoption.<sup>17</sup> Korean adoption was first popularized in 1955, after Harry and Bertha Holt adopted eight Korean war orphans. Local and national media seized on the story of their great humanitarianism, inspiring hundreds of thousands of white Americans to follow in the Holts’ footsteps.<sup>18</sup> Korean adoption presented white parents with the opportunity to save Korean orphans from a war-torn, communist country. As a result, new adoptive parents were seen as patriotic and devout Christians who carried out America’s impressive and undying exceptionalism and humanitarianism. While one might think such adoptions were radical and transgressive, they were actually acceptable, as Korean babies did not threaten the racial order. Instead, these adoptions reinforced it; Korean American adoptees were expected to forgo their Korean history and adorn the whiteness of their families. This was a new form of racial passing,

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<sup>15</sup> John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 101.

<sup>16</sup> Louie, *How Chinese Are You?*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> For this thesis, I refer to South Korea as Korea. This is not to suggest that South Korea is better than North Korea, but rather reflects the way Korean adoptees refer to their birth country.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 47-48.

in which the Asian American adoptee could achieve honorary whiteness in American's colorblind, neoliberal society.<sup>19</sup> Although Chinese adoption differs significantly from Korean adoption, white American parents of Chinese children echo this language of honorary whiteness and color blindness. They place an emphasis on minimizing racial and ethnic difference and buy into the illusion of family as true as a biological family.

To end this historical overview, I find it is pertinent to understand and acknowledge the history of transracial adoption in the United States.<sup>20</sup> The discourse on domestic transracial adoptions has been dominated by Black-white adoptions. During the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, transracial adoptions—Black children and other children of color adopted by white parents—were seen as a positive step towards racial integration and assimilation. By the 1970s, however, the placement of Black children in white families came under intense scrutiny and harsh criticism. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) called such adoptions “cultural genocides” and argued that white parents were unable, and unwilling, to prepare their children “for survival in a racist society.”<sup>21</sup> This controversy put such unwanted pressure on white adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and other social service agencies that by 1978 thirty states had established strict policies limiting the number of domestic transracial adoptions. By the 1990s, domestic transracial adoptions were extremely discouraged both in the eyes of the state and the public. At the same time, Chinese/U.S. adoptions were much more appealing because “motifs of model Asia America play[ed] off the construction of the abject black America and failed black-white relations.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in addition to the geopolitical environment, white

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup> The domestic adoption of a child of color carries with it a traumatic legacy. The first transracial “adoptions” were the removal and kidnapping of Native American children and their placement in white households (to act as servants) and boarding schools.

<sup>21</sup> Mia Tuan and Jiannbin Lee Shiao, *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race: Korean Adoptees in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 42.

American parents turned to China because such adoptions were not only possible, but also, as stated above, more desirable.

Today, Chinese American adoptees are reaching young adulthood and learning about their history: the history of Chinese-U.S. relations, of Chinese Americans, and transnational, transracial adoption. And yet, the history we learn is incomplete. The brief history I presented above only touches on the few forces and stakes at play within Chinese-U.S. adoption. It focuses on the adoptee as the object, as being passed from the hands of one country to the hands of another. It is my hope that the stories told throughout this thesis recognize the adoptee as an actor. It is an attempt to converse with these histories and to rewrite history so that we are at the center of the discourse.

### **A Short Literature Review**

Within the last few decades, there has been a significant shift in the everyday conversations about transnational, transracial adoption. Throughout the 20th century, adoption was rarely, if at all, discussed between family members, friends, and other adoptees. Parents, adoption organizations, and social service agencies did not question the adoption process, and many assumed their transnational, transracial adopted child would grow up “white.” In the late 1980s and into the 20th century, these actors assumed a different position, in part because Korean adoptees vocalized their isolating experiences. With their stories in mind, new adoptive families were highly encouraged to discuss adoption, explore their identities, and learn about their birth country/culture.<sup>23</sup>

Everyday conversations were significantly influenced by the change in the academic discourses on transnational, transracial adoption. The earliest adoption studies from the 1960s

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<sup>23</sup> Volkman, *Cultures of Transnational Adoptions*, 4-5.

and 1970s focused primarily on transracial adoptees' social adjustments to their new home and family.<sup>24</sup> Psychologists, social workers, and to some extent, sociologists, were interested in the psychological, behavioral, and developmental consequences of placing children of color, mostly Black children, into white households. Such studies, called outcome studies, were not concerned with race or ethnicity, as most assumed successful assimilation into a white middle-class family. More recently, a growing number of anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have started to examine the social, cultural, and historical tensions within and implications of transnational, transracial adoption.<sup>25</sup> This thesis builds upon and contributes to the growing body of literature questioning transnational, transracial adoption within the United States. I aim to situate this thesis amongst Asian American ethnographies and research studies.

In her book, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*, Sara Dorow focuses on the public and private constructions of Chinese American adoptees' racial and cultural identities. Dorow, herself the mother of two adopted Chinese girls, documents the Chinese-American adoption process, as experienced by (mostly) white parents. She brings our attention to the myriad of strategies parents use to articulate and understand the racial differences between themselves and their children. Like Dorow, I am interested in exploring the tensions that arise from and within the Chinese-American adoption process. Rather than look at how parents interpret and handle racial and cultural differences, however, I examine how Chinese American adoptees narrate their adoption stories and navigate their own sense of social and cultural belonging.

Kim Park Nelson also explores the historical and sociocultural forces that have both brought families and adult adoptees together. As an Asian American adoptee herself, Nelson

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<sup>24</sup> Tuan and Shiao, *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

offers an insightful ethnography of adult Korean American adoptees, interviewing adoptees adopted as early as the 1950s. In privileging the stories and voices of Korean American adoptees, Nelson argues Korean adoptees cross and recross the “White/Asian American color line,” and thus enact “identities that are sometime White, sometimes Asian.”<sup>26</sup> This profound sense of in-betweenness is extended in Jennifer Ho’s theory of “racial ambiguity.”<sup>27</sup> According to Ho, racial ambiguity—transgressive identities and identifications that defy dominant racial categorization—denaturalizes and destabilizes notions of race as fixed, constant, and knowable. In her chapter, “Antisentimental Loss,” Ho explores the racial identity formation of Asian American adoptees. By focusing on adult adoptee bloggers, she argues their work not only counters the romantic narratives of salvation, but also creates a community and culture that encompasses their racially ambiguous identities.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to Ho, Elena Kim’s *Adopted Territory* provides a useful framework to understand and analyze adoptee community and adoptee activism. By focusing on the agency and social mobilization of Korean adoptees, Kim argues adoptees are “social actors” who consciously participate in the construction of a distinct Korean adoptee culture and political identity.<sup>29</sup> She articulates the emergence of an “adoptee counterpublic,” a form of nation-building that create a sense of kinship and belonging amongst adoptees.<sup>30</sup> As we will see in Chapter 3, Chinese American adoptees are in the beginning stages of cultivating a national and international Chinese adoptee community and counterpublic.

### **A Chinese Adoptee Ethnography: Research Methodology**

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<sup>26</sup> Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Elena Jean Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and The Politics of Belonging* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004) 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

I hoped that by providing my own adoption story at the beginning of this thesis, I could make clear the profound personal and political implications this work has on me. Here, I would like to disclose even more information about my involvement in the adoptee community before describing my research methodology. From the time I was seven years old to my senior year in high school, I was a part of Also Known As (AKA), an Asian American adoptee community. In my sophomore year of college, I joined Wellesley College's first adoptee group. Since then, I have joined many adoptee-only Facebook groups, connecting with adoptees across the U.S. and around the world. My involvement in adoptee communities, like AKA, allowed me to feel comfortable in approaching the community to conduct research.

When envisioning this thesis, I knew I would follow in the steps of Kim Park Nelson, a Korean adoptee activist and scholar. In her book, *Invisible Asians*, Nelson conducted oral history interviews, citing that they -- as opposed to traditional research interviews -- truly privilege the voices of the adoptees. Grounded in memory, oral histories are in-depth accounts of personal experiences and reflections. This methodology allows adoptees to control the telling of their stories with little to no structural boundaries. Moreover, many Chinese American adoptees, like Korean American adoptees, share their adoption stories and other adoptee experiences with each other in an oral history fashion. The telling and sharing of stories is, in many ways, a "ritual of socialization among adoptees."<sup>31</sup> While my interviews were much more formulaic than Nelson's open-ended oral history interviewing, I wanted my interviews to center the voices of the adoptees. Thus, after obtaining consent from each adoptee, I explained that their stories belonged to them: they could share what they wanted, stop when they wanted, and structure their answer to my questions in any way.

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<sup>31</sup> Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 19.



For this thesis project, I talked with twenty-five young adult Chinese American adoptees, ages 18 to 25 years old. Though some participants were people I had known since I was little, I met many of them for the first time in-person or via Skype. All of the adoptees I spoke with identified as women, as a majority of Chinese adoptees are women for reasons explained above. Because, as explained previously, Chinese-U.S. adoption is an expensive process, all of the adoptees I spoke to came from middle to upper-middle class families. And thus, all either attend or attended a four-year college institution. Furthermore, the parents of these children were all white, except for two—one of whom had a white father and an Asian mother and another who had a white father and a Latina mother. It is important to note that these demographics do not reflect the limits of my research, rather they reflect the population demographics of Chinese American adoptees—a majority of whom are female, adopted in white, two parent households with middle-class backgrounds. Additionally, because I am based along East Coast, more specifically in the North East, twenty out of the twenty-five people I interviewed were from New York, Boston, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Adoptees, however, are located throughout the United States.

As both an adoptee and an Asian American, I am a research insider. At times, I had difficulty navigating how much I wanted to share about myself and my experiences. I always invited the adoptees to ask me questions about my research and my adoption story. But because I did not want my experiences to influence their stories and answers, I emphasized that I was centering their voices. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to extract myself from their narratives and to maintain a certain level of objectivity. A few of the people I interviewed were very close friends, and others were friends of friends. Thus, I constantly had to navigate how my identity was both an asset and a liability to my research process. There were times that I was unable to

remain objective; I often had strong emotional reactions to the things I heard. It proved challenging to listen to the adoptees' stories and check my own emotional response, as well as acknowledge how such emotions influenced and informed my note taking and my analysis.

Nevertheless, before and during the interview process, I saw my relationships to adoptees and adoptee communities grow and deepen. I found myself reaching out to adoptees who posted on Facebook pages and attended more Chinese American adoptee community events in both the New York and Boston areas. The more I engaged with Chinese American adoptees, the more complicated and complex my understanding of adoption became. Their voices and their stories allowed me to become more critically engaged with theories of race, gender, culture, class, and nationality. Because I learned and continue to learn from their stories and this community, I see this thesis as one way to give back to the Chinese American adoptee community. And I acknowledge that what is written here does not capture the voices of all Chinese adoptees, but rather provides a glimpse into the lives of a few within my community. Regardless, it is this glimpse that can begin to disrupt assumptions and constructions of the adoptee experience and articulate notions of belonging, authenticity, and community.

### **The Chapters to Come**

Chapter 1, "Telling Narratives: Stories on Adoption," opens with an examination of the dominant media narratives—historical and contemporary—that have defined and shaped the public's understanding of adoption and the adoptee experience. This chapter builds upon the history provided in this introduction and chronicles the institutionalization of Chinese-U.S. adoption. It uncovers prevalent and damaging media/parent narratives and analyzes tropes—the white savior parent and the rescuable, marketable, and pitiful orphan—that emerged out of them. I counter such narratives with Chinese American adoptees' own stories. And I examine how such

stories complicate the narratives, as adoptees both challenge and reinforce the tropes constructed about and around them.

Chapter 2, “Between White and Yellow: Racial Flexibility and Liminality,” focuses on how adoptees approach and understand their racial and ethnic identities. In this chapter, I draw extensively from Jennifer Ho’s theory of racial ambiguity. Because Chinese American adoptees are “exposed to contradictory, racialized experiences... they must learn to navigate and negotiate [their racial identities] over the course of a lifetime.”<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, they are raised by white parents and within white mainstream culture. On the other hand, they are perceived as racial minorities and subject to racial discrimination. As I delve into their narratives, I examine the racial boundaries and racial categories that constrain Chinese American adoptees’ identities and relationships. And I show how adoptees resist being defined by the white family upbringing and their Asian ancestry.

Chapter 3, “Building a Transnational Community,” describes Chinese American adoptee experiences with adoptee communities. Unlike Korean American adoptees adopted in the 50s through to the 80s, a majority of Chinese American adoptees participated in parent-constructed adoptee communities such as Families with Children from China (FCC). This chapter explores the complicated process of community building, both by parents and Chinese American adoptees themselves. My examination of communities run by and for Chinese American adoptees, such as China’s Children International, reveals the distinct adoptee culture that has emerged. Finally, I offer my suggestions to the Chinese American adoptee community as steps to take when constructing and cultivating a transnational space of belonging.

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<sup>32</sup> Richard M. Lee and Matthew J. Miller, “History and Psychology of Adoptees in Asian America,” in *Asian American Psychology*, ed. Alvin N. Alvarez (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 345.

The conclusion, “What’s Next?: Adoptees in the Trump Era,” describes the current challenges the Chinese American adoptee community face. Since the deportation of Korean American adoptee Adam Crasper and the presidential election of Donald Trump, tensions have grown within Chinese American adoptee community. I conclude with my own reflections on pressing current events, the path ahead for the Chinese American adoptee community, and the process of writing (and re-writing) this thesis.

To close this introduction, I want to stress what this thesis does not answer: Should we support transnational, transracial adoption? Adoption, whether it be domestic or international, is a complex process and practice, one that is unlikely to end in the future. What I offer instead is a piece that brings together the voices of Chinese American adoptees, voices that are raw and real. Their narratives reflect the fears, the doubts, the comforts, and the hopes that come with being a transnational, transracial adoptee: narratives that demand to be heard.

## Chapter 1

### *Telling Narratives: Stories on Adoption*

“People have stories of their mom being pregnant. We have stories of our moms doing paperwork.” – Kara

Since the early 1990s, news reports have widely shaped and defined the Chinese American adoptee experience. In this chapter, I discuss the dominant narratives that have contributed to the public’s, as well adoptees’ own, understanding of adoption. While major news stories covering adoption have evolved significantly since the 1950s, they continue to propagate certain negative tropes, including the pitiful Chinese orphan; the white, savior-like parents; and the perfect, multicultural family. To counter such tropes, this chapter captures Chinese American adoptees’ own adoption stories. The stories of these young adult adoptees—from bloggers to my thesis participants—express confusion, sadness, loss, and anger, directly contradicting common narratives of Asian backwardness, white heroism, and good fortune. Thus, I argue these “counternarratives” ultimately reveal and refute the socially constructed adoption/adoptee narratives.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Rescuing Chinese Children: The Romanticization of Adoption**

In 1995, the year I was adopted, BBC News aired *The Dying Rooms*, a 38-minute documentary directed by Kate Blewett and Brian Woods. The film follows the two documentarians as they travel to orphanages in and around Shanghai.<sup>34</sup> With concealed cameras and a good ruse in case they are “discovered,” Blewett and Woods set out to uncover the growing rumors of orphan abuse and neglect. To their horror, as well as the audiences’, they find

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<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 45.

<sup>34</sup> “The Dying Rooms,” directed by Kate Blewett and Brian Woods, *True Visions Productions*, accessed April 9, 2017, url: <https://wellesley.kanopystreaming.com/video/dying-rooms>.

many children—most of them girls—uncared for and malnourished. The film, which would go on to win awards, became well-known and well-received by hundreds of thousands of people around the world. For many current and prospective parents, the film confirmed that “China and its orphan children were in need.”<sup>35</sup>

Weeks after the documentary’s debut, Human Rights Watch, an international human rights research and advocacy organization, published a 331-page report claiming “thousands of children died in China’s state-run orphanages from deliberate starvation, medical malpractice, and staff abuse.”<sup>36</sup> News outlets—national and local—instantly picked up on this report, decrying the treatment of Chinese orphans. From this report and the film, the image of the abused Chinese baby girl emerged. For example, one New York Times article covering the film’s release in the United States begins:

Her name in Chinese is rendered Mei Ming, which means No Name. Her cheeks are sunken, and her eyelids are crusted with blisters of neglect. When she cries, the exertion stretched, perilously, the parchment skin of her face. Her hooded eyes refuse to tear. Instead, they are filled with such desperation that when you see the terror in them, then hear the rasping sound that escapes her, you know that death is not far away.<sup>37</sup>

It’s coupled with a black-and-white photograph of Mei Ming, a corpse-like, skeletal baby. This article is haunting, but it’s also sensationalistic, playing into the minds of white Americans who imagine Asia as a dark, backwards continent, unable and unwilling to care for its children. More importantly, it paints all of China’s orphans as children who need to be saved.

As the image of the pitiful, rescuable Chinese orphan emerged, so too did the image of their rescuers. Adoptive parents, usually white, well-off, and well-educated, are often portrayed as humble humanitarians. In fact, many parents see themselves as people fulfilling a moral,

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<sup>35</sup> Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Tyler, “U.S. Rights Group Asserts China Lets Thousands of Orphans Die,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 6, 1996.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick Tyler, “In China’s Orphanages, a War of Perception,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan. 21, 1996.

religious, or humanitarian duty. The media, in particular, features celebrities who have adopted transnationally and transracially, praising their efforts to help a child in need. The rhetoric surrounding adoptive parents culminated in the creation of a Barbie doll and her newest accessory: a Chinese baby.<sup>38</sup> While these “Going Home Barbie” dolls are no longer in production, they were usually given to parents staying at the White Swan Hotel, a hotel on Shaiman Island known for its large number of adoptive parents guests. To have Barbie—a beautiful, happy, all-American white woman—and her newly adopted daughter as the face of Chinese-U.S. adoption sums up the public’s image of the perfect adoptive family. Additionally, Barbie and her new Chinese daughter make clear the overt “consumptive overtones” that haunt the adoption.<sup>39</sup> In a 1998 issue of *Vanity Fair*, for example, adopted Chinese girls were considered “the season’s hot accessory in the Hamptons.”<sup>40</sup> Here, it is evident that Chinese orphan girls were imagined as objects first, children second.

The objectification of Chinese orphans is possible in part because adoptees have biological stories that are virtually unknown. Given the mystery surrounding their biological origin stories, they are perceived as objects with blank slates. This allows parents both to formulate and project a narrative onto their adoptive child’s body, making adoption and incorporation into the family seem “easier.” Thus, Chinese orphans are marketable, as they are advertised as pure, innocent, and malleable newborns. But a child’s marketability complicates the relationship between parent and child. For example, Linda, a twenty-one year Chinese American adoptee, describes an encounter between her parents and her best friend’s parents:

“Our parents met...they met in, like BabyRUs, or something. And her parents were toting around

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<sup>38</sup> David Barboza, “A Chinese Hotel, Full of Proud American Parents,” *NY Times*, March, 31, 2003, accessed April 10, 2017, url: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/31/world/a-chinese-hotel-full-of-proud-american-parents.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Esther Fein, “Secrecy and stigma no longer clouding adoptions,” *New York Times* (October 25, 1998), quoted in Barbara Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World: Race, Identity, and Transnational Adoption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 31.

this little Chinese baby. And my parents were like, ‘Hey, we’re getting one of those too.’” One could easily mistake the conversation to be about China dolls, not actual children, as the term, “getting” is not usually used to describe how parents have children. As Linda’s vignette indicates, Chinese American adoptees must witness parent narratives of their own objectification. Linda makes clear that such narratives are upsetting, unsettling, and uncomfortable.

Regardless of such uncomfortable, consumptive overtones, the fantastic union of child and parent(s) was and is a spectacle: the formation of the complete, loving, and multicultural family. This image of the diverse family corresponded with the colorblind discourse that emerged after post-Civil Rights era in the United States. It is significant that Barbie is a white, single American mother; she, alone, is able to “create” and maintain the image of the perfect family. Furthermore, she inspires awe in her ability to overlook racial difference. In another example, Rose Lewis’ children’s book, *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*, tells the story of a young, single mother adopting her beautiful Chinese daughter. The narrator skips over the legal details of adopting a child and jumps straight to the overwhelming bond between mother and daughter. For example, when meeting her Chinese daughter for the first time, the narrator says: "When you looked at me with those big brown eyes, I knew we belonged together. 'I love you like crazy cakes,' I whispered. How did this happen? How did someone make this perfect match a world away?"<sup>41</sup> While the bond may seem natural, the forces bringing them together are not. Furthermore, by idealizing this romantic, perfectly-matched family, these narratives obfuscate the unnaturalness of adoption.

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<sup>41</sup> Heather Davis, “How I Found You,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2000, accessed April 17, 2017, url: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/19/reviews/001119.19davist.html>.



These tropes—the pitiful, marketable Chinese orphan, the white parent rescuers, and the complete, happy (almost natural) family—do not exist in a vacuum. They have a long history dating back to the first wave of Korean-U.S. Adoptions. As mentioned in the introduction, during the 1950s, there was a proliferation of stories about Korean adoption in newspapers, magazines, books, and films.<sup>42</sup> According to Nelson, who interviewed many adoptees adopted in the 50s and 60s, white American parents who adopted children from Korea became instant celebrities in their small, Midwestern towns. Local news articles congratulated the parents and marveled at the children. Though such self-congratulatory articles have long since passed, this is not to suggest they have faded within the American imagination. In fact, as I have illustrated, such tropes remain alive, albeit in a different way, today.

Finally, it is impossible to ignore how these narratives had and have concrete and tangible effects. As Jennifer Ho argues in *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, such stories constructed adoption as “a benign intervention that is necessary to prevent these abandoned children...from languishing in state run institutions, bereft of loving homes and parents” and a necessity in getting rid of the world’s suffering.<sup>43</sup> This imagery elicited the sympathy of some adoptive parents, prompting them to adopt. As a result, Chinese-U.S. adoption increased exponentially. From 1998 to 2006, Chinese adoption reached an all-time high of 66,000 children adopted by and into families from twenty-two receiving countries, 45,000 of whom were adopted by American parents.<sup>44</sup> These numbers serve as a reminder of the consequences of narratives constructed, believed, and rendered visible by the nation.

These sentimental narratives of mother-daughter reunions have taken on a different form as adoptees have grown up: they have become birth family reunion narratives. This past January

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<sup>42</sup> Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World*, 31.

*Good Morning America* filmed the emotional reunion of Andrey Doering and Gracie Rainsberry, twin 10-year-old Chinese American adoptees adopted by two different parents.<sup>45</sup> Having waited months to meet each other, the girls—dressed in matching pink shirts, black leggings, and black-rimmed glasses—finally embrace each other on live TV, tears streaming down their faces. When they finally sit down for their interview, they girls are too shocked to speak. In this section, I briefly look how reunion narratives involving older adoptees, like Audrey and Gracie, are constructed.

The *Good Morning America* segment begins with an interview about the twin’s adoption processes and their parents’ discovery. When she first found out Gracie might have a twin, Gracie’s mother confesses, “To be honest with you, one of the first thing I thought was: We’re not telling her.” But after the parents’ initial hesitation to bring the girls together, the girls ultimately (re)unite on screen. Following the segment, *People Magazine*, *US Weekly*, and other popular entertainment and celebrity gossip magazines re-published the story. The articles praised *Good Morning America* and the parents for discovering the twins and bringing them together.

Though their reunion is certainly unique, and admittedly heartwarming, I found the responses from the public, as well as from the adoptee community, much more interesting. Viewers and readers, adopted and non-adopted, criticized *Good Morning America* for robbing the two girls of a very private family moment and then capitalizing on it. After the segment’s release, I talked to many adoptees included in this project and outside of it, who had mixed feelings about the reunion. Some expressed they thought it could have been handled better and many said they would not have wanted for it to happen to them in that way -- live and on national television. They argued such a reunion like Audrey’s and Gracie’s should be done in the

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<sup>45</sup> Cathy Becker, Shannon Crawford, and Doug Lanz, “Twin Sisters Separated at Birth Reunite Live on ‘GMA,’ *ABC News* video, 10:36, Jan. 11, 2017, accessed April 12, 2017, url: <http://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/twin-sisters-separated-birth-reunite-live-gma/story?id=44693342>.

comfort of their own homes as to avoid sensationalism and romanticism of the adoptee experience.<sup>46</sup> This narrative, as the comments and reactions to suggest, obscures the initial loss and tragedy of separation that allow this reunion to happen.

Similarly, the 2012 film *Somewhere Between* grapples with the sentimental adoptee narrative. Since its release, the film has become a staple in the adoptee community. It follows four Chinese adoptees as they navigate the “ups and downs” of being a teenager and an adoptee.<sup>47</sup> The director, Linda Goldstein Knowlton, a white American mother in the process of adopting a child from China, captures nearly three years of footage and asks the viewers to witness the girls grapple with questions of identity, belonging, culture, and family. Many of the interviews are upbeat and lighthearted, scratching only the surfaces of issues related to abandonment, racism, and stereotypes. The film ultimately focuses on one of the girl’s reunion with her birth family. This return to the sentimental, the emotional, story confirms the good fortune of adoptees.

The tropes that haunt Chinese American adoption are not only problematic, but also consequential. The Chinese orphan girl—labeled as pitiful, rescuable, marketable, and desirable—and their adoptive parents—seen as heroic, yet necessary saviors—present a romantic and sentimental story that is both alluring and attractive. When these two actors are brought together through transnational, transracial adoption, they are the most perfect example of family and colorblindness. Yet, this parent-driven narrative obscures the reality of privilege and oppression that allows for such adoptions to occur in the first place.

### **Vlogs and Blogs: Adoptees’ Public Narratives**

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<sup>46</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> *Somewhere Between*, directed by Linda Goldstein Knowlton (Long Shot Factory and Ladylike Films, 2012, DVD, (Docuramafilms, 2013).

Today, there are many adoptees who write blogs and have Youtube channels in which they discuss adoption directly. They share stories that “pose as a counternarrative to a variety of themes often found in adoption stories: rescue and relief, love conquering all obstacles and a force for colorblindness, and race either as nonexistent or a factor that can be absorbed by a neoliberal rhetoric of inclusiveness.”<sup>48</sup> In her work, Ho turns to blogs (by Korean, Vietnamese, and Taiwanese adoptees) as the happy medium of the traditional, sentimental narrative and the counternarratives that correct and counteract simplistic and oftentimes harmful images of the adoptee. I too turn to blogs, in this case one video blog and one Tumblr blog, in search of this counternarrative.

Alex Brennan’s “My Adoption Story,” an eight-minute video watched over 32,000 times, documents her adoption story from her parents’ decision to adopt her to her family now. Though Chinese Canadian, Alex’s experience is not unlike many Chinese American adoptees, and she is one of the few adoptees with a personal Youtube channel. Her video is relatively uncontroversial: she expresses how happy, lucky, and thankful she feels to be where she is today. The video, if anything, is a touching tribute to her adoptive parents, with a brief thirty-second clip of her pondering her birth parents.<sup>49</sup> It directly plays into the romantic image of an orphan grateful for her adoption and her adoptive parents. On the other hand, Alex’s other videos, like “Where are You Mom?,” which captures her thoughts on her birth mother and “What Not to Say to Asian Adoptees,” which shares common micro-aggressions Asian adoptees hear every day, express very different feelings. For example, in “What Not to Say to Asian Adoptees,” Alex

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<sup>48</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity*, 57.

<sup>49</sup> Alex Brennan, “My Adoption Story,” YouTube video, 8:06, Oct. 29, 2015, url: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONC0BmWGC\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONC0BmWGC_4).

begins: “That’s so cool that you are adopted. I wish I was adopted.”<sup>50</sup> Here, her sarcastic tone is unmistakable. At another point she says, “Your real parents didn’t want you, so we don’t either.” This video touches on her anger, sadness, loss, and confusion, over being abandoned and being attacked as a Chinese Canadian. And yet, this video, compared to her sentimental adoption video, is largely unwatched and largely unheard. It is clear which story the audience wants to hear.

Similarly, Kathryn Jin’s Tumblr blog, titled “Different, Not Less,” is one of the few Tumblr pages to feature an adoptee’s experience. Many of her blog posts are only a few sentences long and give us a short glimpse into her life. While many earlier posts include her ramblings on friendship and pictures of bookstores, her most recent posts from 2016 are related to being adopted and being an adoptee. For example, in one post from early 2016, Kathryn writes about her Adoption Day:

It’s been 19 years. I always miss the exact day. I don’t even know the exact day. Exactly 19 years ago, we were probably in America already. My parents don’t remember the exact date either—but how am I supposed to remember if I was never really told. 19 years since I’ve been part of this family. Since I came to America. Since I lost my Chinese citizenship and became an American(ish-it was a process). 19 years ago and I left China forever. Whoa.<sup>51</sup>

Like most Tumblr blogs, Kathryn has also reblogged many posts from other blogs featuring and centering adoptee experiences. One post she reblogged from “Confessions of an Adoptee,” states: “#422. Every time I see an exchange student from China, I wonder why her parents decided to keep her and why mine didn’t.” Kathryn follows this statement with her own

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<sup>50</sup> Alex Brennan, “What Not to Say To Asian Adoptees,” YouTube video, 6:40, Aug. 3, 2016, url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdHYGyjVoxU>.

<sup>51</sup> Kathryn Jin, “19 Years,” *Different, Not Less* (blog), 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, url: <http://kathrynjin.tumblr.com/post/124880308655>.

thoughts: “We’re the lost daughters of China.”<sup>52</sup> Her blog posts are not filled with the happiness and gratitude adoptees are expected to feel. They are filled with her own realizations, her own struggles with understanding what exactly it means to be adopted. She acknowledges the gaps in her story and the loss that comes with being separated from China. Unlike Alex’s videos, Kathryn’s blog takes a very unconventional, candid look at her adoptee experience.

Both Alex and Kathryn, as young adult Chinese adoptees, are beginning to challenge the dominant discourses around their adoptions, albeit each in her own way. As adults, they counteract the image of the Chinese baby girl and they represent and produce a different form of knowledge. As Jennifer Ho notes, blogging, whether it be video blogging or Tumblr blogging, “allows these adoptees to not only narrate their own stories but to correct the misimpressions that have shaped the dominant discourse around adoption, especially around Asian transnational adoption.”<sup>53</sup> Ho continues that it is precisely these blogs, and their connections to other blogs, that form a community of adoptees. The share community these blogs represent is unmistakable and powerful, and a topic I will return to in Chapter 3.

### **Sounds and Silences: Listening to Chinese Americana Adoptees’ Origin Stories**

Even though these adoptee vlogs and blogs are illuminating, they are made for public consumption. This last section is solely dedicated to the stories about adoption, also known as origin stories, as told by the adoptees themselves, stories not curated for video blogs or Tumblr or Facebook posts. These stories hold truths and speculations; they are incomplete and yet convey all that the adoptee knows. By sharing and connecting their narratives, I uncover the

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<sup>52</sup> “#422”, *Confessions of an Adoptee*, Aug. 19, 2015, reblogged by Kathryn Jin, *Different, Not Less* (blog), 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, url: <http://kathrynjin.tumblr.com/post/127118699075>.

<sup>53</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 65.

ways in which adoptees want their stories to be told, heard, and remembered. They provide, what so many of the stories we have already encountered missed, their voices.

Before delving in, I want to highlight that much of what adoptees know about their adoptions come from their parents. As Sara Dorow notes, many adoptees, adopted as infants, are too young to remember being adopted. (As mentioned earlier in this chapter, their unknown histories make them desirable). What they do learn, they get from their parents, from their adoptee peers, and from the media itself.<sup>54</sup> The stories they construct for themselves about themselves are culled not from their memories, but from others' memories. Thus, they can be flawed and inaccurate. But this does not indicate that they are any less true or relevant to an adoptee's life. In fact, it is the stories that they create for and about themselves regarding their adoptions that are far more revealing and empowering than the ones created by others. They offer their own reflections and interpretations of their experiences that their adoptive parents would never be able to capture.

Emily, a twenty-one-year-old New Yorker, begins her story with a description of her childhood. Growing up in a family with other adoptees, she believed that her adoption story was one that applied to everyone:

I actually thought that all kids were adopted up until a certain point when I learned about the birds and the bees...I used to, like... most [children] think that babies come from hospitals, like you go into a hospital and come out with a baby. I used to think that you go on vacation somewhere and a baby was brought to a hotel room because that's how my parents got me....

She continues,

In my Kindergarten class, there were 5 of us adopted kids, yeah, so I remember all of them too. We were all in a little group, and we all identified that we were the same. And that's when I started realized that we were adopted and Asian and they were white and biological, and then I was like, "Maybe all Asian people were adopted."

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<sup>54</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 168.

Here, young Emily saw her family's story as self-evident and universal. This story, unlike the sensationalistic and sentimental ones crafted by dominant discourses, offers an image of adoption not as a spectacle, but as the norm. Though this explanation of where babies come from is clearly not true, and young adult Emily acknowledges that, it reveals the social construction and policing family. Her normalization of the "abnormal" makes clear that the nuclear, all-American white family is neither natural nor preordained. And in doing so, Emily challenges the claims of adoption as romantic, as a spectacle; it is simply family.

While adoptees might normalize their adoptive families at a young age, their stories of family formation change as they begin to learn more about the circumstances around their adoption. What stands at the heart of their adoption stories is the One Child policy. Talia, a twenty-two-year-old New Yorker, explains:

My parents said I was adopted at 13 months old... And so they have this One-Child Policy in China. I don't believe they have it anymore, but you know, they had it. That basically means that the families, if they're gonna have a kid, they want a boy because the boy -- traditionally and culturally -- will take care of the family. And they don't want to a girl because the girl will take care of her husband's family and no one will be take care of her parents.

Talia, like many other Chinese American adoptee, recognize that her adoption was as the result of an enforced policy. Similarly, twenty-two-year-old Catherine from the Midwest states:

I was obviously born during the One-Child Policy, like, I don't know the reason behind my adoption, like all of those things are very open-ended, um -- but I was born with a second thumb on my right hand and I know that's kind of like seen as a disability or something, you know, like bad...I don't know...like weird thing.

And yet, Catherine's story differs slightly from Talia's. While both acknowledge the One Child policy, Talia sees it as the only reason behind her adoption, whereas Catherine sees it only as tangential reason. Ultimately, their narratives do not challenge the image of the abandoned,



pitiful, and rescuable orphan. Nevertheless, they both appear unconcerned and undisturbed by the reason behind their abandonment and eventual adoption.

In addition to the narrative of the unwanted Chinese baby girls, the parent-as-savior narrative also emerges out in the adoptees' own narratives of their adoptions. Lena, age twenty-one, shares:

It was only recently that I like, asked her why she adopted and she said that she felt like the only way that she could really change, make an impact in the world—you know, everyone can recycle, we can all become vegetarians, you know? But the only way to really make a direct impact immediately is to either adopt a human or an animal. And that just like, for some reason in my head that just made so much sense. You know, I was like, “Wow,” you know, she didn't do it because she just wanted a kid. Like she was really doing it for the betterment of the world...

Lena's statement harkens back to the white rescuer narrative that has characterized and permeated the Korean adoptee experience in the 1950s.<sup>55</sup> In another example, Catherine, the one born with a second thumb, tells me: “One day, [my mom] just saw an ad in the paper for like Chinese adoption and she just like had a feeling. She was like, ‘This is God's sign! This is what I'm supposed to do.’” For both Lena and Catherine, as for many adoptees, such motives of the parents are common. The “salvation” of Chinese adoptees, through troubling, is woven into the fabric of their stories. What is clear is that adoptees borrow heavily from their parents and the media to construct their origin stories. But this is not to suggest that adoptees are not actively constructing their own stories. In referring both to the One Child policy and their parents' motivations, Talia, Catherine, and Lena are actively engaging with the dominant narratives, reinforcing them, but also reclaiming them as their own.

Without memories of their past, adoptees rely heavily on their families' retellings to glean insight into their own lives. Needing a medium for memorialization, many parents, with encouragement from Families with Children from China (and other adoption organizations/

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<sup>55</sup> Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 160.

parent support groups), created “life books” for their children. According to Dorow, these life books, which hold both textual and visual evidence, “strive to chronicle and approximate the life of the adopted children, by way of adoptive parents’ rendition of historical traces.”<sup>56</sup> When talking to the adoptee participants in this thesis, many of them referred to their own life books in helping them remember their adoption stories. For example, twenty-one-year-old Maya describes her life book: “I grew up always going through my photo albums when I was baby and a lot of those include labels like, ‘[Maya] getting adopted’ and the legal process -- like all of these little labels of like getting [Maya] from China...” She continues, “And my mom, she is an open book about it.” Maya’s explanation of how she learned about her adoption story reveals that her mom not only provided all of the information, but sculpted her daughter’s identity formation.<sup>57</sup> The parental role in shaping the narratives of their daughters reveals a narrative that flips the script is needed.

Like Maya, Marissa was raised learning about her adoption story through a book. “My adoption story is a lot more exciting than I thought it was—my mom told me the story, I always had a little book she made, with the little cut out pictures and photographs and kind of, telling the story. But I didn’t get the adult version until a couple of weeks ago, and it was very exciting.” She shares when her mother adopted her, Marissa was extremely sick and was not permitted to leave the country. After traveling all over city the Chinese city where she was adopted, Marissa’s mother found an English speaking doctor who was able to help Marissa, and she was ultimately allowed to travel to the United States. Implicit in Marissa’s retelling is an acknowledgement that there are multiple versions she can hear about her adoption story. For Marissa, and for many other adoptees, as they have grown older, their stories have changed as new details emerge and

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<sup>56</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 173.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

new accounts are heard. In this way, it is clear that the adoptee participants' histories are constantly in flux.

Adoptees' stories not only change with the addition of new details, but also with the expansion of national and cultural imaginings. Many create and weave together a narrative that can explain their origins and their abandonment. Talia discusses the fact that she has freckles, a rarity for Chinese people, could mean "maybe someone from a fishing village brought me on like a boat over to the mainland area." Similarly, twenty-one-year-old Helen speculates:

I would say...I'm speculating completely, but I think I was put up for adoption, or at least just like left in the public bathroom because... I speculate that my birth mother could not take care of me. I feel like she was sick or something, and it wasn't necessarily because of the One-Child Policy. I think there was something about her health that maybe she couldn't—but this is all speculation. Or maybe that is what I want to believe. I do realize that the One-Child Policy was a real thing and people did get penalized for it. So I wonder too if she like, maybe did give me up when they found out I was female, so they wanted a male sort of thing.

These speculations, as Helen calls them, are her own contributions to her adoption story.

Although Helen does not know if there is any "truth" to her tale, she holds onto it. Her creations and imaginations of her own adoption story are the beginning steps of her reclaiming her adoption story. According to Elizabeth Honig, these imaginings are to be expected for transnational, transracial adoptees. She argues:

Many transnational adoptees live with phantom lives, lives defined as possible but un-lived. Those adopted at older ages...may carry a memory on whose fading image that phantom life is constructed in fantasy, while those adopted in infancy must weave their possible lives out of individual threads gathered from many sources: travel books, photographs of the adoption journey, cultural camps, the face in the mirror. From these scraps, a story is invented, one that begins "what if..." "What if my birth mother had been able to keep me?...What if I were growing up in China right now?"<sup>58</sup>

It becomes painstakingly clear that the stories adoptive parents tell their children are not necessarily the stories adoptees create and imagine for themselves. To return to Catherine

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<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Honig, "Representations: Phantom Lives, Narratives of Possibility," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Volkman (North Carolina: Duke University Press), 215.

once again, there are some parts of her story that she cannot control, like having two thumbs on one hand or her mother's decision to adoption a child after reading an ad. But there are many more parts of her story that she has the freedom to think about. "When I was little, I always wanted to write a book about [my story] because my adoption is like super—I don't want say complicated—but it is kind of complicated and there's a lot of loose ends, open ends, so there's always something that I kind of want to explore."

It is this freedom to dream up their past lives, that adoptees revel in. When talking about a movie she watched when she was little, Olivia says:

[The man in the movie] said one of the best things. It's a really cute movie...It's like very reflective. Um, he said, one of the best things about being adopted, in not knowing your biological parents, is that you can create them in any light that you want. You can create them as you like them...you can see them as whatever you want, you can imagine them as whoever.

In this example, Olivia, like Helen, enjoys the relative freedom of not knowing about her birth parents; it allows her to be in charge of the narrative. But when I ask her if she would like to know more about her birth parents or learn some facts to fill in the gaps in her adoption narrative, Olivia confesses she's not interested in learning more at the moment. Thus, there exists an inherent dialectic within these narratives: of wanting to create a story, while simultaneously not wanting to learn the whole story.

To summarize, these adoptee narratives are counternarratives, as they offer stories that escape the narratives the public and their parents have prescribed for them. While their stories affirm particular stereotypes about Chinese American adoptees, such as "parent-as-savior" and "perfect family," there is a certain freedom that comes from acknowledging and claiming one's own origin story. In becoming the agents, not the objects of their own stories, they begin to both challenge and disrupt ideas of the romanticized and sentimental adoptee story.

## Conclusion

The point of this chapter was to highlight how particular dominant media narratives, historical and contemporary, have shaped the public's understanding of adoption and the adoptee experience. Narratives, like *The Dying Rooms* documentary and *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* picture book, presented the image of the pitiful, rescuable orphan; the white, benevolent mother; and the romantic adoptive family. But as we saw with Alex's video blogs and Kathryn's Tumblr posts, adoptees' testimonies complicate and often counteract such narratives.

This chapter also reveals Chinese American adoptees' complex origin stories. Though Chinese American adoptees are often told their adoption stories when they are little, their stories often change as they grow up and hear the stories again as adults. For many, they are told different versions of the story, like Marissa who heard one version as a child and the more mature version as an adult. As we have seen, their narratives also draw from the grand themes of orphaned children, white saviors, humanitarianism, and the ideal family. But they do not confine themselves to these limited narrative tropes. Like Olivia and Helen, they invent for themselves their own storied origins based on instinct and their own research. Thus, although the adoption story rarely gives adoptees any agency (being abandoned, being adopted and brought to the United States), in telling and imagining their own stories they become the agents within them.

## Chapter 2

### *Being In-between: Racial Flexibility and Liminality*

“If you raise a kitten with a bunch of dogs, she’s probably going to grow up and act like a dog, but she’s not going to be a dog.” – Linda

The Asian American adoptee represents a particular kind of racial difference and racial belonging. Like most people of color in the United States, Asian American young adult adoptees must constantly “navigate [their] racialization within dominant discourses of society and cope with stereotypes about their racial/social/cultural group.”<sup>59</sup> Yet, as people raised by white American parents, they achieve a type of honorary whiteness and are subject to a “Whitening” through assimilative family processes, making them appear “culturally white.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Asian American adoptee experience is a complicated one, further compounded by the Asian American racial position between Black and white. In this chapter, I revisit theories of race, gender, class, and citizenship within the context of Chinese American adoption. Through their own accounts, I analyze Chinese American adoptees’ in-between racial positions, and I argue their understanding and negotiation of such positions are at once problematic and empowering.

Before proceeding further, I find it necessary to first define race and ethnicity. Drawing from Mia Tuan and Jiannbin Shiao, I understand race to mean “the visible physical markers (skin color, facial features, hair texture, etc.) that are used to sort individuals into broad ancestral groups (such as Black, white Asian, Native American, and Latino).”<sup>61</sup> As many sociologists have argued, race is a sociohistorical concept rooted in social, economic, and political process.<sup>62</sup> Race is not biological, but constructed and maintained to protect and elevate elite, white male power.

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<sup>59</sup> Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 121.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>61</sup> Tuan and Shiao, *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “Racial Formation” in *Racial Formation in the United States: From 1960s to the 1990s*, ed. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

On the other hand, ethnicity is the “specific ancestral groupings (such as African American, Haitian, German, Irish, Korean, or Chinese) that are used to sort individuals into cultures, often nation-based, with distinct practices (such as linguistics, aesthetic, culinary, and so on) and beliefs.”<sup>63</sup> Ethnic categories are made to distinguish the vast cultural differences among racial groups, such as Asian Americans. Race and ethnicity are both rigid and flexible categories, as they are at once bounded and policed, but also constantly changing and adapting to new contexts in order to accommodate different political projects.

### **Historicizing Transnational, Transracial Adoption**

When I was eight years old, I was asked to paint a self-portrait for my 3rd grade art class. When our portraits were complete, we took them home to show them to our parents. My mother was shocked when I showed her mine. In addition to my long, black hair and brown eyes, I had painted my face black. Many years later, when I was 15 years old, I was assigned to paint another self-portrait for my 10th grade art class. Again, my hair was painted black and my eyes brown, while my face was a peachy, pale pink. At the end of the semester, during the school’s art gallery show, a classmate of mine commented, “You look very white [in the painting].”

I recall these two paintings because they serve as an interesting example of my changing understanding of race and my racial identity. In the 3rd grade, I had little to no understanding of racial difference. I just knew I was different from my white family and my white classmates around me, and thus I distanced myself from that whiteness and painted myself Black, literally. This is in part because U.S. racial categories are described as a binary, something that I had unconsciously picked up on. When I was in 11th grade and had started to develop an understanding of race, I painted myself white. I had allowed myself to be insulated in a world of

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<sup>63</sup> Tuan and Shiao, *Choosing Ethnicity, Negotiating Race*, 3.

primarily white people, to reject my Asianness, and to see myself as white. While much has changed since then, this anecdote illustrates the challenges transnational, transracial adoptees face as racially flexible and ambiguous subjects, a concept I will return to in the latter part of this chapter.<sup>64</sup> For now, I turn my attention to the transnational, transracial adoptees' relation to and belonging within the family and the nation.

Transnational, transracial adoption asks us to revisit traditional concepts of the nuclear, white family. Such “authentic” families were seen as being connected by blood, making questions of belonging simple: people who were born into a family belonged to the family. Adoption, simply put, is a different way to form a family, one that is not biologically based or racially similar. Transnational, transracial adoption, in particular, asks white families to turn foreigners (read: people of color) into family members (read: white people), posing a threat to the homogeneity of the white family.<sup>65</sup> Because the nation is in part defined by the family, this threat to the nuclear, white American family is felt as a threat to the United States. With the rise of a colorblind ideology in the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of a “post-racial America” in the late 2000s, however, transnational, transracial families have become incorporated into the mission of the United States. These multiracial, multicultural families carry out the myth that the United States makes no distinctions based on race, as one's children can look like anyone.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, although adoption is a personal, individual family choice, it is also a one that reflects the national discourse about one who does and does not belong in the nation.

For transnational, transracial adoptees, the tensions between family and nation are in part rooted in nativism. Although transnational, transracial adoptees have been embraced within the white family, nativist discourse still dictates their “otherness” within the nation. Nativism refers

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<sup>64</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 50.

<sup>65</sup> Ellen Herman, *Kinship by Design* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>66</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 210.



to the belief that those who claim to be “natives,” in this case white Americans, can belong to and own a place, and those designated as “non-natives,” in this case Asian Americans, do not and can never belong to that place.<sup>67</sup> It ignores people with identities and experiences that transcend the national sphere, crossing boundaries and borders in their everyday lives. Transnational, transracial adoptees are caught in nativist and citizenship discourses. As immigrants, particularly those who are Asian or Latino adoptees, they are seen as perpetual foreign others, unable to belong within and assimilate to the United States. As a result, their legal citizenship and adoption status are rendered invisible, and they are not seen as belonging to the United States.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, they constantly have to navigate and negotiate their social citizenship and social belonging in their families and their country.

Furthermore, transnational, transracial adoptees’ inclusion into the family can be viewed as their forcible inclusion into the United States. In *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives Across Cultures*, Yen Le Espiritu coins the term, “differential inclusion” to describe how a group of people are deemed valuable to a country’s economy and culture, but are only so because they are unequal.<sup>69</sup> In other words, a group is valuable only because their bodies can be exploited, their rights denied, and their position deemed inherently inferior. Espiritu uses this term when describing the Filipino American experience to emphasize that not all immigrants came to the United States voluntarily; many were forcibly imported and enslaved. By using this “differential inclusion,” Espiritu asks us to think about the lack of agency immigrants had and still have when immigrating, as well as the particular ways people of color have been economically dependent on the United States. Of course, transnational, transracial adoptees have vastly different

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<sup>67</sup> Angelo N. Ancheta, “Race, Immigration, and Citizenship” in *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 85.

<sup>68</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 211.

<sup>69</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives Across Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 41.

experiences than Filipino American immigrants, but they are still immigrants (a word not normally associated with adoptees) who were forcibly incorporated into the white American family and nation. Transnational, transracial adoptees did not chose to be abandoned, to be placed in an orphanage, or to be whisked away to a “better life.” They are not agents in the story of their migration and they are forced to deal with the consequences of being a person of color within a white family and white nation.

Despite national narratives that the United States is a “melting pot,” “colorblind,” and “post-racial,” it is a nation that has long had a low tolerance for multiple and intersecting identities and continues to enforce strict boundaries along racial and ethnic line. In her seminal work, *Invisible Asians*, Nelson provides a brief account of the creation of performative racial categories, which ensured those who did not fit neatly into a single constructed racial group were arbitrarily forced into a particular category. This absoluteness of racial categorization severely “limits the choices available to people of color in expressing their racial and ethnic identities.”<sup>70</sup> Those who identify as biracial, multiracial, or transnationally and transracially adopted challenge the idea of a monoracial, monoethnic identity. Their identities directly highlight the inadequacy of monoracial and monoethnic models that govern our consciousness and the world.

This strict policing of racial identities in a racist and white-dominated social context has lead to the increasing need for the performance of race.<sup>71</sup> In other words, one’s performance of race is judged by one’s performance of ethnic culture. For example, we often expect someone who is coded as Chinese to be able to speak Chinese.<sup>72</sup> As Sara Dorow elucidates, “In the age of multiculturalism, when race is not supposed to matter, the discourse of culture increasingly

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<sup>70</sup> Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 121.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that such standards are not the same for white European Americans. We do not expect a white American of say German descent to perform particular German practices.

substitutes for or supersedes that of race.”<sup>73</sup> Dorow calls the relationship between race and cultural performance “race-culture matching, whereby racial difference constrains the construction of identity because American society expects racial difference to mean cultural difference.”<sup>74</sup> For transnational, transracial adoptees raised by white parents, there is a disjunction between their racial identities and their ability to perform certain cultural practices. In being “raised white,” such adoptees have to negotiate how their racial identities may demand certain cultural performances they are unable or unwilling to perform.

Thomas Hansen, in the *Melancholia of Freedom*, also observes the same demand of cultural performance for South African Indians. According to Hansen, South African Indians are often demanded to perform and practice Indian culture.<sup>75</sup> As a result, South African Indians have fetishized Indian culture, as this fetishization “did the complicated work of maintaining the aura of something while also accepting unreality.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, in an attempt to stop the public’s scrutiny of their “authenticity and purity,” South African Indians objectify the performance of Indian culture.

This demand for Indian authenticity parallels the American public’s demand of Chinese authenticity from Chinese Americans. Thus, although the South African Indian experience and the transnational, transracial adoptee experience are in many ways very different from each other, it would be a mistake not to look at their similarities. Transnational, transracial adoptees grapple with being both attached to and detached from their racial groups and racial identities. Here, we are beginning to see Jennifer Ho’s theory of racial ambiguity play out. I will return to this in-between state for Chinese American adoptees specifically in the next few pages.

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<sup>73</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 232-233.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Hansen, *Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 201.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Between White and Yellow: Racial In-betweenness**

Up until now, I have discussed the racial identities and cultural performance of transnational, transracial adoptees. It is now necessary to contextualize the experience of Chinese American adoptees in particular. The image of Chinese Americans, especially women, in the white imagination had, and still has, very real and tangible consequences in Chinese adoptees' lives. I begin with a brief discussion of how Asian Americans have been and are viewed in the United States and how this perception has led to the in-between state of Asian Americans and ultimately Chinese American adoptees.

The model minority myth, a term that gained ground in the 1970s and 80s, depicts Asian Americans as hard workers who have stayed out of trouble and achieved the American Dream. On its surface, the model minority stereotype acts as a compliment; but this is misleading and harmful. It not only "hides the diversity among Asian Americans," but it also "pits Asian Americans against other racial group."<sup>77</sup> In other words, this myth places Asian Americans in a hierarchy over Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans. For Asian American adoptees, this stereotype influences white American parents' decision to adopt from China. According to Andrea Louie, author of *How Chinese are You?*, "Asian adoptees are viewed as innately intelligent and fairly trouble free to raise."<sup>78</sup> They are seen as high achieving, obedient, and innately smart: the perfect children.

In *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, Mia Tuan describes the unique racialization of Asian Americans. Here, Tuan uses the word "honorary white" to describe the perceived acculturation and assimilation of Asian Americans in the United

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<sup>77</sup> Lee et al. "The Model Minority and the Perpetual Foreigner: Stereotypes of Asian Americans," in *Asian American Psychology*, ed. Alvin Alvarez, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 73.

<sup>78</sup> Louie, *How Chinese Are You?*, 52.

States. Tuan, of course, points out that the idea of Asian Americans as honorary whites simplifies their experiences.<sup>79</sup> She argues that Asian ethnics have, in their own ways, resisted such constraints on their racial identity. When discussing Chinese adoptees, I find the term “honorary whites” particularly interesting. Unlike Asian Americans raised in Asian American households, adoptees raised in white households are, however momentarily, afforded certain privileges that come with having a white parent(s). They, more so than other Asian Americans, are regarded as white and carry this honorary whiteness, consciously or unconsciously.

This idea of honorary whiteness, as posited by Mia Tuan, fits nicely into Claire Kim’s theory of racial triangulation. Kim argues Asian Americans have been “racialized relative to and through interaction with Whites and Blacks.”<sup>80</sup> She proposes we use the “field of racial positions” to evaluate the racial dynamics. For her, Asian Americans have been “racially triangulated” between whites and Blacks, whereby whites valorize Asian Americans relative to blacks (both racially and culturally) and construct/ostracize Asian Americans as “immutably foreign and unassimilable.”<sup>81</sup> The Asian American adoptee experience adds to, and even extends, her theory of racial triangulation; adoptees, both their adoption story and their lives, are enmeshed in being neither white nor Black and neither white nor Asian.

Throughout this chapter, I have been leading up to Jennifer Ho’s theory of racial ambiguity, which perfectly captures the experience of Chinese American adoptees. Drawing from Leslie Bow’s articulation of “racial interstitiality” and “racial indeterminacy,” Ho argues that Asian American adoptees are racially ambiguous subjects because they “have internalized the experiences of living as honorary whites subjects who nonetheless recognize their racial

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<sup>79</sup> Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreign or Honorary Whites: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>80</sup> Claire Kim, “Racial Triangulation,” *Politics & Society* 21 (March 1999): 106, accessed March 5, 2017, doi: [10.1177/0032329299027001005](https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

difference from their white adoptive families as they mature into adoption.”<sup>82</sup> She continues that many adoptees struggle to articulate their racial and ethnic identities and negotiate how they fit within “white mainstream culture, Asian American culture, and the families in which they were raised.”<sup>83</sup> In her chapter, “Antisentimental Loss,” Ho pays particular attention to Asian American adoptee bloggers and the way they are re-writing and re-creating their adoption narratives to reflect their racially ambiguous position. For Chinese American adoptees, the idea of being racially flexible or in-between deeply resonates with them. As their narratives illustrate in the next few pages, Chinese adoptees endure particular racial experiences and navigate and understand their racial identities in unique ways.

### **Understanding Whiteness**

Chinese American adoptees have multilayered, multifaceted racial identities; they know that perhaps more than anyone else. Because they are racially ambiguous, they occupy a particular position with the racial landscape: they are neither white nor Black, and neither white or Asian. My interest lies in the how Chinese American adoptees themselves describe, discuss, and articulate this particular position. The narratives they tell highlight how racial ambiguity complicates and destabilizes notions of whiteness and race.

For many Chinese American adoptees, whiteness is not only conferred on them through their relationships with their white adoptive families, but blindly accepted by them. Twenty-one-year-old Emily says “[My parents] are white and I’m Asian, so it’s not like they could have hidden [my adoption] for very long. Coincidentally, though, I thought I was white for like a long time, like up until I was 5.” While Emily knew she was different from her parents when she was little, she still believed that she was white. Similarly, Lily saw herself as white too, rationalizing

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<sup>82</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

to herself that she was “white but with a darker complexion.” In another example, Willa would be surprised to see a Chinese person looking back at her in the mirror instead of a white person:

When I was a kid, I actually get [sic] surprised sometimes when I would look in the mirror because, you know, when you look out of your eyes you’re not seeing yourself, you’re just seeing the world. So sometimes, I would be like, not that I felt white, I was like surprised, like ‘Ahh!’... It was interesting that I was Asian.

Emily, Lily, and Willa as young girls made the conclusion most children would make: they looked like their parents and, to a certain extent, their local community. And yet, many of their parents sought to construct a Chinese cultural identity. All three adoptees shared that they had gone to Chinese language school when they were younger and attended Chinese cultural events. Thus, despite their access to cultural resources and to a diversity of people, they still understood themselves to be white. In some instances, Chinese American adoptees consciously rejected their Chinese-ness. Lena, a twenty-two-year-old from New York, explains: “I didn’t want anything to do with Chinese people at all. You know, even other kids that were adopted, I was just like, I don’t want to have any type of affiliation [with them]. I am *white*. You know, my mom is white, so I am white.” Unlike the three other adoptees, Lena’s embrace of whiteness marks her distance from her Chinese American racial identity. She consciously worked to avoid “that part” of her identity.

For many Chinese American adoptees, identifying as white was something they did as a child. As they grew up and entered middle school, they began to identify more as “Twinkie” or “Banana.” These contemporary racial slurs (along with “oreo” and “apple”), Nelson argues, “‘applied to individuals who are perceived to be racially Red, Black, or Yellow but thought to be ‘White inside’ underscore one cultural price of supposed assimilation of non-White individuals into White-dominated society.”<sup>84</sup> An adoptee’s identification with this racial slur, both accepted

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<sup>84</sup> Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 122.

by the adoptee and/or ascribed by society, emphasizes their liminal racial identities.<sup>85</sup> Lily tells me that when she was much younger, she would identify herself as a Twinkie:

I would like self proclaim, “I am a Twinkie.” I would be like, “I’m yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I’m the whitest Asian person you can know. I’m whitewashed.” I would say stuff like that, which is problematic now that I think about it. A lot of internalized racism.

While Lily acknowledges that the term, “Twinkie,” is a racist slur, for her, and for many other adoptees, it may have been the only term that encompassed how she identified. When living in a world that has strict race categories, her identity as a transnational, transracial adoptee has no meaning. Thus, in a society that creates such inflexible categories, people like Lily create their own cultural and language tools at their disposal to describe and define their experiences.

For Emily, however, she was not even called such racial slurs, rather she was called “White Girl” to her face:

The high school I went to was mostly Asian kids, so I actually got the nickname White Girl...because my parents were white and I brought like a sandwich for lunch instead of like rice or whatever Asian people eat, and I didn’t speak an Asian language at home and I wasn’t taking like, AP Chinese...It’s probably like the most insulting way that [my classmates] can be [racist] without being outwardly racist...When I like got a 93 on a test and I thought I did well, and they were like, “Okay, white girl,” and I’m like, “Okay.”

Here, Emily, unable to perform certain stereotypes about Asian American students, is automatically labeled “White Girl.” Bringing a sandwich for lunch, being unable to speak Chinese, and doing “badly” on an exam, set her apart of the Asian American students in her high school. This overt term exclusively prescribed for her is a way for the Asian American students to highlight and even exploit her difference from themselves.

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<sup>85</sup> It is important to note that these racial slurs are not exclusively use by and in reference to Asian American adoptees, but are also used to describe Asian Americans who appear to have assimilated to white American culture.



These examples of Chinese American adoptees conferring whiteness onto themselves signals them as racially ambiguous subjects. Not only can they recognize themselves as white, but they are recognized by others to be white as well. And yet, it is this whiteness that sits uncomfortable on their shoulders. In claiming whiteness, they ignore, reject, or misunderstand the boundaries of racial difference. Although they identify as white, and other Asian Americans and people of color may identify them as white, this does not necessarily mean they are seen or identified as white by white society. Nevertheless, in being identified as white, their identities begin to show the fluidity and mutability of racial integration.

### **Parental Advice: Connections and Disconnections**

In addition to the differences perceived by their classmates, many adoptees described moments when the racial difference between themselves and their parents was felt quite acutely. Even though they may not have understood or had the words to articulate what was happening, the gap between white and Asian was palpable and memorable. Many such moments happened in hair and nail salons, when the Chinese adoptee and her white mother are surrounded by mostly curious and confused Asian women. Willa recounts one moment in particular when she was with her mother in nail salon.

[The nail salon people] were like, talking to me in Chinese and like, I obviously don't speak Chinese -- or at least not obvious to them, but obvious to me -- and they were like, and then my mom had to be like, "Oh, she doesn't speak Chinese, she's adopted." And they didn't understand what that mean. And they were asking my mom if she was my nanny. And it definitely made my mom uncomfortable, which as a child, you kind of vibe off, so it made me uncomfortable.

Willa also remembers one conversation she had with her father then she was seven years old.

When I was a kid, my favorite thing to do with my dad was run away from him. And as I got a little bit older, he got upset and he was like, "You really can't run away from me." And I was like, "I'm not." And he was like, "Because people are really going to think that I'm trying to kidnap you." And I was like, "Why?" And he was like, "Because we don't

look alike. People, if they call the police, we're going to have to prove that I'm your dad." And I was like, "That sucks." And I told him that I wasn't going to run away from anymore.

Unlike Willa's previous anecdote about her mom, this anecdote about her father has very different racial undertones. Her trip with her mother to the nail salon is indicative of the way the people imagine the family as being racially homogenous. In asking her to speak Chinese, we see how Willa is asked to perform her Chineseness, even though she has no connection to the language and the culture. Her second anecdote reinforces assumptions about how the family should look, but also reminds us that the family is also constantly surveilled and policed. They are both a threat to the white nuclear family and threatened by ideas of the white, nuclear family. Furthermore, it is important to point out how these anecdotes are extremely gendered. For example, Ruby, who was raised by a single, white father, explains that when she was little most people assumed that she had a mother, and her mother was Asian. For Willa, the nail salonist did not assume that her father was Chinese. Furthermore, for both Ruby and Willa, the public also made assumptions about the heteronormativity of the family: that one is raised by a father and mother.

As young adults, Chinese American adoptees have begun to discuss their racial identities with their parents. This brings with it a new set of obstacles. While many of the adoptees share they are feel comfortable discussing adoption and race with their parents, for some, such subjects are avoided in family discussions. Nineteen-year-old Claire from Long Island shares:

I feel like sometimes my mom gets really uncomfortable when I bring up the fact that I am not white. Um, not that I think she's racist against Asians or think that she has a problem with me or think that she loves me any less because I am not white, but I think it makes her uncomfortable to be reminded of the fact that she like, that anyone could possibly perceive us as not a normal family.

She continues: “[My mom] feels so strongly about being my mom, and she loves being my mom, and so she doesn’t want to be reminded of the fact that someone might not recognize the fact that she is my mom.” It is here I remind the readers that this thesis does not seek to pass judgment on families, but rather interrogate the ways adoptees and their families have experienced and discuss racial and ethnic identity. Claire’s mom subscribes to the idea of nuclear, biological family as the “real family:” she does not want her role as a mother to be questioned. Here, discussions about the transnational, transracial family intersect with and reveal an adoptee’s own self understanding of her racial identity: Claire must negotiate her position as a constant reminder to her mother as a racial, family outsider.

### **Questions of Authenticity: More Thoughts on Race and Culture**

Many Chinese adoptees struggle with their racial identities as they get older and during their college years. Chinese adoptees, unlike many of the Korean adoptees adopted in the 70s and 80s, had parents who wanted their children to be exposed to Chinese culture. As the previous section indicated, despite this exposure to culture, questions of identity and authenticity weigh heavily on the adoptees’ minds. Discovering an Asian or Asian American identity, whether conceived of as a child or accepted as a young adult, is no doubt a confusing process that adoptees’ white parents cannot fully understand. This section looks at non-white identities of Chinese adoptees and the social pressure to identify as White or Asian.

Whenever Ruby has to tell someone that she doesn’t speak Chinese, it breaks her heart. She continues, “It’s like, I don’t know, I feel like I have a responsibility to know Chinese.” Though one could not possibly expect that Ruby speak Chinese, as she was adopted at a young infant and raised in a white household, society demands her to know how to speak Chinese. Helen, who acknowledges the connection between culture and race, but refuses to let said culture

dictate her life, says: “I’m still going to be Asian American, regardless of how strong [white mainstream American] culture is.” She argues that her physical features, not her cultural background and social connections, make her Asian American. Unlike Ruby, while Helen may feel a certain pressure to act “Chinese,” she does not factor her performance of her “Chineseness” in her own racial identity.

Inherent in questions about culture are questions about authenticity. Many of the adoptees were exposed to Chinese culture through their white parents. Thus, questions of an authentic Chinese culture are also questions of who can represent and pass on authentic Chinese cultural standards and practices. Can white American parents pass on to their Chinese American children an authentic Chinese/Asian cultural experience? Can a Chinese American parent pass on an authentic Chinese/Asian cultural experience?<sup>86</sup> These questions are, to a certain extent unanswerable, and even more so when considering adoptee-constructed culture. On the one hand, Chinese American adoptees are outsiders who have not grown up in China and have not been raised by Chinese/Chinese American parents. On the other hand, they have experienced race-based discrimination and understand what it means to be Asian in America. Their detachment from their birth parents, birth country, and birth culture make navigating cultural authenticity even more challenging. Many of my informants feel this detachment, and feel it most acutely when asked to perform or present their culture, either by speaking the language or knowing about a certain holiday. For example, Olivia shares that she cannot truly connect with being Chinese, rather she connects more with being Asian in a broader sense because “Asia’s a continent and you don’t have to pin yourself to a particular history or a particular culture.” But

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<sup>86</sup> Authenticity, itself, is a complicated, highly contested concept. In her book, *How Chinese Are You?*, Andrea Louie writes, “Academic works on Chinese identity and in the Chinese diaspora note that... there is a wide diversity of cultural practices that are deemed Chinese, and that these have varied across time and place” (7). Being Chinese and exhibiting one’s Chineseness is not reducible to one particular representation. Nevertheless, white adoptive parents believe there is a “authentic” Chinese experience.

Olivia continues that even though she cannot display particular cultural practices, her understanding and her Chinese cultural practices cannot be deemed any more inauthentic than someone else's Chinese cultural practices. For her, authenticity is not something someone can define; it is of her own choosing and making. There are others, however, who feel their own cultural and racial identity is inauthentic and problematic. For example, Kara considers herself an imposter, as if she is living in someone else's skin. The imposter sensibility Kara feels is indicative of her racially ambiguous position, as someone who can belong in neither one group nor another.

### **“Where are you from?": The Complexity of Self-Identifying**

When Chinese American adoptees are asked to self identify, their position as in-between, liminal subjects become more apparent. When I ask Emily to self-identify herself, she just says a New Yorker. When I ask her how she fills out forms, she confesses that used to check Asian, but she's started to check white:

I was told when bubbling in my race to put white instead of Asian because Asian... it's more competitive to get into college as an Asian because grades are higher... So when I apply to medical school I'm going to bubble in white, for that same reason, it's because there are so many more Asian people with better scores than I have. And then, if someone - I was telling my guidance counselor, "Technically, that's lying." And they were like, "No, it's not. If someone asks you about it, say you culturally identify as white and if they give you a hard time, that's a bigger issue."

In another example, Lena, who used to identify as Chinese American (and mark Asian American on forms), has recently been filling out forms by checking "Other." As to the reason, she says, "Because like, I, you know, there's a whole, whole inequality about it, you know. Like whether you are Asian, whether you're Black, like if you label it, you know, automatically put in a statistic, and I was kind of like, ugh, I didn't want to be a part of that."

Willa, too, feels conflicted about her identity. She says, “If I’m filling out a survey about what my race is or whatever, I always feel kind of weird, um, because I think I’m supposed to put down Asian because that is my demographic, but I also feel like being adopted definitely is its own race.” Chinese adoptees certainly feel the pressures of having to compartmentalize themselves into a single racial category. And the pressure is at times too much. Willa shares, “I do think adoptive children are their own kind of race, and I don’t think our voices get heard enough...” Here, Willa’s comment calls our attention to how the distinct racial experiences of transnational, transracial adoptees defy experiences by many other people of color. Her experience cannot be captured in a single form. This sense of racial ambiguity, as articulated by Jennifer Ho, is acute. Confusion, misunderstanding, and hopelessness are only some of the feelings transnational, transracial adoptees feel when it comes to explaining and exploring their racial identities. As Lena states in her interview, she feels like she is in between two groups and she is at a loss to pick. It is not a choice, but rather she is saddled with two identities.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how Chinese American adoptees—adopted in white families and distanced from their ethnic/national culture—have unique and complex racial identity experiences. Their experiences simultaneously confirm and complicate our understanding of racial belonging within the United States. As we have seen with Emily, Lily, Willa, Kara, and others, an adoptee’s racial and ethnic identity is not always static or discernable. Throughout their lives this identity has changed and is still changing to adapt to their environments and their own understandings of race. And yet, what they all share is the state of being in-between, of being racially ambiguous.

I want to return briefly to the anecdote I began this chapter with: me painting two very different pictures of myself at two very different periods in my lifetime. Though I personally never saw myself as white growing up, I knew that I was different. I unconsciously painted myself with a darker skin color because I had picked up on the skin color difference between myself and my family. When I was older, I painted myself with a much lighter skin tone because I saw myself as being lighter than my Black peers and had, to a certain extent, internalized my own white cultural upbringing. If asked to paint another self-portrait, I don't know what I would draw.

As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, Chinese adoptee racial identities are multilayered, multifaceted identities. They challenge our assumptions and understanding about race, gender, and citizenship. And they demand to be accepted and acknowledged in our constrained racial and ethnic landscape.

## Chapter 3

### *Building a Transnational Community*

“Being around FCC and being around other Chinese American adoptees...it normalized [being adopted].” – Olivia

The narratives of Chinese American adoptees, as described in the previous chapters, highlight the diversity in experiences amongst adoptees. Yet one of the most important things about these narratives is that they reveal the possibility of community. Their narratives do not exist in a vacuum, rather they are the beginnings of adoptees’ connections to and with each other. In this chapter, I begin with an overview of Families with Children from China (FCC), a parent-run organization, as an entryway into exploring parent-run adoption communities. I then turn to the emergence of a Chinese American adoptee community, one run by and for Chinese American adoptees. The importance of this community cannot be overstated. In establishing our own culture and community, we can cultivate a sense of solidarity with each other and become a force for change.

#### **Families with Children from China: Interrogating Parent-Run Adoptee Communities**

When I was adopted in 1995, Families with Children from China (FCC) was in its infancy. Like many newly adoptive parents, my mother turned to FCC as a source of support. She became very active in the New York chapter, helping plan and host events for adoptive parents and their adopted children. My childhood memories include marching in Chinese New Year’s parades in Chinatown and eating mooncakes at Autumn Moon Festivals. My exposure to and understanding of China and Chinese culture were largely due to these FCC cultural events put on and hosted by white American parents. FCC is a staple in the lives of many Chinese American adoptees.



I focus on FCC, rather than other national or local organizations for two reasons. First, FCC is one of the largest, and most well-known, Chinese American adoption communities. Many of the adoptees I spoke with cited FCC as *the* organization they were a part of as children. Second, FCC, particularly the New York and New England chapters (and other ones I have been a part of), are undergoing immense change. With the number of Chinese adoptions slowly declining and the number of young adult Chinese American adoptees steadily increasing, the local chapters have been forced to reevaluate their role within the Chinese American adoption community. This period of change hints at the beginnings of something new.

Founded in 1992, FCC was inspired by Korean American adoption groups formed in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>87</sup> One of FCC's first group meetings included a trip to New York's Chinatown, in celebration of their newly adopted Chinese children. FCC would go on to become the "name used by more than hundred organizations across the United States and Canada."<sup>88</sup> Though all local chapters use this name, each chapter is independent from each other; each with different development and outreach plans. For example, the New York Chapter is headed by a group of five parents and one adoptee, whereas the New England Chapter is run mostly by one parent. All, however, are non-profit organizations run exclusively by volunteers and receive most of their funding from member donations. Although the chapters are scattered across the United States, each one is committed to replicating Chinese culture and instilling in their children ethnic pride. Volkman attributes this fierce commitment to culture to parents' awareness of the Korean adoptee experience in the 70s and 80s, which had emphasized assimilation and denial of cultural heritage.<sup>89</sup> Today, unlike the first generation of Korean adoptees, many Chinese adoptees

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<sup>87</sup> Toby Volkman, "Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America" in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Volkman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 89.

growing up have been “integrated from a young age into communities with Chinese adoptees and other Chinese adoptive families, sent to culture camps, [and] regularly travel back to their birth country.”<sup>90</sup>

In her work, Toby Volkman pays particular attention to “Culture Days,” days centered around a Chinese festival. During annual Culture Days, there are multiple cultural performances, such as drum ensembles, shadow puppet plays, Peking operas, and Chinese ribbon dances.<sup>91</sup> Chinese American adoptees enrolled in Chinese dance classes are also invited to perform. Festival vendors sell Chinese artwork, jewelry, and clothing. Adoptive parents can buy raffle tickets for more exclusive Chinese items, the benefits of which go to Chinese orphanages. Their children can place a sticker on a huge map of China, indicating her presumed place of origin.<sup>92</sup> Culture Days inundate Chinese American adoptees and their families with an intense amount of Chinese culture. They are, as Volkman argues, representations of FCC’s commitment to transferring Chinese culture to their children.

In addition to hosting Culture Days, FCC encourages its members to go on heritage tours, also known as “root tours.”<sup>93</sup> These trips back to China are often seen as a way for Chinese adoptees to “find themselves” or to fulfill a “longing for a secure ground of identity.”<sup>94</sup> This cultural experience is certainly a privilege for those who can afford it. For many of the adoptees I spoke with, heritage tours are often extremely painful experiences. If they are young and with their parents, they are stared at. If they are older and with their parents, they are often mistaken for an interpreter. For those who revisit their orphanages and meet with their original caregivers, they have to confront their privilege as adoptees. Rarely do adoptees feel like they are a more

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<sup>90</sup> Kim, *Adopted Territories*, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture,” 91.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World*, 145.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

“complete” person once they returned. Rather these heritage trips are mostly for the parents who yearn for a “tangible connection to their daughter’s past.”<sup>95</sup> Parents take pictures of their children’s “abandonment site,” their orphanage cribs, and their caregivers, reconstructing for themselves and for their daughters their origin stories. Thus, in bringing their children “back” to China, parents impart that connecting to and learning about China is crucial to the adoptee identity.

FCC’s demand for an authentic Chinese cultural experience and a connection to China is problematic. With regard to Culture Days, Volkman writes, “the overwhelming celebratory view of China and Chinese culture” can exoticize Chinese culture. She continues, Culture Days are “appealing little packages of culture” and can be seen as a form of racism, as they omit histories of colonialism, oppression, and immigration.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Culture Days simultaneously celebrate Chinese culture and fetishize Chinese culture, reinscribing it as different, backward, and “other.” On the other hand, heritage tours force adoptees to connect to their birth country as tourists. And they reinforce the idea that Chinese American adoptees must feel an attachment to China.

However problematic Culture Days and heritage tours may be, these activities have also brought Chinese adoptees together. For example, I met many of my Chinese American adoptee friends by attending and participating in Culture Day events, and I traveled with other Chinese American adoptees on trips back to China. Furthermore, I do not want to discredit the hard work done by adoptive parents. Their work has allowed many Chinese adoptees to grow up around and with other adoptees. Thus, what distinguishes FCC is its main tension: it is at once bringing together adoptees and complicating and limiting their sense of belonging. This tension is

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<sup>95</sup> Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture,” 101.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

troubling because communities, especially communities of color, should not be based on and confined by stereotypes and certain expectations. Community should offer identities, histories, and cultures that are fundamentally liberating. Thus, I argue that the Chinese American adoptee community needs to depart from parent-run organizations like FCC and create and sustain their own organizations and community groups. In doing so, we will be recognized as having a specific community and culture of belonging that transcends the nation, and disrupt notions of kinship, race, and nation, and forge unity across transnational borders.

### **Locating Community and Culture**

Up until now, I have assumed there is a shared experience that binds adoptees together and can be the grounds of constructing a community. In the words of Elena Kim, I have presumed there is a unique, and somewhat inherent, “adoptee kinship.”<sup>97</sup> But is there a distinct Chinese adoptee identity strong enough to even form a community around? In *Adopted Territory*, Elena Kim argues Asian American adoptees do not have a “single and momentous historical event from which they draw their collective memory.”<sup>98</sup> While Chinese American adoptees may share the common narrative of the One Child Policy, we were not adopted at the same time and are adopted under the same circumstances. Thus, it is not this narrative that binds Chinese American adoptees together, rather it is the common narratives of isolation, liminality, and survival in white America that articulate a possibility of group membership and confer membership to certain individuals. An adoptee community is not natural or pre-existent, rather it demands constant and conscious production in order to respond to “the lived contradictions that adoptee have experienced as racially ‘other’ children assimilated into the normative Western

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<sup>97</sup> Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 96.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

nuclear family.”<sup>99</sup> This section focuses on the voices of Chinese American themselves and their ideas on the community they grew up in and the community they might be constructing now.

Similar to my own childhood experiences, many of the adoptees I spoke with discussed their involvement in FCC and/or other adoptee communities. Twenty-four-year-old Marissa shares her family was heavily involved in FCC when she was growing up. “We were a part of the wave of families who believed very strongly that their kids need to have friends who had similar experiences, so like I was in an [Chinese adoptee] playgroup and I would go to FCC events.” For Marissa, joining her playgroup and FCC was strictly her parents’ decision. Like Marissa, many other adoptees discussed how they were forced to go to FCC events. As they grew up, many adoptees stopped going to FCC events, despite feeling somewhat connected to them. Willa stopped going because she felt like an outsider. She explains, “There was like a huge gap, where people that I was adopted with were no longer going to events, and all of a sudden it was little kids. And I was like, ‘I feel like a grandma at these things.’” But Willa also explains that she did not attend more teen/young adult oriented groups: “I was like not into going... I don’t know, I would have rather have used my time to do something, you know, like hanging out with friends or going to parties.” In a certain way, Willa felt both pushed away from the Chinese adoptee community (by her age), but she also lost interest in it and pushed herself away. Helen too feels disconnected from the Chinese adoptee community: “As for an adoptee group, I don’t know a lot of people because I feel like they are young -- or at least younger than me and you.” She continues, “I definitely feel an adoptee connection, but I don’t necessarily feel a personal connection.” Thus, even though she may feel distant from such a community, she believes that there is an underlying connection, a connection that can and may be built upon.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 99.

Many other adoptees shared they too felt connections to other Chinese adoptees. As

Lola, a college student attending a university on the West Coast, shares:

You can form bonds with other adoptees really quickly. I mean arguably, they are superficial and there's only one layer of stuff that you are connecting off, but it is such a deep and personal part of yourself that you are connecting on that it feels like a really strong bond. Like whenever I talk to someone about adoption who is herself adopted, I am always like, "Yes, I feel you! Can we be best friends?"

Lola recognizes, as most adoptees, do that there is a bond that adoptees have with each other, albeit a superficial one. And yet, as Elena Kim argues, these bonds are based on "experiences of disconnection, disidentification, and displacement from a real or imagined Korea or Korean family," in this case China and a Chinese family.<sup>100</sup> While such bonds might seem natural, much work is needed to ensure such bonds endure and thrive.

Today, there are a few organizations run by and for Chinese American adoptees. For example, Adopteen, founded in 2007, is a Chinese adoptee community formed in response to "the lack of Chinese adoptee role models and community."<sup>101</sup> They make clear in their mission statement they are not a "culture camp" or a "therapy session," but rather a family. Similarly, China's Children International (CCI), an online community, seeks to "empower Chinese adoptee from all over the world by providing inclusive and supportive community for all of us who share this common beginning."<sup>102</sup> Besides Adopteen and CCI, there are more online communities run by and for Asian American adoptees, away from the eyes of their parents. Through these online communities, either blogs or Facebook groups, Chinese American adoptees are given the space to vent and voice their concerns and turn to others who will understand and empathize with their experiences. These organizations and online groups are doing a very different kind of work than

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>101</sup> "Who We Are," Adopteen, accessed April 18, 2017, url: <http://adopteen.org/AboutUs.aspx>.

<sup>102</sup> "About," China's Child International, accessed April 18, 2017, url: <http://chinaschildreninternational.org/about>.

local FCC groups. For example, CCI has begun to put together a manual for adoptees interested in or already searching for their birth parents. Their newest project, titled “Humans of CCI” and based on the popular “Humans of New York,” aims to feature the stories of young adult Chinese adoptees. As these two projects demonstrate, they are consciously and creatively producing communities that address the adoptee part of Chinese Americans adoptee identity. Nevertheless, these organizations have places and spaces to expand.

Having space (i.e. having a community) is crucial to the lives of adoptees. And yet, having space is not always easy and not always clear cut. This idea of space is perfectly articulated by Claire, a college student from the North East. She tells me: “I always feel like I’m taking up too much space and I’m always like really self-conscious about imposing trouble on people and always being worried about like making people upset...I am constantly afraid to take up space.” Her fears of taking up space are valid. Chinese American adoptees do not fit neatly into particular racial and ethnic groups; their identities confuse and “queer” normative conceptions of family and identity. This defamiliarization demands the production of an adoptee counterpublic that can appear to take up other people of color’s spaces.<sup>103</sup> Thus, it is crucial, if not necessary, that a space and community be made, where we neither take over nor take up spaces, but rather seek out and establish our own.

For Kara, finding a group of young adult Chinese adoptees, like CCI, was extremely cool. She shares: “I finally found people who validate and like relate to each other... My Asian friends would never understand what it’s like to be around white people all the time, like having traditions like Easter and everything else.” She continues, “I actually love networking with adoptees. Knowing that I could be there and just like validate people’s emotions was really rewarding and also developing for them their own voices.” Furthermore, they provide role

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<sup>103</sup> Kim, *Adopted Territories*, 100.

models. Kara says wishes she had a Chinese woman role model: “Like an adult role model who could really teach me about what it means to be, not Chinese, but Chinese American, because that was something that like was never brought up in like...it was only like, ‘This is how you are Chinese and this is how you are American.’” Similarly, Lily has recently become active in the Chinese adoptee community. She reasons:

What I personally feel about my experience as an adoptee is that we are very aware of our situation but we don’t really talk about it. It’s not something that is seen as a problem. And it’s not a problem, but it really does affect your life and how you perceive yourself and how you perceive people around you.

She adds, “I found CCI randomly and I was like, ‘Oh my God, this is so cool!’ I had never seen an organization for adoptees by adoptees, especially Chinese adoptees.” Lily sees CCI as a place and space where people who identified as Chinese American validate all her feelings and thoughts. These online communities have produced a space of support and validation, but also a space of intense community building.

In addition to networking with adoptees, many have involved themselves in adoptee mentorship programs. As more Chinese adoptees enter adulthood, they have become more interested and invested in giving back to their communities. Maya, a Chinese adoptee in her early twenties and in her last year of college, participates in her university's adoptee mentorship program. The program, which is run by college students and caters to adoptive families in the surrounding area, meets once a month. While the program focuses teaching young adoptees about China and cultural practices, it is also a place and space for older adoptees to mentor younger adoptees. This mentorship is crucial to the experience of Chinese adoptees. As Kim points out, the adoptee experience cannot be taught or learned, and adoptee knowledge “cannot be so directly transferred because it is lived and embodied knowledge grounded in



inauthenticity” -- the inability to speak Chinese or use chopsticks for example.<sup>104</sup> Thus, what these spaces/program, both online and in-person, provide is the company of others who will not question or interrogate their identities and, moreover, validate the complexities of their in-betweenness.

### **Art as a Form of Community Building**

Chinese American adoptees have begun to seek out space for their voices to be heard, in the form of online organization and in the form of artwork. Many adoptees I spoke with who were in the beginning stages of recording their voices and cultivating community through literature and art. I devote the rest of this section to showcasing work that they readily shared with me. Interestingly, those who shared their work created their pieces, whether a zine or a short memoir, for a college class. While the idea may have been lurking in the backs of their minds, having access to certain resources was fundamental to the creation and production of their work.

Both Lily and Helen, seniors at two different liberal arts colleges, shared with me their projects on race, gender and adoption. Lily is currently working on a multimedia project, commenting on and analyzing self-identifying as a “Twinkie” and/or “banana.” Lily shares,

I’m working on a project write not where I’m digitally illustrating this -- the image is, um, a banana and like the peel is coming down, being unpeeled. But instead of the Chiquita stickers, I took that a copied the design of it and instead of the Chiquita lady, it’s, um, the stars of the Chinese flag, and then in the Chiquita font it says adoption.

Lily’s project explores the adoptee as suspended between White and Asian. As I discussed in Chapter 2, “Being In-between,” bananas and Twinkies are common and contemporary racial slurs, which highlight Asian Americans hybrid racial identities. What’s interesting is that non-adopted Asian Americans have also been called these racial slurs. And yet, Lily almost defines the Twinkie and banana slur as exclusively as an adoptee experience. Furthermore, in

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 124.

manipulating these objects, Lily comments on the commodification of adoptee bodies and experiences. The way in which a banana or a Twinkie is literally consumable translates to the way in which Chinese American adoptees' identities are cultivated. Her project clarifies for its viewers the way a racial slur has come to define her and other adoptees' experiences. But, at the same time, she appropriates and redefines for herself.

On the other hand, Helen's project, a theater piece for a Women's and Gender Studies class, grapples with the performance of female Chinese adoptees. Helen shares:

I interviewed three girls who were adopted and I interviewed them and transcribed their interviews and put all of them together. And I saw what was the same: all of us had gone back to China and had the similar kind of feeling like that "other" experience, of not feeling a part of [the country]. I didn't write a paper, but I printed out and cut out pieces of the quotes and I hung them from my arms, and sort of like, unifying adoption solidarity, and just like performing the adoption narrative. I think at the same time obviously recognizing that even though we are all adopted, we all have different stories.

It is clear that in her performance Helen is thinking about the similarities across adoptee experiences. She consciously works to understand and reveal the strength within the adoptee community when dealing with shared feelings of isolation and dislocation. Unlike Lily, Helen explores adoptee solidarity as something constructed and performed by herself and other adoptees. The creators not only work to describe the adoptee experience, but also claim ownership of their own identity. In doing so, they both contribute to the growing body of work on adoptee narratives.

Many other adoptees have captured their voices and their stories in the form of zines, short stories, and poetry. Such works have allowed them to articulate their own experiences and feelings toward their adoptee identity. Because many of them are not widely circulated they only reach certain eyes. Those who have gone on to have their works published either in their campus literary magazines or other mediums, such as public blogs, are reaching a much wider audience.

Such writers are engaging themselves and their readers in a discussion about adoption and the adoptee identity, disrupting and interrupting preconceived notions. The works discussed here are the beginning of a literary and artistic culture curated by and for Chinese adoptees.

I find it pertinent to acknowledge the ways this adoptee culture and community subscribes and conforms to Benedict Anderson's model of an imagined community. Kim, herself, acknowledges this. She writes this adoptee community not only depends on a shared language (English), but also is "conditioned by the mass circulation of media that permits individuals in geographically distant locations to imagine themselves as connected to each other and existing in the same time-space as others who have similar and simultaneous experiences."<sup>105</sup> Anderson, in his work, argues the nation is a imagined community, one that is socially constructed by the people who perceive themselves to have a connection each other.<sup>106</sup> Thus, when thinking about both the history and the future of the Chinese adoptee community, it is necessary to see it as a transnational, independent community, one that transcends geographical and spatial boundaries and directly challenges the notion of a community as tied to a space.

### **The Korean Adoptee Movement: A History of Community Building**

Before turning to the steps ahead for the Chinese adoptee community, I find it necessary to historicize the Korean Adoptee Movement. I call it a movement, as Elena Kim does, because it was truly a political and social gathering of people and resources to connect Korean adoptees to each other over decades of hard work. The Chinese adoptee community will be similar in

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>106</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

certain regards, and different in many others. In departing from organizations like FCC, the Chinese adoptee community will forge its own path within the Asian American adoptee sphere.

Elena Kim in *Adopted Territory* provides an invaluable historical analysis of the Korean Adoptee Movement from its slow beginnings in the early 1990s to its popular explosion in the 2000s. She locates the movement's different node across the world, particular in South Korea, Europe, and North America. While she discusses early gatherings in the late 80s and the early 90s, she focuses on the first and third international Korean adoptee gatherings, held in 1999 and 2004 respectively.<sup>107</sup> The International Gathering of the First Generation of Korean Adoptees (now know as the Gathering) in 1999 in Washington D.C. cultivated a strong collective sense of personhood and community. According to Kim, the Gathering “emerged as the main forum for the collective production of the Korean adoptee history and shared memory.”<sup>108</sup> She explains that this conference and the ones that followed were able to “provisionally suspend time and space and locate a sense of home in their liminality.”<sup>109</sup> The third Gathering of Korean adoptees in 2004 in Seoul, like the ones before it, continued to build the community and collective identity. This time Korean adoptees were welcomed “home” and identified as being a part of the wide-reaching Korean diaspora.<sup>110</sup> These conferences, predominantly adoptee-dominated spaces, succeeded in transforming the understanding of the Korean adoptee identity and empowering them to claim membership in the adoptee network. They also presented a new, and different, face of the Korean adoptee community to the public, disrupting often harmful media representations and narratives.

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<sup>107</sup> Kim, *Adopted Territories*, 104-105.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

Today, Korean adoptee conferences continue to happen and thrive. The International Korean Adoptee Association (IKAA), formed in 2004, is composed of ten international Korean adoptee organizations; those organizations run most of the Gathering conferences.<sup>111</sup> Hundreds of Korean adoptee organizations (run by and for adoptees) are scattered throughout the world. IKAA, as an online platform, serves as virtual forum for adoptees and links the organizations to the thousands of adoptees around and across the world. Today, there are many Korean adoptees who are continuing to produce works of art for the public and for their community. But this is only a part of Korean adoptee community social practices. According to Elena Kim, there are four key goals of a Korean Adoptee community. First, to gain a self consciousness about not fitting into dominant categories of race, family, and nation. Second, to access and capitalize on the Internet's networking potentials. Third, to acknowledge the significance of conferences as face-to-face meeting ground where adoptees can construct representations of themselves for themselves and the public. And finally, to recognize adoptees as a part of the Korean diaspora.<sup>112</sup>

Today, national Asian American Conferences, like the East Coast Asian American Student Union, have begun to include workshops and caucuses for Asian American adoptees. Furthermore, Adopteen, the organization discussed previously, has held a national camp-conference, bringing together Chinese adopted teens. The organization stresses these conferences are not culture camps or long, drawn-out therapy sessions, but a place for adoptees to be together and celebrate their adoptee identity. I look to these conferences and organizations as the beginning of what may develop into a Chinese Adoptee Movement.

### **The Steps Ahead: Suggestions for the Future**

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<sup>111</sup> "History," International Korean Adoptee Associations, accessed April 18, 2017, url: <http://www.ikaa.org/history/>.

<sup>112</sup> Kim, *Adopted Territories*, 85.

Like the Korean adoptee activists and scholars who have come before me, I see Asian American adoptees as having a culture and an identity that is separate and different from the cultures of our birth countries and our adoptive countries. I believe Chinese adoptees must create their own organizations and communities away from their parents' organizations and communities. This movement away from white American parents will cultivate an identity that is transnational and liberating.

In this section, I offer suggestions for the Chinese adoptee community as we move ahead in owning our unique culture and common identity. These suggestions are both based on previous adoptee movements, specifically the work done by Korean adoptees, and my own research on Chinese adoption. The continuing creation of a Chinese adoptee identity and culture is the first step in self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-empowerment. In finding and belonging to a community, Chinese adoptees will begin to dismantle their limited racial identities and build their own sense of belonging and community. The list presented here is neither an exhaustive nor an extensive identification of the work that needs to be done by the Chinese adoptee community. It is intended as a list that invites conversation and debate by other Chinese adoptees based in the United States and abroad.

**1. Being Intentionally Transnational, Intersectional and Feminist:** The Chinese adoptee community must be intentionally transnational, intersectional, and feminist in its philosophy and framework. As we saw in Chapter 2, Chinese American adoptees are racially ambiguous subjects, whose interstitial position is complicated and compounded by gender. Thus, we must recognize the ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability have both shaped our adoptee experience and inform our adoptee identities. When moving ahead, we must be based in ideologies that both uphold and affirm diversity.

**2. Reclaiming History:** The Chinese adoptee community must be committed to re-learning and unlearning this history of Chinese-U.S. adoptions, as well as transnational and transracial adoption as a whole. As presented in Chapter 1, the prevalent tropes prescribed and projected onto Chinese adoptees is in part due to a constant historical narratives written by the media. To cast off these tropes, this history must be acknowledged and rewritten by those who experienced it. Furthermore, from past to present, we need be informed about the adoption of Native American children by white settlers in the 19th century and stay informed about adoption practices around the world. In addition, we must learn about the history of immigration and the historical and racial construction of citizenship within the U.S. context.

**3. Reconstructing Culture:** As we have seen in this chapter, parent-run adoptee organizations are problematic and troubling. They not only objectify and appropriate Chinese culture, but also limit our own creations and constructions of culture. Thus, the Chinese American adoptee community must depart from the culture constructed by our parents and construct a unique Chinese adoptee culture and identity. This culture and identity will be inherently and overtly political, as it directly challenges white American adoptive parents' own curated Chinese culture and identity. Like the Korean Adoptee Movement before us, we need to create literature and art, so that we may share our stories with each other and with the public.

**4. Connecting Communities:** Throughout all three chapters, we have seen the power of narratives in building and maintaining community. Community and connection amongst Chinese American adoptees is not natural or pre-existent; it demands constant work. Thus, the Chinese American adoptee community must connect to other Chinese adoptee communities around the world, and with Korean adoptee groups and other transnational and transracial adoptee

organizations. This includes holding conferences accessible and open to all adoptees around the world. By developing such connections, the Chinese American community will continue to learn from others, expand, and flourish.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter gave a brief account of Chinese American adoptee communities. I reveal how FCC, a parent-run adoptee organization, is problematic and needs to be replaced with adoptee-run groups and communities. And through the adoptees' narratives, I illustrate the ways in which adoptee communities, whether parent-run or adoptee-run, are constructed, cultivated, and engaged with. More importantly, this chapter sheds light on how the adoptee-run Chinese American adoptee community is one that transcends boundaries and borders; it is a self-defining, liberating space of belonging. My suggestions posited at the end of this chapter illustrate the moves our community will need to take if it is to protect and uplift our identities and ourselves.

It is clear that much work is needed in order for the Chinese Adoptee Movement to both begin and thrive. We need to build our own community from the ground up and by our own hands, or we risk allowing our community to continue to be defined by others. And yet, I am confident that the work already being done and the history of the Korean Adoptee Movement behind us, shows that a movement, whether we are ready for it or not, is not only imminent, but also possible.

Over the summer, while I was still in the midst of gathering sources and reaching out to Chinese adoptees to interview them, I attended my first young adult adoptee gathering. It was informal. We talked about our schools and our families, about our career plans and our hobbies. The topic did turn to adoption, but it felt natural and real. And it gave me both hope and determination that the future of the Chinese adoptee community is in our hands.



## Conclusion

### *What's Next? Adoptees in the Trump Era*

“Today, we’re trying to figure out how to accurately represent ourselves and how to tell the world who we are without being pigeonholed.” – Lily

On Tuesday, November 16, 2016, while the nation continued to reel from the US presidential election results, 41-year-old Korean adoptee Adam Crasper was put on a plane and flown back to South Korea.<sup>113</sup> Bound for a country he had not seen or been to since 1978, Crasper was forced to leave his family, friends, and home. In the months leading up to his deportation, Asian American adoptees, and the general public, were horrified and outraged at the failings of the adoption and immigration system.

The story behind Adam Crasper’s deportation is a long and complicated one. According to a profile piece by the *New York Times* in 2015, when he was three, Crasper was adopted to abusive adoptive parents, who decided they no longer wanted him three years later and placed him in the foster care system.<sup>114</sup> When he was sixteen, Crasper, having been kicked out of an abusive foster home (the latest in a long string of fosters homes), broke back into his foster home to retrieve the few belongings he had carried from Korea. He was arrested, found guilty, and served a 25-month jail sentence. After his release, Crasper continued to have small run-ins with the law. But eventually he began to build a life for himself, becoming a barber, marrying, and having children. When Crasper finally applied for a green card in 2012, his old crimes resurfaced. Unprotected by the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, which granted automatic

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<sup>113</sup> Associated Press, “U.S Adoptee Adam Crasper deported From U.S.: Attorney,” *NBC News*, Nov. 17, 2016, accessed April 18, 2017, url: <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/adoptee-adam-crasper-deported-u-s-attorney-n685661>.

<sup>114</sup> Maggie Jones, “Adam Crasper’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 2015, accessed April 18, 2017, url: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/magazine/adam-craspers-bizarre-deportation-odyssey.html>.

citizenship to children adopted legally by U.S. citizens born after 1983, Crapser was legally undocumented.<sup>115</sup> Because Homeland Security prioritizes the deportation of noncitizens who allegedly threaten public safety, U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement ordered and enforced his deportation.

Of course, Adam Crapser is not only international adoptee to be deported back to his birth country. And he is certainly not the only adoptee to be undocumented. According to the Adoptee Rights Campaign, an estimated 30,000 international adoptees, 18,000 of whom are Korean adoptees, are undocumented -- they were never naturalized by their parents.<sup>116</sup> Their undocumented status, like most undocumented persons in the United States, presents them with many barriers to employment, social and public services, loans, and more. For a majority of Chinese American adoptees adopted in the 1990s, concerns about being undocumented and deported are non-existent. Though their belonging to the nation is complicated, their privilege of citizenship cannot be ignored. The story of Adam Crapser makes it painfully obvious to adoptees, particularly Asian American adoptees, that even though they may have been raised in a white American household they are still seen as the “other.” His story has increasingly made Asian American adoptees visible in the media and visible to other transnational, transracial adoptees.

Moreover, this thesis makes visible the unheard narratives of Chinese American adoptees. Their narratives of adoption, as explored in Chapter 1, illustrate the ways in which Chinese American adoptees have learned, interpreted, and reclaimed their storied histories. Their narratives of race and culture, as interrogated in Chapter 2, reveal their racial in-betweenness.

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<sup>115</sup> “Child Citizenship Act of 2000 - Sections 320 and 322 of the Immigration and Nationality Act,” Travel.State.Gov, accessed April 18, 2017, url: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal-considerations/us-citizenship-laws-policies/child-citizenship-act.html>

<sup>116</sup> “Summary of the Family is More Than DNA Postcard Campaign,” Adoptee Rights Campaign, accessed April 18, 2017, url: [http://adopteerightscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2016/09/Summary-of-the-Postcard-Campaign\\_English.pdf](http://adopteerightscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2016/09/Summary-of-the-Postcard-Campaign_English.pdf)

Their liminal racial position complicates our understanding of cultural performance and belonging in the United States. And finally, their narratives of community, as studied in Chapter 3, shed light on the importance of creating, cultivating, and constructing a Chinese American adoptee community that embodies our unique histories and identities.

This community will be crucial in the era of the Trump Administration. White parents have taken note. On Thursday, November 10, 2016, the two days after the election of Donald Trump, the Huffington Post published an article, “What Parents of Internationally Adopted Children Want Trump To Know.” In it, senior writer and columnist, Ann Brenoff, describes the general panic and terror she and other parents feel for their Chinese adopted children.<sup>117</sup> One parent describes how she is ““wracked with guilt that we brought her here as a baby... now we are wondering what the future holds for an immigrant child of color in the United States.”” Another grieving parent said she had “told [her daughter] that now that the Kraken [a legendary sea monster] has been released she may well get comments about her ethnicity and her right to be here.” Amongst the chorus of parent voices, this is only one comment by an adoptee, who asks parents to verify their children’s citizenship.

In the months leading up to the election, I heard from many parents and adoptees about their thoughts and feelings regarding the chance of a Trump presidency. So for me, the issues raised in the article were nothing new. The concerns of the parents reveal the parent’s limited understandings of adoptee experiences. For many Chinese adoptees, they have constantly been the targets of racial and ethnic slurs and questioned about their “right to be here.” The Trump presidency may make such instances more prevalent, but these concerns are ones Asian American adoptees have always had. As I have demonstrated in my previous chapters, there is a

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<sup>117</sup> Amy Brenoff, “What Parents of Internationally Adopted Children Want Trump to Know,” *The Huffington Post*, Nov. 9, 2016, accessed April 18, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-parents-of-internationally-adopted-children-want-trump-to-know\\_us\\_58235a28e4b0e80b02ce5f47](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-parents-of-internationally-adopted-children-want-trump-to-know_us_58235a28e4b0e80b02ce5f47).

danger to centering the voices of parents. And yet, having white parents defend and support adoptees is itself another privilege. Nonetheless, the Trump presidency has made Asian American adoptees hyper-aware of their position within the nation and, to certain extent, hyper-visible has complicated their navigation and negotiation of their political, personal, and social identities.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, popular narratives have long defined Chinese adoptees, dismissed our experiences, and silenced our voices. We are often overlooked and ignored because we are “racially ambiguous subjects,” a term I borrow from Jennifer Ho and take to mean people whose identities inherently challenge notions of whiteness, kinship, and nationality.<sup>118</sup> Though our experiences as “racially ambiguous subjects” are varied and variable, similar experiences of loss, isolation, and questioning are ultimately what bind us together. It is in sharing our stories and identifying our similarities that we create a culture and an identity that transcends boundaries and borders and embodies and expresses our experiences. Thus, this thesis provides a different lens to view Chinese American adoptees and their perspectives on adoption, race, community, and identity. And while I believe current societal understandings of adoption and adoption practices will prevail for the moment, I know adoptees will begin to change discussions about it. As a scholar deeply interested and invested community building, I believe that creating a Chinese American adoptee community will give rise to political action. Such political action can and will continue to stretch and break the boundaries of belonging within the Asian American community and the American society. Thus, a Chinese American adoptee community is one that goes beyond the nation and challenges the very notion of belonging. And I believe the transformative potential of a Chinese American adoptee community run by and for Chinese American adoptees must be acted upon.

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<sup>118</sup> Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 4.

To conclude, I return once again to the personal. As is the case for many other scholars, my own research project stems from my personal story. This thesis has allowed me to reflect upon my own experiences and has challenged my thoughts and feelings about my identity and adoption. My time spent listening to adoptees has been both intense and illuminating. I have witnessed the power of the community in supporting and helping me with my work. It is in learning about myself and my community that I have learned there is a story to tell about Chinese American adoptees and have begun to grapple more with the intersectionality of race, class, gender, ability, age, etc. Yet, the story told here is not complete. There are voices that still need to be heard. It is my hope that I and other adoptees will continue to investigate our identities, our communities, and our place within the transnational adoption industry, building an imagined community.

I end with an excerpt of poem written by Christine Collins, a Chinese American adoptee and a sophomore from Long Island. As I have often found in my studies, it is poetry and literature that can convey inexpressible feelings and experiences. Her poem, “What To Do With the Transracial Adoption,” does just that.

Step Ten:

Tell your story. Make people uncomfortable, make them  
realize that family is about a lot more than just blood,  
show them that love is not so weak as to be contained  
by color lines, show them that no matter what color  
skin you have, your blood is still red, make them see  
you for you, not for their racist preconceived ideas  
of you, render them unable to hurt the world  
with their ignorance, make them  
unable to ignore you, make them  
understand, or at least get them  
to try to understand.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Christine Collins, “What To Do with the Transnational Adoption,” 2016.

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