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Catching Herself In the Middle: How Chinese-American Adoptees and Their Parents Construct Narrative and Ethnic Identity

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Vassar College

**Catching Herself In the Middle:
How Chinese-American Adoptees and Their Parents Construct Narrative and
Ethnic Identity**

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in Sociology

by

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Thesis Advisor:
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ABSTRACT

Since 1992, over 85,000 children have been adopted from China by U.S. citizens (Miller-Loessi and Kilic 2001:246; U.S. Department of State 2013). Most of these adoptees are girls. They were abandoned as infants due the combined factors of patrilineal culture and to China's one-child per person policy. While a plethora of studies examine adoptive parents' experiences raising Chinese-American adoptees (CAAs), little research has been conducted on the lives of CAAs themselves. Utilizing previous literature on adoptive parents, I aim to uncover the beliefs and experiences of CAAs in regards to their narrative and ethnic identities. I conclude that adoptee identity is shaped by multiple factors, including parental approaches to birth/ethnic heritage, racism and bio-centrism from community members, and self-agency.

Racism causes CAAs to question their ethnicities and family ties. From their parents, adoptees learn to seek out birth origins while still creating alternative adoptive beginnings; and to craft an ethnic identity from simplistic elements of Chinese culture. All the while, adoptees come up with novel and empowering interpretations of origins, race and Chinese society. They establish their own organizations to provide each other with support and pride. The conflicting and fluid beliefs of adoptees and their parents reflect the struggles of a diasporic population stuck between two worlds.

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FORWARD

It's dark out, and I'm standing in line waiting to use the ATM. I'm in Mendoza, Argentina, about to text my host mother about groceries. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a disembodied voice shouts *¿Sos China?*, 'Are you Chinese?'. A complete stranger has just interrupted my life to ask about my ethnicity. While talking about race is acceptable in Argentina, this man does not stop when I tell him 'no'. He asks me where my parent are from, and I say "America". He asks me where my grandparents are, and I repeat, "America". He tells me I'm lying and demands to know *de dónde vienen tus ojos Chinos*, where do you get your Asian eyes from. This time, I lie and say "I don't know".

The truth is, I do know. I was born in Nanjing, China in 1992. My place of birth is unknown, but it is probably in the countryside. Ten days later, someone--perhaps my biological mother--wrapped me in a blanket and left me at a bus stop. For two and a half years, I lived in an orphanage surrounded by other infant girls like me, abandoned by birth families. In 1994, a middle-aged, white couple from Michigan adopted me. Since then, I have bonded with my amazing parents, gained the ability to walk, learned English, written a thesis, and much more.

But I do not tell the stranger at the ATM all this. Last time I tried to explain my origins, the other person just kept asking questions (Do you know your real parents? Do you speak Chinese?). While American citizens tend to be more discreet about race, I still get these questions at home. I still feel like an outsider. People stare at my family when we travel together, strangers call out "Ni hao!" to me, yet my peers say "you're basically white". I can't even decide what to call myself (Asian American? Adopted?).

At that ATM, I began to wonder what other Chinese adoptees deal with. Do people

expect them to excel in math, play the piano, and dress up as Mulan for Halloween? When someone asks about China/Japan/Korea, or makes 'Tiger mom' jokes, do they mention adoption?

Do other adoptees feel apathetic towards birth parents? *What even are we?*

While there are hundreds of memoirs and research studies by/about adoptive parents, adoptees themselves have earned little attention in the academic world. In the following pages, I explore the views and beliefs of Chinese-American Adoptees (CAAs for short). I hope to uncover how they (we) make sense of ethnic and familial identity.

INTRODUCTION

To control the state's population size, the Chinese government enacted the one-child policy in 1979 (Johnson 2002). The law poses a challenge for rural communities, where sons are needed to inherit family property and provide old-age care. Families who are unsuccessful at conceiving a son often abandon their second and third-born daughters. Abandonment occurs anonymously, and soon after the child is born. These orphans are usually unable to find homes in China because government policies limit domestic adoption. To mitigate this crisis, in 1992 China opened its borders to international adoption (Johnson 2002).

Meanwhile, in the U.S., controversy over transracial adoption policy was making it hard for families to adopt domestically. Increasing numbers of Americans turned to other nations for a solution. Since 1992, over 85,000 children have been adopted by U.S. citizens (Miller-Loessi and Kilic 2001:246; U.S. Department of State 2013). Most of these families are white, middle to upper-middle class, and well-educated (Volkman 2005b:83). A smaller number are of Asian descent (Volkman 2005b:83). Almost all of them live in urban and suburban communities (Volkman 2005b:83).

Much research has been conducted on adoptive parents, whose main concerns revolve around adoptee birth and ethnic heritage. In general, adoptive parents choose China hoping children will be free of messy biological ties, and integrate into US society easily. Once they begin raising a daughter, however, parents change under pressure from adoption advocates and a bio-centric society. They commemorate adoption artifacts, Chinese birth mothers and the 'divine plan' which brought CAAs to America. They go on 'roots trips' to China with adoptees, looking for traces of birth origins. Adoptive parents also celebrate simplistic elements of Chinese culture,

to varying degrees. In all their efforts, parents are trying to build a narrative and cultural foundation, so CAAs can grow up with pride in their narrative and ethnic identities. What effect do parental approaches to birth heritage and ethnicity have on CAAs?

Unfortunately, there are a paucity of studies on the actual experiences of CAAs. Perhaps this is because most CAAs are in their teens, still too young to publish scholarly articles on their experiences. Perhaps it is because (mostly white) adoptive parents have written so much, and had so much written about them, that they dominate current adoption discourse. Either way, the perspective of CAAs, whom issues of adoption are all about, is sorely missing. In this work, I aim to uncover the beliefs and experiences of CAAs in regards to their narrative and ethnic identities. I analyze both previous literature on adoptive parents, and raw data from CAA blogs and documentaries.

I argue that adoptee identity formation is influenced by parental approaches, and the larger social forces of racism and bio-centrism. Bigoted comments from community members cause adoptees to question their family bonds and racial identities. From their parents, adoptees learn to both accept and contest dominant notions of birth heritage; to seek out biological ties while still creating alternative adoptive beginnings. CAAs also learn to craft an ethnic identity from simplistic elements of Chinese culture. All the while, adoptees contest and resist both parental and societal influence. They come up with totally new interpretations of origins, race and Chinese society, which empower CAA identity. They establish their own organizations to provide each other with support and pride. The conflicting and fluid beliefs of adoptees and their parents reflect the struggles of a diasporic population stuck between two worlds.

Chapter 1 overviews the political and historical context of abandonment in China, demonstrating that government oversight is to blame for China's orphan crisis. Chapter 2

provides a literature review of studies on adoptive parents, as they try to foster their children's birth and ethnic heritage. In chapter 3, I analyze data from the popular CAA blog "One World", and the documentary "Somewhere Between", which follows the lives of four adoptees. In chapter 4, I compare the perspectives of adoptive parents and children, and use the theoretical framework of diaspora to make sense of them.

CHAPTER 1: FROM PATRIARCHY TO POOR POLICY

PLACING ABANDONMENT AND ADOPTION IN A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before investigating the beliefs of American parents and CAAs, we must place adoption within a historical framework. In China, a surge in infant abandonment started in the late 80's, due to strict population-control policies and the limited resources of rural communities. A surge in the number of foundlings, coupled with the Chinese government's insufficient response, made international adoption from China possible for American citizens.

The 'One-Child Policy' and Abandonment in China

The rate of child abandonment in China has risen due to the combined factors of culture and government policy. Patrilineal culture in rural communities favors sons over daughters (Johnson 2004:4). After marrying, a son stays with (or near) his birth family, continues the family name and cares for his aging parents (Johnson 2004). But when a daughter marries, she leaves her family to live with her husband's (Johnson 2004). Rural citizens, who are not guaranteed state-sponsored pension funds, thus rely on their sons as a form of social security (Johnson 2004:58). Women are often under pressure from their relatives to bear at least one son, and may be shamed or abused if they do not (Johnson 2004:5). At the same time, while rural families feel the need to have a boy, they also want a girl (Johnson et al. 2000:87). An ideal "complete" family includes one son and one daughter (Johnson et al. 2000:87).

Even with male favoritism, abandonment was relatively uncommon, and orphanages could usually find homes for foundlings (a majority of whom were disabled or ill) (Johnson et al. 2000:77). But in 1979, China enacted a one-child per family policy in order to limit

overpopulation (Johnson 2000). After protest from rural communities, officials revised it into a 'one-son two-child' law in the mid 1980's (Johnson 2004:16). Rural families with only one daughter were allowed to try again for a son (Klatzkin 2004:xx). This new policy was enforced more strictly, and families with 'over-quota' children were heavily fined or even sterilized (Johnson 2004:14). Social and economic pressure to have a son, combined with legal sanctions for over-quota births, compelled many parents to abandon their infant daughters.

By 1990, there were one million more boys reported born each year than girls (Johnson 2006:6). Some of the missing girls were killed at birth, many were adopted informally, and others were abandoned. Since only 20% of orphans make it to state-run orphanages, it is not clear how many were abandoned (Johnson et al. 2000:79). A study by Johnson, Banghn, and Liyao (2000), surveyed and interviewed 250 abandoning families and 800 adoptive families from 1995 to 2000. A vast majority of these abandonments were committed by rural families during the 80's and 90's, when policies were more strictly enforced (Johnson et al. 2000:80). Over 90% of the abandonees were healthy infant girls, many of them second and third-born daughters (Johnson et al. 2000:85). So why did birth parents keep their first daughters but abandoned their later girls? Families told researchers their motivation was to preserve a chance to have a son (Johnson et al. 2000:88). Since birth-planning sanctions increase with each over-quota child, parents feared that if they kept their third or fourth daughter, they might be sterilized (or forced to abort future pregnancies) (Johnson et al. 2000:88).

During the act of abandonment, parents reported a continuum of care. Some families simply left their daughter in a field and walked away, while others placed the baby in a well-populated area and watched her be taken away (Johnson et al. 2000). It was common for parents to abandon their child in other townships or a nearby city, increasing her likelihood of being

found and their ability to stay anonymous (Johnson et al. 2000). Finally, a number of parents left their children at someone's doorstep, especially neighbors who had no daughters (Johnson et al. 2000).

The Chinese government implicitly accepts abandonment as a solution to the contradictions between cultural norms, a lack of social security and birth-planning policy. While abandonment is technically a crime, there are "few provisions" for its prosecution, and convictions are rare (Johnson et al. 2000:91). Village cadres, in charge of implementing population-control policy, monitor only the official size of families, overlooking abandonment and infanticide (Johnson 2004). Only one fourth of abandoning families surveyed by Johnson et al (2000) were caught. Overall, birth planning officials responded to a surge in abandonments by monitoring and punishing families more thoroughly (basically adding fuel to the fire). When abandoning families got caught, as some participants in Johnson et al.'s study were, they were punished for having over-quota births in the first place (2000). Clearly officials did not see abandonment as a serious crime.

An Incompetent Government Response

Government policies in the late 20th century failed to address the underlying causes of abandonment, as well as its consequences. It refused to accept any criticism of population control efforts, and ignored the clear link between retirement security and rural citizens' desperation to have sons. Rather than providing pension funds for rural workers, state officials blamed the abandonment crisis on them and their 'backwards' traditions/lack of education (Johnson 2004:36). When orphanages began to overflow with infant girls, the government failed to increase their funding and resource allocation. Most foundlings arrived at state orphanages in

poor health (due to exposure and neglect), and needed medical treatment which the institution could not always afford (Johnson 2004:43). In these overcrowded and understaffed environments, over 40% of children died (Johnson 2004:43). The state tried to mitigate its orphan crisis via charity donations and international adoption.

In 1993, vice-minister of civil affairs Yan Mingfu and president Jiang Zemin brought public attention to the plight of China's orphans (Johnson 2004:68). The government encouraged citizens to donate and volunteer at orphanages, which received increased community support (Johnson 2004:69). In 1992, China opened adoption to childless foreigners over the age of 35 (an age restriction which lasted for 7 years) (Volkman 2005b:83). Donations and fees from international adoptions allowed orphanages to expand their facilities and improve medical care (Johnson 2004:69). A number of children were adopted by foreign families, but many more languished in orphanages due to the government's punitive population-control laws.

Domestic adoption in China remained underutilized due to birth planning policies. To prevent families from faking adoptions for over-quota children (or giving their over-quota children to relatives), birth-planning officials tightened regulations (Johnson 2004:62). In 1992, officials also restricted domestic adoptions to childless couples over the age of 35 (Johnson 2004:62). This law successfully curbed fake adoptions, but at the expense of orphans who were less likely to find homes (Johnson 2002:163).

From analyzing the circumstances of abandonment and domestic adoption in China, it becomes clear who is most responsible for the crisis of orphaned children. In the late 20th century, the state's strictly enforced birth-planning policies and harsh punishments pushed many rural families to desert their infant girls. A clear connection exists between policy, retirement security and abandonment of rural children, yet the Chinese government failed to address any of

these issues. When the rates of abandonment skyrocketed, the government expanded birth-planning and adoption regulations, failed to punish offenders, and refused to increase orphanage funding. Instead, state officials asked private donors to support orphanages, and encouraged foreign couples to take China's 'excess' children off their hands. At the same time, the central government prevented most Chinese citizens from adopting orphans. In its attempts to limit population growth, the state has made young girls the "victims of this population war" (Johnson 2004:74). The Chinese government has violated their rights to exist, fulfill basic human needs, and be part of a family.

Political Truth versus Adoptive Family Myth

Abandonment and adoption stereotypes held by American adoptive parents, and the U.S. in general, run contrary to actual historical fact. Generally speaking, American adoptive parents simplify China's foundling crisis into 'the one-child policy'; a conflict between a single law and sexist patriarchal practices. Adoptees themselves tend to blame sexism.

But as we have seen, the surge in abandonments in China was much more complex; it involved not only written policy, but severe punishments, a non-existent peasant welfare system, and obstacles to domestic adoption. Second, while rural family structure was patriarchal, families still valued girls. As interviews with Chinese abandoning and adoptive families show, most parents wanted to keep their daughters. Birth parents often kept their first and second daughters, only turning to abandonment when they feared losing the chance to have a son. In addition, thousands of Chinese adoptive parents, some of whom already had sons, took on great risks to raise female foundlings (Johnson 2002). CAAs and their parents have investigated little about the circumstances of orphans in China, because doing so would make it difficult to see adoption as

'fate' (as will be explained later).

Another common misconception by U.S. parents is that birth parents did what was best for their children (Johnson 2002). One mother interviewed by Dorow imagined her daughter's birth parents "wanted to give her a chance of a good life" and knew she "would be better off in an adoptive family" (Dorow 2006:189). While the actions of abandoning families can be understood in terms of socioeconomic pressures, they were based on the welfare of the parents rather than children (Johnson 2002:157). A majority of foundlings were never adopted by either foreign or Chinese families, and perished. Half of birth families interviewed by Johnson et al had no idea what had happened to their daughters, nor if the girls were even alive (2000:91). Considering the extreme overpopulation and high mortality rates of state orphanages, birth parents must have known that prospects were not good for abandoned infants. This may be one reason why they kept their older daughters. Finally, the case that birth parents did what was best for their children is nullified by millions of families who refrained from abandoning their daughters (Johnson 2002:156).

Reviewing historical facts, we see the explanations CAAs and their parents give (i.e. abandonment is caused by policy, sexism, fate) do not reflect reality. Instead, they serve the purpose of boosting CAA self-esteem. Adoptive parents and children are either uninterested in learning the gritty details, do not have access to such information, or both.

A Brief History of International Adoption in the U.S.

International adoption gained popularity in America after World War II. On the premise of humanitarianism, U.S. families brought orphans of WWII, the Vietnam War and the Korean War into their homes (Dorow 2006:53). Adopting internationally became even more prominent

in the 1970's, when alternative domestic adoption policies were coming under fire (Dorow 2006:53).

Voluntarily or forced by law, families of color were giving up their children for adoption into (mostly) white families (Briggs 2012). African American and Native-American rights groups charged that state-sponsored trans-racial adoption amounted to cultural genocide (Briggs 2012). They pushed for legal reforms restricting interracial domestic adoption (Briggs 2012). Meanwhile, adult domestic adoptees were rallying against typical closed adoption procedures (in which children's birth records are sealed off) (Homans 2006:4). Advocates like Betty Jean Lifton argued that closed adoptions prevented adoptees from fully exploring their identities (Homans 2006). In the midst of these debates, families wishing to adopt recognized that international options would be cheaper, less regulated, and less politically charged (Briggs 2012; Volkman 2005b:85). Foreign-born children would be free of ethnic and historical ties to American racial and adoption politics.

Between WWII and the 21st century, millions of families chose to adopt internationally (Volkman 2005a:1). A majority of these families were white, middle-class, and suburban (Volkman 2005a:4). They encouraged their children to ignore ethnic heritage in favor of complete assimilation (Volkman 2005a:4). Adoptees from Korea, the largest group of adoptees from any one country, voiced their discontent with such a color-blind upbringing. When Korean adoptees faced racism from their community, they were unable to discuss incidents with color-blind parents, leaving them feeling alienated and alone (Palmer 2011:30). In addition, American parents' ignorance and rejection of Korean culture made adoptees feel ashamed of their heritage (Palmer 2011:42). Their opinions mirrored domestic adoptee criticisms of closed adoption, and helped to create an adoption culture focused on origins and birth culture (Homans 2006:4). A

new ideology of multiculturalism was also appearing, promoting the celebration of differences (Volkman 2005b; Dorow 2006). It was in this environment that the first American parents began adopting Chinese children.

The next section demonstrates how these historical circumstances affected the experiences of adoptive parents.

CHAPTER 2: NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE
ADOPTIVE PARENTS' INTERPRETATIONS OF C.A.A. BIRTH AND ETHNIC
HERITAGE

This chapter investigates adoptive parents' motives for adopting, and their strategies for dealing with CAA beginnings and ethnicity.

Various scholars have investigated the beliefs and experiences of CAA parents. Ann Anagnost (2000) and Toby Alice Volkman (2005b) both analyzed China adoption websites and e-mail discussion lists. Helena Grice (2005) reviewed memoirs and children's books written by adoptive parents. In 2001, Jay and Jacy Rojewski conducted an online survey of 339 parents of CAAs. Finally, Andrea Louie (2009) and Amy Traver (2009) interviewed dozens of adoptive parents from across the nation. A number of these researchers also attended events run by adoption organizations.

Piecing Together the Past

Taken together, these works show adoptive parents are very concerned with their children's origins. At first, adoptive parents choose China hoping their child will arrive without any strings attached to a previous life. But as time goes on, bio-focused society and adoption culture convince parents that abandonment and relocation have fragmented their daughter's identity. To fill in these gaps, American parents create origin stories for their daughter. They redefine abandonment in ways that allow her to maintain pride in her birth mother and herself. They compile materials from the adoption process to replace newborn photos and hospital birth

stories. Finally, some adoptive parents travel with their young child to China, in search of her birth family and heritage.

The first step on adoptive parents' journey is ironically, a desire to avoid birth heritage conflicts. Before adopting, many prospective parents had learned of Korean American and closed adoption cases, in which ignored histories created tension among family members (Dorow 2006:58). They also know that orphans in China are in a unique situation: abandoned as infants by anonymous parents (Dorow 2006:58). Thus families adopt from China (partly) because they want a child without ties to her biological kin (Dorow 2006). Her identity will be flexible, easily incorporating American family and culture.

Once American families have an adopted child, however, they experience socio-cultural pressure to explore her origins. According to Françoise-Romaine Oullette and Helene Bellau, American society promotes blood kinship as an "indissoluble bond of love" (as cited in Volkman 2005b:99), an essential part of human identity. In the case of adoption, these genealogical roots have been broken, and only traces remain. Since CAA origins do not match dominant biological narratives, adoptee identity appears to be fractured or missing (Homans 2006; Volkman 2005b:97). Contemporary adoption culture and advocacy, stories of birth family reunions, and genetic research all reinforce this assumption (Volkman 2005b:97; Homans 2006:4). For example, adoption advocate Lifton proclaims all adoptees "have experienced a profound loss", which can only be healed through origins exploration (Lifton 2008). Korean-American adoptees have denounced the practice of adoption agencies hiding information about their origins (Palmer 2011:62) These forces create "new cultural pressures to find the missing genetic link" for CAA parents (Volkman 2005b: 97).

Adoptive parents use destiny to explain the first missing piece of CAA origins: why her

Chinese mothers abandoned her. This focus arises out of cultural ideologies of motherhood; the birth mother bonds spiritually with her child via pregnancy, and plays a larger role in her child's life than the father (Dorow 2006:180). According to most American families, patriarchal customs and the One-Child Policy compelled Chinese mothers to abandon daughters (Dorow 2006:181; Grice 2005:143) . Yet circumstance alone does not explain why other women hold on to their girls (Dorow 2006). To reconcile this disparity, American parents re-conceptualize abandonment as a gift exchange and divine intervention (Dorow 2006: 139). The birth mother, according to various interviewed parents, "did have a plan" and "gave her daughter away "to have a brighter future" (Dorow 2006:185). Carol Antoinette Peacock's book for CAAs tells adoptees "your mother couldn't keep you", but "She did the best thing she could...left you where she knew someone could find you" (as cited in Grice 2005:132). Fate then connects Chinese orphans to their U.S. parents--it was 'meant to be' (Dorow 2006).

The 'placement' stories American parents create for their children maintain CAAs' self-esteem within a bio-focused society. All of these explanations allow CAAs (and American parents) to feel empathy, admiration and affection for Chinese mothers (Dorow 2006; Anagnost 2004). Mothers did not want to leave their children behind, but social forces left them no options. Abandonment was a choice based on maternal love, rather than self-preservation or community demands. In the end, abandonment leads to a better life for adoptees. These myths celebrate birth mothers as an essential part of adoptee narratives, and support the notion of infinite maternal love.

American parents utilize physical materials to reconstruct a birth heritage for CAAs. By archiving, adoptive parents replace unknown biological histories with concrete stories of adoption (Homans 2006:4; Grice 2005:138; Louie 2009:308). Items pertaining to a child's first

years are treasured and archived: the first photo sent by the orphanage, baby clothes, birth certificates, citizenship papers, orphanage and travel pictures, and more (Anagnost 2000:409; Grice 2005:138; Homans 2006:4). Parents can even fill pre-made adoption memory books, created and sold by other adoptive families (Grice 2005:134). These archives provide tangible evidence that CAAs were actually adopted, have a real heritage, and belong to their American families. For CAAs, such evidence is especially important, since they have so little information about their birth. Even so, objects in a box or book cannot substitute for actual places and people.

A growing number of American parents are visiting China with their children, in search of adoptee history (Volkman 2005b:99; Grice 2005:129). By going on a 'roots trip', as Homans (2006) asserts, parents attempt to "make [adoptee] origins seem knowable, memorable...to provide certain knowledge of who you are" (p. 5). Audacious families may search for an adoptee's orphanage, abandonment site, and even biological relatives (Volkman 2005b; Grice 2005). Unfortunately, these traces often run cold: orphanages are rebuilt or relocated, clues about birth parents lead to dead ends, etc (Volkman 2005b:101). In *Wuhu Diary*, adoptive mother Emily Prager recounts bringing her four year old daughter LuLu to China (as cited in Grice 2005). While they did not find LuLu's birth mother, Grice argues that Prager's intention was for the girl to "to reconcile herself with her traumatic early history of separation" (2005:129). Adoptive parents like Prager assume part of their child's identity is missing, and can be rediscovered in China.

Due to social forces and adoption discourse, adoptive parents fixate on a past they had planned to forget. Before their daughter is old enough to spell 'abandonment', parents tell her of a heroic Chinese mother who loved by letting go. They display her citizenship papers and orphanage clothes, and bring her to China in search of birth ties. By constructing and

emphasizing beginnings, parents teach their child to equate birth heritage with narrative identity--to remember and seek out her past in order to understand the present.

Multiple Ways to Perform 'Chinese'

Another topic parents are concerned about is culture. White families adopt from China hoping the ethnic and cultural "flexibility of Asian difference" will guarantee easy assimilation for their daughter (Dorow 2006:41). But adoption advocates and bigoted community members compel parents to acknowledge issues of race. To give their daughter pride in her ethnic identity, many parents introduce her to Chinese culture. The extent to which parents immerse their daughter in China culture varies. Some families incorporate only decorative elements, while others engage in multiple activities. In their attempts to foster CAA ethnic identity, white parents may actually be reducing China to exotic crafts. Minority parents, on the other hand, focus on adoptees' experiences as Asian Americans in a white-dominated society.

White parents choose China based on racial and cultural stereotypes. While blacks and Latinos inhabit the bottom of America's race hierarchy, Asians and Asian Americans are considered "model minorities", even 'honorary whites' (Tuan 1998:30; Espiritu 1997:109). Thus, American families see Chinese children as different enough as to be racially interesting, but not so different that they will be rejected by (white) society (Dorow 2006:47; Louie 2009:298). For example, in explaining why she adopted from China specifically, one mother mentioned, "black is still...a minority that doesn't fit in as well as some other minorities" (Dorow 2006:47). Adoptive parents also believe that Asian culture is " 'more aligned' with white culture", as Louie puts it (2009: 295). The white families interviewed by Dorow had a 'taste' for China even before deciding to adopt (2006:43). They revered Chinese culture for being timeless, accessible and adaptable--a birth heritage which could be celebrated by children without preventing assimilation

(Dorow 2006:44).

Once parents raise their child, however, they are forced by larger society to acknowledge their child's race. Previously racially invisible themselves, white adoptive parents (the majority of CAA parents) are suddenly thrust into the social spotlight (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:124). Over 90% of participants in the Rojewskis' study had been asked by strangers about their child's background (ex: Is her mother/father Chinese? How much did she cost?) (2001:95). As part of a multiracial family, white parents must constantly reaffirm their parenthood and their daughter's racial identity (see Dorow 2006).

In addition, multiculturalism and adoption discourse emphasize birth *culture* as an essential part of adoptee identity (Traver 2009; Homans 2006; Volkman 2005b). The ideology of multiculturalism promotes the celebration of cultural differences as if they were flavors to be sampled (Traver 2009:46). International conferences and adoption experts promote "embracing at least a portion of a child's birth culture...to help fill the gaps and heal the 'broken' adoptee" (Dorow 2006:211). Chinese adoption authorities even make US parents promise they will teach their daughter about Chinese culture (Volkman 2005b:90). Korean-American adoptees have expressed anger and alienation from parents who did not celebrate Korean heritage. Under all these pressures, adoptive parents decide to instill their daughter with a cultural heritage "for which the child should be proud" (Volkman 2005b:90). They hope doing so will shield her from racism, prepare her to answer the questions she will receive, and foster her self-esteem.

Families worry how much Chinese culture to introduce; too much heritage may alienate their child, while too little could make her feel ashamed of her roots (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:96). Parents in both Dorow's and the Rojewskis' studies tended to fall along a continuum, from promoting only white middle-class culture, to emphasizing exclusively Chinese culture.

Parents with older adoptees, and those who live in diverse communities, tend to focus more on Chinese culture (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:89; Dorow 2006:217). This is not surprising, since older CAAs become more aware of their racial identity, and families with greater access to Chinese-American culture are better able to expose their children to it.

Assimilationist families--often white couples living in white suburbs--consider American and Chinese identity to be mutually exclusive (Dorow 2006:217). Save for an oriental fan or two, they do not incorporate Chinese culture into their adoptee's life (Dorow 2006:217; Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:92). They fear doing so would impede the girl's assimilation into American society (Dorow 2006:217; Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:92). They give her an Anglicized name (Dorow 2006:219). For these parents, China is the past and America is the present (Dorow 2006:219).

Dualist parents (or 'balancing act' parents as Dorow calls them) are the largest group. They try to give equal attention to both Chinese and U.S. culture (Dorow 2006:221; Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:96). These families tend to live in diverse communities (Dorow 2006:221). Seeing their daughter as "both Chinese and American" (Dorow 2006:223), parents enact "symbolic ethnicity by proxy": promoting Chinese cultural practices and experiences in order to give her an ethnic identity (Grice 2005:140). Parents introduce her to Chinese festivals, traditional crafts, language classes, and/or adoptee organizations (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:94; Traver 2009:51; Anagnost 2000:412) . They give their daughter a Chinese first or middle name (Dorow 2006:221).

A third group of parents, immersionists, believe "a strong grounding" in Chinese heritage is "essential for establishing a strong, positive self-identity" in their daughter (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:94). Immersionists involve their child in similar activities as dualist parents, but

to a greater degree (Dorow 2006:227; Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:95). They give her a Chinese first name (Dorow). A few immersionist parents even join Chinese-American communities and learn Mandarin for themselves (Dorow 2006:228).

From these studies, it becomes clear that American families believe culture is an important part of adoptee identity formation. But they have varying interpretations of how cultural identity should be formed. Immersionist and assimilationist parents have already formed an opinion on adoptee ethnicity (it is Chinese-American, or just American) (Dorow 2006:225). In order to support this ethnicity, it is the family's job to (or not to) emphasize Chinese culture (Dorow 2006:225). In contrast, parents who support dualism consider ethnicity a personal journey (Dorow 2006:225). Adoptees have roots in China and the U.S., and parents can support their identity formation by exposing them to Chinese activities (Dorow 2006:226). But in the end, it is the child's decision how much of each culture she wants to incorporate.

Critics charge these families with exoticizing and decontextualizing Chinese society (Volkman 2005b:92; Anagnost 2000:414). White adoptive parents introduce their child to bits of Chinese culture which can stand opposite 'Western' life (Louie 2009:308). They also tend to neglect Chinese history, international politics, and the experiences of Asian Americans (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001:99, Dorow 2006:230, Volkman 2005b:92). Multiculturalism as a social movement "can box people into stereotypical images" and "aestheticize racial difference" (Anagnost 2000:412). Thus, adoptive parents' multicultural approaches may actually 'contain' ethnic difference, subsuming a stereotyped China under modern American culture (Louie 2009:308). On the positive side, families do create CAA communities for their children, so kids can share experiences with adoptive peers.

Minority parents interpret ethnicity in a larger context of U.S. racial relations (Dorow

2006:229). They foster CAA cultural identity in a different manner than white parents. Chinese-American families do not worry about authentically representing Chinese culture, because they have ancestral ties to China, and because they believe culture can be interpreted multiple ways (Dorow 2006:230). These families participate in Asian American communities with their adoptees, and focus on racial identity more than traditional Chinese customs (Dorow 2006:230). Minority parents recognize that ethnic identity is more than just a menagerie of cultural activities; it is a particular regional heritage, and racialized experience as a hyphenated American.

In short, white adoptive families had hoped their Asian adoptee would blend in easily into white America. But adoption advocates and larger society compel them to celebrate racial differences. Their daughter will face racism on a daily basis; she will also question her own racial identity. Knowledge of Chinese culture, parents believe, will give her the resources to face these challenges. How much culture families introduce varies. Parents with older adoptees, those with greater access to Chinese communities, and those who see their child as more 'Chinese', tend to incorporate more culture. Unfortunately, white parents often fetishize China, reducing a nation with complex sociopolitical affairs into a jumble of past-times. They also fail to address Asian American experiences in the US, a topic which Chinese adoptive parents are keen to explore. But as many researchers have noted, white parents face the unique challenge of supporting an ethnic identity they do not share.

Summary

In short, adoptive parents start out hoping to ignore their child's origins. Yet biocentrism, multiculturalism, racism and adoption culture intervene. As result, parents decide to invest in

their daughter's birth and ethnic heritage, in order to foster her self-identity. Adoptive families construct narrative origins for their child in similar ways, because they share the goal of promoting CAA self-esteem. The ways parents explore Chinese culture, however, vary; families interpret adoptee ethnic identity differently. Race and ethnicity are very particular experiences, which white parents especially struggle to grasp. As we will see, CAAs' understandings of birth origins and ethnicity are influenced by parents' actions.

In the next section, I analyze raw data to gain insight into adoptees' beliefs.

CHAPTER 3: FINDING YOURSELF BY GETTING LOST
ADOPTEE STRUGGLE TO CREATE BIRTH NARRATIVES, ETHNIC IDENTITIES
AND COMMUNITY

Methods

To get a sense of what CAAs think, I analyzed a blog exclusively run by adoptees, and a movie about four adoptees. The "One World: Chinese Adoptee Links Blog" is a website founded by eight CAAs ("One" 2014). It is an extension of a larger organization, Chinese Adoptee Links International "Global Generations" (CAL G2), founded in 2007, which is "the first global group created by and for the more than 150,000 Chinese adoptees and friends" (CAL G2 2014).

On "One World", The authors explore issues pertaining to adoptees, share their personal lives, and stay in touch with each other. "One World" originally started as a pen-pal program, before participants transformed it into a website in 2009 (Jue-Steuck 2010c). From September 2009 to March 2014, adoptees submitted 631 entries to the blog. For this study, I analyzed all submissions from January 2010, February 2010, May 2011, November 2012 and December 2012. I chose this range in order to cover a variety of months during the blog's most active years. My data encompassed 52 posts written by nine different female adoptees. Their usernames and ages were: Jazz, Julia, Juleigh, Chen Xiaoming, and Jessie L (all teenagers); Sabrina, JetLoakman and Jennifer Bao Yu "Precious Jade" Jue-Steuck (young adults); and Mei-Mei (an older adult). The bloggers hailed mainly from the North East and West Coast. The bloggers did not consistently state their parents' ethnicities.

The documentary *Somewhere Between* (2011) is directed by Linda Goldstein Knowlton,

and follows the lives of four CAAs over the course of three years. The young teenagers (and their States) are: Jenna Cook (NH), Haley Butler (TN), Ann Boccuti (PA), and Fang "Jenni" Lee (CA). Butler and Boccuti were each adopted by white heterosexual couples; Cook was adopted by a white lesbian couple, and Lee by a white mother and Asian father. An adoptive mother herself, Knowlton made the film in order to prepare for her own daughter's identity journey. Using in-depth interviews, footage of daily life, and family photos, Knowlton creates a coming-of-age story of these adoptees.

In the film, Cook speaks at an adoption conference, and is gifted a necklace from another adoptive mother. She begins to overcome her insecurities about being abandoned. Butler and Boccuti travel with the CAL G2 organization to Europe. Later on, Butler travels to China and miraculously finds her birth parents. She visits their village and learns about her origins. Finally, Lee raises money for Chinese orphan Run Yi, and facilitates the girl's adoption process.

Both bloggers and documentary subjects mention four overarching topics: birth origins, Chinese culture, racism and community. Adoptees struggle to make sense of their beginnings. Sometimes they view abandonment as injustice, and reject the notion that birth parents/heritage should define them. Other times, CAAs portray abandonment as God's plan, and long to know their birth parents and histories. Adoptees try find their place in the world. They consider themselves Chinese-American, with names to prove it. Yet, while some CAAs connect to China through visits, others feel alienated from Chinese society. Even their depictions of China range from sociopolitical observations to travel diaries. At home, CAAs deal with racism and bio-centrism from community members. They fight back against bigoted comments, but internalize certain ideological approaches. To gain support and understanding, adoptees join together and form communities.

Love Me or Hate Me: CAA opinions on Birth Family

The subject adoptees discuss and deliberate over the most is *birth origins*. On the one hand, adoptees view abandonment as a sexist, unjust practice. Their reactions vary from indignation to insecurity. On the other hand, CAAs repaint abandonment and adoption as destiny. Many adoptees want to find their birth parents and learn more about their infancy. Those who remember or later discover their biological families are happy to obtain: a more continuous personal narrative, concrete proof of the past, and an opportunity to self-reflect. Other adoptees reject dominant conceptions of birth heritage as a literal and vitally important aspect of selfhood. They construct a narrative identity based on self-agency and adoptive parental support. When adoptees tackle the issue of beginnings, they come up with multiple, contradictory conclusions.

Both bloggers and interviewees emphasize gender as the main motive for birth parents abandoning them. Jazz writes, "I was abandoned because girls are looked at as weak" (2012b). Remembering her childhood, Lee says her birth father "really needed a son, and I was essentially a mistake to him. I wasn't supposed to be a girl" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Adoptees have different reactions to gendered abandonment. Since "gender" is "something that you can't control", as Lee puts it, some adoptees become righteously indignant (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Jazz and Lee want to prove their self-worth, both to themselves and to their birth parents (Jazz 2012b; Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Cook, on the other hand, worries there is an additional "reason maybe I wasn't good enough" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). She excels in school "to compensate for the fact that I'm a girl...for that initial rejection" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Finally, Boccuti says being left "just because I was a girl doesn't really bother me. That's back in China" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011).

In these examples, Adoptees simplify economic imperatives and social customs (ex: retirement security, family structure) into a general preference for boys. They consider abandonment an indictment on their personal character and worth. Some adoptees interpret this as a challenge to prove themselves, while others fall into insecurity. Only one adoptee dismisses the issue by placing abandonment in the past, 'over there'.

At the same time ,adoptees also re-conceptualize abandonment as careful placement by birth parents, and adoption as destiny--a portrayal very similar to that of adoptive parents'. According to Mei-Mei, CAAs were " never truly abandoned", since "even if [they left us] on a sidewalk, our birth mothers...wanted us to be found and cared for" (2012). Lee recognizes she "wouldn't be here if it weren't for the decisions [my birth mother] made" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). She considers her origins to be Tien Ying, "the plan of the heavens" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Finally, Butler explains her life with, "God has everything for a reason" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). The same adoptees who perceived abandonment as sexist and unjust, now reframe it into a story of motherly love, fate and divine intervention.

Many adoptees miss their birth parents and yearn to find them. Jazz (2010b) describes living without her birth mother through a poem:

the mind wonders
about the missing screw
but of course

it will have to do". Xiaoming plan to visit China in order to "find my parents" and "satisfy my yearnings to know myself" (2010b). She will be "devastated" if she fails (Xiaoming 2010b). An essay by Cook reads: "Someday I hope I will fall into my Chinese mother's arms, just as that necklace fell into mine", which was "by an act of faith" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Even

though most CAAs (minus Lee) do not remember their biological parents, they still experience a sense of loss. Just as adoptive parents have concluded, CAAs believe biological origins form an important part of narrative history and selfhood.

In addition to parents, adoptees wish to know other aspects of their past, such as their medical histories, birth dates and infancy. On not knowing her genetic predispositions, Xiaoming gets "enraged that this sort of injustice had happened to me" (2010a). Both Xiaoming and Lee want to know their real birth dates rather than estimates (Xiaoming 2010c; Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Since officials often underestimate age (to increase adoption chances), it is very possible Lee has "been fifteen for a long time" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Finally, Jazz (2012a) visits her orphanage, learns new details about her abandonment, and excitedly holds her government file. She titles her post "Finding ourselves in our birth place", demonstrating how adoptees connect origins to selfhood (Jazz 2012a). While these birth facts may seem trivial, adoptees miss knowing the truth and having a definitive narrative origin.

The stories of adoptees who remember or reunite with birth families help answer what adoptees hope to gain from a reunion. Abandoned at the age of five, Lee holds clear memories of her previous life: her father "chopped firewood for a living", and they all lived "in a little shack with one bed" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Although her birth mother wanted to keep her, one day she "handed me over to my step-brother... he took me to the city on a bus, and he sat me down...and he just left like that and never came back" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Lee says "my mom piercing my ears... it's the only proof that my [birth] mom and father ever existed" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). While knowing her past is in some ways painful, it gives Lee a sense of closure. She has physical proof; she can construct a complete narrative and focus on her current life.

Somewhere Between also follows Butler as she meets her birth family for the first time (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). She learns they left her because they were poor, had three other daughters, and needed a son (like the results Johnson found) (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). After visiting her Chinese family's home, Butler learns what her life could have been like. But due to language barriers, there are still questions left unsolved. She imagined, "they'd tell me everything. But then I forget that they speak Chinese, and I don't" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Adoptees like Butler hope a reunion with their birth parents will reconnect them to the past. While it can answer many questions, a reunion does not mend the discontinuity of adoptive origins.

Blogger JetLoakman recalls finally meeting her birth mother: "I finally found out what I look like...meeting [her] I saw my future face and through my half-sisters, I saw a possible past" (2010). She learns her personality is similar to her mother's and sisters' (JetLoakman 2010). JetLoakman believes adoptees "want something from our biological past" in order to find "a place that we can hold in our heart that is 'ours' and not 'theirs' " (2010). As she makes clear, adoptees believe meeting biological kin can teach them something about themselves. They want to know their origins directly, rather than through legal documents or imagination.

In sum, adoptees want to meet their birth parents in order to solve mysteries about the past: why birth parents abandoned them, what their lives could have been like, etc. These are the same questions that adoptive parents reported exploring. Like adoptive parent, CAAs believe knowledge of the past would give them a more complete narrative identity, and transform myth into concrete reality. Meeting birth parents would also give CAAs the chance to learn more about themselves.

At the same time, CAA bloggers assert that birth parents and birth origins do not play a

major role in shaping their identities. Julia's birth origins are not vital to her identity: "my birthday doesn't really mean anything...I don't even remember being born, or even being in the orphanage" (2010c). This CAA believes one's "birth mother doesn't define who they are", and considers her birth parents "only a small fraction of my past" (Julia 2010b). She also asserts her adoptive mother, not birth mother, is the "real mother" who "loves and takes care of me" (Julia 2010d). While Jazz is interested in meeting her birth parents, she recognizes her chances are slim (2010a). After Mei-Mei learns her birth name, she declares "It is not the 'name' that defines me" (2010a). According to these CAAs, birth dates/names/parents are not identity shapers because they cannot be remembered, and do not have emotional significance.

Julia, Jazz and Mei-Mei look towards themselves and their adoptive families to create a sense of self. Julia values her "metaphorical" birth-of-conscious over a literal date (2010c). She believes "finding your identity is something you choose by yourself", rather than being pre-defined (Julia 2010b). Adoptive parents do, however, contribute to this journey: "I am piecing together my identity through my [adoptive] mother and her everlasting love" Julia concludes (2010b). Jazz's comment is similar: "With my parents being so great, I find I am already finding who I am" (2010b). Lastly, Mei-Mei declares: "I am myself and, I am the daughter of [adoptive mom], my only true mother" (2010a). Mei-Mei thanks her mother for having "nurtured me" and taught of "life's possibilities" (2010a).

In all three cases, adoptees distance themselves from an unfamiliar past. They re-define common understandings of birth heritage. A parent is the person who raises and cares for one you, rather than someone you share DNA with. Names and birthdates are states of mind, rather than words on a certificate. For these CAAs, self-agency and parental support play the largest roles in shaping identity.

There is not one single way adoptees interpret their birth heritage and construct an origin narrative. Approaches vary between CAAs, and for each adoptee over time. Sometimes they construct their beginnings as God's will, other times the same CAAs protest it as injustice. Certain adoptees long to rediscover their biological roots and families--to fill in the gaps of an incomplete self. Other CAAs redefine origins all-together, forming identity through the resources available (themselves and their adoptive parents).

No Place Like Home: Chinese Adoptees trying to fit in China

In addition to birth origins, adoptees construct their identities in relation to China. Most CAAs in this study have re-visited (or plan to re-visit) China, and many have Chinese first or middle names. Through their names, various adoptees connect to both China and America, both their biological and adoptive heritages. Traveling also influences how CAAs understand their ethnic and national identity. Some adoptees come away with a stronger sense of Chinese identity, Others discover how different Chinese society is, and leave feeling disconnected from it.

A number of adoptees consider themselves Chinese-American, and hold their multicultural names as proof. A section of Julia's (2010a) name poem reads,

The identity of Chinese from my middle name Qiufeng

My baby name from my orphanage, meaning Autumn Maples

And my adopted Italian identity from my mom, which is where Julia completes me.

Jennifer (2010b) gives details on her 'American' name (Jennifer), Chinese name (Bao Yu, "Chinese for 'Precious Jade' ") and last name (Jue-Steuck, "both German and Chinese"). " I'm really proud of all my names", she ends (2010b). At the end of *Somewhere Between* (2011), Haley Butler is given the name 'Zhu Yuan' by her birth father. She is proud to have a new name

connecting her to her nation and birth family (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Julia, Jennifer and Butler value both their Chinese and American heritages, and stay tied to each through their names.

Through visits to China, adoptees explore and re-shape their national and cultural ties. One adoptee, Xiaoming, identifies with China to the exclusion of America. While planning her visit, she says: "My first trip home will be...a journey for an orphan who was ripped from the heart of China into foreign lands and raised with foreign culture" (2010b). Some adoptees incorporate China into their selfhood after visiting. From spending a month in Beijing, Mei-Mei builds a "profound bond to the people and the home of my ancestors" (2010b). Upon parting, she bids "farewell to my beloved China...I left part of my heart behind in the land of my forbears" (2010b). Lee visits China every year with her adoptive family (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). "I love China. China is my homeland", she states (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Cook plans to "carry pride in my Chinese culture" on the first return to her orphanage (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). By traveling, these CAAs build a connection to China as a nation, people and culture.

After returning home, other CAAs distance themselves from a Chinese identity. After living in Beijing for months, Sabrina notices the stark differences between U.S. and Chinese media. "As Americans and foreigners...we've learned to live with it [censorship]", she writes (2012). While touring China, Jazz finds Hong Kong the "most comforting place...because there were more westerners" (2012a). Julia realizes on her first trip, "even though I looked like the Chinese, I wasn't really a true Chinese [*sic*]. I couldn't speak Chinese, and I didn't know and understand the way of their world" (2010d). She concludes that she is "adopted Chinese-American" (Julia 2010d). In their travels, these adoptees realize how different China is demographically, culturally and linguistically from the U.S.. Feeling out of place, they start to

identify less as 'Chinese' and more as 'American'.

Adoptees are proud of both their cultural heritages, both their Chinese and 'American' names. CAAs want to explore both worlds, an outlook most akin to dualist adoptive families. Before traveling, most CAAs expect to feel at home in China. Through travel, Mei-Mei, Lee and Cook bond with Chinese society. In contrast, Sabrina, Jazz and Julia find their social upbringing makes them much more American than Chinese. Like adoptive parents, CAAs have varying levels of attachment to China.

It is also important to note how CAAs understand Chinese culture and society. The way adoptees talk about China depends not so much on how much they culturally identify, but how much time they spend visiting. Adoptees who visit for a few weeks tend to focus on simpler parts of Chinese culture, such as festivals, foods and regional differences. Those who travel yearly, or stay as expats, want to learn more about the people and their world view.

Jazz (who visits for a few weeks) discusses regional differences and shopping; she notes "westernized" Hong Kong citizens speak Cantonese instead of "Chinese" (Mandarin) (2012a). In rural Feng Wan, "known for the Mao minority", she shops along the river, then dresses up in a Mao costume for fun (Jazz 2012a). While Jazz begins to see cultural diversity, she remains interested in clothes rather than people or culture.

Mei-Mei describes her one month by focusing on food, festivals and ancient history. She misses, "red bean bread at the corner bakery", her "superb acupuncturist", and "the ever-changing wares displayed by migrant vendors" (Mei-Mei 2010b). On Chinese New Year, she sees families visiting "Temple fair grounds festooned with red flags, stopping to buy candied fruit on sticks, delicate animals blown from melted sugar" (2010b). Finally, she admires "China's inestimable heritage dating back thousands of years" at the Capital Museum and Great Wall

(2010b). She glorifies and exotifies the more easily accessible aspects of Chinese culture.

Lee (who visits yearly) and Sabrina (currently living in Beijing) explore social and political aspects of society. Each year Lee visits China, she visits different ethnic communities "where I might find people that look like me" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). She tries on minority clothing because, " If I stand out it's harder for me to talk to people and really be a part of the community" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Lee wants to get to know people, and learn where she fits into Chinese society.

Sabrina (who lives in Beijing) discusses more recent history. She ponders what life was like in late 20th century China, "a period of transition in...politics, culture, the influence of outside ideas, and a slowly changing mindset as China positioned themselves in the world" (Sabrina 2010). Sabrina also wonders how censorship of news media "shapes Chinese perceptions of other countries and how they see critical historical and political events" (2012). Her understanding of China is by far the most political.

Adoptees who only visit China for a short period of time are drawn to material culture (clothing, food, etc), and cultural icons (major festivals, the Great Wall). This viewpoint reflects adoptive parents' approaches. Adoptees who spend more time in China focus on complex aspects of society, such as economic and political changes. These CAAs want to interact with the community, to learn how Chinese citizens view the world.

It's a Twinkie! It's a Banana! It's a Chinese-American Adoptee!

Adoptees also discuss issues of racism and racial identity . Many grow up in predominantly white communities, where they are one of few Asian Americans. They deal with racist comments, bullying and bio-centric questions. CAAs respond by refuting family and race

stereotypes, though sometimes they internalize these images.

As children, CAAs were often teased by white peers about their race, ethnic origins and multiracial families. Julia (2010d), Jennifer and Butler all remember kids in school pulling their eyes back mockingly, and muttering "strange 'Hollywood Chinese gibberish' " at them (Jue-Steuck 2010d). In ballet class, girls would question Julia " ' If your mom looks like our moms, then shouldn't you? " (2010d). According to Jennifer, this treatment taught CAAs to be "ashamed of being 'Chinese', and of being 'adopted' " (Jue-Steuck 2010d).

Adoptees have also received racist, bio-centric comments from teens and adults. The parents of Julia's peers used to ask "Can you find your real [birth] mom and dad?", and assert "your real mom is in China" (2010d). In one documentary scene, fellow students mock Butler with phrases like "Are you an adopted Asian?" and "You're so white" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). Finally, Boccuti recalls strangers asking "Do you speak English?" and expect her to excel academically (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). In these cases, (often white) community members assert dominant ideologies of family and ethnicity. They reproduce common stereotypes of Asians as ugly, hyper-intelligent foreigners with a senseless culture (Tuan 1998:32; Espiritu 1997:110). They also assume a family bond cannot be 'real' unless it is genetic and mono-racial.

Adoptees react to racism with both resistance and insecurity. On the one hand, they refute and mock racism/bio-centrism, responding: "My [adoptive] mom *is* my real mom" (Julia 2010d), "I probably speak it [English] better than you", and "That question isn't even funny" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). CAAs shrug prejudice off with "What else can you do", or "I have a normal family" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). On the other hand, adoptees become insecure about their origins and ethnic identities. They ache to learn more about the past and find their birth parents. Some CAAs, like Butler and the sisters of Cook, compare themselves to bananas or scrambled

eggs for being "yellow on the outside white on the inside" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011).

The cruel words and bigoted assumptions of white community members have left an indelible mark on CAAs' lives. Adoptees will always remember they and their families are strange in the eyes of American society. As adoptive parents have done, each adoptee resists assertions that she is racially inferior, or that her parents are not "real". Yet she can't help but doubt herself, wonder whether her life is incomplete without birth parents, belittle her own ethnic identity to get along with the (white) crowd. She lives out a struggle between refuting dominant ideology and trying to find a place within it.

Empowerment Through Adoptee Solidarity

To cope with their unique situation, CAAs have developed communities. Adoptees form ties in order to share support and experiences with people who understand. At conferences and online, CAAs explore relevant issues (race, birth origins, etc), take pride in their identities, and connect across borders.

Adoptees find great comfort in sharing their experiences with others who 'get it'. The first time Jessie L talked to fellow CAAs, it felt "powerfully healing" for strangers to "understand completely where everyone was coming from and how it is living as a trans-racial adoptee" (2012). Boccuti and Butler both participate in CAL's Global Girls group. When Boccuti has "moments of self-doubt, because you were given up" and Butler hears "people say stupid stuff", they enjoy talking to fellow CAAs who "know what it's like" (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). In these examples, adoptees share their struggles dealing with abandonment anxiety, racism, and ethnic identity. By having others empathize with their experiences, adoptees gain self-confidence and emotional strength.

In addition, an adoption community provides a space for CAAs to explore questions on birth heritage, race and culture. Throughout the posts I analyzed, adoptees were constantly raising and discussing origin questions, such as "What is your mother's name?", or "Where were you born?" (Jue-Steuck 2010a). According to Jennifer (2010d), "One World" can provide CAAs a sense of pride in their racial and adoptive identities, which have hitherto been denigrated by society. She urges older adoptees to consider "all the children who are bullied today for being adopted, for being different", and to unite as a group in order to combat prejudice (Jue-Steuck 2010d). Through community, adoptees can give the next CAA generation empowering new values and definitions.

Through websites and conferences, adoptee organizations provide support across time and space. Via the "One World" blog, CAAs can support each other even if they live thousands of miles away. Julia says "This blog is a place to connect", and offers to be "here for anybody...that needs to talk" (2011). Mei-Mei tells readers, "you have a huge network of friends and 'family'...only an email away" (2011). She praises a fellow blogger's post for its "openness and courage" (Mei-Mei 2012). At conferences around the world, Cook shares her experiences with CAA families and gives advice (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011). When she begins to cry, an adoptive mother gifts Cook a jade necklace, from which she draws emotional strength (Goldstein-Knowlton 2011).

By uniting together, adoptees can create a space where they don't have to explain themselves. They can acknowledge their insecurities and explore issues of birth, race and culture safely. CAAs create new value systems in which their identities as transnational, transracial adoptees are respected. They reach out to community members who are in different states and nations, and unite.

Summary

The story of CAAs is about the struggle to find one's identity living in a white, bio-centric society. Community members teach CAAs that being Chinese, adopted by white parents, and unfamiliar with your "real" parents, are all disadvantages. 'You are an American imposter; you have no family; you do not know your true self'. These messages have impacted CAAs profoundly, in ways similar to adoptive parents. Adoptees try to make sense of abandonment; they search for birth parents and records; they even travel to China looking for a sense of culture. In short, CAAs travel through narrative time and space in the hopes of finding themselves. At the same time, each adoptee resists dominant ideology in some form; by redefining family, creating alternative origins, and declaring she is both Chinese and American.

As this analysis shows, CAA narrative and cultural identity varies between adoptees, and for each adoptee over time. In spite of their divergent and changing opinions, these adoptees unite as a group to support each other. As Butler puts it, "The whole adoption community has this commonality about us...but at the same time, we're each at our own place in our own journey".

I will next compare the beliefs of adoptees and their parents, and interpret them within the framework of diaspora theory.

CHAPTER 4: CONNECTING C.A.A.s, ADOPTIVE PARENTS, AND DIASPORA THEORY

Half the Apple Falls Far from the Tree: Parental Influence on CAA identity formation

Adoptees and their parents are both under social pressure to search for biological origins and ethnic heritage. Parents of the 90's were under extra pressure from adoption advocates and multicultural ideology. Both parents and children have similar interpretations of CAA birth origins, Chinese culture and community. This suggests that parents may be influencing how adoptees form their identities.

Adoptive parents and CAAs deal with birth origins in similar ways. Both adoptive parents and children suffer pressure from society to recognize birth origins as an essential part of narrative identity. Adoptive parents also receive this message from government officials, adoption advocates and Korean-American adoptees. In order to smooth narratives gaps, parents and children reframe abandonment as maternal love/destiny. They ignore adoption's more complex sociopolitical causes (ex: obstacles to intra-national adoption), and parental motives (infertility, race stereotypes), so that CAAs can stay positive about the past.

Many CAAs want to search for their birth parents and history, a quest that adoptive parents in previous studies embarked on with toddlers. CAAs grieve and yearn for their birth families, while adoptive parents feel this loss vicariously (and sometimes preemptively). By championing the search for birth heritage, parents may be triggering CAAs to miss it. Indeed, both parents and children hope knowledge of origins can mend fragmented personal narratives, validate the present, and provide 'certain knowledge of who you are'.

Both groups do have moments of resistance and reclaiming. By archiving tangible items,

parents try to replace birth stories with adoption stories. Perhaps inspired by parents, CAAs redefine their beginnings to match adoption: birth is an adoptee's first memory of her American family, and parenthood is based on care rather than DNA.

In regards to ethnic heritage, parental cultural approaches predict the extent to which CAAs bond with China. Adoptees who feel more connected to China by traveling (Xiaoming, Mei-Mei, Fang Lee, Jenna Cook) tend to have Chinese first names, suggesting their families took immersionist approaches. Adoptees who did not feel as connected (Sabrina, Jazz and Julia) had Anglicized first names, suggesting they came from dualist or assimilationist families. These CAAs felt too American to understand Chinese culture.

Adoptive parents also influence the way CAAs understand China. Parents and adoptees who visit China for a short time, interpret Chinese culture to be a series of activities and festivals. For instance, adoptive families host culture camps for their children, teaching calligraphy, boat racing and acrobatics. On the "One World" blog, CAAs Mei-Mei and Jazz reminisce about China's clothing shops, New Year's celebrations, and red bean bread. Both portrayals of China emphasize material culture. They ignore more controversial sociopolitical aspects of Chinese society, and reduce Chinese ethnic identity to a simplistic, joyful ideal.

Lastly, CAAs and American parents each work to create communities. Parents have established chapters of Families with Children from China across the U.S., in order to connect with other adoptive families and provide support for their daughters. The foundations parents establish help adoptees build their own organizations. CAAs meet each other through parental organizations, and later form adoptee-oriented groups like CAL G2/"One World". Through community, parents and children share their experiences, challenges and ideas. Both groups prosper from support.

This being said, there are important differences between CAAs and parents. Adoptees are angrier at birth parents, and reject bio-centric ideology more strongly. While parents tend to stress sociopolitical motives for abandonment (like the one-child policy), adoptees cite a general attitude of sexism. Adoptees take abandonment very personally, and feel the need to prove themselves. Some reject the necessity of birth families in personal narratives entirely, turning instead to self-agency and familial love.

CAAs have slightly different interactions with Chinese culture. While demographics correlate with parents' investment in China (parents closer to Chinese communities tend to focus on China more), demographics do not predict adoptee interests. This is to say, CAAs explore Chinese culture because they feel ostracized in the U.S., and are looking for a place to fit in (not because it is convenient). Finally, adoptees who visit China for long periods of time become intrigued by complex aspects of society (ex: political changes, media), which parents do not explore.

Finally, CAAs depend much more on community support than parents. While parents often deal with issues of origins, race and ethnicity, CAAs cannot escape it. In previous studies, parents reported hearing racist comments while in the company of their daughters. But adoptees, as Dorow states, "carry their history with them on their gendered, raced bodies" (2006:177). CAA bloggers and film subjects experienced racism on an ongoing basis. Additionally, while parents may worry about their daughters' identity journeys, it is adoptees who must live them. CAA bloggers and documentary subjects relied much more on community than adoptive parents in previous studies. In CAA organizations, adoptees can let their walls down, investigate relevant issues, and promote group pride.

To conclude, adoptive parents and children have similar ways of interpreting the world. Parents teach CAAs to smooth over narrative ruptures/learn about themselves by believing in fate and rediscovering their birth heritage. At the same time, parents encourage CAAs to create new adoption narratives, and lay the foundation for CAA community. From parents, adoptees learn how important China should be for them, and what parts of culture to valorize (simple elements which do not complicate ethnic identity). There are differences between the two groups. CAAs are more emotionally hurt by abandonment, racism, and biocentrism. They wrestle with identity issues to a greater extent, and with more thoughtfulness, than parents. To find support and a place to belong, CAAs visit China and form adoptee communities. They also create revolutionary, personally empowering definitions of narrative and ethnic identity.

The CAA Diaspora is Truly 'Somewhere Between'

The experiences and beliefs of CAAs and their parents can be understood from the framework of diaspora. Karen Miller-Loessi and Zeynep Kilic argue there are four elements that make up a post-modern diaspora: connections with the homeland and each other, hybrid identities, affinity and hostility towards the homeland, and communities based on a common history. American parents in previous studies, and adoptees in my analysis, all demonstrate these characteristics.

First, a transnational diaspora has "organized, institutionalized, and sustained connections with the homeland and with other diasporic communities" (Loessi and Kilic 2001:251). As we have seen, CAA networks, created by both adoptive parents and children, connect families across the US and around the world. The "One World" blog hosts adoptees from Italy, the U.S., Britain and more. By participating in CAL G2 events, film subjects Boccuti, Butler and Cook were able

to connect with Chinese adoptees from England and Spain. Adoptive parents and "One World" bloggers have also traveled to China with the support of CAA organizations.

Diasporic people live a "double identity", " seeing themselves as part of both homeland and host-land but not fully part of either" (Loessi and Kilic 2001:257). Loessi and Kilic (2001) argue that CAAs constitute a post-modern diaspora, because they "occupy multiple categories" which "remain hybrid, fluid and multicultural", and which challenge normative notions of ethnic identity (p. 251). The adoptees in my study, as well as dualist parents from previous studies, assert that CAA identity is multifaceted and flexible. CAAs are 'both Chinese and American', but they are not completely accepted by either society. CAA bloggers and film subjects identified with both China and America, birth families and adoptive parents. Parents and adoptees each challenge dominant conceptions of birth, family and race.

Members of a diaspora have a complex relationship with their origins. They live and move on a continuum between assimilating into host nations, adjusting, and remaining foreigners connected to a homeland (Loessi and Kilic 2001:253). They share a "collective memory and myth of the homeland" and desire a "symbolic return" (Loessi and Kilic 2001:254). But diasporic peoples also resent their homeland, and deal with hostility from multiple sources (Loessi and Kilic 2001:256). In my analysis, I found that adoptive parents and CAAs had varying levels of affinity for China. Adoptees and parents share idealized, simplified notions of Chinese society (ex: China's "estimable history"). They make return journeys, search for birth families and fetishize Chinese culture. But CAAs are still angry at their birth parents (and China as a nation) for abandoning them. In both China and the US, parents experienced alienation and racism (ex: "Why is your mother white?").

Finally, diasporic people form "solidarity" and "group consciousness based on..a sense of

distinctiveness [and] a common history" (Loessi and Kilic 2001:255). Adoptive parents and CAAs form communities based on their common experiences as adoptees/adoptive parents. These bonds provide guidance, emotional support and pride. "One World" bloggers and documentary subjects repeat over and over how "healing" and "freeing" it is to share one's journey with empathetic peers (L 2012). CAAs rely even more than parents on these connections for survival.

The concept of a post-modern diaspora helps to explain why adoptive parents and CAAs have such complex, changing journeys. As children expelled from their homeland and raised in another nation, CAAs are always "somewhere between" two worlds. While they are the victims of the Chinese government's irresponsibility, adoptees cannot erase their historical ties to China. Their identities and beliefs are always in flux, between glorifying China and resenting it; missing birth parents and thanking adoptive parents. Both passively and actively (through narratives, organizations, etc.), adoptees pose a challenge to normative understandings of ethnicity/nationality/family.

Through familiar bonds, adoptive parents are also part of this diasporic community. Parents try to prepare CAAs for the difficulty of living between nations. Their efforts partly help, and partly re-create diasporic tensions within adoptees.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have traced the history of abandonment in China, and adoption to the U.S.. We have seen that CAAs and their parents tend to ignore complex, more tragic aspects of history. They ignore the fact that most Chinese orphans do not survive, that birth parents probably acted against infants' best interests, and that many Chinese families want daughters but cannot legally adopt. These details would make it difficult for CAAs to maintain faith in Chinese parents or society. As transnational adoptees, CAAs already wrestle with enough conflicting emotions about their homeland.

The story of CAAs can be explained in relation to adoptive parents, community responses, and diaspora. CAAs learn how to negotiate birth and ethnic heritage from their parents. They seek out both biological and cultural ties to China, but maintain firm adoptive beginnings. In their daily lives, CAAs deal with bigotry and ostracism, destabilizing their sense of self even further. Each adoptee's exploration of birth and ethnic heritage thus becomes a *survival mission* to find a culture and time where she belongs.

All the while, CAAs are constantly re-imagining themselves in revolutionary ways, beyond the guidelines set by parents or society. They construct narrative beginnings which contradict dominant ideology, and empower CAA identity. They formulate ethnicity based on *sociopolitical and historical* knowledge of China and America. They create organizational spaces for exploration, support and affirmation of the adopted self. In short, CAAs actively create their own birth stories, nationalities, selves.

The complex and contradictory beliefs of CAAs reflect their struggles as a diasporic people. Adoptees are caught between two nations and histories, always moving physically and symbolically from one to the other. Each CAA never completely fits in either world, but has

indissoluble ties to both. Adoptees must make sense of their situation, their identities, and carve a space in each society. To do this, they create communities and stories which challenge social conventions of family/race/nationhood. Like other diasporic groups, CAA understandings of abandonment, adoption and culture are based on 'myth' and 'imagination' rather than literal truth.

By uncovering CAA experience, we learn that ethnic and narrative identity is not a given fact. It is a process influenced by social pressure, familial values and historical events. Identity formation is also shaped by an individual's interpretation of her (or his) circumstances, self-agency, and interactions with fellow group members (ex: fellow adoptees). For people of marginalized ethnic and familial heritage, identity formation is an especially complicated and contentious process. These minorities do not have racial or familial privilege; they must constantly fight societal expectations and ideologies in order to create spaces to exist.

The experiences of CAAs resonate with those of other minorities. As transracial, transnational adoptees, Korean-American adoptees also struggle to understand their place in the world. As Palmer writes, they often feel "confused about how to identify themselves, since the world, their communities, and families were sending mixed messages" (2011:18). They were told to ignore race and birth heritage by adoptive parents, but called 'chinks' and 'sell-outs' by white community members (Palmer 2011:31). Korean Adoptees move from seeing themselves as honorary whites, to being confused about their ethnicities, to claiming adoptive Korean-American identities (Palmer 2011:18). Perhaps CAA identity formation follows a similar route, from uncertainty to reclamation of adoptive selfhood. This being said, Korean adoptees were more likely to find information about their birth heritage and family than CAAs (Palmer 2011). They assertively reclaimed birth origins, rather than contesting 'birth' and 'parenthood' as ideological constructs. This suggests adoptees' relationships with birth heritage depend on their

ability to access the past, and fit into a bio-focused society.

CAAs have less in common with third and fourth generation Asian Americans. As people of Asian ancestry living in the U.S., both groups deal with racism in their communities (Tuan 1998:78). Neither have a strong connection to Chinese society or culture. Late-generation Asian Americans living in white communities learn "ethnic snippets" from parents (Tuan 1998:51). This "erratic patchwork of cultural exposure with little lasting value" is similar to CAAs' lessons in calligraphy and boat racing (Tuan 1998:51). Racism and weak cultural connections for both groups may be caused by cultural dilution, from living in white communities.

Late generation Asian Americans try to distance themselves from Asian-ness more than CAAs. They "have chosen to retain very little" elements of Asian culture (Tuan 1998:106). They internalize racism, often holding "resentment and avoidance" for first-generation immigrants, for "fueling stereotypes" (Tuan 1998:87). The extent to which a minority group chooses assimilation versus integration may depend on its ability to blend in.

Does being a transracial, transnational, adoptee always necessitate a struggle and search for identity? Do adoptees' identity journeys differ based on their ethnicity or ability to recover biological ties (and if so, why)? What roles do white communities and first-generation immigrants play in minority narratives? Further research should be conducted which compares CAA experiences with those of other transracial/transnational adoptees, Asian Americans, and minority groups. From just this study alone, it is clear that CAAs' journeys can tell us a lot about ethnicity, family and identity.

AFTERWORD

From analyzing CAA blogs and documentary interviews, I have learned a new way to craft my own identity. We (Chinese-American adoptees) all face a difficult path towards finding and creating ourselves, our pasts, our futures. Before, I could not imagine an identity outside of being 'white' (ignoring race, forgetting about biological ties, refusing to acknowledge China) or 'Chinese' (searching for your past, fixating on Chinese culture). After investigating other CAAs' experiences, I realize adoptees can be both Chinese and American, without 'selling out' to whiteness or internalizing dominant ideology. I can visit my orphanage and look for my birth parents, while still denouncing bio-centric notions of parenthood. I can learn Mandarin and Chinese history, and fight racist assumptions about Asian Americans at the same time. If I decide not to explore my ethnic and cultural heritage, this is *my choice*; it does not reduce me to a 'banana' or 'twinkie'. Thank you, my fellow adoptees, for teaching me how to take charge of my own narrative journey.

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