Negotiating Identity: A Sociological Study of Chinese Adoptees in the United States

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In the 15 years from 1999 to 2013, a total number of 15,071,066 new immigrants gained permanent residency in the United States.\textsuperscript{1} During the same period, 249,694 children have been internationally adopted,\textsuperscript{2} which constitutes 1.66\% of the overall immigrant population. Although international adoption, simply by looking at numbers, is not the major source of immigration, it is a phenomenon that requires special attention in the field of migration research. While migration has always been conceptualized as the result of migrants’ voluntary decisions, in the case of international adoption, the adoptees are usually too young to give consents (Louie, 2013). This involuntary action is also associated with insufficient preparation for the move, as well as other post-adoption issues including psychological development, nurturing intimate family relationship, and incorporation into the American society.

This study focuses on international adoption between the United States and China. It takes a close look at the adoption process, and aims to capture the unique experience of the adopted children with an emphasis on identity formation. It explores how the adoptees identify themselves in terms of culture, race and ethnicity. At the same time, it also tries to explain the social mechanisms behind these identity choices, as adoptees are radicalized and culturally socialized under the broader social arrangements of the United States.

\textsuperscript{1} Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2013, Department of Homeland Security.

\textsuperscript{2} Intercountry Adoption Statistics, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs.
The research is structured around identity formation of adopted Children from China. Section One provides background information on international adoption from China. Section Two examines the current adoption process, after China joined the Hague Adoption Convention in 2009. Section Three discusses existing literature and empirical data on immigrant children incorporation as well as the identity formation process of the second generation. Section Four presents research methodology. Section Five to Six discusses research findings and limitations.

**International Adoption From China: History and Current Trends**

Historical analysis on international adoption to the United States suggests a shift on its purpose. Although initially a humanitarian effort to rescue war orphans, international adoption has turned to satisfy the need of childless couples since the 1980s (Serbin, 1997; Tizard, 1991; Wilkinson, 1995; Altstein and Simon, 1991). The change on incentives led to variation in sending-country preferences. Instead of European WWII orphans in the 1950s, as well as the Korean and Vietnamese children in the 1960s and 1970s, children from the Global South, including Asia, South America and Africa, have became good choices for American families since 1980s (Louie, 2013; Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001).

China has always been a favorite destination to seek for a child as a part of an American family. The Chinese government has granted adoption to U.S. parents since the early 90s, and since then,, adoption from China experienced tremendous increase. The number of children adopted yearly grew from 201 in 1992 to its highest point - 7903 in 2005. Statistics from 2008 to

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3 The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-Country Adoption (Hague Adoption Convention) is an international agreement to establish safeguards to ensure that intercountry adoptions take place in the best interests of the child. See [http://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/hague-convention.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/hague-convention.html) for further information.
2012 also confirms this Chinese preference, with China being listed as the number two adopting country in 2008, and the number one adopting country in the rest of years.\textsuperscript{4} In the fifteen years from 1999 to 2013, a total of 71,632 children were adopted from China to the United States. This accounts for 29% of all international adoptions in the country, and the annual percentage is even higher in recent years (33% in 2013 and 31% in 2012).\textsuperscript{5}

Specific trends are visible in the adoption data. Many more girls are adopted than boys. In fact, almost 90% of the adoptees from China are girls, because they are more likely to be abandoned than boys. The One-Child Policy, combined with the predominant male-favoring culture, has led to highly imbalanced sex ratio (Feng, Cai, & Gu, 2012; Peng, 2010). In order to have a boy at home, a very commonly practiced strategy is to abandon girls (Peng, 2010). These abandoned girls, usually sent to orphanages, constitute the child population available for international adoption.

Children of younger age are more likely to be adopted. Although the age cap set by the Chinese law for adoption is 14, the majority (94%) of adopted children fall in the age cohort of 0-4 years old,\textsuperscript{6} which is categorized as the second generation by migration scholars (Zhou, 1999). Typically these children are taken by middle-class white parents in their forties and fifties, and then live in white neighborhoods without much contact to the oversea Chinese community (Louie, 2009; Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999). Therefore, their unique group characteristics

\textsuperscript{4} Intercountry Adoption Statistics, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs.

\textsuperscript{5} Fiscal Year 2013 Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs.

\textsuperscript{6} Intercountry Adoption Statistics, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs.
needs to be addressed in research, including living in mix-racial families, distance from the Chinese ethnic heritage, and lack of transnational connections back to China.

**The Adoption Process**

All adoptive parents in the United States have to use adoption agencies as service providers, who charge an average cost of $15,675 to adopt from China. Prospective parents start with selecting a service provider, and then file applications to obtain approval from both countries and wait for being matched with a child ("Intercountry Adoption From A to Z,"). Usually the matching process is conducted by Chinese bureaucratic officials while the American parents have no idea which child they are going to be paired with. However, in certain cases where the adoptees have severe health problems, they are classified as children with special needs and parents who decide to adopt a special-need child may have the privilege to make choices. Whether the child is healthy or not, the waiting period takes an average of 257 days before a package finally arrives with some pictures of the child and a health report.

Excited about hearing back, adoptive parents then prepare for their journey to take the child home. They are organized as groups by their agencies to meet the child and take care of necessary legal procedures. Usually a group consists of five to ten couples that adopt from the same city, or even from the same orphanage. The group of parents applies for American citizenship on behalf of their new adopted family member at the United States Consulate General in Guangzhou. After then most of the adoptive parents, also as a group, take a “cultural tour” all

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around China with the child (Aoki, Okimoto, & So, 2002; D'Antonio, 1997). Cultural tours are organized by Chinese government-supported agencies that corporate with American service providers. Activities are specifically tailored for adoptive parents in order to give them a sense of Chinese culture (D'Antonio, 1997). Yet ironically, in many cases, the crafted cultural exhibition is structured in a way that satisfies the orientalist fantasies that adoptive parents have already processed, and reinforces the binary opposition between Chinese and American culture (Louie, 2003).

As the starting point of adoptees’ migration journey, the actual process of adoption is fairly important to the later identity construction of the adoptees. Identity formation can begin at this stage because some agencies, accompanied by local organizations, may continue to provide post-adoption support in forms of support groups as well as local cultural events. The involvement of adoption agencies and adoptive organizations becomes one of the major institutional factors that are influencing adoptees’ identities, and connections with the agency starts early in the adoption process.

Parents from the same tourist group would probably also develop interpersonal connections with each other (Aoki et al., 2002). This relationship based on shared experience may contribute to adoptees’ identity formation, because parents sometimes refer to each other for issues emerging in post-adoption experiences and thus construct children’s cultural identity in similar ways (Louie, 2009). At the same time, this relationship, accompanied with other personal connections developed after the adoption process, provides opportunities for adoptees to socialize with someone from a same background. Studies on second-generation Chinese Americans have found out that socializing with peer second-generation Chinese children enables shared feelings,
in which way they collectively negotiate their group identities (Zhou, 2006). This conclusion may also be applied to the adoptees, where peer-socialization plays a significant part in their identity formation. More detailed findings will be discussed in later sections.

Identity Formation

Immigrant incorporation theories have suggested distinct pathways through which Chinese immigrant youth, including adoptees from China, navigate and construct their identities in the United States. These include: 1) a classical assimilation approach of blending into the mainstream; 2) maintaining a strong sense of Chinese identity though close ties with Chinese community; 3) a unique, self-produced Asian American youth culture; 4) a decontextualized and aestheticized Chinese identity that their parents (mostly whites) end up constructing, and 5) a context-based, more flexibly negotiated identity. Although empirical studies have found evidence for all of these pathways, their findings also challenge some of the propositions. This section then discusses the possible frameworks, their supporting evidences as well as limitations in explaining the identity choice of Chinese adoptees, although they may not be mutually exclusive.

Blending into the Mainstream

A major cluster of theories on Chinese immigration incorporation points to the inevitability of assimilation. Assimilation, by its essence, is the process in which group differences diminish and eventually disappear (Alba & Nee, 2003). In terms of identity formation, there is a possibility that Chinese immigrants may modify or even move away from their Chinese ethnicity, and accept Americanized core beliefs as well as cultural practices. (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, &
Holdaway, 2008; Park & Burgess, 1921; Reprint 1969). However, the definition of mainstream America remains controversial. While classical assimilation theory takes an Anglo-Saxon centered approach, defining mainstream America as a middle class, white suburban culture that remains intact in the assimilation process, a modification of this theory argues that minority culture is also impacting the local white culture and they collectively constitute the mainstream American essence (Alba & Nee, 2003; Kasinitz et al., 2008; Zhou, 1997; Zhou & Lee, 2007).

In resonance with these theories, scholars have proposed two assimilation models. On one hand, the straight-line assimilation model points out that each generation of Chinese immigrants takes a step closer to the mainstream white culture (Thomas, Park, & Miller, 1921; Reprint 1971). On the other hand, the segmented assimilation theory notes that various groups of Chinese immigrants can be assimilated into different segments of American culture, and there are chances of downward assimilation where immigrants become the local minority (especially African Americans), in terms of both race and culture (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997; Zhou & Lee, 2007). Although empirical research has yielded extensive results favorable to the latter statement, it may not explain the case of Chinese adoptees. The main reasons scholars find for the segmented or even downward assimilation include the lack of social capital available for immigrants as well as the neighborhood they live in (Kasinitz et al., 2008). Since adoptive families are predominately middleclass families living in white suburbs, the effects of limited social capital and neighborhood minority influence diminish. This unique demographic characteristic, combined with Chinese Americans’ stellar economic and educational attainments in the American society, makes it more likely that Chinese adoptees may assimilate into the white culture instead of local African American groups.
Even though assimilation theories have proposed plausible possibilities on adoptees’ identity choice, they are problematic no matter how mainstream America is defined. Since these frameworks assume that adoptees’ Chinese identity will be inevitably altered, either to merge with local African Americans or to act white, the quintessence of Chinese ethnicity becomes marginalized. However, the American racial hierarchy today is much more complex than a black-white division. Empirical studies on the second generation Chinese Americans have also presented evidence on going back to local Chinese community for empowerment and the preservation of Chinese ethnicity, which confirms the pluralist model of incorporation (Zhou, 2003; Zhou & Lee, 2007).

**Preservation of Chinese Identity**

Opposite to assimilation theories, the pluralist model of incorporation suggests an alternative that Chinese adoptees may not necessarily have to give away their Chinese identity. Rather, they may go back to the Chinese ethnic community and preserve a strong Chinese ethnicity in order to gain self-empowerment (Alba & Nee, 2003; Zhou, 1997, 2003; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

This statement is well supported by empirical studies on second generation Asian Americans. Regarded as the model minority, Asian Americans, especially the ones from East Asian origins, have gained upward mobility in terms of education and employment. Previous research suggests that the empowerment of Asian Americans is partially due to the rich resources embedded in the ethnic community, while members in the ethnic group rely on their ethnicity in to gain access to these opportunities (Zhou, 1992, 2007). Functioning as both a collective maneuver against external hostility and a resourceful co-ethnic network, Chinatown plays a huge role in
reinforcing a sense of Chinese identity (Zhou, 1992, 2007; Zhou & Kim, 2006). However, central to this identity preservation lies the power of ethnic communities. The basic requirement for the second generation to develop a sense of Chinese identity is that they have to be exposed to at least a certain amount of Chinese ethnic resources, no matter in the form of enclave economy, Chinese schools, or parental instruction of Chinese cultural themes (Zhou, 1992, 1999, 2006, 2007). Hence a question comes: for immigrants and second generation youth who do not have much contact with their ethnic community, how do they consider their relationship with the ethnicity? The answer to this question is crucial to the identity choice of Chinese adoptees because in most cases, adoptees from China are segregated in white suburban neighborhoods without sufficient interactions with their co-ethnic peers. Thus, their identity choices may be distinct from that of their Chinese American peers who grow up with Asian parents and have strong connections with the Chinese community.

**Asian American Youth: Unique Identity**

The other possible identity choice for Chinese adoptees is a unique Asian American youth culture. This identity, mostly cultural, is heavily influenced by the pan-Asian ideology and thus differs from the traditional Chinese practices that their parents try to pass along (Louie, 2003). It also distinguish itself from the local white and minority culture as Asian American youth create this unique culture to combat negative stereotypes (Zhou & Lee, 2004). This identity choice may be appealing to Chinese adoptees since the Internet now enables them to be exposed to these Asian American youth cultural productions, but whether they choose to identity with this particular identity still depends on many other factors.
Overall, whether assimilating or not, the basic assumption of incorporation theories is challenged by the case of Chinese adoptees. Theorists always assume that new immigrants come with their own ethnic culture and pass it to the next generation. A Chinese family raises their children with traditional Confucius values, while Jewish parents teach their kids Hebrew and continue the family religious practice (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Zhou, 2006; Zhou & Lee, 2004). However, in the case of adopted children, they are often too young to take Chinese culture with them. The fact that most of them live in white families further complicates the issue, as their parents cannot teach them what “authentic” Chinese culture is (Louie, 2009). The consistency between one’s race and cultural background is thus broken, which poses new challenges to immigrant incorporation research. While existing theories are built on the basis of race/culture uniformity, little is known about the incorporation experience of immigrants who either do not come with pre-existing native culture, or processes the culture that doe not “belong to” their race.

This distinction between race and ethnicity is important in researching the internationally adopted children in color. It helps to understand the real barriers as well as the pushing force for them to fully incorporate into the United States. It also studies their coping mechanisms under the unique circumstances of their life. While previous research tend to emphasize identity incorporation in terms of culture, scholars often take racial groups as the target population. At the same time when the conformity of racial and cultural identities is taken for granted, other questions arise: how do one’s racial and cultural identities influence each other? How do they shape the experience of international adoptees respectively? What if they work together and make impacts collectively? The study on adoptees’ identities may help answer these questions, and explore other dimensions of identity incorporation.
Decontextualized and Aestheticized Chinese Identity

In her study on Chinese adoptees in San Francisco Bay Area and the Mid-West, Louie (2009) suggests that white parents, who claim less authenticity in understanding Chinese culture, spend more effort teaching their children Chinese culture intentionally. However, Louie argues that these cultural constructions are mostly out of parents’ own orientalist fantasies about China, and are therefore materialistic, decontextualized, aestheticized and probably superficial. Set aside the controversy about the authenticity of Chinese culture, it is clear that this constructed identity is different from any of the identity possibility discussed above. Then, does this mean that Chinese adoptees have developed a unique identity different from any other ethnic group in the United States? The answer seems to be negative.

The problem here lies on the huge variation of identity choice. Unlike other Chinese immigrants who are usually considered as a racial and ethnic homogeneous group by theorists, international adoptees migrate as individuals without necessarily being part of a group. Often times segregated in white suburbs without sufficient interaction with Chinese communities or even other Chinese Americans, their identity choice may dramatically vary. Louie (2009) also points out that white families may combine their family history (mostly European cultural and ethnic origin) with the so-called Chineseness in the construction of adoptees’ identity. How they combine these two sections then draws a huge variation in the formation of adoptees’ identity.

Moreover, Chinese adoptees may not even possess the consciousness as a collective group. Although multiple Chinese adoption organizations have gained some public attentions, like the
“adopeen” group,\(^9\) their influences on identity formation remain questionable. This again casts doubt on adoptees’ identity as a group and especially questions previous research since it is conducted in the Midwest “cultural deserts” (Louie, 2009).

**Context-bound Rationality and Mechanisms in Identity Formation**

The between group and within group variations are well addressed in Alba and Nee’s (2003) context-bound rationality theory. They argue that identity choices are strategically made, basing on contextual access to various mobility opportunities. According to this argument, Chinese adoptees may determine their self-interest through interacting with various institutions positioning in the larger social structure: they make choices out of their own beliefs, and then test the outcomes in situational environments. This description of identity formation process is supported by empirical research, and could also possibly explain the identity formation process of adoptees from China.

Consistent with the context-bound rationality theory, empirical research on second generation Asian American concludes that the process of identity formation is highly contextual (Zhou & Lee, 2007). Unlike whites, Asian Americans (as local ethnic minorities) do not have the privilege to claim a symbolic identity (Waters, 1990). Rather, their self-perceived identity is negotiated within the social context by reflecting on what is associated with better resource and how others perceive their identity (Alba & Nee, 2003; Kasinitz et al., 2008).

In Chinese adoptees’ encounter with the external environment, different levels of mechanisms may have impact on the outcome of the interaction. On the micro level, one’s personal and

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family background determines the degree of parental influence, as well as one’s own connection to China. Chinese and Chinese American parents regard it natural to pass along their culture heritage, and they assume more cultural authenticity than their white counterparts (Louie, 2009; Zhou, 2006). Transnational connections break the geographic constraints of cultural influence, creating a unique sense of ethnicity as “overseas Chinese,” but it is also associated with the differentiation within this community and eventually breaking down the constructed identity of Chinese diaspora (Louie, 2000; Zhou & Lee, 2004). One’s accessibility to these cultural assets and his/her own interpretation of observed cultural difference then influence their own attitudes toward this unique “overseas Chinese” identity. As transnational ties are hard to establish for Chinese adoptees, they may have no idea about this identity, and if they do know about it, they still have to determine whether to accept it or to reject it.

On the meso level, resources embedded in one’s social network (community, familiar and trusted group, etc.) are also crucial to his/her identity. The power of the ethnic community has been well demonstrated in previous research (Zhou, 2003, 2006). Nowadays, although ethnic communities have taken new forms like cultural centers, religious institutions, supportive groups and language schools, neighborhood remain important (Zhou, 2006). Since most of the adoptive families live in white middle-class suburbs, the access to cultural resources embedded in Chinese ethnic communities is very limited. Often times, white adoptive parents rely on adoptive agencies, local cultural service providers, non-profit organizations and supportive groups to install a sense of so-called “Chineseness” (Louie, 2004) in their children. But due to lack of contact with the Chinese community, they often end up constructing a decontextualized and aestheticized Chinese identity. This new “Chineseness” combines selected, often times superficial segments of
Chinese culture, with one’s own family history, where Chineseness is framed in binary opposition to western cultural elements (Louie, 2009).

On the macro level, larger institutional and structural arrangements not only influence the identity construction per se, but also influence micro and meso level mechanisms. Alba and Nee (2003) categorize micro and meso level mechanisms as proximate causes, and define macro level mechanisms as distal causes. They argue that distal causes determine how proximate causes may play a role in one’s identity construction. In another word, although being involved in Chinese ethnic community remains vulnerable to ethnic stereotypes, its negative effect may not be as strong as identifying with blacks. Therefore, Chinese Americans may choose to identify with Chinese ethnicity to acquire substantial social resources from co-ethnic connections, while the dark-skinned West Indies intentionally keep their immigrant identity to distinguish from the local African Americans (Waters, 1990; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

In summary, possible identity choices for the Chinese adoptees include: 1) the own ethnic practice of their (mostly white) parents and their neighbors in white, middle class suburbs; 2) a strong sense of Chineseness; 4) the unique, self-produced Asian American youth culture; 3) de-contextualized and aestheticized Chineseness that white parents end up constructing, and 5) a context-based negotiated identity. This research looks at the dynamics within parent-child interactions, focuses on adoptees’ interactions with external contexts, and examines in detail how the adoptees negotiate their identity through confronting all the micro, meso, and micro constraints as well as opportunities. Of course, their racial and cultural identities do not have to be consistent. But if the conflict does exist, a process-based study on identity formation will help reveal
the origin of this inconformity.

**Methods**

Taking an inductive, grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), methods of this study include participant observations and in-depth interviews. During the five-month period from October 2014 to February 2015, I conducted participant observations at 15 post-adoption supportive activities and meetings in the North Carolina Triangle Area. These include six supportive group meetings for adoptive parents and nine Chinese cultural events tailored for adoptees.

I chose to observe at supportive group meetings to find out how parents think of their children’s identity and how they construct a desired identity. In the five-month period, I have attended a total of six meetings. Post-adoption supportive groups are overwhelmingly run by and for adoptive parents in the North Carolina triangle area. Some of the examples include Families with Children from China (FCC) North Carolina Triangle Chapter, Our Asian Kids (OAKS), and NC Triangle Adopted Asian Kids in School (Triangle Adopt Asia). In addition to virtual community discussions (such as Yahoo group posts and email listserv), supportive groups also facilitate local gatherings designed for adoptive parents. Topics around adoptees’ identity were raised in these meetings. Parents discussed their efforts to teach the adoptees something about Chinese culture, and some of them would also share their children’s progress in learning Mandarin. Following the guidance of grounded theory, my priority is given to study phenomenon and process, rather than the setting itself (Charmaz, 2006). I listened to their discussion, paying attention to their interactions and took field jottings, and after the meeting I wrote observation notes.
I have also observed nine Chinese culture activities tailored for young adoptees. These activities are overwhelmingly facilitated by local organizations, including some summer camps specifically targeting Chinese adoptees and some student-run organizations. I chose to observe cultural events facilitated by a specific organization, because this organization has a weekly schedule for Chinese activities while two other major camps at North Carolina only offer summer cultural programs for adoptees. As a student volunteer as well as a mentor, I have participated in nine activities. In these activities, young adoptees (age 5-12) are paired with a mentor, usually a Chinese or Chinese American college student, to complete certain tasks like making lanterns for the Mid-autumn Festival. Sometimes, a brief introduction to the cultural themes is provided. Observing how adoptees react to these cultural themes and how they interact with their mentor, I focus on the construction of cultural identity and explore how these activities play a role in the process. In addition to observations at meetings and cultural activities, I have conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with two of the facilitators who run the Chinese cultural events that I attended. The proposed questions include the purpose of these activities, how these events were initiated and are organized, adoptees’ responses to the cultural themes, and the facilitators’ own point of views on Chinese culture, adoptee identities and being Chinese.

I relied on snowball sampling to recruit a convenience sample of adoptees and parents of adoptees. In total I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with both adoptive parents and adoptees: 20 young adult Chinese adoptees 18 and over (18 girls and two boys) and 20 parents (17 mothers and three fathers) who have adopted children from China. Four of the adoptive parents in the study are Asian Americans, while the rest of them are whites. Among these 40 interviews, I have included 10 parent-child pairs, 10 adoptive parents and 10 adoptees in the study. The sample was
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stratified in terms of residential community, race, gender, and marital status to minimize possible bias. Respondents come from different residential communities including white suburbs, metropolitan areas, and multi-racial suburban neighborhoods. The sample represents 10 U.S. states: North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Michigan, Wisconsin, Texas, Montana, Hawaii, and California.

Interviews with all study respondents were conducted in English. Questions were unstructured and open-ended. In the interviews, adoptees were asked to identify themselves in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity and why they identify themselves in such way. They were also asked to describe the Chinese and American culture in their mind. They told their stories living the United States as an adopted child, both inside their family and outside in the society. Questions on transnationalism also explored their connections to the Chinese community as well as China, their trip(s) to China, their idea on being Chinese/American, and their future plans in terms of staying in the United States or moving to other countries. On the other hand, adoptive parents were asked about their adoption process, including decision-making before adoption, the actual steps they took to adopt, and the role of adoption agency in this process. As for the identity formation process, adoptive parents shared their own knowledge on Chinese as well as American culture, their expectations of their children, and talked about their efforts trying to construct or not construct identities in their children.

The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 90 minutes, with an average of 67 minutes. All Responses were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed following data coding rules of the grounded theory. First I used software Atlas.ti to draw upon themes that emerged from the data. As patterns emerged, I began using more analytic codes and drafted analytic
memos. These memos included chunks of data, my interpretation of the data, evidence for that interpretation and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Results and Analysis

Identity Mismatch Across Generation

I surrounded her with a lot of Chinese kids and adults, and she was very drawn into the culture. I did put together a Chinese school here in my home for her and there were other Chinese kids in this Chinese school and there was a Chinese woman, a lovely Chinese woman, who came to teach Chinese to the kids. They met here a couple of times a week for years… and then [my daughter] took five years of Chinese in high school. She took all the Chinese she could… What I was going to say was that the beauty of… not only having the culture right here in my home and the energy from it all, but when some people ask my daughter to teach their Chinese adopted children Chinese, I heard my daughter be the teacher and how beautifully she did it. It was just a gorgeous experience.

Amanda, 56, mother of an adoptee from Massachusetts.

I'm probably more related to the American [identity] because that's how I've grown… I don't know much about China and the culture. Initially it was my mother that enrolled me into the Chinese language courses and stuff and I didn't really... like I didn't get full concept of why I was doing it… But then I was also struggling a lot with learning it… I think, for me, somehow I have like a kind of language barrier to Chinese. I mean I'm fine when it comes to other languages. I can pick them up a lot easier… But for Chinese, I can pick it up but then it's like something kind of holds me back. And so I've always kind of had that struggle… So I've been kind of really off and on.

Veronica, 23-year-old female adoptee, daughter of Amanda.

Being asked about Chinese adoptee’s ethnic identity, Amanda, a white mother in her fifties, gives an opposite answer to the one that her only daughter, Veronica, gives. Their responses reflect a key finding of this study: the mismatch between parental and adoptees’ perspective on Chinese ethnic identity. As a typical white mother who has adopted from China, Amanda has been very conscious about the “missing part” in her daughter. The lack of racial diversity in
the community where she had lived worried Amanda a lot, as she saw no way to preserve her daughter’s Chinese identity when Veronica “increased to the Chinese population 100%” there. In order to make Veronica “who she was,” Amanda made a very intentional decision to move to a multi-racial neighborhood, where she could expose her daughter to all kinds of Chinese elements, including Chinese school, Chinese dancing classes and Chinese friends. Although moving is not very common in all adoptive families, most of the adoptive parents in my study do try their best to create a Chinese ethnic environment for their adopted children. Their efforts range from buying Chinese books, Chinese toys, and all the other Chinese-related products to enrolling their children in Chinese school and all sorts of Chinese cultural activities, including family trips back to China. Some form of Chinese education is obviously the most popular choice among adoptive parents: 17 out of 20 parents I interviewed had enrolled their children in Mandarin-learning programs. Just like Amanda, many of them wanted the adoptees to enjoy this learning experience, and they have these Chinese elements listed as a must-have in terms of raising the adopted child.

Adoptive parents’ enthusiasm in preserving their children’s Chinese identity is analogous to what Louie (2009) found in her research on families with Chinese adoptees in the Midwest and San Francisco Bay Area. However, this only constitutes half of the story. To fully understand how adoptees develop their ethnic identity, it is equally important to study adoptees’ responses to the Chinese identity intentionally constructed by their parents. Veronica’s struggle with the Chinese language program gives a hint on how differently adoptees may interpret the “looking-for-the-missing-part” effort: almost opposite to what their parents have believed, the adoptees find it extremely hard to relate to Chinese culture, and many of them are intentionally differentiating themselves from the Chinese identity.
The distinct take on Chinese identity between adoptive parents and adoptees reflects a conceptual disparity in terms of race, culture and ethnicity. While adoptive parents define their children racially, culturally and ethnically Chinese (or hyphened Chinese), adoptees have developed a more complex identity. Although they acknowledge the fact that they were born in China and therefore they would put Asian American or Asian as their race in paperwork, they have made a clear distinction between their cultural identity and their race. Olivia, a 20-year-old female adoptee from Tennessee, argues that “I was born Chinese, but I am never Chinese,” because she knows nothing about China and feels no emotional connection to that country. The division of racial and cultural identity is common to three-fourths of the 20 adoptees in my study, where all of them identify themselves racially Asian Americans, but culturally align with the Anglo-Saxon American core values. Consequently, adoptees feel a sense of ambivalence when it comes to ethnic identity. Instead of a stable and consistent ethnicity, their ethnic options become contextualized and situational.

Analysis of the identity mismatch between adoptive parents and their children should focus on the structural position that each group occupies, their interactions with other social groups, as well as the relationship between the two of them. In the following section, I will organize my analysis from three perspectives: adoptive parents, adoptees and their interactions.

**Parental perspective on adoptees’ identity**

Having travelled tens of thousand miles away to China for adoption, all of the 20 adoptive parents in my study consider Chinese ethnicity as an integral part of who their children are. Since the majority of Chinese adoptees come to the United States in such an early age that they
do not take any Chinese cultural background with them, adoptive parents, internalizing the notion of racial, cultural and ethnic consistency, feel pushed to construct an environment where Chinese cultural elements are always available. The parental perspective of adoptees’ identity is shaped by the institutionalized ethnic categorization in the United States, and is reinforced though interactions with foreign, national and local organizations.

_The notion of a unified racial, cultural and ethnic identity plays a key role in determining parental understanding of adoptees’ identity._ Predominately white adoptive parents have internalized the ethnic categorizations institutionalized in the American society, especially the prevailing color line, and thus draw the ethnic boundary between themselves and the foreign-born adoptees (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2008; Zerubavel, 1996). The American society has been functioning on the black-white color line for centuries, where Asian Americans are marginalized as model minority and perpetuate foreigners (Zhou, 2009). Adoptees’ distinctive racial features and their country of birth suggest clear marks of Asian (Chinese) ethnicity, so their parents feel nothing but natural to set the children in this pre-existing category. “We all know that we are different,” says Sarah, a mother of 2 Chinese adoptees from Michigan, “because of how we look… and the different family histories that we come from.” All the white adoptive parents in my study have draw the racial boundary. With this consciousness of Chinese identity embedded in their relationship with the adoptees, parents naturally take Chinese culture as an important aspect of a complete Chinese ethnicity. This notion echoes the basic assumption that many migration scholars take in their theoretical frame – the unification of racial identity and cultural background. Consequently, all the parents agree that they should at least expose their children to
a Chinese cultural environment, so that they do not take from them the choice of being Chinese.

Some adoptive parents do not aware how they have internalized the structured categorization. Instead, they believe that Chinese heritage is what the adoptees want. Clara, a white mother from Wisconsin says she does not care how her two adopted daughters identify themselves, but she then continues, “if they want to say they're Chinese, they are Chinese. They are Chinese. If they want to be Chinese-American, they're Chinese-American.” John, a father from North Carolina agrees that adoptees can make their own identity choice, but he insists that his daughter should take Chinese in high school, even if she is interested in Italian. He explains, “[my daughter] has to learn Chinese before any other foreign languages. She is from China, so it is important for her to know something about the culture. At least she won’t regret it when she grows up.”

Thus, consistent with Louie’s findings (2009), adoptive parents feel obliged to teach adoptees’ birth culture, because the children may seek this information out later. But the parents do not see how problematic it is to assume that adoptees would also internalized the ethnic categorization and develop a consistent racial-cultural identity. They also have neglected how they subconsciously identify their adopted children, leaving the children no other options except a (at least partially) Chinese identity.

Seeing adoptees as racial minorities, most of the adoptive parents acknowledge that racism is something that the children have to deal with. Louie (2009) argues that some parents intentionally preserve adoptees’ Chinese identity so as to prepare them to combat racism with Chinese heritage and ethnic pride. However, my interviews and ethnography work present a somewhat different picture. None of the adoptive parents in my study regard Chinese culture as a strong defense against racism. In fact, many adoptees have expressed the feeling that their par-
ents, being white, do not really understand the extent to which they have experienced racism.

Peach, a mother of three adoptive children (two of them are from China) from Texas, suggests that racism is something that her daughters “have to play with.” “I told [my daughters] that you shouldn’t take [racism] so seriously. I know it does hurt, but there is no better way to deal with it. So my daughters… they just play with it.” But Kiki, one of Peach’s daughters, says she does not talk to her mom about the racial comments she receives, because “my mom is white. She could not understand what it feels.” Thus, rather than preparing adoptees to combat racism, parental construction of Chinese identity perpetuates the existing racial categorizations, and carries assumption of racial, cultural and ethnic consistency.

_Ethnic identity is also promoted through foreign, national, and local organizations._

Group plays a crucial role in linking micro-level decision making to macro-level social structures (Fine, 2012). In the case of adoptive parents, their sense of obligation is constructed, maintained and reinforced by all the institutions advocating adoptees’ Chinese heritage. These institutions could be foreign, national, and local non-profit organizations.

The Chinese government actively promotes its national identity to the diaspora overseas, while international adoptees are also included as the target population (Louie, 2003&2004). Since the diaspora population is racially Chinese, culture becomes the key to bonding. The Chinese Embassy in the United States has been celebrating the Chinese New Year with adoptees for at least 12 years. The mass majority of adoptive parents have taken well-designed Chinese cultural tours in the adoption process, which also send an implicit message about adoptee’s Chinese identity.

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10 It has been well documented in media reports. For more information, see [www.china-embassy.org/eng/](http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/)
identity. Caroline, a mother from California, says she was “excited to see where my daughter was from.” To her, the journey is much more than a vacation elsewhere in the world, as it reminds her “this is where my daughter would live if she was not adopted.” Just like all the other adoptive parents I interviewed, Caroline feels a little guilty to have taken her daughter away from her roots, “I know she could do fine, or even better, in the U.S…. I know I’ve done the right thing. But it was me who made the decision. Not her.” Therefore, when she thinks of her journey in China, she knows that she has to keep her daughter “who she was.”

National, regional and local organizations have also developed special Chinese cultural activities, which attract a relatively stable group of adoptive families. In the 5-month period when I attended weekly events by one of the organizations, anywhere from 5 to 11 adoptees participated. Among a total of 27 adoptees I have met there, 17 of them attended more than 80% of all the activities. Three-forth of the 20 parents I interviewed confirm that they have been registered at (at least) one adoptive family organizations and that they have been receiving emails about Chinese cultural activities regularly, especially on Chinese holidays. “We get emails from Families with Children from China, a local organization,” one mother says, “so we know it’s a Chinese holiday or, you know, it’s time to learn some Chinese culture.” Serving as both a reminder and cultural resources to the parents, adoptive family organizations reinforce the idea to cultivate Chinese culture.

Getting together with other adoptive families at these events also create informal peer pressure for cultivating Chinese culture at home. In the six parental supportive meetings I have attended, Chinese culture has always been an extremely popular topic. Parents exchange information about local cultural activities, and they discuss how their children do in Chinese classes.
Those who are more active in preserving adoptees’ Chinese culture gain more respect from other parents. Alice, a second-generation Chinese American who have adopted from China, is one of the most respected participant in her group, where the other parents attending are all white. Alice speaks the most every time the group meets, and she serves as an expert of Chinese culture there. She encourages other adoptive parents to have Chinese-speaking friends, who can “help the children with their Chinese.” It is also at these meetings that the notion of “not taking away your children’s opportunity to be who they were (which in this case, is Chinese),” is constantly brought up. About one-thirds of the 20 parents in my study are active in these loosely structured parental groups. They all have talked about Chinese culture in supportive meetings.

Even for the parents who do not register at any organization, peer pressure for ethnicity preservation also emerges from their personal social network. Because adoption trips are usually organized on a group basis, it creates the opportunity for families to know each other. More than half of my respondents still keep contact with their peer adoption group members, while all the 20 parents have friends who also have adopted from China. Clara, a mother from Wisconsin who does not have access to any local organization, sends email invitations to all the “adoptive families within probably an hour to an hour and half radius,” to have them join some Chinese culture activities like the Chinese New Year celebration. Trying hard to preserve her daughters’ Chinese identity, she still feels “[falling] short sometimes in maintaining their culture,” as there are not many ethnic resources available in the Midwest. Her guilt comes from the comparison with some other families she knows, who live in the West Coast and have sent their adopted children to different Chinese camps and intensive Mandarin language programs.
Adoptees’ Identity Perspective

Rejecting a unified (hyphened) Chinese identity in terms of race, culture and ethnicity, adoptees’ identity choice is much more complex. This study suggests that there is usually a clear division between adoptees’ culture identity and their self-identified race. While all of the 20 adoptees included in the study identify themselves racially Asian Americans, they overwhelmingly draw the distinction between themselves and the Chinese culture. Consequently, Chinese adoptees’ ethnic identity is neither stable nor coherent. Most of them have developed fluid, contextualized, as well as situational ethnic options.

Chinese adoptees have defined a clear division between their racial and cultural identities. Just like their parents, adoptees have internalized the predominant racial categorization system in the United States. However, their cultural identity is more of a dynamic process of negotiation (Alba & Nee, 2003). Despite of the efforts their parents have made to preserve a sense of Chinese identity, nine-tenth of the adoptees I interviewed purposefully shy away from Chinese culture. Although Amanda, the white mother from Massachusetts, sees her only daughter Veronica as a promising Chinese teacher, Veronica actually has a lot of problems learning this language as a student. Veronica says she did not understand why she had to learn Chinese as a child, but the fact that she did continue learning Chinese makes her one of the most pro-Chinese culture adoptees I interviewed. In fact, among the 16 adoptees that have reported being enrolled in Chinese school at any stage before college, 11 of them quitted, while another three were forced to stay even if they strongly objected it.

Not surprisingly, another topic frequently brought up by the adoptees is their lack of knowledge about China. None of the adoptees in my study, except one who came to the United
States at age 11, expresses a sense of familiarity with the culture. For them, China is no more than an abstract symbol of their birthplace. As an adoptee mentioned in the interview, the only attachment she has to China or Asia is “that’s where I was born… that’s it.” Even those who, like Veronica, are “proud of being Chinese,” admit that their knowledge of China is very limited and biased.

The context-bound rationality theory could be applied to explain this racial-cultural identity disparity (Alba & Nee, 2003). According to the theory, after making a decision out of their personal interests, adoptees test their choice in a broader society and then revise it. Adoptees’ personal interests do not necessarily have to be practical. In fact, most of the decisions they make to move away from Chinese culture happened in a very early stage of life, where irrationality is fairly common. Not necessarily knowing anything about “culture as a tool to combat racism,” the school-aged adoptees see nothing beneficial of learning Chinese culture (Zhou, 2003, 2006; Zhou & Kim, 2006). “I don’t have any great need to go back [to China] or anything,” Stephanie, a 21-year-old from California explains, and seven other adoptees agree with her. The difficulty in learning the Chinese language creates an extra barrier for them (Kasinitz et al., 2008). Veronica explains her struggle with Chinese that even though she appreciates the beauty of that language, “it is a totally different language than English” requiring “a great deal of memorization… and its characters are extremely complex.” Only one adoptee, Frank, who came to the United States at the age of 11 and thus fluent in Chinese, did not mention problems with learning the language. Frank did struggle to learn English at first, but he knew that fluency in English is a requirement living in this country, so he tackled it down in two years. But for other adoptees, Chinese is never something as important.
It is then evident that instead of sitting in the classroom learning a difficult and hard-to-relate to language, young adoptees would much prefer to play sports or simply to have fun with their friends during weekends. But their parents made the decision for them. An adoptee expresses the frustration to not be allowed to quit Chinese school as a child,

My parents never understand… they never understand how bad I wanted to play with my classmates. Every Monday I went back to school hearing the story of other kids having fun in the weekend… all I could share was my Mandarin class… and obviously no one cared.

Racial dynamics also affect adoptees’ personal interests, while institutionalized racial categorizations limit their maneuver in racial options. Looks matter the most. As Mary Waters (1990) points out, ethnic minorities do not enjoy the privilege of flexible ethnic choices. The stereotypical image of Asians – short, yellow-skinned, with black hairs and small eyes – leaves little room for adoptees to negotiate their racial identity, as the racial categorizing system has been well established and institutionalized in the United States. In other words, even though adoptees attempt to adopt a different racial identity, it is very unlikely that this identity would pass the factual test, as others would easily deny its legitimacy. However, the boundary between cultural identities is much less rigid. Mary Waters’ study of West Indians in New York City finds out that in order to avoid the stigma attached to being black, West Indian immigrants intentionally choose to preserve their immigrant culture so as to distance themselves from the local African Americans (Waters, 2001). Racial hierarchy is thus linked to cultural practice. Being racially Asian Americans then creates incentives for adoptees to find a way to combat the associated disadvantages.

Chinese adoptees also take cultural identities as a remedy. For all the 13 adoptees living
with white parents in predominant white communities, the fear to be different is a common feeling they have grown up with. However, Chinese school and all the ethnic cultural activities differentiate theses adoptees from their fellow (predominantly white) classmates. Challenging Louie’s (2009) argument that white parents construct a materialistic, decontextualized, aestheticized and probably superficial Chinese identity in their children, I find that adoptees in predominant white communities would rather assimilate into the white Anglo-Saxon culture, because even a little bit of ethnic culture could be punished under that context. Anna, an adoptee from predominant white Montana, graduated from a Catholic middle school where “there were only two minority students: me and another Brazilian girl.” The condescending white culture there made it “a bad thing to be non-white,” because “being different there was looked down upon.” Anna admits that going to this all-white school “raised my whiteness to a whole new level,” and she had her best “to be as white as possible and… to distance myself from being Asian as much as possible.” Already being in a disadvantaged position because of her race, she intentionally refused to include any Chinese culture as she grew up.

Anna is not a unique case. Without any connection to the local Asian Community, adoptees growing up in white neighborhood find it impossible to rely on their ethnic culture for empowerment (Zhou, 2003, 2006; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Sandra, a 23-year-old adoptee from North Carolina, says she prayed to have white skins when she was little; and Olivia, a 20-year-old from Tennessee, says the only gift she wanted as a child was “just to look like them [her white parents and classmates].” Therefore, to act in their best interests, these adoptees choose to differentiate themselves from Chinese culture, and they ultimately become “the bananas” – yellow outside, yet white inside. Jennifer, a 21-year-old adopted by a Jewish family, even practices
Jewish culture and identify with Jews. The fact that they are adopted makes it even harder to “be different.” Most of the adoptees from China are orphans abandoned by their birth parents, so they constantly feel unsecure and it puts more pressure on their shoulders. Karen, one of the 13 adoptees living in predominant white communities, explained,

Knowing that I was abandoned makes me feel unsecure… even with those other people you're still trying to prove yourself to them. Because you feel like you always have to prove yourself. Not just to your parents. Even if your parents are saying "Oh, you don't need to try so hard. I'll love you for you." You still feel like "Oh, what if? What if I do something and they're not going to be there for me?" And then you do that with other people too, like your friends. You're like "Well what if they don't still like me". And you just keep on sometimes doing stuff that you necessarily don't agree with just because you're really seeking to have everybody else's approval.

While peer pressure in white communities pushes adoptees to assimilate, the stress is much lower in multi-racial communities where being an Asian is less stigmatized. Veronica, the 23-year-old adoptee from Massachusetts, graduates from multi-racial public schools. Although Veronica does not know much about Chinese culture, she does not refuse it either. She appreciates the beauty of Chinese dance, and she is very into Asian food. In her case, incorporating Chinese elements in her cultural identity does not equal to “being looked upon.” So her judgment on personal interests could be different from that of Anna and the other 12 adoptees living in white communities. Yet accepting some aspects of the culture does not necessarily excludes differentiation. Rather, adoptees growing up in multiracial communities hold an ambivalent attitude towards Chinese heritage. Veronica’s statement makes a good example. “I love the Asian culture…but I don’t fit in with Chinese people.” Distancing herself away from Chinese people, Veronica draws a clear line between the culture she appreciates and the culture that defines who she is.

*The sense of belonging is also critical in the formation of adoptees’ ethnic identity*
Emotions are directly associated with senses of belonging, and since human beings are not always rational, it is important to study their emotions as how they motivate actions (Pugh, 2013). In the case of Chinese adoptees, the way they identify themselves is also related to the sense of where they belong. Teaching adoptees Chinese culture in white family settings, adoptive parents want their children to be both Chinese and American. However, from adoptees’ perspective, they are neither American nor Chinese – they are stuck in between.

Unlike other immigrants, adoptees are cut off from their past. With ambiguity as to who they are and where they come from, they live in a vacuum with no families, relatives or even friends in China. All the 20 adoptees I interviewed call America their home. Only two of them have expressed emotional attachment to China, and both have transnational connections: Frank, the one who was adopted at age 11, has orphanage friends; Lisa, a girl adopted by a Chinese American family, has her parents’ relatives there. Among the other 18 adoptees, although five-sixth of them have travelled to China for at least once, they only returned to be more American (Louie, 2003). The 21-year-old North Carolinian adoptee Jennifer describes her trip as “a little horrified,” as being physically in China only exaggerated how different she was,

I didn’t know anything about China. I didn’t speak the language. I didn’t understand what people were doing. I missed my friends back home in America… It was at that moment I realized that I was definitely not Chinese.

Those who have never been to China also expressed similar concerns. Anna thinks she will only travel to China for once, because “I am not sure whether it is a good idea to be there too often… I do not know anything about China and the people there, so I don’t see myself fitting in with them.” Differentiation is then exacerbated by the cultural shock that adoptees experience in their home country. In the specific Chinese cultural field, adoptees draw a boundary between
themselves and the local Chinese (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2008; Zerubavel, 1996).

Without experiences living in China, nor familiar connections in that country, adoptees’ emotional attachment is extremely weak, and their lack of cultural knowledge makes the situation even worse. Kiki, a 20-year-old adoptee from Texas, speaks of the embarrassment when a Chinese international student approached her in college and talked to her in Mandarin,

    I am like so awkward… I mean, the international students… they have their own dressing styles. But I wear American clothes, and I can’t speak Chinese. So I just said, sorry, I don’t know what you are talking about. But it’s just so weird that he came and spoke Chinese to me… I don’t think I look like an international student.

Even though adoptees intentionally distinguish themselves from Chinese and consider America their home, they are fully aware that they cannot be real Americans. Since Asian Americans are treated as perpetuate foreigners (Zhou, 2009), adoptees’ race and birth country make it a common experience to feel a strong sense of exclusion in the United States. Karen, a 22-year-old female adoptee from Michigan, expresses her frustration that every time she meets a new friend, people would always ask her where she comes from.

    So I said I came from Michigan, and they were like, OK, so where are you originally from? I was like, what do you mean? I am from Michigan, my parents are there, my friends are there… and all the people I know are there. But I knew what they were asking. I just said I was born in China, and I was adopted.

Karen’s experience represents the dilemma that adoptees face when it comes to their ethnicity. Because they are stuck in the middle, being neither Chinese nor American, they find the best way to work it out is to alter their ethnicity depending on the social context and with whom they are interacting. Kiara, a 19-year-old from Florida, explains, “when I am with my Chinese friends, I am American. But when I am with other Americans, I say I am Chinese.” Since
adoptees are constantly negotiating their identity, especially their cultural identity under various circumstances, their ethnic identity is also in flux. As Anna suggests, although she “wanted to be as white as I could for the first 20 years of my life… now that I’m in college with a much more diverse student body, I start to think more about the Chinese part in me… and moving to a racially diverse city after graduation.” Therefore, adoptee’s ethnic identity is not a consistent continuum. Rather, it is multifaceted, constantly changing, and context dependent.

**Parent-child Interactions**

If adoptees are consciously distancing themselves from a unified Chinese/Asian American identity, how could adoptive parents insist that their children are becoming Chinese? How could Amanda, the mother who was introduced at the beginning of the findings section, see her daughter Veronica doing beautifully in teaching Chinese, while Veronica is actually struggling with the language herself? Perhaps it has something to do with the different expectations between the two parties.

Without any knowledge about Chinese culture, non-Asian American parents rely heavily on institutions to educate adoptees about their roots. Chinese school and local cultural activities have become the most popular choice. All the parents I have interviewed have had their children participate in at least one Chinese cultural activity, and three-fourth of them have been actively involved. From a typical white parent’s perspective, Chinese cultural activities are perfect opportunities to “expose the children to a Chinese environment.” But my ethnography work yields different conclusions: albeit named Chinese cultural activities, many of the activities have little to do with Chinese culture.
In the five-month period I attended all the nine activities hosted by a local student-run organization. Each activity had a Chinese-culture related theme, ranging from watercolor traditional paintings to dumplings making. Special events were designed for Chinese holidays, such as lantern making for the Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon boat racing for the Dragon-Boat Festival, and the Chinese New Year Scavenger Hunt. Usually a parent would leave his (her) child with a volunteer that has been paired with the kid, and then pick the child up one and half hour later. Their absence during the activities makes it difficult to know what is really going on in these activities, and because their children are always too young to understand cultural activities, their only source of information is the written description of the activity itself.

Activity descriptions could be misleading. For the Mid-Autumn Festival activity, the description said, “we will be making lanterns to celebrate Mid-Autumn Festival! This is a traditional cultural practice in China so we hope you will enjoy it!” As soon as adoptees arrived, they were paired with student volunteers, who could be American-born Chinese, international students from China, or white Americans. In fact, there were only one Chinese-born student volunteers in the group – a number equals to that of white volunteers. The majority of the volunteers (and the facilitators) only speak English so they had much difficulty to pronounce Zhongqiu Jie (Mid-Autumn Festival) in Mandarin. To deliver the story of Mid-Autumn Festival, they collected information online and made a PowerPoint presentation in front of the classroom. An activity facilitator admits that she is “not the best person to teach Chinese culture,” as her own knowledge is limited as well. She has no idea what the adoptees should do to celebrate Spring Festival, so she decides that a scavenger hunt game might be entertaining, despite of how non-Chinese this game is. “We don’t have much to choose from,” she adds, “so I am taking a Chinese course
this semester and hopefully I can learn more about the culture.” The hybrid nature of the activities cast doubts on the authenticity of the Chinese culture being taught here, yet to the white parents, the word “Chinese” in the written description speaks for itself.

Authentic or not, the cultural themes in these activities are not very appealing to the young participants. In the five-minute presentation about Mid-Autumn Festival, a girl was talking to her sister in low voice, a boy was trying to blow a balloon, and another girl reacted to the Mid-Autumn story saying, “this is so Chinese school!” Adoptees’ lack of interest always discourages volunteers from talking more about cultural themes. In the Mid-Autumn Festival activity, presenters wrapped up their talk quickly to blow balloons with the kids; in Chinese Traditional Games Playing activity, while adoptees were not interested in the Chinese jumping rope game, volunteers took them outdoors to have vending-machine-purchased snacks. After all, teaching Chinese culture is never the most important aim. An activity facilitator explains her goal in our conversation. “We want them to have fun, and hopefully they could learn something about the culture. But we are not schooling them. If they are not interested then that’s fine.” As a result, adoptees attending the Mid-Autumn Festival activity could end up blowing up balloons and playing catch ball game. Some of them did follow the instructions to put sticky rice paper on their balloon, but it was very hard for them to connect the balloon-made lanterns to the real bamboo-structured ones with candles inside. They just had fun.

For many white parents who have no idea on Chinese culture, a balloon-made lantern could represent their children’s cultural root. However, as the adoptees growing up, they are very likely to forget these activities and when they see the real lantern, they probably will have no knowledge about it. Since all the adoptees I have spoken to are 18 years and older, they all have been out of
Chinese school and the cultural activities for years. Being conscious of the cultural themes now, they do not think they have been well educated on “the real Chinese culture.” A conceptual mismatch is created between parents and adoptees because of different references they use (Fine, 2012). Amanda is right that Veronica speaks better Chinese than most people in her community, but Veronica finds it extremely difficult to talk to someone from China in that language. Differentiating herself from “the real Chinese,” Veronica argues that she does not “know much about China and its people.” Yet drawing the boundary between non-Chinese speaker and Veronica, Amanda believes her daughter embraces Chinese culture. In the end, it comes to the dynamic equilibrium of boundary work (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2008; Zerubavel, 1996).

Conclusion and Discussion

My thesis has both theoretical and methodological implications. The results of my thesis suggest an identity mismatch between adoptive parents and Chinese adoptees: while the parents believe that their children are racially, culturally and ethnically Chinese (or at least partially Chinese), adoptees have developed a multifaceted, contextualized and situational identity, where they make a clear division between the culture they align with and the Asian American race.

Adoptive parents feel the responsibility to preserve the children’s Chinese identity because they have internalized the ethnic categorization institutionalized in the United States. Seeing ethnicity as consistent, stable and pre-assigned, adoptive parents see a unification of racial, cultural and ethnic identity, where the center lies on race. Adoptees’ distinct racial features and their birthplaces remind the parents of the pre-established racial category – Chinese. Since adoptive parents have also accepted the notion that one’s race, cultural background and ethnicity
should be consistent, they feel obliged to cultivate Chinese culture in adoptees. The fact that they have adopted the children abroad intensifies the obligation, as parents feel guilty of making the choice for the adoptees. They then feel the necessity to expose their adopted children to Chinese cultural elements, so that they do not take the choice away from the adoptees. At the same time, foreign, national and local organizations also promote the unified racial, cultural and ethnic identity. Providing Chinese cultural resources and creating peer pressure for preserving adoptees’ Chinese identity, these organizations emphasize the obligation of keeping the adoptees who they were – at least partially Chinese.

Adoptees, on the other hand, develop a multi-faceted, contextual and situational identity. Although racially they identify overwhelmingly with Asian Americans, their cultural identity could be significantly different, depending on the context. The results suggest that while racial categorization has been institutionalized and thus is hard for minorities to deny, there is more flexibility in the negotiation of cultural identity. I find the context-bound rationality theory plausible in explaining the process, as adoptees’ identity choice is resulted from the constant interaction of themselves and the broader social context: the social context defines what their best interests are, and then they test their choice (out of personal interests) in the larger society and make alterations to their identity on the basis of the feedback (Alba & Nee, 2003). The unbalanced racial dynamics in the United States have casted great disadvantages for the adoptees, so they rely on culture to combat the racism they have experienced. In predominantly white neighborhoods, adoptees assimilate into the dominant white culture. However, in the communities where racial composition is more diverse, and thus being minorities are less sanctioned, adoptees would show appreciation toward Chinese (and other Asian) cultures yet still differentiate themselves
from the real Chinese people.

We can infer from adoptees’ identity choice that identity is not only about who we are, but also about who we are not (Fine, 2012). Although adoptive parents try to make their children both Chinese and American, adoptees feel stuck “in between” as they are neither Chinese nor American. The lack of belongingness results from both the absence of transnational connections and the exclusion that adoptees have experienced since Asian Americans are seen as perpetuate foreigners (Zhou, 2009). In response to the “in-betweeness” adoptees have developed a situational identity: they are Chinese when they need to be Chinese, yet they are American when they want to be American. Their ethnic choices are constantly negotiated under different circumstances, where adoptees are actively involved in boundary work (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Wimmer, 2008; Zerubavel, 1996).

Since identity choice is the constant process of boundary making, adoptive parents and their children have employed distinct reference groups, and thus they see adoptee’s identity very differently (Fine, 2012). While the parents compare the adoptees to themselves, their friends and family members and conclude that their children are more Chinese, adoptees compare themselves to the Chinese-born Chinese and Chinese Americans growing up in ethnic households, so they could easily distinguish themselves from the authentic Chinese. Structural constraints exacerbate the misunderstanding. White parents, usually knowing nothing about Chinese culture, believe the adoptees are becoming Chinese as they regularly take their children to Chinese cultural activities. Yet the description of these activities could be misleading. Besides being unauthentic, Chinese cultural activities teach little about the cultural themes because adoptees are not interested. The purpose of the activities is to have fun.
My thesis also has methodological implications. It focuses on a less-studied yet unique group of immigrants – international adoptees. Taking an approach of both ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviewing, it focuses on the real interactions, but also exploring the process of individual-level meaning making. The methodology is fruitful in capturing the contextualized identity that adoptees develop. By bringing adoptees into discussion and comparing their responses with those of the adoptive parents, this study pays close attention to both sides of story, and therefore, avoids making assumptions based solely on parental perspectives.

Clearly, more work needs to be done. The claim about identity mismatch is a relatively novel finding and thus needs further research. Due to limitation of resources, the sample of this study is small. In addition, because of the snowball sampling strategy, I am not able to study a representative sample, especially in terms of geographic distribution. Hence, it might be interesting to compare Chinese adoptees from the East Coast and those from the West Coast, to determine how structural difference (for example, the availability of ethnic resources) influence their identity choice. It is also worth studying to compare Chinese adoptees with South Korean adoptees, who have got extensive media coverage on returning to their birth country (Jones, 2015).

Reference


Intercountry Adoption From A to Z. U.S. Department of State, Office of Children's Issues.


