

**Triple Nothings: Racial Identity Formation in Chinese-American Adoptees**

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## **Triple Nothings: Racial Identity Formation in Chinese-American Adoptees**

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The experiences of Chinese-American adoptees vary greatly, but at the beginning of each of our stories is the journey from China to the United States. As Chinese-American adoption rose in popularity in the 1990s, it created a unique sub-population of adoptees. The circumstances of our adoptions are closely tied to the 1979 one-child policy in China, which intersected with cultural values in China and international adoption trends to create a phenomenon of predominantly white American parents adopting Chinese, predominantly female, children. As these children grow older, they face dissonance when trying to form their racial identities. Their experiences and personal histories differ from those of white people, non-adopted Chinese Americans, and Chinese people who grew up in China, leaving a “triple nothing” in which they can explore their racial identities.

For this project, I aimed to document and analyze this process. I traveled up and down the East Coast to interview twenty female Chinese-American adoptees, all between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five at the time of the interviews, to record an oral history of their processes of racial identity formation. I asked them how they racially identify, what those identities mean to them, what influenced their racial identity formations, and how those identities impacted other parts of their lives.

In this thesis, I argue that Chinese-American adoptees’ methods of racial identity formation have potential shortcomings or limitations for the purpose of forming a positively constructed racial identity. Yet adoptees’ processes of racial identity formation are useful as a means of revealing more broadly the ways in which people construct racial identities, since attempts to

articulate and understand the formation of these identities renders the frameworks of racial identity formation more explicit. In chapters two and three, I examine the frameworks adoptees use, analyzing their advantages and drawbacks, as well as how adoptees define their identities through interactions with their families and how they define their identities through interactions with non-adopted Chinese and Asian people.

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## 1.0 Introduction

If you are also a Chinese-American adoptee, people may tell you how lucky you are, or how generous and wonderful your adoptive parents are for raising you. People may ask prying questions about your personal history, eager to know more information than you have concerning your birth parents. If they are particularly cruel, they may tell you that your birth parents did not want you. Chinese people may try to speak to you in a language you do not understand. They may tell you that you are Chinese or they may tell you that you are American. Your parent or parents may have kept Chinese books in the house or enrolled you in Chinese school, or they may have told you they do not see you as Chinese. You may know with certainty how you identify racially, or you may know but want to qualify it or add an asterisk, or you may not know at all. The experiences of Chinese-American adoptees vary greatly, but at the beginning of each story is the journey from China to the United States, and in the background of each story is China's family planning policies.

China's 1979<sup>1</sup> one-child policy aimed to hold China's population to less than 1.2 billion by the end of the 20th century. The policy came after Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's subsequent rise to power, and while spurred by anxieties over an aging population, it combined with a cultural preference for young men that led to a gender imbalance in the early twenty-first century (Zhuang). The one-child policy was never enforced with equal rigidity, nor was it applied to all groups; exceptions were included for ethnic minorities and rural families, and

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<sup>1</sup> While some pinpoint the 1980 open letter from the Central Committee of the Communist Party to Party members as the start of what is now commonly referred to as the one-child policy, the policy itself was introduced in 1979 (Central Committee).

depending on the region, government officials did not execute the policy consistently (Goodstadt). Yet enforcement still manifested in coercion, steep fines, and forced sterilization as punishment (Johnson). To avoid these punishments, couples turned to sex-selective abortions, infanticide, and abandonment as additional measures of family planning, since out-of-quota children were a risk for families. The children left at welfare centers were overwhelmingly female (Johnson), and in December 1991, China passed the “Adoption Law of the People’s Republic of China” (“Adoption Law”), allowing foreigners to adopt Chinese children. After that, what *Vanity Fair* in 2008 termed “The Chinese Adoption Effect” began (Clethane).

While the article is written in response to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the dissonance between China’s international image and the history of adoption, it also offers a glimpse into the normative expectations of Chinese-American adoption. The image that accompanies the article is a white woman with her stance wide, planting her feet on a watercolor globe and reaching across the world to pick up a Chinese baby from a stroller. She wears a blue blouse and skirt, and the baby in her grasp reaches towards her, facing away from the viewer. Her clothing marks the socioeconomic class required to adopt from China, as the adoption process from China is expensive, with estimates ranging from \$17,000 (“Costs and Fees”) to \$43,000 (“How Much”) per child depending on the agency through which prospective parents go and the various fees they pay. Additionally, people who adopt internationally are overwhelmingly white, making up 92 percent of those who adopted internationally in 2009 (Office). That year alone, the U.S. State Department recorded 3,000 adoptions from China (“Adoption Statistics”), although the trend was on the decline after peaking at a recorded 7,903 in 2005. In addition to most adoptive parents being white, most are also middle or upper class as the costs of adoption acted as prohibitive barriers to those

without the financial means to undertake the adoption process<sup>2</sup>. The adopted children are primarily female, making up 85.1% of adoptees from 1999 to 2017, although they made up 97.9% in 1999 (“Adoption Statistics”). Cultural attitudes towards women in China shaped this trend, such as the necessity of sons in a patrilineal family line and the tradition of women taking care of her husband’s parents rather than her own, although factors such as birth order and the gender composition of the adoptees’ biological siblings also had an influence (Johnson). While not all adoptees and their parents fit the demographic description of Chinese girl with white parents, it became the understood norm for the more than 93,000 Chinese adoptees in the United States (“Adoption Statistics,” “Immigrant Visas”). It also became a source of tension as adoptees grew up and began forming their racial identities.

While non-adopted Chinese Americans<sup>3</sup> often find themselves caught between Chinese and American culture, they have created their own distinct culture in America out of their shared experiences. Many Chinese-American adoptees, however, are often precluded from the hyphenated-American culture because their adoptive parents are white. Instead, they must navigate among three cultures: their birth culture, Chinese-American culture, and white American culture. Even adoptees who are raised in Chinese-American families are separated from their personal family histories and traditions, creating separation between them and their birth cultures. These sources of distance shape the frameworks they use to form their racial identities. I will examine these frameworks, several factors that influence those frameworks, and the implications for various methods of identity formation and definition. In Chapter One, I will review the identities adoptees listed in their interviews and examine the frameworks adoptees used to form those identities, and

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese-American adoption continues today, and prospective parents face similar fees and socioeconomic barriers.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, “Chinese American” and “Asian American” will remain unhyphenated when they function as nouns but will be hyphenated when they are compound modifiers.

I will argue that each method has potential shortcomings or limitations for the purpose of forming a positively constructed racial identity. In Chapter Two, I will review a selection of factors that adoptees cited as contributing to their understandings of those frameworks, focusing on their interactions with family. While these factors are not in themselves frameworks, they help contextualize and exemplify attempts to form racial identity through frameworks established in Chapter One. In Chapter Three, I will continue to examine influential factors that adoptees cited, this time focusing on their interactions with non-adopted Asian Americans, their experiences learning about Chinese language and culture, and their experiences going back to China.

While interviewees brought up other factors, ranging from media to dating relationships, those discussed in chapters two and three were most commonly mentioned across interviews. Additionally, they contribute most directly to constructing various frameworks for understanding and forming racial identity, whereas interviewees located others as effects of those frameworks rather than causal factors in the frameworks' creations. In showing how these causal factors affect definitions of identity, I will argue that adoptees' experiences with racial identity formation are distinct from those of Chinese, Americans, and Chinese Americans, leaving a "triple nothing" behind. All of these identities are imagined positive constructs that are simultaneously limiting and, at times, dangerous yet also important to understandings of the self, and the ways adoptees attempt to fill the "triple nothing" left by these distinctions renders more visible the ways in which people try to chase positive identities.

For this study, I conducted individual interviews with twenty Chinese-American adoptees who grew up on the East Coast. All twenty were women, and their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five years old at the time of the interviews (August 2017-July 2018). I chose to limit participants to those eighteen years old or older because post-high school experiences are often

fundamental to the identity formation process as people encounter others outside their childhood communities when they attend college or enter the workforce. I found adoptees through a Google form and other requests for participation shared in adoptee Facebook groups, as well as through word of mouth with previous adopted acquaintances and their subsequent connections. I traveled to Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, North Carolina, and Pittsburgh to conduct the interviews in person so that interviewees were more comfortable and I could better read their expressions and nonverbal feedback throughout the process.

Interviews lasted between an hour and two hours, forty minutes, and during the interviews, I asked adoptees how they identified, how they defined those identities, what influenced those identities, and how those identities influenced other parts of their lives. Before the interviews, I informed each adoptee that the project's purpose was to create an oral history of racial identity formation in Chinese-American adoptees. I also informed them that it would be recorded and that they would have the ability to limit my use of the transcript and edit the transcript. Each adoptee gave their written consent before the interview began. Because this oral history did not begin with a hypothesis, interview questions were open ended and aimed towards better understanding and taking record of their unique experiences. My experiences as a Chinese-American adoptee informed some of my follow-up questions, but I let the interviewee lead the discussion to better capture an oral history of their experiences, although my identity as a fellow adoptee likely influenced their responses. Interviewees were permitted to end the interviews at any point or decline from answering any question. After each interview, I transcribed the recording and sent the transcript along with the deed of gift to the respective interviewee. I received the deed of gift from each interviewee, transferring the rights to use the interview to me for this paper. Interviewees were also able to access the recordings of their interviews afterwards, although not all have chosen

to do so. Throughout this paper, I will refer to adoptees by first name<sup>4</sup> unless they specified that they wished to remain anonymous, in which case their names are stylized [first initial]\_\_\_\_. Adoptees are a population situated between cultures with different naming conventions and have lost and had other names imposed on them before. As a result, I do not wish to impose another name on them as a pseudonym, particularly because it imposes a cultural identity on them against their will<sup>5</sup>.

While I argue that adoptees' processes of racial identity formation are useful as a means of revealing broader ways in which people construct racial identity, adoptees' specific experiences are not generalizable to other groups due to the specific nature of contemporary Chinese-American adoption. The adoptees who shared their oral histories for this project do not represent the experiences of all adoptees, and a more comprehensive study could examine adoptees across the United States. The oral histories compiled for this study, however, offer a microcosm of how people attempt to construct a positive racial identity, which is made more visible by the separation from their birth cultures through the process of adoption. While I will critique the methods by which people form those identities, I also recognize the simultaneous importance and value of constructing those identities, particularly for a population that has had a separation from that identity imposed on them. It may at first seem that these are contradictory, or that the former renders the latter futile, but I do not aspire to resolve this tension here, merely to analyse the continued efforts of Chinese-American adoptees to navigate it.

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<sup>4</sup> Two adoptees have the same English first name. I will distinguish the two by also including the first letter of their English family names.

<sup>5</sup> The choice to use English letters in this stylization inherently gestures towards one culture rather than another, but this is an attempt to reduce that effect while respecting the significance of names as not only cultural markers but also vessels of personal history.

As a Chinese-American adoptee, I am sympathetic to the difficulties of the process of forming a racial identity as it is a process I continue to negotiate. The frameworks I discuss throughout this paper result in different iterations of identity, each filtering some aspects at the expense of others as interviewees' experiences press against the bounds of various terministic screens (Burke). In interpreting these frameworks, I borrow from Maurice Charland's conceptualization of constitutive rhetoric as a means of revealing the construction of identity while simultaneously making it real (Charland). The ways in which we use and understand race was constructed in modernity as European colonialists were expanding into the Americas, Africa, and Asia, and it was a means to justify the dehumanization and exploitation of those peoples (Hirschman). While understandings of racial identity have changed over the centuries, current understandings of racial identity are formed in response to and in the context of these colonialist and imperialist histories of oppression. To address these legacies, we require frameworks of language and understanding, and the meaning and sense of community and affiliation that they enable are helpful in that they offer support for and ways of processing one's experiences, as evidenced by interviewees' use of them. That usefulness does not erase, nor is it erased by, the limitations inherent in any rhetoric, and critiques of such rhetoric can offer better understandings of why multiple frameworks exist as well as the potential dangers of strictly policing boundaries of racial identity.

While I discuss multiple frameworks and their complications, for utility, the working definition I use for Chinese Americans borrows from Erika Lee's broader definition of Asian Americans, who "can trace their roots to countries throughout East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia" (Lee). Lee also acknowledges the vast differences in experiences borne from differences in immigration and generational status, class position, religion, and gender, but these act as

intersections of identity rather than precluding factors. My use of Chinese American encompasses similar diversity in experiences, although it is restricted to people in America who can trace their roots to China. The Chinese Americans referred to by adoptees in interviews tend to be second and third generation, however, as they tend to be closest in age to adoptees. I also argue that whiteness also plays a large part in adoptees' racial identity formation, and my use of whiteness borrows from Robin DiAngelo's definition of whiteness as a constructed race privilege that remains unmarked and invisible, which allows it to be perceived as universal and objective (DiAngelo). Intersections with other markers such as class can render whiteness more visible, indicating the assumption of middle or upper class when discussing whiteness, although such intersections do not negate white privilege.

In gathering and evaluating interviews, I find myself performing Aaron Hess' methodology of embodied judgment, offering evaluations of the rhetoric adoptees use to share their narratives and make meaning out of their experiences from the perspective of someone situated among this population (Hess). While I aim for this paper to serve as an oral history of Chinese-American adoptees, I believe it is simultaneously important to examine and critique the frameworks of racial identity and influential factors as a means of better understanding why these methods are used, what is gained by them, and what is left out. I hope this analysis of the ways in which Chinese-American adoptees navigate these tensions may prove useful in future analyses of racial identity and racial identity formation.

## 2.0 Frameworks adoptees use to racially identify

Racial identity remains a difficult question because the more adoptees try to explain their identities, the less clear it becomes what separates each identity from others. Examining how adoptees identify in terms of identities listed and reasons given for listing them reveals several frameworks for forming identity, although each presents complications upon further inspection. When asked how they racially identify, adoptees answered with racial, ethnic, and other identities. Many identified themselves in more than one way, resulting in a total greater than twenty when counting the identities adoptees named. Adoptees identified themselves among seven identities: Chinese American (9), Chinese (8), Chinese adoptee (6), American (6), Asian American (6), Asian (4), and white (2). Some specified a particular order, foregrounding certain aspects of themselves over others, such as Leah, who specified that she identified as American and then as a Chinese-American adoptee. Others listed identities that they once identified with but no longer did at the time of the interview, such as Olivia, who identifies as Chinese American and as an adoptee but previously identified as white, hinting at the use of multiple, competing frameworks. Many responded with an ethnic identity rather than a racial identity, which is likely influenced by the common usage of the two terms interchangeably as well as the history of pan-Asian ethnic movements in the United States that bring ethnic and racial identities closer together for Asian Americans (Espiritu).

**Table 1 How Chinese-American adoptees racially identify**

| <b>Identity</b>  | <b>Number of adoptees who identify as such</b> |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Chinese American | 9                                              |
| Chinese          | 8                                              |
| Chinese adoptee  | 6                                              |
| American         | 6                                              |
| Asian American   | 6                                              |
| Asian            | 4                                              |
| White            | 2                                              |

Six adoptees specified their identities as Chinese adoptee, Chinese-American adoptee, or Chinese transracial adoptee, listed in Table 1 under “Chinese adoptee,” indicating a desire for specificity and distinction from non-adopted Chinese and Asian people. That desire for distinction became more apparent when adoptees were asked how they define the identities they listed or what those identities meant to them. The primary frameworks that appeared as adoptees answered this question were: bureaucracy, appearance, heritage or biology, essentialism, and experience. Bureaucracy manifested as official forms and documents such as standardized tests, passports, college applications, and censuses, although the underlying mechanism of bureaucratic organization is the same. As Natalie L. explained, “That’s what I put down on all of the censuses,” which was a sentiment expressed by twelve adoptees. Three of the twelve, as well as a fourth adoptee, cited a U.S. passport as a means of understanding their identity, although none of these methods provide an explanation for what constitutes a racial identity, leaving it up to individuals to determine.

Taking the U.S. census as an example, people could not self-identify until 1960; instead, a census-taker identified them (“Census Race”). No Asian identities were available on the U.S. census until 1870, and at the time, only Chinese was listed as an option. Since then, Chinese has remained an option as other Asian ethnic identities have been added and taken off the census, and the inclusion of what are otherwise considered ethnic identities also muddles the distinction

between race and ethnicity. The underlying limitation of bureaucracy remains, however, despite the addition of more options. Checking a box does not allow for further explanation or caveats to identifying in a certain way. One either is or is not a person who can check a certain box. Adding more boxes allows for increased accuracy — a Korean person no longer has to identify as Chinese if they do not want to identify as black, white, or Indian<sup>6</sup> — but it still necessarily places a boundary on what is and is not a certain identity.

While allowing people to self-identify takes away some of the external imposition of identity, it asks people to internalize external perceptions of their identity to more accurately situate themselves among other people filling out the census. As Natalie M. put it, “In terms of being Asian American, first of all, no one will believe me if I check on the census box that I am white.” Selecting one box rather than another, or seeing a certain identity printed near one’s name on an official document, can serve as a form of validation in that it is a visible and explicit recognition of an identity by an external source. In the case of government or other bureaucratic documents, that recognition comes with the authority lent by those structures, which can serve as simultaneous proof and reassurance of a certain racial identity. Yet choosing whether to identify as Chinese on the census or other forms forces adoptees to decide whether they fit into what they understand to be Chinese, indicating that there are other methods of identity formation and definition to guide one’s decision. It also holds the potential for dissonance if one’s bureaucratic identification does not align with one’s understanding of oneself, and attempts to change bureaucratic identifications return to the question of what constitutes that identity.

The alternative ways of identifying that adoptees used were physical appearance, heritage or biology, essentialism, and personal experience, each of which, like the census, offers some

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<sup>6</sup> Now recognized as “American Indian or Alaska native” on the 2010 census.

benefits while also leaving out various aspects of identity. Of the fourteen adoptees who cited physical appearance as a means of identifying, four cited their reflection in the mirror as a more specific iteration of their physical appearance. Similar to the census, though, deriving meaning from one's physical appearance requires the internalization of external perceptions because in most places, people "don't care what your passport is. And in practice, most places don't, they go by your face," as Natalie M. said, although she also used bureaucratic organization as a means of forming identity. Since, in practice, most people do not ask others how they filled out the census or a different bureaucratic form before interacting with them, appearance is a means by which some adoptees understand and form their racial identities. Annie also expressed this sentiment, saying, "I look in the mirror every day and acknowledge what my features look like, that I have dark hair and Asian eyes," which begins to form a composite of what "Asian" or "Chinese" looks like. Even if that composite is not fully comprehensive, it allows adoptees to understand themselves as part of a group or community of people who share similar physical traits. It is also a way for them to make sense of racial encounters, as their appearance provides the foundation for race-based assumptions, which can foster a greater sense of solidarity with others who have these experiences. I will discuss the link between appearance and experience more fully later, but isolating an appearance-based framework of racial identity provides adoptees a way of making sense of many interpersonal interactions and of separating themselves from white adoptive parents.

While appearance offers daily functionality, it becomes untenable as a strict boundary and can present a new set of concerns if it is treated as such. The appearance-based framework rests on trends of physical traits in various regions, but phenotypes are not limited to a single ethnic or racial group. "Asian eyes" may refer to monolids, although Chinese people also have double and creased eyelids. It may also refer to the size or shape of one's eyes, but those also vary greatly

among Chinese people. One can make such disputes for any trait one may try to label as a marker for being Asian or Chinese. One way around these qualms might be to make a list of common phenotypes among an ethnic group and require either a minimum number of traits from that list or the presence of certain traits to count as a certain race or ethnicity. But the immense variation among people who identify as Chinese makes a minimum or essential set slippery to pin down. Neither will guarantee that someone who has a certain number of physical attributes from that list will be identified by others as a particular racial group, nor will it guarantee that a person will identify themselves as a particular racial group.

Such attempts at systematizing appearance inevitably exclude or include too many, and relying on appearance alone to form racial identity places significant importance in an imaginary definitive “Asian” or “Chinese” appearance. Attempting to form a negative composite of appearance runs into similar complications, although the descriptions of appearance that adoptees listed tended to form from positive descriptions. Forming a positive composite of what “Chinese” or “Asian” looks like is further complicated for many adoptees because they grow up in predominantly white communities. If one learns what “Chinese” or “American” looks like through media, there is already an external lens guiding and limiting what one can see as falling within that boundary. Since media representations of Asians and Chinese people in American media are scarce and often whitewashed (Tseng), it shapes and reinforces narrow understandings of how Asians and Chinese people look, behave, and live. Adding more representation validates more people’s experiences and appearances by allowing them within that boundary, but it still evades the underlying question of what forms that boundary. Kiera and R\_\_\_ felt as though they did not “look

Chinese” despite identifying as Chinese or Chinese American<sup>7</sup>, indicating that physical appearance is not the only marker of identity but can be used to stabilize or destabilize it. Mixed race people, as well as those who can “pass” as or are often confused for a different race, further complicate the notion that there is a definitive appearance or list of physical traits that constitute a racial or ethnic identity.

The concerns and instabilities that arise from an appearance-based framework are similar to those for heritage- or biology-based frameworks. Similar to physical characteristics, genetic variations are not limited to a particular geographic region (Bolnik) and are not limited to a particular racial or ethnic group. Due to the one-child policy’s punishments for those who have out-of-quota children, many adoptees are left with little to no information about their personal or biological families’ histories, which make consumer DNA tests popular among adoptees. These tests can provide validation for adoptees, particularly if their appearances are ever called into question, and that validation comes backed by the authority of science, which comes with the connotation of objectivity and truth. It is also an active step adoptees can take on their own, which can provide a sense of autonomy and control over the process of their racial identity formation that external impositions based on physical appearance may not. As R\_\_\_ shared, “I also always grew up feeling like I look mixed, like I wasn't fully Chinese because I personally feel like I've never seen someone who looks like me,” which motivated her to take a DNA test to find out the specifics. Her test results showed Chinese heritage along with a mix of other Asian countries, which led her to wonder if her percentages were typical. Understanding racial identity in terms of percentages, particularly from DNA tests, can present new uncertainties since test results are based on the

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<sup>7</sup> This also raises the question of whether “Chinese” looks different from “Chinese American,” although this again brings experience into the appearance-based framework through fashion, makeup, and mannerisms that are taught, cultivated, and developed over lifetimes.

genetic databases each company has, which causes genetic analyses to differ depending on which company a person chooses to use. Results also depend on how each company chooses to label gene variants, since they can appear in multiple locations. If a gene variant appears in both China and Japan, a company may label it as Chinese because it appears more frequently there, but it cannot prove definitively where the gene variant came from in any given individual. Knowledge about genetics is continuing to develop, adding a layer of uncertainty to interpretations offered by various companies. Basing racial or ethnic identity on genetics also invites the question of what percentage constitutes an identity. While some people change how they identify to make themselves seem more “exotic” or interesting (Roth and Ivemark), racial oppression can also be invalidated or ignored if one does not meet a minimum to qualify as a racial minority, as is the case with blood quantum laws established in the United States for indigenous people (Villazor). For adoptees forming their racial identities, biology as measured by DNA can offer some autonomy<sup>8</sup>, and understanding the limits of current genetic analysis<sup>9</sup> can help lessen any instability or insecurity from test results. Assigning sole significance to such tests, however, may not be the most stable or secure means of forming a racial identity.

Some adoptees, however, shifted their focus away from genetic definitions of biology towards lineage and heritage. One adoptee’s understanding of biology creates what at first seems like reassuring logic: “I was born in China to Chinese parents, so I’m Chinese,” as Charlotte said. Seven other adoptees also cited birthplace as a marker for racial identity, which is distinct from heritage but may not provide the most stable foundation for an identity since anyone can be born in China without taking Chinese as their ethnic or racial identity. Adding the qualifier of being

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<sup>8</sup> DNA tests also allow adoptees to fill in some gaps in their medical information created by their adoption processes, which can ease the tension of uncertainty and serve as a means of reconstructing one’s personal history.

<sup>9</sup> As well as capitalist incentives to present genetic test results as definitive knowledge

born “to Chinese parents” may seem to sift out that group of people, since people tend to derive their racial identities from their parents. It seems, *prima facie*, that a Chinese couple would bear a Chinese child rather than an American or white child. It also provides a useful way to distinguish an adoptee’s racial identity as distinct from their adoptive parent or parents, although adoptees who identify as both Chinese and American or as Chinese American point to the practical insufficiency of heritage or birthplace to understand racial identity. Focusing on heritage alone, however, begs the question of the parents’ Chinese identity, evading the question of defining what that identity is by relying on the adoptee’s identity to validate the parents’ or nesting that identity in the generation prior. One could follow someone’s lineage back for centuries or millennia, past when people understood race as it is understood today, without pinning down what makes any of the people in that lineage a certain race. Lineage still promises a personal history, though, making it an understandable and significant consideration in adoptees’ self-reflections.

Bureaucratic organization, physical appearance, and heritage and biology all present further questions or tensions when one uses them to capture a positive definition of racial identity for adoptees, but in pursuing each to their logical ends, they rely on various forms of essentialism. The imagined person who fits within the box of “Chinese” on a census or standardized test form, the imagined appearance of a person who “looks” Chinese, the imagined list of genetic variations that guarantee one “is” Chinese, and the spiraling reliance on another generation to secure one’s identity are more complicated structures and logics built upon the idea that there is something fundamentally Chinese that one can achieve or align with. Or, if they cannot do so, then it is something they can approach. Pinning down what that thing is escapes ease, although, held loosely, these frameworks can provide means of forming identity and justifications for those identities that are useful and real. Tightening one’s hold and searching for a definitive boundary, however, is

where problems arise. The alternative is using a nebulous essential quality or feeling as a means of constructing identity. It offers no grounds for dispute, which is appealing for people, such as adoptees, whose identities are contested by external sources. While there are no grounds for dispute, however, there are not solid grounds for proof either, since this essential quality resists definition and instead relies on a gut feeling or intuition. Anyone could claim any identity, but a racial identity free-for-all does not provide a useful framework for examining race as tied to historical oppression that influences the racial experiences people have. Relying on racial essentialism based in history also implies that there exists a consistent racial history from which people are descended and implies that race has existed for as long as humanity has, which presents a false construction of history. Locating racial identity in an essential quality or feeling can be validating, especially since it allows the individual to have control over their racial identity regardless of external interference, but at the very least, it points to the necessity of other frameworks to understand different histories of different racial identities.

Moving away from essentialism, then, points to using experience as a way of forming identity. If race is not an essential feeling, then it is a set of experiences, as fifteen adoptees expressed. What those experiences are, however, remains unclear. Natalie M. shared that she “grew up doing Chinese dance and I would spend a lot of long time with my next door neighbor who is Chinese, so I'm a little bit more ethnically Chinese than a lot of adopted people I know.” Using experience as a marker for identity, however, distanced most adoptees from the Chinese identity. Depending on what one understands the Chinese experience to be, one may feel alienated from that identity, as L\_\_\_ described: “I don't fully identify as being Chinese, but I think it's just because I don't really speak the language, I really don't know a lot about the culture itself anymore. So I think that's why I identify more as American.” The contrast between Chinese and American

returns to the blurring of racial and ethnic identity, as neither “Chinese” nor “American” is a racial identity. “American” is not typically understood as an ethnic identity, either, while “Chinese” is, indicating a perceived cohesion to being Chinese that is extended to an American identity in this context. While some adoptees specified the ethnicities of their adoptive parents — Polish, Italian, French German — only one of them felt a strong affiliation with those identities over a Chinese identity, whereas many used an American identity to negate or qualify a Chinese identity. Regardless of whether we grant that “American” is a racial or ethnic identity or merely a cultural influence, adoptees’ use of it to indicate a tainting or qualifying aspect of Chinese or Asian racial identity shows a border around the experience of a Chinese identity.

Adoptees offered a variety of experiences that make up this identity: “grow up in a community of other Chinese Americans,” “have parents that are Asian,” “have that language,” “eat authentic Chinese food,” “listen to Chinese music,” “watch films that are made by Asian film companies,” “date a Chinese guy.” Setting the first two aside, learning Mandarin or another Chinese dialect, eating authentic Chinese food, listening to Chinese music, and watching Asian or Chinese films are things anyone can do. At the University of Pittsburgh, many students taking Chinese language courses do not identify as Chinese. Authenticity is a difficult concept to pin down, but no matter what definition one decides to use, people who are not Chinese will find a way to eat that food. Chinese music is available on music streaming services such as Spotify, and Chinese films are available on movie streaming platforms. Turning experiences into a checklist of becoming or being Chinese presents similar problems as creating a checklist of physical traits. Yet the process of reclaiming an ethnic or racial identity is common in second-generation, non-adopted Asian Americans (Min; Creswell). For Chinese-American adoptees, however, their immediate tie to their birth culture and the associated racial and ethnic identities that follow is cut through the

process of adoption. Language, food, music, and movies are weak factors that do not in themselves constitute a racial or ethnic identity. For purposes here, weak factors are experiences anyone, regardless of racial identity, can have, such as consuming certain foods or media. In comparison, strong factors are experiences that on the surface, and perhaps for most functional, daily use, are sufficient to create the boundary of Chinese experience. Because of the one-child policy, most adoptees cannot route their racial or ethnic identities through their birth parents while still subscribing to an experience-based racial identity. Some adoptees do reconnect with their birth parents, but they still do not grow up with those parents. If one sets aside experiences in adolescence and young adulthood, or at least distinguishes them from the experience of birth, adoptees can route their racial and ethnic identities through a connection with their biological parents via birth. Including birth as a formative racial experience, however, stretches what most people understand as experiences. People do not recall their own births, which makes it difficult to draw meaning or identity out of that event. Additionally, there is not something innate passed onto a baby entering the world, returning to the issue of using heritage or lineage as a means to form racial identity.

Using one's parents to gird one's identity is not as easily accessible as the consumption of food and media, but its insufficiency to form an identity is further exposed by an adoptee who grew up with Chinese-American parents and still differentiates between Chinese and "Americanized Chinese," as Sharon put it. The distinction maintains that there is such thing as a Chinese identity but also indicates that something else besides one's parents infringes on it. Sharon also grew up in a relatively diverse environment, which leaves wanting the experience of living with "other" Chinese Americans as a marker of Chinese or Chinese American identity. On its own, it evades the question of what makes those other people Chinese American, and it asks for a

minimum number of “other” Chinese Americans without defining the identity that is shared among them. Turning the minimum from a quantity to a quality turns attention towards the idea of community, which adoptees who lived in more diverse communities said helped make them feel more comfortable, or, as Charlotte said, “I didn't feel like I was alone.” Comfort and likeness, however, do not translate into clear, positive, racial identities, and those perceptions of likeness rely on understandings of race through other means such as appearance or experiences.

Adoptees’ methods of forming racial identity put on display the circular and unstable nature of those methods. Competing understandings of race create further dissonance for their identities because reliance on appearance to form racial identity clashes with experience-based understandings of racial identity. Despite physical appearances and how people treat adoptees based on those appearances, many qualify their racial identities with experiences that stem from adoption, which is further exacerbated when adopted into a white family. Separating external, interpersonal interactions from internal reflections on race, however, is functionally impossible because internal reflections rely on frameworks of understanding and defining that adoptees must learn from external sources. Adoptees’ experiences with racial identity formation show that there is some functional value to these methods of forming and understanding one’s identity. Some gained comfort from the frameworks they used, and various frameworks complement and support understandings of oppression and history. The tension with which adoptees grapple when forming and articulating their racial identities, however, reveals the layered way in which racial identity is commonly understood. Adoptees simultaneously understand that others see them a certain way and that the circumstances of their adoptions also preclude them from the other ways racial identities are understood. Attempts to reconcile that tension force into the foreground an endless hunt for a positively formed racial identity. While this chapter has focused primarily on

frameworks of understanding that identity, chapters two and three will focus on influences on definitions within those understandings.

### **3.0 Defining identities through parental lenses**

As seen in the discussion of experience as a means of forming racial identity, understanding and definition cannot be fully separated. Factors used to define racial identity shape understanding, but they are part of the larger framework of that understanding, not the framework itself. While biological family was discussed as a means of forming racial identity in Chapter One, the adoptive family greatly influences how adoptees talk about and define their identities. While there are many facets to adoptive parental relationships, in this chapter I will focus on the understanding of family as a lack of difference, the vocabulary adoptive parents use to talk about adoption, and adoptive parents' attempts to teach adoptees about Chinese culture. Adoptive parents influence how adoptees develop definitions of Chinese culture and identity, and while the whiteness of most adoptive parents plays a large factor, adoption itself inherently shapes adoptees' position relative to their birth cultures. These differences create greater disparity between the experience of adoptees and those of their non-adopted Chinese and Asian peers, and the dissonance that stems from these differences reveals experience- and appearance-based frameworks of racial identity formation. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on adoptees with at least one white adoptive parent, as they make up the majority of cases and represent 18 of the 20 interviewees, although the sample population was not large enough to determine whether the racial identity of the adoptive parent(s) affected the likelihood of the adoptive parent(s) attempting to connect adoptees to Chinese culture.

Although most Chinese-American adoptees are adopted in white families, family structures vary greatly. Of the 20 adoptees interviewed, five had single parents, 10 had two white parents, one had one mixed-race parent (Japanese and Austrian), one had one white parent and one non-

white parent (Armenian), and one had two white parents during childhood but spent late adolescence with her father after the death of her mother. Common actions and perspectives cut across those differences, though, which affect how adoptees understand themselves and articulate their identities. The notion of family itself shapes this framework, since family connotes similarity or lack of difference. As previously noted, racial identity is understood to pass from parent to child, and regardless of whether that is passed through the idea of heritage or through specific physical traits, it reinforces the idea that a family is a unit of similar individuals. In a transracial adopted family, there is a visible dissimilarity between parent and child that can become invalidating of the familial relationship when pointed out. Because of its visibility, however, many adoptees have the experience of not being identified as part of their family. Strangers in restaurants, at grocery stores, and in doctors' offices make incorrect assumptions based on the premise that family members look alike. When some adoptees are with their fathers in public, the logic that family is synonymous with lack of difference intersects with assumptions about relationship dynamics between younger Asian women and older white men<sup>10</sup>, creating uncomfortable situations for adoptees when they realize people assume they are their father's mistress, girlfriend, or wife.

Several adoptees have also been reminded of the difference at gatherings with extended family members. The latter experience can be particularly hurtful because, if one takes family to be a lack of difference, pointing difference out shows that some family members "don't think I'm as much family as the other white people in the room," as Angelica said. In itself, the encounters

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<sup>10</sup> Such assumptions are rooted in the fetishization of Asian women and the history of constructing Asian women as submissive, hyperfeminine, exotic sex objects (Vō; Cohen), which in this case intersects with the imperialist construction of white male military dominance (Kaiksow). This creates an assumed sexual relationship between a Chinese young woman and white man, bolstered by the infantilization of Asian women through their supposed submissiveness and the age of the man conferring dominance. As Chinese-American adoptees are primarily female, gender intersects with their racial identities to create experiences such as these, although the gendered expectations and stereotypes manifest in other contexts, such as dating and yellow fever (Zheng), as well.

have a more immediate effect on adoptees' understanding of family, but the invalidation of the familial relationship leads some parents to take active measures to assert similarity as a means of asserting familial connection. In some instances, it can lead to the rejection of the qualifier "adoptive." Olivia's mother takes issue "hates that phrase 'adopted kid,' like she just like, her head will turn like an owl if she hears someone say 'adopted kid,' and she'll be like, 'kid.'" The distinction between adoptive and biological parents will be discussed further later in this chapter, but another way of asserting similarity between white parent and Chinese child is diminishing the racial difference. The colorblind method of addressing racism aims to promote a form of racial egalitarianism that papers over systemic oppression (Underhill). Despite the difficulties pinning down the boundaries of racial identities, racial oppression persists, and colorblindness does not prepare people for discrimination they may face. East Asians are typically overqualified for jobs and disproportionately underpaid for their skill level (Quan), and Southeast Asian refugees make up 29 percent of immigrants with deportation orders in the United States ("Devastating Impact"). Colorblind parenting does not enable people to have discussions about continuing racial oppression. It also limits discussion of historical oppressions as well as contemporary microaggressions in the name of maintaining similarity among people of different races, which can lead to frustration and pain from adoptees when faced with a parents who do not sympathize with or understand adoptees' experiences (McKee).

The ability to ignore systemic and historical oppressions is rooted in privilege that white parents have, but that their Chinese children do not. The ignorance of difference also situates whiteness as the standard from which difference departs and is distinct from, which reinforces whiteness as "raceless." For Chinese-American adoptees in white families, colorblindness intersects with stereotypes of Asians as the "model minority" and adoptees' proximity to whiteness

throughout childhood, which make it more difficult to explore and construct one's racial identity. The model minority myth that Asian Americans are unilaterally financially successful and well educated obfuscates the different experiences of various groups clustered under the identity "Asian," and it erases the systems of oppression that continue to marginalize black and Latinx Americans (Palumbo-Liu). The myth is often used to compare Asian Americans to a standard of white Americans, using the "success" of Asian Americans to prove that it is possible for racial minorities to achieve near-whiteness. Doing so can make it more difficult to recognize and discuss the disparities in higher education and income among Asian Americans (Lee), but it also presents whiteness as a standard and a neutral, or negative, identity. Others not only can but should rid themselves of their difference and achieve near-whiteness, as Asians supposedly have achieved.

By reinforcing this false ideal of raceless meritocracy under laissez-faire capitalism, the model minority myth also reinforces anti-black and anti-Latinx bias because it denies the histories of slavery and discrimination that still affect black and Latinx communities and individuals. Instead, it reduces success to hard work, perseverance, and nondependence on the state (Palumbo-Liu), which also fosters anti-black and anti-Latinx sentiment among Asian Americans because it reifies their hard work and draws a line of causation from their hard work to their success. It also suggests that those who are not successful are not working hard enough, persevering enough, or are too dependent on the state. When combined with the erasure of different histories of oppression, it encourages Asian Americans to view themselves as distinct from other people of color and marginalized communities. In distancing themselves from other people of color, however, they push them closer to whiteness and farther from positive differences that rise out of oppression, which the myth frames as aspirational.

The concept of near-whiteness from the model minority myth takes on another layer for Chinese-American adoptees because they grow up in white households, physically “near” and enculturated in the whiteness towards which the myth tells minorities they should strive. It makes it more difficult to dispute the myth, and if one is raised in a colorblind household, they may not have the vocabulary to articulate ways in which they feel the myth and other stereotypes do not align with their experiences of Chinese or Asian identity. Colorblindness and the model minority myth cast an invisibility over Asian American identity, muting difference and ways of talking about difference that would allow adoptees to better understand themselves as different from their white parents. The colorblind approach, while often intended as a means of validating the adoptee as a family member, also invalidates any non-white identity. For example, Brooke recognized that her parents “couldn't care less about what I identify as personally. And so what they identified me as is just their daughter ... My dad has told me specifically that he doesn't see me as Chinese, he sees me as white.” By brushing away or attempting to bracket any difference, parents implicitly discourage exploration of racial or ethnic identity by setting up a context in which exploration is a disagreement with the parent and also a rejection of the familial relationship. It makes it more difficult to address any discomfort from instances when they are perceived as separate from the rest of their family since emphasizing similarity comes at the cost of muting conversations or reflections about differences that could help adoptees better prepare and respond to future encounters.

Ten of the adoptees interviewed encountered the model minority myth in some manifestation, which was a difficult point to reconcile. If they fit the stereotype, they faced “a little guilt about being good at something because I feel like I'm reaffirming the Asian stereotype,” as Kiera put it, or, like Gracie, they felt it was “frustrating because like, no, I'm smart because I

worked hard and studied and did what I had to do, not because I'm Chinese.” These experiences also occur for non-adopted Asians (Creswell), although it typically led to a distancing effect, which suggests a more stable identity before encounters with the stereotype. It also reveals the enduring distance that near-whiteness still holds, creating an asymptotic relationship to whiteness where one can approach but never fully achieve it when they start from a place of difference. This difference is reinforced by the perception of Asians as foreigners, which is borne from exclusionary immigration laws and the propagandized “Yellow Peril” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that supposedly threatened the United States because of Asians’ inevitable disloyalty to the United States (Ng). The Cold War’s anti-Communist sentiment reinforced the perceptions Chinese Americans as “non-white” and disloyal (Wu), since Communism was tied to China and juxtaposed with the democracy of the United States. While there were some attempts to assimilate Chinese Americans to present a more united front against other nations, the enduring distrust and othering of Chinese Americans remained (Wu). The competing perceptions of Chinese Americans provide a convenient scapegoat for whatever a given political situation demands, whether it is the vilification of Chinese Americans or the delegitimization of the oppression of black and Latinx Americans. Regardless of the situation, however, whiteness remains as the neutral and the unblemished, and the model minority myth offers what falsely appears to be a way to avoid further condemnation.

For adoptees, the myth has a push and pull effect, offering validation for their identity as Chinese while also invalidating their efforts in school and at work, paradoxically pulling them closer to being Chinese by pulling them closer to being white. The frustration with the stereotype indicates a frustration with their distance from whiteness and neutrality being pointed out, but the latter can only occur if whiteness is established as the goal or if one assumes they are the neutral.

For adoptees used to colorblind approaches to race, they may think of themselves as the neutral that their parent or parents can inhabit, not only from watching their parents interact with the world but also being told that they are like their parents because they are family. Colorblind parenting techniques also fail to give adoptees a framework to think about the ensuing tension from manifestations of the perpetual foreigner stereotype, which can lead to adoptees avoiding thinking about the issue altogether, although that does little to prepare them for future occurrences. Attempts to think around or past colorblind approaches require the identification of colorblindness as ineffective or incomplete. Chinese-American adoptees are in a unique position to do so since their proximity to whiteness through their parents and the “model minority” myth doubly reinforce the understanding of white as neutral and achievable, creating the potential for examining that basic premise from multiple perspectives.

Parents’ vocabulary shapes adoptees’ understanding of identity in other ways, and while the vocabulary primarily centers on adoption, discussions of adoption are necessarily intertwined with and affect the formation of racial identity. Terms like “gotcha day” and “forever family” appear in adoptee communities, and adoptees learn them from their parents to describe various aspects of the adoptee experience. While some adoptees integrated the phrases into their speech, others brought them up to criticize the implications, indicating the limitations that the phrases create when discussing adoption. Margo and Angelica mentioned celebrating “Gotcha day” as a way of commemorating their adoptions, which makes the process of adoption more visible but obscures the history and context leading up to the “gotcha” moment. The term is also often used to talk about adopted pets, but it is commonly used within adoptee communities to talk about adopted children. It is unclear which use came first, although the continued use of the phrase to refer to adopted humans creates a dehumanizing connotation not only through the connection to

pet adoption but also because it treats adoptees as an object to be picked up or received. “Forever families” are used to refer to the families into which children are adopted, indicating that they will be the children’s family forevermore. The term returns to the desire of adopted parents to reinforce that their adopted children belong in the family, offering the stability of forever to bring the adopted child into the structure of the family unit. Loretta used the term to describe her adopted family, explaining, “we call it like my birth mother, my birth family, like that. But I think “forever family” is what happens after that ... my forever family is going to be the ones that carry me through life.” While it is used with a forward mindset, forever also stretches into the past as well, which implies that adoptees’ birth families are not legitimate or valid families, or at least that they are not as much so as the adopted families. There is plenty of disagreement over the definition of family, but the phrase “forever family” obscures adoptees’ biological families and can create a barrier to learn more about them because it creates the risk of upsetting members of the “forever family” by insinuating that there was a family that came before them, thus rendering the foreverness false. For both terms, the emphasis remains on bringing the adoptee into the family, but in doing so, it renders the adoptee’s personal history less visible. If an adoptee wants to explore their racial identity, it requires pushing against that invisibility, which in turn pulls more of the process of racial identity formation into the foreground.

Adoptive parents, however, often attempt to connect their children to Chinese culture. Although this desire appears mutually exclusive with colorblind approaches and the use of adoptive-family-oriented vocabulary, the multiculturalism of the 1990s allows for the contradiction. Acknowledging and even celebrating an individual’s difference is encouraged, but the framework of understanding that multiculturalism promotes is routed through and gatekept by the dominant culture (Coulthard). The dynamic maps easily onto the relationship between white

parents and Chinese children, resulting in some parents acting as the principle source of Chinese culture for their children and filtering what is allowed to be Chinese. Even parents who fully acknowledge their child's racial difference still filter Chinese culture through a white lens when they take it upon themselves to teach their children Chinese culture, and when adoptees explore their identities further, the filtering of their parents becomes more apparent as they gain more points of comparison and can situate themselves within a broader context.

Six adoptees discussed efforts their parents made to teach them about China and Chinese culture. Annie had “books as a kid about Chinese New Year and things like that. I never had a lot of full immersion, I would say.” Other adoptees’ parents kept objects such as Chinese dresses, umbrellas, and dolls in the house, although many adoptees, such as Emma, noted that their parents’ methods “didn't go into depth” or were “superficial ways” of teaching about another culture. The incomplete picture of Chinese culture makes connecting with that culture more difficult not only because it facsimiles an aesthetic rather than presents a robust culture, but also because it is stripped of broader meaning, connection, and context. Presenting these objects as “Chinese” obfuscates the cultural blending that has occurred within China and flattens the dimensions of history and cross-cultural interactions into a monolith of “Chineseness.” It also presents what the dominant white culture permits to be Chinese, using whiteness as filter for acceptable difference and showing only what makes it through that filter. While it is understandable that parents want to show what they consider the best parts of Chinese culture to their children as a means of fostering a positive association for their children, doing so constructs a flimsy identity that can create dissonance for adoptees when they encounter non-adopted Chinese and Chinese-American people.

Parents’ decisions about the presentation of Chinese culture to their children also appears in adoptees’ names. Three adoptees’ parents changed the adoptees’ Chinese names while including

their Chinese names in their current legal names. Since names reflect one's personal and family history, alterations to names are a source of tension for adoptees when understanding their identities because they acts as a more direct and explicit erasure or overwriting. Kiera's parents changed her Chinese name from one that expressed a love of her birth province to what someone told her "is kind of weird. It's like what you would find in like a storybook or something." When she discovered the name change, it led to feelings of shame and embarrassment over the "weird"-ness of her name. It also led to frustration because she understood the situation as one in which her parents "made me think my old one was bad and weirdly Communist or something, and then as a result, I kind of had a skewed impression of China." Names act as source of connection back to China, since adoptees' Chinese names were often given by people at welfare centers or by foster parents, and because of the adoption process, it is one of the few things they retain from before their adoption. Changes to the name obscure adoptees' personal histories or place a judgment on those histories and molding it into something the adoptive parent finds suitable. L\_\_\_'s parent changed the spelling of her Chinese name in an attempt to make it more pronounceable, but by doing so, she made the name less recognizably Chinese. While it was not a complete erasure of the adoptee's history, it still creates a judgment over what belongs in America and leaves distinctly Chinese names outside of that boundary, further exemplifying the picking and choosing that the dominant culture has the power to do.

Adoptive parents' attempts to teach or alter Chinese culture to fit what they deem acceptable leads adoptees to use non-adopted Chinese people as markers and points of comparison as they try to learn more about Chinese culture. Interactions with non-adopted Asians will be discussed further in Chapter Three, but all eighteen interviewees with at least one white parent brought up such interactions as sources of comparison and education, indicating that adoptive

parents' packaging and presenting Chinese culture creates a distinct experience of Chinese identity. The two adoptees who did not have at least one white parent also used non-adopted Asian Chinese people as gauges for Chinese culture identity, however, pointing to the adoption process as another source of distance while forming one's identity. It also brings to the forefront the issue of authenticity when teaching and learning about other cultures. White parents teaching about Chinese culture introduces an additional layer of distance and distortion because of the way dominant cultures interact with a subculture, since, for many, appearance intertwines with experience-based understandings of race when attempting to understand what makes a more or less "authentic" experience. Someone who is understood to be white will be received and treated differently when they participate in Chinese culture, which ripples out to affect their attempts to teach others about Chinese culture. If a Chinese-American parent teaches a Chinese-American adoptee about Chinese culture, however, it seems as though that would not lead to dissonance between the experiences of the adoptee and a non-adopted child. The continued comparison by adoptees indicates the use of an experience-based framework, as racial identity formation necessitates comparisons to other people understood to align with a certain identity as a means of constantly defining and redefining identity. Through this framework, charges that the dominant culture's actions as impositions or threats to this process raises the issue of authenticity. For Chinese-American adoptive parents, challenges to authenticity do not come in the dominant culture-subculture relationship but in the inherent separation that adoption creates from the history of the biological family. Even if the adoptive family can trace their history back to the same region, an inevitable difference remains between what the adoptive family and the biological family could teach and pass on.

Adoptive parents play a large part in shaping definitions of family and of China for their children, and attempts by adoptees to explore their racial identities outside the frameworks that their parents provide makes the forces that whiteness exerts onto racial identity more apparent. Colorblindness and stereotypes such as the “model minority” set up whiteness as the neutral, the default, the lack of difference, which intersect with the ideas of family as a lack of difference and requires adoptees to put in additional work to recognize the difference. This seemingly contradicts the recognition of Chinese or Asian identity formed through physical appearance, which would suggest that an Asian- or Chinese-like appearance is enough to constitute identity, but because most adoptees incorporate multiple frameworks in the formation of their identities, these can create dissonance rather than total invalidation of one identity or the other. Because there are multiple frameworks, however, the dissonance created by filtering Chinese culture through adoptive parents inherently adds a layer of distance from the experiences of non-adoptees and disrupts the adoptee’s connections to their birth culture.

#### **4.0 Defining identities through non-adopted Chinese and Asian people**

Adoptive parents positioning themselves as the principle source of information about Chinese culture and history shapes Chinese-American adoptees' experiences with Chinese culture, but adoptees do not live in a bubble of their adoptive household. Chapter Two established that adoptive parents shape the way adoptees understand Chinese culture and construct a Chinese identity, but parents are not the only source of influence. Adoptees encounter non-adopted Chinese and Asian people even when they grow up in predominantly white communities through interactions in public and at school. Adoptive parents also facilitate interactions with non-adopted Chinese and Asian people through enrolling adoptees in Chinese schools, dance groups, and other activities aimed at teaching Chinese language and culture. Some parents also take adoptees back to China as children and adolescents for visits, which often focus on tourism, although some include trips back to the welfare centers where adoptees stayed. As adoptees grow older, many seek out these experiences themselves in high school and college, in person and online, and college is often a time when they encounter a significant number of Asian or Chinese people or an Asian or Chinese community for the first time. These direct interactions with Chinese culture and non-adopted Asians and Chinese people have an effect on identity formation and reveal the methods by which adoptees form their racial identities. Adoptees' efforts to use these as markers for racial identity, however, also reveal the shortcomings of such frameworks, as well as the ways in which adoption alters the racial identity formation process such that experiential difference always remains between adopted and non-adopted Chinese people. As a result, adoptee-specific groups and spaces offer some support, and some adoptees incorporate "adoptee" into their racial identities to demarcate their experiences and identities from non-adopted Asian and Chinese people.

None of the interviewed adoptees' parents spoke Chinese fluently, but ten adoptees' parents enrolled them in some form of Chinese language lessons in or slightly before elementary school, which allowed adoptees to interact with non-adopted peers and teachers. Table 2 shows the age ranges at which adoptees learned Chinese, with age ranges denoted by school levels since adoptees learned Chinese in classes offered by their schools or in outside programs on the weekends during or in the years leading up to elementary school<sup>11</sup>. Several learned Chinese during multiple age ranges, so the total number is more than twenty.

**Table 2 Age at which adoptees learned Chinese**

| <b>Age Range</b>  | <b>Number of adoptees learning Chinese</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Elementary school | 10                                         |
| Middle school     | 2                                          |
| High school       | 8                                          |
| College           | 7                                          |

Chinese school classmates in elementary school tended to be non-adopted Chinese children, which made it difficult for adoptees because lessons were structured based on the assumed knowledge of children growing up in households where parents or other relatives spoke Chinese. While it was a learning environment that avoided the issue of filtering Chinese culture through non-Chinese lenses, it created a barrier of entry for adoptees that, for most, did not make the experience enjoyable or worth continuing. As Gracie expressed, “That was really tough because almost everyone there were like kids who understood the language because they were spoken to it at home ... And I was just like completely in the dark with that ... I think at that point in my life I wasn't that reflective or like aware of, you know, what that really meant for me. I just knew that like I hated it, and that was the year I quit Chinese school.” Other adoptees expressed

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<sup>11</sup> The latter group is included under “Elementary school,” as the class format was similar in these instances to those experienced by adoptees who learned Chinese in elementary school.

similar sentiments of discomfort in the Chinese school environment, especially since they could not turn to their adoptive parents for help, which cemented a further distinction between them and non-adopted Chinese peers.

Since adoptees made note of non-adopted Chinese and Asian people as references for Chinese identity, experiences at Chinese school for elementary-age adoptees also likely contributed to the perception that part of being Chinese was speaking the language. Two adoptees explicitly mentioned lack of Chinese language speaking abilities as part of why they consider themselves more American than Chinese, and the connection between language and racial identity may also contribute to the fourteen adoptees who qualified their Chinese identity with experiences they did not consider Chinese or considered to be American. This assumption, however, points to the ways in which adoptees understand Chinese as separate and distinct from American in the United States, which indicates the use of “American” as a metonym for the white, English-speaking dominant culture. Learning a different language is a positive departure from the dominant culture, marking it as Chinese rather than American. The distinction between the two raises the question of whether adoptees would stop identifying as American if they became more fluent in the language, which it seems they would not, since one adoptee who identifies as American has learned Chinese since middle school and remains nearly fluent. It also pushes into the forefront the extent to which language is a necessary factor for racial identity formation. Three adoptees never formally learned Chinese in a school or camp environment, and all three still identify as Chinese or Asian, although one adds American as a separate identity, which shows not only that language is only one factor of many that create a Chinese or Asian identity, but also that, on its own, it is an inadequate measure of identity.

Adoptive parents also enrolled adoptees in Chinese dance groups and other recreational activities, where interactions with non-adopted peers and teachers tended to lead to fewer feelings of discomfort when adoptees started out on the same or similar skill level as their peers. The motives of the adoptive parents, as understood by the adoptees, were similar to those that drove adoptive parents to enroll adoptees in Chinese school: give adoptees a space where they could be surrounded by Chinese peers. Three adoptees mentioned participating in Chinese dance as children. To varying degrees, each adoptee's experience with Chinese dance strengthened the formation of a Chinese or Asian identity. Natalie M. participated in Chinese dance for about eighteen years, which she said created an environment where she "was always brought up knowing what it is, like quote, good and was bad, from my teachers and from my friends' parents." While language and dance are both parts of culture, there is less variation in the skill level at which children can start dance lessons, whereas children who grow up hearing a language from their parents have a significant advantage in classes, particularly when that is the assumed background of the students. The smaller variation in starting skill level reduces the risk of alienation, and it can instead create an avenue for learning and internalizing values from the Chinese teacher and parents<sup>12</sup>.

Spending time in such environments can lead to the formation of a stronger and more stable Chinese identity, indicating that cultural values as well as participation in cultural activities such as dance are major factors in identity formation, although adoptees can also learn these values from interactions with non-adoptees in other contexts<sup>13</sup>. Four adoptees cited values as part of why they

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<sup>12</sup> This is not an endorsement for adoptive parents to sign adoptees up for Chinese dance. It is merely an observation on the different outcomes based on the different contexts of learning.

<sup>13</sup> Other such contexts include dating relationships, which do not create the same learning environment as dance groups but still demand form of cultivation of one's identity as someone's significant other, becoming the person

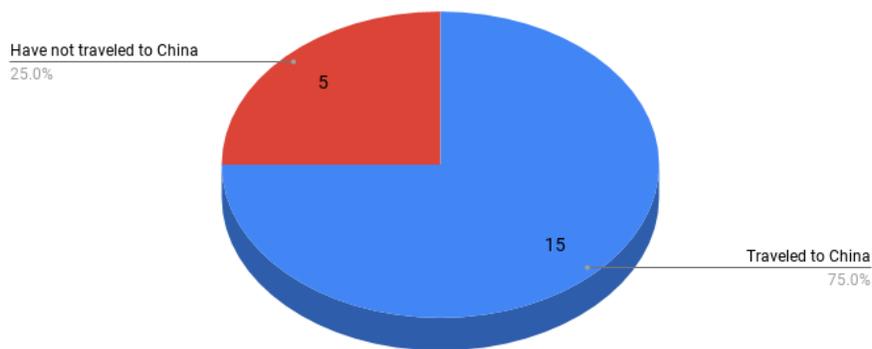
identified as either Chinese, Asian, or American, showing an understanding of distinct values among the identities. Like differences in language, differences in culture also tended to focus on ways in which Chinese or Asian values differed from American values, leaving the latter undefined and distinct as neutral, normative, or empty. The juxtaposition reinforces the process of positively constructing racial identities that are not white, although it still leaves unclear and flexible which positive attributes fall into the category of “Chinese culture.” When asked about those values, adoptees offered different answers, such as Natalie M., who said, “respect people older than you, you don't challenge other people's opinion,” and Olivia, who, in the context of expressing care for others, said, “acts of service but not a lot of positive words of affirmation.” Four adoptees also mentioned Asian and Chinese beauty standards, which they learned through interactions with non-adopted Chinese and Asian people as well as media representations. When those values were learned outside of educational contexts such as Chinese dance, however, they tended to create greater dissonance for adoptees’ racial identity formations. Learning values in an educational and immersive environment, however, creates a context in which where one is expected to mimic and perform those values along with peers undergoing the same process. Encountering those values on one’s own, however, emphasizes the difference between the adoptee and the understood values, which is further compounded by the lack of an environment where the purpose is not only to learn different values but to become a person who exhibits and holds them<sup>14</sup>.

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who dates one’s partner. In cases where adoptees date non-adopted Chinese people, expectations and values of the significant other and their family can play a role in the person an adoptee becomes while dating their partner.

<sup>14</sup> In Chinese, there are different ways to say doing a job, being a person who does a job, and becoming a person who does a job. In this analogy, adoptees who learn alongside other non-adopted peers from a non-adopted mentor is most similar to a someone becoming a person who does a job. It is a more wholly transformative process, whereas others result in more superficial imitations.

The distinction between learning values in Chinese dance lessons and learning values on one's own is also relevant in adoptees' travels to China<sup>15</sup>, where interactions with non-adopted Chinese people can be more significant due to adoptees' personal histories and the perception of Chinese people in China as a greater authority over what is or is not Chinese. Figure 1 shows the number of adoptees who have traveled to China in any capacity. Travel back to China tends to create more intense feelings of acceptance or rejection based on interactions with Chinese people raised in China, which follows the relative experiential framework discussed earlier. Of the seven adoptees who traveled back with parents during childhood or adolescence, all of them did so at least partially as tourists for those trips. While tourism versus the authentic experience of a different country's cultures is a well-seasoned discussion (MacCannell), tourism here is made distinct from study abroad and other trips by travel to multiple cities over a relatively short span of time.



**Figure 1 Number of adoptees who have traveled to China**

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<sup>15</sup> Not all adoptees have the financial means to do so. While parents' health and income is a factor in the adoption process, there is still variation as well as changing circumstances as the adoptee grows older that can prevent or make travel to China more difficult. Similar to Chinese dance, this is not a judgment on parents who have or have not traveled to China with their child or allowed their child to travel on their own.

Traveling to China with adoptive parents drew attention to parents' whiteness for two adoptees. One of the two, Olivia, expressed, "if someone passed my mom another baby to take a picture with, I was gonna break their camera." Traveling with parents in a tourist capacity, however, elicited positive or neutral associations of the trip and of China for other adoptees, since it offered small snapshots of China, although by curating the trip, adoptive parents also curate adoptees' experiences and understandings of what constitutes China and Chinese identity. For Natalie L., traveling with her mother turned China into "this idyllic place. Yeah, it was kind of this place of wonder and my mom emphasizing, this is where you came from, this is where you were born, and it was kind of this place of curiosity." The positive or neutral associations are a stark contrast to the discomfort with adoptive parents teaching adoptees about China and Chinese culture. While both involve information about Chinese culture passing through a white filter, traveling to China allows adoptees to directly experience primary cultural artifacts and interact directly with non-adopted Chinese people, which aligns more closely with adoptive parents' facilitation of adoptees learning from non-Chinese people. These trips are also mediated through the construction and policing of what is Chinese by the Chinese government (Vickers). Tourist attractions such as the Great Wall and seeing pandas are common experiences for adoptees who travel with their adopted families, but they are also experiences that the Chinese government puts on display as Chinese. The use of heritage as a framework of race and the definition of Chinese American as people in America with traceable roots to China compounds the authority on the experience of Chineseness in China, since the root is considered the origin point and thus seems to be a purer or truer manifestation of Chineseness. The desire of adoptees to give it such authority also makes it so, and when combined, these factors allow adoptees to create their own memories of China rather than form them from what are understood as second-hand sources. Instead of flattened representations

of Chinese culture, adoptees could experience culture in China for themselves, creating a stronger foundation for forming their racial identities.

In addition to emphasizing adoptees' birth cultures, trips to China with family members also placed an emphasis on adoption and personal history, particularly in trips to the welfare centers where adoptees had stayed. Adoptee reactions to orphanage visits varied greatly, although more complicated or mixed emotions tended to correlate with age. Adoptees who were younger at the time of the visit, typically in childhood, tended to remember the experience as "fun" or an "amazing experience," which may stem from how adoptive parents framed the trip. Meanwhile, adoptees who were older at the time of the visit, typically adolescence or young adulthood, tended to focus more on their personal histories relative to people in the towns or cities they visited. They often compared themselves to the children still in the welfare center or the people who would have been their peers or elders had they grown up there. The latter draws from appearance- and experience-based frameworks of identity, which Natalie L. addressed: "my facial feature were very different from anyone else that we encountered that week, and I guess initially it had made me feel more perplexed ... because I thought I was going to find the answers about something ... but instead I ended up being more confused about the whole experience." Whereas using non-adopted Chinese and Asian people as references in appearance-based understandings of racial identity outside of China or in other places in China created dissonance for adoptees' identities, doing so in their hometowns<sup>16</sup> amplified any resulting dissonance because of the framing of that place of home, or at least as a place where they are from. Home, like family, carries connotations of

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<sup>16</sup> Because of the risk of punishment for out-of-quota children, many adoptees were left with no information about their birth parents. Some parents may have traveled from different regions to avoid authorities or leave their child at a facility with better care practices, which renders the common phrase "hometown" to describe this area potentially incorrect.

sameness, as well as security or stability<sup>17</sup>, which can lead to stronger reactions of dissonance or isolation when those connotations are not fulfilled when combined with frameworks of racial identity that depend on comparison to and validation from others.

The difference in reflection between age groups also seems to correlate with adoptees' knowledge of China and Chinese culture that did not come from parents, as those with the strongest negative or mixed reactions had studied abroad or otherwise spent time learning about China from sources other than their parents. This correlation suggests that having frameworks beyond those offered by adoptive parents allows for greater exploration of racial identity, since each adoptee who traveled to their hometown at an older age expressed stronger feelings of destabilization or stabilization of identity. For example, Brooke felt the experience was “[i]solating. I was by myself in a place I'd never been except for the time when I lived there when I was a baby,” which strengthened her American identity because of the distance she felt from what she conceptualized as a Chinese identity. She also traveled without her parents, which may have played a part, as other adoptees who traveled to China as parts of study abroad groups also tended to experience destabilizations of their Chinese identities based on interactions with non-adopted Chinese people in China. Figure 2 quantifies the types of trips adoptees have been on when traveling to China. Because some adoptees have traveled to China multiple times for various purposes, the number adds to more than twenty. The third category represents trips in which, even if an adoptee traveled with a parent, they primarily spent time with peers. While some adoptees have multiple trips in various categories, adoptees are counted only once per category.

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<sup>17</sup> In Chinese, the same character is used to mean “house,” “home,” and “family.”

**Table 3 Types of travel**

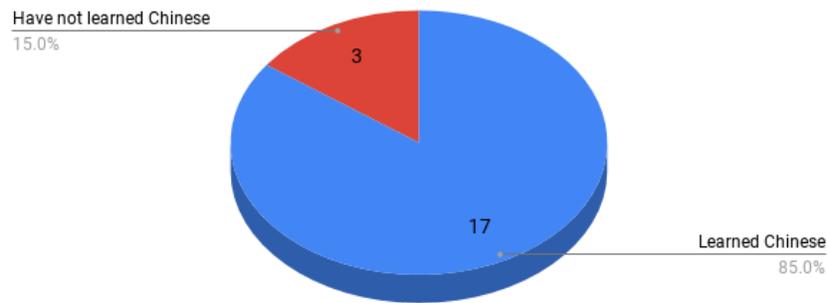
| Type of travel                        | Number of adoptees |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Traveled with parents                 | 9                  |
| Traveled with study abroad group      | 8                  |
| Misc. (e.g. dance trip, volunteering) | 4                  |

The most common source of dissonance or destabilization came from inability to speak Chinese or noticeable difference in skill from native-born speakers. One adoptee shared that it was an interesting experience because “that’s where I could kind of pretend, though, or like blend in with the crowd because everyone else was Chinese, and I was Chinese, and we all just looked like we belonged until we spoke.” She traveled with a volunteer group, although adoptees who traveled with study abroad groups also noticed differences in language with their non-adopted Chinese peers who grew up in China. Others noted differences in appearance, particularly one adoptee who believes she is part of an ethnic minority in China. She “stood out in Shanghai because statistically over ninety-one percent of those people were Han Chinese. So even then, I looked different.” The destabilizations of identity that adoptees felt because of these differences stem from experience- and appearance-based frameworks of racial identity formation, although stabilizations of Chinese identity from interactions with non-adopted Chinese people also stem rely on the same frameworks. For those who felt comfort or validation from “seeing all these people that look like me,” or, as the adoptee above put it, being able to “blend in with the crowd,” the assurance was borne from understanding racial identity as something one can be nearer or further from. While it did not preclude them from also identifying as American, it helped to root their identities in a positive difference from the normative American identity they grew up with.

As adoptees grew older, many sought out information about Chinese culture on their own. Eight of the interviewees expressed a desire to connect with Chinese culture as a motivation to learn more, returning to an experience-based framework for racial identity formation. Experience,

in this case, involves not only cultural actions but also cultural knowledge, although both fall into the same pitfalls when solely relied on. Just as anyone can participate in Chinese festivals or celebrations, anyone can learn about Chinese culture and history. While neither a non-Chinese person nor most adoptees grew up with Chinese parents, the sense that there is a difference between the two learning about Chinese culture or history indicates that heritage also ties into the framework of experience-based racial identity. As discussed in Chapter Two, a white person will be received and responded to differently when interacting with Chinese culture, but adoptees also have a personal history that ties them to that culture and larger history. The primary ways in which adoptees explored those ties were through language classes and classes in college about Chinese history or culture. Figure 2 shows the total number of adoptees who have experience learning Chinese. Of the seventeen who had any experience learning Chinese, eleven began learning in middle school or later. For some, in middle and high school, parents' insistence that they take Chinese classes offered at school pushed them to learn, although in college, adoptees were the ones who took the initiative to learn Chinese.

Seven adoptees enrolled in Chinese language classes in college, further tying language into racial experiences and indicating a desire to connect with those experiences because for many, such as Angelica, they "had never had the opportunity to do so before that." The active and personal decision to take language classes in college can validate and strengthen one's identity not only through the presence of choice, but also through the positive departure from the dominant culture where English is the normative language, which marks the experience as Chinese rather than American. The choice to learn Chinese is still tied to adoptees' personal history, though, which can raise the stakes of learning for adoptees and serve as a contrast with non-Chinese, particularly white, classmates.



**Figure 2 Number of adoptees who have learned Chinese**

Adoptees also sought out classes in college about Chinese history, and some of them chose their majors or coursework based on their interest in Chinese politics or language, including Leah, Brooke, and Kiera, for whom classes helped her “understand that the Chinese identity is multifaceted.” These efforts differ from those fully facilitated by their parents in the level of autonomy and control adoptees have in the information they learn and the contexts in which they learn it. While class content and discussion are still mediated by professors, adoptees can choose which classes to take, and, typically, they have control over the decisions they make in college. Juxtaposed to discrete cultural objects or bits of information taught by parents, a more “multifaceted” understanding of identity also offers more for adoptees to connect with and subsequently identify with. Classes can also offer theoretical frameworks for thinking about identity and adoption, which can act as guides and touchstones for adoptees’ exploration of their racial identities<sup>18</sup>.

Adoptees also have the ability to take part in Chinese or Asian communities on campus if those organizations are present, which may not have been an option during childhood and

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<sup>18</sup> Thank you to all of my professors who taught about terministic screens, constitutive rhetoric, and historical approaches to racial identity.

adolescence if they grew up in predominantly white areas. Learning environments that adoptees took part in as children typically did not provide the same sense of community, likely because of the educational aspect, whereas Chinese and Asian organizations on college campuses tend to be more socially oriented groups. The decision to seek out such groups, and whether to stay in them if one initially joins, shows the continued effect of interactions with non-adopted Chinese and Asian people on adoptees' racial identity formations. Comparisons to non-adopted organization members can emphasize the difference in adoptees' upbringings, as Leah noted: "honestly there weren't a lot geared towards Chinese Americans that were adoptees, like it was mostly like Chinese Americans or Asian Americans that were from Asian families." The feelings of disconnect and alienation are reminiscent of the feelings expressed about Chinese school, since both contexts assume a certain base level of knowledge and understanding about culture that adoptees typically do not have. Reminders of those differences can drive a wedge between an adoptee and a Chinese identity in the experience-based understanding of racial identity, although for most it was not prohibitive in continuing to identify as Chinese or Asian.

Seven adoptees had positive experiences and continued their involvement, although this group did not align significantly with those who expressed a feeling of greater connection or affinity with Asian and Chinese people. Instead, feelings of general affinity tended to correlate with uncertainty over whether they belonged in spaces meant for people of color, showing dissonance within the framework of experience-based identity formation. While adoptees share some experiences with stereotypes and racism with non-adoptees, as well as broader recognition of similarity in external impositions of identity by others, adoptees also recognize that their household experiences differ from those of non-adoptees. The ensuing dissonance raises questions concerning reclaiming culture, which is a process some non-adoptees undergo as well. For

adoptees, white upbringing does not seem to negate the ability to reclaim identity, as indicated by attempts to learn more about Asian and Chinese cultures and histories in classes and to spend more time with Asian and Chinese social groups. These attempts point to something more than experience in the framework of understanding racial identity, although isolating experience in this framework reveals perpetual dissonance concerning identity formation. The source of that dissonance is ultimately adoption, which is highlighted by the creation of adoptee-specific groups in person and online.

Adoptee groups initially started as prospective parents were preparing to adopt. Primarily online, parents would connect with other parents who adopted from the same region of China, or who lived in the same region in America. Sometimes adoption agencies would facilitate the creation of these groups, but the result tended to be a cohort of adoptees whose parents brought them together occasionally as children to play. These cohorts are referred to by different names — China sister, China cousins<sup>19</sup> — but regardless of name, they provided a means of normalizing Chinese-American adoption. Eight interviewees discussed such groups, and most felt greater recognition of their adoption as a result of the interactions. Some parents incorporated selected elements of Chinese culture to teach the adoptees, but all of the interactions were primarily social. As Loretta reflected, “it’s really helped me just identify — maybe, not really specifically Chinese, but maybe as a China sister.” Other adoptees sought out adoptee communities later in life, whether through already established groups or by creating their own groups. While online groups<sup>20</sup> tended

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<sup>19</sup> My cohort was all from the same welfare center, so our parents called us — and then we later called ourselves — Gaoyou sisters. Ashley, one of the participants in this study, was another member of this cohort. The name I continue to use for this group also indicates the power of adoptive parents to frame how adoptees think about aspects of their adoption, racial identity, and personal histories, since this helped foreground my difference from my parents as well as my non-adopted Chinese peers.

<sup>20</sup> Including, but not limited to, “subtle asian adoptee traits,” “Adoptee Only CCI Group,” “China Children Adoptee Advise/Help Support Group,” “Parents with Children Adopted from China,” and “China’s Children International.” There are also groups for specific regions of China.

to focus on solely Chinese adoptees, in-person groups and organizations tended to be open to adoptees from various countries. Of the six adoptees who identified as adoptees when asked about their racial identities, all six either participated in adoptee groups their parents arranged or participated in adoptee-oriented groups they found or created in later adolescence. Participation in such groups, particularly when sought out by adoptees later in life, reinforces experience-based understandings of racial identity. Such groups, and subsequently identifying as an adoptee, offer an alternative to trying to align with the experiences of non-adopted Chinese people: identify as an adoptee, using adoption as a qualifier that alters the expectations for experiences and as one that marks the racial experiences of adoptees as distinct from those of non-adoptees.

Adoptees' interactions with non-adopted Chinese people reveal the intertwining of appearance and experience as frameworks for racial identity formation. Looking to non-adoptees to gauge the legitimacy or strength of one's own racial identity gives it the power to stabilize or destabilize adoptees' Chinese or Asian identities, which can create feelings of rejection or confusion for adoptees. Typically these feelings do not prevent adoptees from continuing to identify as Chinese or Asian, but the differences they notice contribute to the tendency to qualify those identities. Identifying as an adoptee in addition to identifying as Chinese or Asian serves as such a qualifier, although separating it as a discrete identity, listed in addition to rather than as modifiers to other identities, indicates the extent to which adoption in itself shapes adoptees' experiences with racial identity formation.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Chinese-American adoptees' frameworks of understanding their racial identities situate them among a multitude of identities. The seven that adoptees listed stretch the definition of race, including what are also considered nationalities and ethnicities, although the inclusion of "adoptee" defies those bounds as well. The transracial and transnational adoptions are broader categories that expand beyond Chinese-American adoptees, but the history of China's one-child policy and the prevalence of the white adoptive parent-Chinese adoptive child dynamic creates a unique situation in which the methods by which people form racial identities become more visible. While trying to explain why they understood themselves as various identities, adoptees used various, often overlapping and interconnected, frameworks. Further examination of each framework, however, reveals shortcomings that either avoid the question of what definitively creates the boundary of a racial identity, or offers an answer that is unprovable or sets too rigid or loose limits.

Bureaucratic organizations offer checkboxes for various racial identities, but it is unclear what allows a person to be someone who can fit one box or another. The ways for understanding what constitutes a racial identity that fits within a certain box, however, remain unsatisfactory. Heritage merely delays the question and suggests something inherent that is passed down biologically, which obscures the history of race and the ways in which those understandings have changed over time. Biological approaches also slip towards such claims, and neither heritage nor genetics are immediately knowable to others, which calls into question the strength of such approaches, as most racial encounters rely on immediately knowable appearances. While biology is tied to appearance insofar as the expression of phenotypes, gene variants are not exclusively tied

to one region or country, and it remains unclear what physical features constitute any particular racial identity. Experience-based approaches fall into similar pitfalls, since many cultural experiences are not restricted by race, although appearance ties into experience because it shapes how various actions will be received. Attempting to construct a definitive list of experiences that constitute an identity, however, seems to chase after the same elusive endpoint as constructing a list of physical traits that make one “look” a certain race. Beneath the various approaches runs a current of essentialism, which is also unsatisfying because it offers an unexplainable, undefinable definition.

Such methods do not seem to offer concrete answers to what constitutes racial identities, yet adoptees use overlapping and intertwining frameworks to understand their identities, and they remain functionally useful despite their slippery nature. The non-Newtonian fluidity of racial identity formation becomes dangerous, though, when strict confines are used to exclude and police the boundaries of racial identity. Historically and in the present, genocides have been perpetrated based on what groups decide belongs inside or outside of the border. The use of racial identities, however, remains necessary as a means to understand and address lingering effects of racism that, while based on nebulous and shifting definitions of race, remain real. Chinese-American adoptees’ processes of racial identity formation merely brings these methods and their shortcomings to the forefront, as adoptees encounter dissonance from various frameworks that lead to stabilizations and destabilizations of various identities over time. The two principle sources of these occurrences discussed in this paper — the adoptive family and interactions with non-adopted Chinese and Asian people — also make more apparent the ways in which non-white racial identity is framed as a positive construction in opposition to the negative neutrality of whiteness as well as the ways in which intraracial constructions interact with white, external frames.

The lens of the adoptive family inherently affects adoptees' connection to their birth culture because of adoptees' lack of personal history due to the one-child policy. No matter the race or ethnicity of the adoptive parent, adoptees lose the context of their birth family's history that would have otherwise shaped and framed what adoptees learned about Chinese culture and history. When the lens of the adoptive parent is also forged by whiteness, it adds another layer of separation and permeates any learning due to the uneven power dynamic between dominant cultures and subcultures. Situating white adoptive parents as the principle source of information about Chinese culture allows them to pick and choose what gets to be Chinese for adoptees, and it often becomes flattened out to a deceptively cohesive and monolithic set of aesthetics and oversimplifications of cultural events and history. These constructions of Chinese culture and identity intersect with colorblind parenting techniques and the placement of Asian identity as "closer" to whiteness through the "model minority" myth, making it more difficult for adoptees to develop strong affiliations, since there is little with which they can connect to a positively formed Chinese or Asian identity. This is compounded for adoptees who are raised within the white, dominant culture, since whiteness is understood as the lack of positive identity and their connections to positive difference is diminished by white lenses over Chinese culture and colorblind approaches to race that mute difference. These childhood experiences also create a sharper distinction between the childhood experiences of adoptees when compared to those of their non-adopted Chinese peers, and the ensuing dissonance adoptees experience reveal the importance of experience-based understandings of racial identity in the overlapping frameworks.

More robust constructions of racial identity can come from direct interactions with non-adopted Chinese and Asian people, although they further reinforce the use of experience-based understandings of race, and they implicate appearance as a complementary and crucial base for

understanding racial identity. The ability of such interactions to affect how adoptees identify as well as the strength of their affiliations with the identities with which they align shows the extent to which such frameworks are used, as well as their comparative and relative nature. The context in which adoptees encounter non-adopted Chinese and Asian people also influences the outcomes, although it does so by making differences in experience more or less prominent. As children, adoptees in Chinese schools tend to feel greater discomfort with their difference, since they differ from the profile of the assumed student — a child with Chinese parents who are fluent in the language — around which lessons are structured. Meanwhile, learning environments in which students begin at relatively similar skill levels are less alienating. Expected skill level or prior experience remain sources of potential validation or invalidation for adoptees' identities, as is seen in adoptees' travels to China, their efforts to learn more about Chinese culture through college courses, and time spent in Chinese or Asian communities in college. The ensuing alienation or distance that adoptees feel can lead to a strengthening of the adoptee identity as distinct from other racial identities, since many adoptees encounter these experiences and can feel greater connection to others who also experience them.

In making the racial identity formation process more visible, Chinese-American adoptees shed light on shortcomings of current frameworks but also their usefulness in creating a community that offers comfort and solidarity. In writing this, I hope to contribute to a greater understanding of how frameworks of racial identity formation are created and used, although there is much more work that can be done on this topic. Examinations of this topic over a larger population, and one that is more geographically diverse, could yield more information that is useful in this discussion, and there are many topics that adoptees brought up in interviews that were not discussed here. Adoptees' experiences with media, jobs, mental health, religion, politics, and

dating are all ripe areas of exploration, and hopefully more work will be done on this in the future. While this paper can contribute to larger discussions of each topic, it will also serve as a preservation and record of twenty members of a group bounded by a policy that came out of temporally and geopolitically specific conditions. The one-child policy began in 1979, became the two-child policy in 2016, and ended fully in 2018, and the population of adoptees it created are our own diaspora, uniquely situated and affected by the circumstances of our adoptions. This thesis is only part of recording and understanding our stories.

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