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Deconstructing an Assumed Shared Identity: Developing Self-Identification, Articulating Family, and Exploring Varied Experiences of College-Aged Women Adopted from China and Raised in the United States

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Abstract

Much scholarship focuses on the general topic of transnational and transracial adoption, especially regarding female Chinese adoptees to the United States. This focus is usually explained by China's one-child policy that went into effect in 1979 and ended in 2015. Most of this scholarship focuses on the adoptive parents or younger adoptive children, and commonly refers to a singular "adoptee experience." This ethnography utilizes reflective participant observation and interviews both in person and over video call as methods to collect and produce knowledge. Three major themes emerged in the search for organized knowledge of college-aged, female-identifying, Chinese adoptees: the role of family, identity, and the connection of both to theories of ethnic and racial essentialism, compounded by the endorsement of stereotypes of transnational and transracial adoptees. The informants' categorically different descriptions of their experiences prove that the "adoptee experience" cannot be essentialized. This essay analyzes instances of misrecognition, reactions to opportunities or a lack of opportunity to explore Chinese ancestry, and the impact of these factors on identity formation. Additionally, this essay introduces a much larger conversation around identity politics and how assumptions can lead to categories of solidarity.

Fieldsite

While I was sitting alone in a coffee shop one evening, doing homework, a middle-aged man, not white-presenting, approached me to ask for a donation for children in Taiwan. Clearly curious about my background, he asked where my parents were from. I supplied him with my rehearsed, though still awkward, spiel about my adoption. "Oh, you're one of the lucky ones!" he said to me, then abruptly walked away to solicit money from others at a table nearby. I blinked twice and paused, and a disgusting cocktail of feelings hit me in waves. Annoyance, shock, guilt, shame, anger, familiarity. *Okay*, I thought to myself before going back to my work.

Three years later, this experience still replays in my head every now and then. At the time, I felt vulnerable about my identity. I was having a hard time making friends, and the thought crossed my mind that if only I had stuck with Mandarin lessons as a child, I would be better able to relate to the Asian population at Seattle University. My identity as a woman adopted from China and raised in the United States is one that remains constantly in the back of my mind, and during these experiences, in the front of my mind. My thick, straight, long, shiny black hair; my dark olive skin; and my brown eyes stand in stark contrast to my mother's reddish-brown pixie cut and freckles and my father's fluffy white hair and hazel eyes. Even now, away from home and in school, the adoption spiel hasn't lost relevance.

Much scholarship has focused on the general topic of what is sometimes called transnational and transracial adoption, especially regarding female Chinese adoptees to the United States. Transnational adoption refers to adopting across borders, while transracial adoption refers to someone adopting a child that identifies as a race different from their own. In this context, the adoptions of all of the female Chinese adoptees I interviewed can be described as transnational and transracial. All of their parents were living in the United States and adopted them from China, and none of the parents were described as identifying as Chinese or as claiming Chinese descent. The scholarly focus on female Chinese adoptees is usually explained with reference to China's one-child policy that went into effect in 1979 and ended in 2015. This policy was a government-implemented and -enforced family planning program that rewarded single-child families (in urban centers and two-child families in rural areas) and strictly prohibited large families in an attempt to control the population and present China as an advanced country in the international sphere (Feng, 2014, p. 17). However, most of this scholarship focuses on adoptive parents, specifically adoptive mothers, or younger adoptive children. This research allowed me to examine myself in comparison with other women with whom I had initially perceived as sharing an identity. The results of my research revealed two things: first, a realization about the many assumptions I had to unlearn about how people see and define themselves, and second, a continuous critical reflection about my

own assumptions of why I thought we would connect. These revelations came as a result of the interviews, self-reflections, and analytical explorations I conducted that looked at the process of identification, articulation of family, and varying opportunities to explore what I will refer to as Chinese “things.”

Methods and Subjectivity

For this project, I conducted reflective participant observation. I did this by first reflecting on my own experiences that I considered to be relevant to my adoption. I then analyzed those experiences in the context of other adoptees. This action of analysis and reflection continued throughout the research process. I chose to focus on college-aged women who, like me, are between the ages of 18 and 22, in order to more accurately center the adoption conversations I would be having around both myself and my interviewees. I also assumed that people in this age group might have already engaged in some form of self-reflection, which may or may not have included thoughts on their adoptions. I interviewed five women adopted from China and raised in the United States. These interviews were done either in person or over video call. I was primarily concerned with their personal experiences related to their adoptions, and the questions I asked them reflected that focus. These were the main methods I used to collect and produce knowledge.

From the very start of this process, I knew that my own subjectivity and initial understanding of my identifiers as a woman adopted from China and raised in the United States would both inform and be informed by this subject matter. I did not try to mask this part of myself in any way, and actively advertised it to my informants both to maintain transparency and, at some points, attempt to better relate to them. I assumed that because we had this “on paper” shared set of identifiers as women adopted from China and raised in the United States, we might better connect with one another. Thinking about myself as an insider, and even making assumptions of an insider-outsider dichotomy, was both useful and precarious. Assuming the insider-outsider dichotomy only served to reinforce the homogenization of my informants and me. This labeled me as “one of them” (an insider), despite not having proof of a concrete, interactive community of adoptees who feel the same way. While I do feel that expressing these identities were helpful, it wasn’t until my first interview with Irene that I began questioning these labels, as well as my assumptions based on them.

Informants

While all five of my interviewees described themselves as adopted, female-identifying, and college-aged, they all described different parental units and upbringings. Carolyn was raised by two women (now married to each other) who she described as white, and has a younger sister who is also adopted from China; Kate was adopted by two women, who she described as white, who were in a romantic relationship and are now separated; Michelle was raised by a single mother, who she described as white, and has a younger sister who is also adopted from China; Irene was raised by heterosexual parents of different ethnic backgrounds, whom she described as “Hispanic” and “white”; and Jan did not explicitly reveal the status of her parents. Additionally, I was raised by a white-identifying heterosexual married couple and have a younger sister who is also adopted from China. None of the women described their hometowns as very racially diverse, though some described their hometowns as more racially diverse than others, and some were described as “very white.” No two families of the women I interviewed were the same.

Assumptions of Race in the United States

An important assumption to begin with, one ubiquitous to the United States, is that race is a biological fact. Goodman (2000) deconstructs the popular connection between genetics and race, and provides six reasons why thinking about race as biological does not hold up: race is based on stagnant types, human variation is continuous, human variation is non-concordant, the fact that within-group variation is greater than variation among the conceptions of races is scientifically proven, classification of race is inconsistent, and there is no clarity as to what race is and is not (p. 1700). Goodman’s concise breakdown of the undeniable fact that race is a human construction rather than a biological fact often clashes with the United States’ long history with racial issues that depended on the assumption that race is a biological fact. Smedley (2011) acknowledges this lived reality of race and the implications of these assumptions by establishing that “in whatever context race comes to play, it conveys the meaning of social distance that cannot be transcended” (p. 19). This touches on the theme of adoption central to this essay. In this way, I will continue to use non-biologically based racial terms to describe the phenotypes (physical expression of genotypes or the observable characteristics of an individual such as skin color and hair color) of some individuals. When adoptees are identified as being in a separate racial category from their parents, people often do not assume a familial relation until the adoptee or parent explicitly establishes one. This

is not only applicable to adoptees; Goodman explains that because genes do not express themselves according to our categories of race, biological children such as those that identify as biracial and multiracial (children of parents from different ancestral backgrounds who have phenotypes that are different from each other) can also be misidentified. This application will reappear later in a discussion of family and instances of misrecognition.

Examining Self-Identification as a Process

When I began this project, identity was a key theme that I wanted to explore. In my own life, defining my identity was inherently wrapped up in my status as an adoptee. I felt like what Abu-Lughod (1991) describes as “‘halfies’ — people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage” (p. 137). My cultural identity was American by virtue of both migration and claimed parentage, but Chinese by virtue of ancestry and assumed connection to phenotype. As this project developed, I looked to focus less on identity itself, and more on the process of identification. If identity is a defined, hard-and-fast determination of who one is, then identification is the “process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given” (Fuss, 1995, p. 2). Think of identity as to “identify *as*” and identification as “to identify *with*”; an individual may not have the same “on-paper” labels as a group, but may otherwise fit into the workings of the group through identification. I apply this to the development of an identity through the process of identification in myself and in relation to my informants. Initially, I understood my identity to *be* the combination of female, adopted from China, and raised in the United States, and I attached this combination of identities to other people who were also female, adopted from China, and raised in the United States. In other words, I subscribed myself and others to an ontological and essential identity. Where I went wrong was assuming that other people who fit into this combination of categories would also use it to define their identities. A better way to think about this is to consider myself as identifying *with* them, rather than identifying *as* them. By identifying *with* them, I acknowledge that we have shared experiences based on some shared personal histories while also acknowledging that we have very different lives and reflect on them differently. If I were to identify *as* them, I would make a more unbreakable connection between having shared experiences and assuming we might reflect on them in the same way. This identification is envisioned as more of a spectrum than a set of fixed categories, allowing an ongoing development of movement across and along that spectrum as we change and undergo new experiences.

Irene sums up her identity formation through identification succinctly:

Where it really hit home for me was understanding that yeah, I'm not really Asian, but I'm not actually American. I'm Asian-hyphen-American, and that inhabits a completely different space and a completely different experience than someone who looks Asian and was raised in Asia or someone who is white and raised in America. (Irene, personal communication, May 2018)

Irene's quote served as a model for how I began reframing my process of identification. I more explicitly included the word "adoptee" into my personal definition. By finding a variety of balances between being Asian and American, accepting some labels and acknowledging their subjective nature, and allowing myself to form an identification, I can continue to develop the way that I think about myself. For other women, this description might be dramatically inaccurate according to their conceptions of themselves and the way they formed their identities depending on their own reflections, their family, and the treatment they received from strangers. Ultimately, this speaks to the impossibility of identifying a single adoptee experience, but it does not erase the ability to analyze and identify certain communal behaviors and feelings.

Articulating Family in the Context of Adoption

Without leading them too much, during my interviews I tried asking my informants to describe how they related to their families as adoptees:

Irene: You don't say, "oh my adopted parents," you say, "oh my parents." (Irene, personal communication, May 2018)

Carolyn: It's not like, "oh they're different from me," it's just, "they are my parents." (Carolyn, personal communication, May 2018)

Michelle: When I look at my mom, like, yes, I realize that she's like a brown-haired white lady, but like, that's not what I think immediately when I look at her, I'm not like, "oh my mom looks different from me," I'm just like, "mom." (Michelle, personal communication, May 2018)

For some of the women I talked to, a concept of a “normal” family was difficult to articulate. In the United States, “culture uses phenotypical resemblances as the primary way that family ties are legitimized and authenticated” (Goss, 2018, p. 111). For people who look nothing like their families or who have “non-traditional” families, such as the adoptees I interviewed, this becomes a precarious situation. My informants negotiated a mental balance between consciously and unconsciously identifying family members as their family members. Irene, Carolyn, and Michelle all expressed a combination of their unconscious identification of their parent(s) as their parent(s) with the conscious and obvious knowledge that they don’t resemble their parent(s) at all. The language they used to describe their parent(s) does not indicate that in a technical sense, their parent(s) are adoptive and not biological. They were clearly aware of this fact, but it did not change the way they felt towards those who raised them. As Michelle explained, when she sees her mother, her immediate thought is not that she and her mother differ in appearance: it is that she identifies this woman as her mother.

Because of phenotype-based notions of family in the United States, it is useful to reference Ann Anagnost’s (2000) concept of misrecognition. This refers to circumstances of dissociation, which are frequent in interactions with strangers who do not recognize that a child and mother are in fact family (Anagnost, 2000). While Anagnost focuses on the perspectives of mothers of adoptees, I apply her theory to the perspectives of the adoptees themselves. Some of my informants recalled instances where they were not recognized as being the daughters of their mothers or instances where that familial relationship was questioned. Carolyn states: “in like grocery stores people would come up to [one of my moms] and be like ‘oh are these your children?’ or ‘are these your foster children?’” (Carolyn, personal communication, May 2018). Michelle also details an experience that she and her mother had in Beijing:

My mom and I actually went to Beijing together just for fun, and we got into a taxi cab and I got in first, and the taxi driver turned and started yelling at me. He must have thought I was stealing my mom’s cab. (Michelle, personal communication, May 2018)

These interactions were the result of strangers not recognizing that adult and child were family. While both can be categorized as instances of misrecognition, Carolyn and Michelle described different receptions of and reactions to these experiences. Carolyn told this story in order to highlight the racism she felt that she and her mothers experienced. Michelle told this story without explicit reference to any race-based discomfort. It was an awkward experience, but she was not necessarily offended by the misrecognition. Despite Michelle’s interaction involving yelling compared to Carolyn’s interaction involving a question, Michelle did not

describe hers as negative, while Carolyn did. While Michelle did not describe this particular interaction as negative, she did describe some other interactions as negative.

Four out of the five women I talked to had experienced some kind of interaction with another person (usually not someone who identifies as a person of color) to which they reacted negatively. I describe these interactions as negative because my informants either described them as “negative,” “bad,” “not good,” or “uncomfortable.” However, each woman had a different conception of the negative experience based on their perception of its severity, its source, and the presence or absence of a microaggression. Often, microaggressions are common verbal or nonverbal indications, comments, or actions which reinforce racial, gender, or any other stereotype and result in the perpetuation of the marginalization of certain groups of people. Not all of my informants used this term to describe their negative interaction, highlighting the subjective experience of microaggressions. This is supported by Derald Wing Sue’s (2011) book on microaggressions, which states:

how a person of color [...] perceives a microaggression, the adaptive resources he or she possesses, his or her racial identity development, the presence of familial/ social support, what he or she decides to do [...] may moderate or mediate the meaning and impact of the incident. (p. 94)

Although I think this definition puts more of the work on the person perceiving the comment or action as a microaggression, it does point to the autonomy they have in the very definition of a microaggression. For example, Jan explained her distaste for the descriptor of “banana,” that is, someone who is “yellow” on the outside and “white” on the inside, while Michelle didn’t have strong negative feelings towards her mother using the word “Twinkie” (the same concept as a banana, “yellow” on the outside and “white” on the inside) as a term of endearment. The color yellow is historically used to describe the skin color of some East Asian peoples in the same way that white is used to describe the skin color of some people of European descent. In this way, the terms “banana” and “Twinkie” are used to describe a person who is racially identified or presents as East Asian but who acts like, speaks like, or shares a cultural background more closely aligned with a white-identifying person in the United States.

One way to understand this difference is by looking at who the comment came from, and with what motives. Michelle cites a comment from her mother, someone she is close with, and who loves her. Her mother’s motive was presumably not malicious. By contrast, Jan’s experience with the term was not connected to a close family member, and therefore she framed the intent and the meaning behind the comment as negative from the start.

Additionally, ambiguous and subjective instances like these are different when the adoptees are speaking for themselves. Irene, whose parents do not identify as white, explained in her own words that she likes to “joke” that “when people see me and my mom and dad, [it’s] always like that episode of *SpongeBob* where *SpongeBob* and *Patrick* like, raise the clam” (Irene, personal communication, May 2018). This refers to an episode created by Hillenburg (2002), on the animated television show, *SpongeBob SquarePants* where two of the main characters, *SpongeBob* (a square, yellow sea sponge) and *Patrick Star* (a pink starfish) come together to take care of a clam. Irene used this analogy to compare the animated characters’ physical incompatibilities to those of her and her family. Although *SpongeBob*, *Patrick*, and the clam baby do not *look* like a family, they *act* like a family. This humorous self-description of her family unit reinforces the importance of who is saying what about the adoption, adoptee, or adoptive parent(s). If someone else had described her family this way, it might not have been received in the same, humorous way. Because Irene made this comparison herself and was referring only to her family, she alone owned the joking statement. Although most of my informants described at least one negative interaction with reference to, or because of, their being adopted and not sharing an appearance with their families, Kate was adamant that she did not perceive any of her interactions involving questions or misrecognitions of her adoption as negative, harmful, or otherwise offensive toward herself. She explained that interactions are negative only when others feel awkward, which in turn causes her to feel awkward. She “wanted to tell them it was fine, like no worries” (Kate, personal communication, May 2018). She did, however, describe a matter involving attachment. She explained that transitional periods, such as the transition from high school to college, and even the transition between grades, “just takes me a little bit longer to adjust to the new environment or situation” (Kate, personal communication, May 2018). Kate attributed this in part to her status as an only child, as well as to the deficiency of physical touch as a baby in an overcrowded orphanage. Taken together with the experiences of my other informants, Kate’s description and interpretation shows the great variation in adoptee experiences.

Reactions to Varying Opportunities to Explore Chinese Ancestry

All the women I talked to described at least one exposure to what I am calling Chinese “things.” By this term I mean food, language, a trip, books, toys, or even other people which connected my informants to China. The way they judged this relationship varied. Irene and Kate explicitly indicated a wish to either take or keep up with Mandarin language courses,

while Carolyn noted ironically that she had taken Mandarin from elementary school through high school and still did not know the language. Michelle expressed a lack of interest in learning about Chinese culture, mentioning that when she was little, she was more fascinated with what she termed “Hispanic culture” rather than Chinese culture. Jan described the importance of having other close female friends who were also adopted from China, explaining: “I think having each other was really helpful because we all went through the same experiences even though we didn’t necessarily talk about them very often” (Jan, personal communication, May 2018).

Unlike Jan, Michelle and Irene reported a lack of close female friends adopted from China but did not feel they were missing out in any way. Similarly, though Carolyn had childhood friends who were adopted, since then she has not made any close adopted friends while in college. Additionally, Carolyn, Jan, and Michelle had all visited China since their adoptions, Irene was about to study abroad in China at the time of the interview, and Kate expressed a desire to visit and had made loose plans to go. Carolyn, Jan, Michelle, and Irene each had different goals and expectations for their visits. Carolyn and Jan travelled to their orphanages, Michelle went as part of a tourist trip, and Irene chose to study abroad in China to gain exposure to Chinese culture. These accounts fluctuated in both the amount of exposure and the desire for exposure to Chinese “things” as compared to American “things.” These variations provide even more evidence for the fact that there is no single adoptee experience.

The concept of “reculturation” (Baden et al., 2012) is useful for thinking through my informants’ responses. According to psychological knowledge and methods, reculturation is “a process of identity development and navigation through which adoptees develop their relationship to their birth and adoptive cultures via reculturative activities and experiences” (Baden et al., 2012, p. 390). According to Baden et al., reculturation ultimately results in one of five outcomes: adoptee culture, reclaimed culture, bicultural, assimilated culture, or combined culture. Adoptee culture is when adoptees identify primarily with adoptees, and secondarily with others of their birth culture or adoptive culture. Reclaimed culture is when adoptees immerse themselves in their birth culture. Bicultural is used to describe adoptees who identify with their adoptive culture and hyphenate their ethnic group with their American status (e.g. Chinese-American). Assimilated culture is when adoptees identify with their adoptive culture. Lastly, combined culture is when adoptees have a combination of any number of the previous outcomes. Because these outcomes imply the end of a constantly changing and dynamic process of self-reflection, I see this framework as useful for articulating the way some adoptees may engage with their cultures. This statement from Irene supports the temporal usefulness of these terms:

I think when you feel distances from a culture, I think that generation is always finding something to get back there, whether that be the culture or the cooking, or the language, or physically going back, so like I would like grasp onto whatever I could. (Irene, personal communication, May 2018)

Irene's description of "grasping" onto Chinese culture may suggest that she belongs in the reclaimed culture category, where adoptees immerse themselves in their birth culture. However, her response described a desire to grasp onto Chinese "things" when she was a child. Having grown, she went on to explain:

We don't need to keep holding ourselves to these standards of "oh I need to be Asian enough," or "I need to be American enough," and I think that's something so human to do, being the "not enough" of whatever identity. (Irene, personal communication, May 2018)

Irene's description suggests that when she was a child, she aligned more closely with the reclaimed cultural outcome, but over time, through self-reflection and a critical lens, her perspective and grasping desire changed to realize that she "didn't need to keep holding [herself] to these standards" (Irene, personal communication, May 2018). In this way, Baden et al. might say Irene aligns more closely with the adoptee cultural outcome since she emphasizes not needing to be Asian or American "enough." I would add on to this to include the temporal element and say that this is how Irene might align at the time of the interview.

Conclusion

Going into this project, I had my own preconceived notions about an "adoptee experience." I was seeking out women with whom I thought I would share experiences based on one aspect of shared identity. I was looking for solidarity and familiarity in the adoption community. This plan was flawed. The "adoptee experience" cannot be wrapped up in a single box with a bow on top because each woman had different conceptions of her own adoption. It was naïve to think that my informants, though they shared some of my identity markers, could possibly offer me something so simple. The role of the individual, the family, and the larger social context were all factors that went into each woman's process of identification; because they were all differently interconnected and experienced, each process of identification

varied. While this may seem obvious in hindsight and was perhaps obvious at the beginning to readers, I found this research integral to how I personally think about my identity in relation to others. I don't think it is generally invalid to seek out similarities in people you perceive as having alike features or backgrounds. However, I do think that to read too much into those perceived similarities can be inauthentic both to your results and in the representation of others. These are lessons I will continue to wrestle with, and will follow me as I continue to navigate experiences like the one with which I began this essay.

I would like to return to a seemingly simple term that I used earlier in my discussion of Chinese "things." To describe some of my informants going to China, I described them as "visiting China" as opposed to "traveling to China," "revisiting China," "taking a trip to China," or "returning to China." I did this for two reasons; first, this was the word my informants used to describe going to China. The second reason is because, to me, "to visit" implies going to a place you were not raised in, did not spend a significant amount of time in, and was not necessarily formative in your growing up. Additionally, "to visit" somewhere implies a temporality; a place you will not stay for long. I did not use the term "revisit" because that implies that they had gone to China before. Although technically we had all been to China because we were born there, it was not a place any of them described as "home."

In further research, it will be important to consider the gender of the adoptees more carefully because it is yet another layer that contributes to an individual's identification: not only in how they see themselves, but also in how others see them and subsequently treat them. In this analysis, a deeper discussion of China's one-child policy, of the intersection of race and gender in the United States, and of subsequent stereotypes that arise from that intersection is necessary. One reason I did not explore gender further in this paper was because it was not something that my informants discussed. In follow-up interviews, though, it will be crucial to creating a more holistic, intersectional analysis of female-identifying adoptees born in China and raised in the United States.

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Note

¹ All names are pseudonyms chosen by the informants.