

CAN YOU ADOPT A CHINESE IDENTITY?:  
IDENTITY CONFLICT IN CHINESE ADOPTEES

A THESIS

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Millions of American families chose to adopt internationally between World War II and the 21<sup>st</sup> century; roughly half of those children have come from Asia (Tuan and Shiao 2011). As a result of China's 1979 one-child policy (Feng, Cai, and Gu 2014), many babies, primarily girls, were abandoned. Since the 1990s, as many as 89,000 children have been adopted from China by families from the United States alone (The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism 2011; U.S Department of Homeland Security 2016). The majority of American parents who adopted from China were college-educated white non-Hispanic from the middle-to-upper class, who typically adopted when they were in their late thirties and forties (Rojewski 2005). Although parents who adopted from China were largely heterosexual and married, there was a brief increase in adoption by single parents, as well as by gay or lesbian couples (Grotevant 2000). The racial differences between adoptive parents and their adopted children created complex contexts for adoptee identity development, in which differences were heightened within families (Grotevant et. al. 2000).

Parents who adopted children from Korea in the 1980s and earlier (Lee et al. 2010) ignored their children's ethnic heritage in favor of complete assimilation. Korean adoptees have maintained that such parental colorblindness caused them to feel alienated and experience racial stigma. In contrast, adoption from China coincided with the emergence of a positive value placed on American multiculturalism (Volkman 2003). Adoptive parents of children from China strove to embrace their child's differences, attempted to help their children construct multiple or fluid identities, and sought to give their children pride in their racial-ethnic heritage by exposing them to Chinese language and culture. By encouraging a positive bi-cultural identity, parents hoped that pride in the birth culture, along with a strong sense of belonging in the dominant culture, would help their children cope with prejudice and discrimination if and when it occurred, and

serve as a buffer against feelings of social marginality and poor self-image (Adams, Tessler, and Gamache 2005).

Studies on Korean and Chinese adopted children and adolescents confirm the importance of ethnic socialization in childhood and adolescence for ethnic identity development (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001). When examining racial and ethnic identity, transracial adoptees are a relevant population to study because they are typically confronted with the paradox of having grown up in a white family and community; in general, they are treated as an honorary white in their early years (Tuan 1998), but are perceived by others outside of the family milieu as an ethnic and racial minority (Lee 2003).

Existing literature has explored how racial-ethnic identity development is influenced by one's family, attending college, and other "lived experiences." The circumstances of Chinese adoptees raise the following questions: 1) what factors influenced the development of their racial-ethnic identity, 2) how do adoptees as young adults decide whether or not explore their ethnic identity, and 3) how do adoptees negotiate identity conflict when external perceptions are inconsistent with their internalized self-perceptions?

Through the narratives of 11 Chinese adoptees, the present study explores the lived experiences of Chinese adoptees in their identity development, identity conflict many encountered, and how adoptees navigated such conflict. Findings indicate that how adoptees dealt with this conflict was influenced by their early exposure to other Asians and Chinese adoptees and their awareness of being Chinese growing up. As young adults, participants reported either distancing themselves from other Asians or exploring their ethnic identity, which led to an increased recognition of their Chinese identity. Exploration included taking Chinese

language or Asian studies classes or or studying abroad, interacting more consistently with people of color, or discussing racial differences with friends.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand what factors influence the development of a racial-ethnic identity for Chinese adoptees, it is necessary to take into account the processes through which individuals apply meaning to ascribed identities in various contexts. Prior research has explored how individuals develop racial-ethnic identities, Asian American identity development, and how one's family, attending college, and other "lived experiences" influence racial-ethnic identity development.

### *Ethnic Identity*

Components of ethnic identity include ethnic self-identification (the ethnic label that one uses for oneself), sense of belonging to a group, positive or negative attitudes towards one's ethnic group, and ethnic involvement (social participation and cultural practices) (Phinney 1990; Song and Lee 2009). Some commonly assessed indicators of ethnic involvement include language, friendship and social organization membership. Ethnic identity development continues through early adulthood and is observed to change as individuals experience new situations and contexts, and assume new roles and responsibilities, which may be mediated by the salience of ethnicity in the social context (Adams, Tessler, and Gamache 2005).

Scholars maintain that ethnic identity development typically begins early in life through socialization practices and customs in the family; it becomes most prominent during adolescence when children begin to develop personal identities (Lee et al. 2010). Models of ethnic identity development suggest that minority group members begin the process of identity development

with an acceptance of the values and attitudes of the majority culture; this sometimes includes internalized negative views of their own group that are held by the majority (Phinney 1989). Additionally, exposure to discrimination, groups of people with different ethnicities, and ethnic organizations increases during adolescence, and is likely to stimulate reexamination of racial and ethnic identity (Phinney 1990; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014).

Phinney (1989) argues that the understanding of ethnic identity is important because it is implicated in the overall adjustment of minority group adolescence. Tan and Jordan-Arthur (2012) add that for transracially adopted youth, ethnic identity development may be more complex than for other minority children. There is a concern that there could be negative implications for transracial adoptees if they do not deal with their ethnic identity, such as a poor self-image or a sense of alienation. Phinney and Alipuria (1990) found that after a process of ethnic exploration comes a commitment that results in a confident sense of self as a member of an ethnic group; they found this was significantly related to positive self-esteem in college students. The findings from Phinney's (1989) and Phinney and Alipuria's (1990) studies suggest that the process of ethnic identity development, not just being perceived as a minority group member, is a key factor in understanding the self-esteem and adjustment of minority youth.

White Americans have the privilege to not identify ethnically, but the opposite is true for those who do not share the same physical features or culture (language, dress, customs, etc.) as the dominant group; for minority individuals, self-identification is at least partly imposed (Phinney 1990). In illustration, Waters (1994) found that some second generation black immigrants from the Caribbean are aware of society's negative portrayal of black Americans, so it is important for those individuals to distinguish themselves from black Americans. Their Caribbean self-identification is at odds with the identification others make of them, and as a

result they consciously try to accentuate their distinct ethnic identity. In a variation of that strategy, Chinese adoptees may feel the need to accentuate their affinity to white mainstream culture to avoid disadvantages associated with being seen as Asian (Pyke and Dang 2003).

*Asian identity.* Claire Kim's (1999) racial triangulation theory states that Asian Americans have been valorized relative to blacks, while simultaneously ostracized in American society. The valorization and ostracism of Asians maintain Asian Americans in a triangulated position vis-à-vis white and blacks. Asians have been labeled the "model minority," upstanding and high achieving individuals respected for their work ethic; compared with the general U.S. population, Asian American children tend to fare well in school enrollment and graduation, regardless of their immigrant status, language usage, or family situation, and are more likely to attend college than college-age individuals in the general U.S. population (Zhou 1999). This suggests that Asians are perceived as superior to other racial minorities in terms of intelligence, temperament, and capacity for fitting into white society (Tuan and Shiao 2011). However, relative to whites, Asians have been ostracized on the grounds of being immutably foreign and unassimilable with whites (Kim 1999; Tuan and Shiao 2011). The perception of Asians as "forever foreigners" (Tuan 1998), regardless of generational status, poses hurdles for all Asian Americans in forming healthy racial identities in the United States.

Claire Kim (1981) conducted in-depth interviews with ten third-generation women with Japanese ancestry to explore the relationship between identity conflict resolution and the development of Asian American identity. Kim concludes that in the case of Asian Americans, conflict in identity consists of the awareness of self as an Asian which one rejects in favor of the models that are pervasive in a predominantly white society, where racial minorities are seen as

foreigners. (Kim 1981). Experiences of denial and/or rejection of Asian Americans contribute to their negative self-concepts and low self-esteem. Kim argues that the cause of identity conflict is not from a specific aversion to aspects or attributes of one's Asian self. Rather, it is a reaction to being exposed to, and internalization of white racism. Kim asserts that the experience of identity conflict ends when subjects acquire new information, which leads to a different perspective on their position as a racial minority.

Kim's (1981) study portrays the process of Asian American Identity Development (AAID) as five distinct sequential stages that lead to specific behavioral manifestations and social consciousness around being Asian American. Participants in Kim's study began with an awareness of being Asian, which largely stemmed from interactions with family. As participants had more significant contact with white society, namely through school, they experienced white identification; this was marked by a strong sense of being different from one's white peers. Kim found that the difference in terms of severity of white identification was related to a previous evaluation of one's ethnic identity; subjects with previous positive ethnic awareness were passive in their white identification while those with neutral ethnic awareness actively identified with whites. It was not until, as a result of being exposed to information about their ethnicity's culture or racial issues, that participants were able to gain political consciousness of being a minority or realistically assess their social position; then they had a clear realization of the existence of societal obstacles and the futility of trying to "pass" or to strive for acceptance within the white world. Soon participants realized being a minority was synonymous with being Asian. What followed was a personal and cultural exploration and appreciation of the Asian American experience. The end of the AAID process occurs when individuals blend their Asian American identity with the rest of their identities in society.

*Identity denial.* Asian Americans frequently experience rejection of their American identity (Tuan 1998). Pyke and Dang (2003) argue that the coding of “real” Americans as white exemplifies the internalization of the dominant racial ideology; identities are collectively constructed social devices that mark boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Whether or not members of racial groups are practicing ethnics in the traditional sense, an ethnic identity is imposed on them by virtue of their physical appearance and they are seen as less authentically American than their white ethnic counterparts (Tuan and Shiao 2011).

Cheryan and Monin (2005) report that identity denial is instantiated through frequent and seemingly innocent questions about identity, such as being asked where one is from. For the millions of Asian Americans raised in America, who have no other national identity, having the credibility of their American identity questioned is equivalent to questioning their credibility as persons (Cheryan and Monin 2005). Studies have found that in some instances, Asian Americans make attempts to distinguish themselves from recent immigrants in hopes of being accepted into mainstream society (Phinney 1989; Tuan and Shiao 2011).

The hallmark of the "white identification" stage in Kim's (1981) study was alienation from self and other Asian Americans. Pyke and Dang (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with Korean and Vietnamese second generation young adults; respondents described a constant pressure to produce and reaffirm their American identity by socially distancing themselves from coethnics. Pyke and Dang (2003) argue that the sub-ethnic identities “FOB” (Fresh off the Boat) and “whitewashed” are an adaptive response to the racial oppression of the larger society. Although these identities are constructed as a means of resisting a racially stigmatized status, they also reproduce the derogatory racial stereotypes. By denigrating coethnics as too ethnic



(“FOB”) or too assimilated (“whitewashed”), respondents attempted to create an identity for themselves at the bicultural middle of the acculturation spectrum, and to be seen as non-stigmatized “normals” (Pyke and Dang 2003). They claim a comfort and ease with mainstream American culture and are able to identify with whites (Pyke and Dang 2003). This option is particularly relevant for Asian American individuals who were raised in white families and feel the need to distinguish themselves from a stigmatized Asian identity in the outside world.

### *Family and Cultural Socialization*

Ethnic socialization during childhood and adolescence is important in the development of a racial-ethnic identity for transracial adoptees. As parents are a child’s main reference group, ethnic socialization is challenging when parents are not the same race or ethnicity as the child. Song and Lee (2009) found that ethnic identities of adopted individuals are less salient than are ethnic identities of non-adopted individuals from similar ethnic backgrounds because adoptees are less likely to have been immersed in their ethnic culture and heritage during childhood and adolescence. Using interviews, Andujo (1988) compared the ethnic identities of Hispanic children raised in white families and Hispanic children raised by Hispanic parents. She found that adoptees raised by Hispanic parents tended to identify as Hispanic American, and adoptees raised by white parents tended to identify as American. These studies suggest that the race and ethnicity of parents strongly influences the development of adoptees’ racial-ethnic identities.

Studies have also found that talking openly about adoption has helped adoptees gain a better understanding of themselves in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Juffer and Tieman 2009; Lee et al. 2010; Tuan and Shiao 2011). Parents’ acknowledgement of racial differences within the family matters because it gives voice to the experiences of adoptees and affirms that

their race, ethnicity, and adoptive status are significant to others (Tuan and Shiao 2011).

Conversely, research indicates that families who deny children's racial-ethnic identities or do not acknowledge racial differences – as experienced by some Korean adoptees – may contribute to adoptees' development of a poor self-image and an unhealthy emotional attitude towards their ethnic origins (Kallgren and Caudill 1993).

For racial/ethnic minorities, cultural socialization entails transmission of values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors that foster racial-ethnic identity development, empowerment of children to respond confidently and securely to racist behavior, and acquisition of skills to function as a member of a racially diverse society (Tessler, Gamache and Liu 1999; Lee 2003). Samuels (2009) argues that raising children with a sense of racial normalcy may require color-conscious parenting, expanding beyond one's own experience of whiteness to include the insights of others who share the child's racialized status and experience. Studies have voiced the need for adoptive parents to provide their child with ongoing experiences and relationships that promote positive racial-ethnic (and adoptive) identity development (McGinnis et al. 2009). Scholars have contended that children can benefit psychologically from being exposed to and familiar with both American and Chinese culture (Tessler et al. 1999).

Studies on Korean and Chinese adopted children and adolescents confirm the importance of ethnic socialization in childhood and adolescence for ethnic identity development (Rojewski and Rojewski 2001). Findings from Rojewski and Rojewski's (2001) study on parents who adopted girls from China, and from Dorow's (2006) study of China/U.S. adoption reveal that parents tend to fall along a continuum, ranging from promoting only white middle-class culture to emphasizing exclusively Chinese culture. These studies have found that the majority of parents try to give equal attention to both Chinese and American culture (Dorow 2006). Many

parents expose their child to Chinese culture by involving them in Chinese language and dance classes, attending children's heritage camps, and celebrating Chinese New Year. By honoring their child's cultural difference and teaching others to appreciate these differences, many parents believed they were preparing their child for life in a racial society (Louie 2009).

Many families have argued that if there is one community that could help shape their child's identity, it is the community of children adopted from China because of their common history and unique experiences (Miller-Loessi and Kulich 2001). They believed that interactions with other Chinese adoptees would provide a greater likelihood of developing a positive sense of self and racial-ethnic identity (Rojewski 2005); thus, some parents carefully nurtured ties between their child and other adoptees.

#### *Influence of College and Other "Lived Experiences"*

The social constructionist perspective, which states that ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction (Nagel 1994; Suyemoto 2002), has been applied to the experiences of transracial adoptees, as adoptees have to navigate between two groups in the co-creation of their racial and ethnic identities. This perspective suggests that differing ethnic attitudes may reflect different stages of an individual's development, as well as situations individuals find themselves in (Phinney 1990).

Using surveys to develop knowledge on identity development for Korean adoptees, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute found that although the majority of respondents identified as Korean Americans as adults, 78 percent of respondents reported that as children they considered themselves to be, or wanted to be, white (McGinnis et al. 2009:36). While the most common reason for the shift was simply maturity, access to a more diverse community and

affiliation with people of Asian background also facilitated the shift. Experiences with racial prejudice, even teasing, led some to reconsider their identities.

Beyond childhood, concerns about ethnicity shift from learning one's ethnic label to understanding the significance of one's group membership (Phinney 1989). Adams et al. (2005) contend that becoming ethnically self-aware depends on the salience of ethnicity in the individual's social context, identity-relevant experiences and learning opportunities, and social support for ethnic self-identification. Song and Lee (2009) add that socializing with other members of the birth culture during the period of 18 to 21 years of age is strongly related to the development of a positive racial-ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014).

During this period, many Chinese adoptees attend college. College has the potential to be a place for meaningful cross-racial interactions (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Students in college learn what it means to identify and differentiate themselves as Latino, black, or Asian etc., and work to act in ways so that these identities are acknowledged and accepted by others (Kaufman 2014). College is not only a time when individuals develop autonomy and independence, but is also an environment that provides numerous opportunities for adoptees to explore their racial and ethnic identities, such as the option to take Chinese language or Asian history classes, or to study in China. Additional research has found that beyond the college setting, positive racial-ethnic identity development is most effectively facilitated by "lived experiences," such as traveling to the adoptee's native country, attending racially diverse schools, and encountering role models of their own race or ethnicity (McGinnis et al. 2009; Tuan and Shiao 2011).

Previous research on Chinese adoption in the United States has focused on the child rearing strategies of adoptive parents (Rojewski 2005). By giving a voice to Chinese adoptees, the present study seeks to contribute to the body of literature that explores the process of racial-

ethnic identity development from those who can best describe the experience. As the earliest cohort of adoptees from China are now in their twenties, a potentially important contribution to the literature is exploring the significance of the college experience on their identity development. It is possible that the narratives of Chinese adoptees, many whose parents exposed them to their ethnic culture, will differ from the narratives of Korean adoptees, many of whose parents denied their ethnic culture.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

To examine identity development for Chinese adoptees, I conducted open-ended, in depth interviews with eleven female Chinese adoptees. I took Chinese language and dance lessons with three of the participants during my childhood. I attended either elementary, middle, or high school or college with the seven other participants. The only respondent I did not previously know was referred to me by another participant. I directly contacted each participant via Facebook and asked if she would be willing to participate in research exploring the development of Chinese adoptees' racial-ethnic identity. Participants were between the ages of 21 and 22.

All of the participants grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods. Ten of the eleven participants are currently attending predominantly white small liberal arts colleges. Seven of the participants were raised in the Pacific Northwest and the others were raised in New York, Missouri, Pennsylvania, or Arizona. In the interest of confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms.

### *Procedure*

In November of 2016, I conducted and recorded open-ended, in-depth interviews with participants that lasted between one hour and two hours and 45 minutes. I began the interview by asking participants about where they were from and the demographics of their neighborhood and K-12 schools. I then raised questions regarding the participant's family, their exposure to other Asians/Asian Americans/Chinese adoptees growing up, discrimination they may have faced, and their college experiences. Adoptees shared stories about encounters with people inquiring about their ethnicity, and spoke about how they ethnically self-identify. I transcribed all of the interviews verbatim. I coded the transcriptions into general thematic categories, and then narrowed down analytic themes that emerged from the data.

### *Limitations*

The present study has several limitations. For one, the sample size is relatively small, therefore findings are not generalizable; the present study explored the range of variation in racial-ethnic identity development of a small sample of Chinese adoptees, not Chinese adoptees as a population. All participants were female, so differences in gender were not taken into account. Additionally, due to the constraints of convenience sampling, there was not much diversity in terms of where the participants were from geographically or what kind of college they attend. Experiences could be different for adoptees who grew up in rural areas or in homes of lower socioeconomic status, for adoptees who grew up in racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods, or for adoptees who did not have much contact with other Asians or Chinese adoptees. An additional limitation is that the interviews were largely retrospective, which may have introduced bias related to memory failure. Another limitation is that my own experience as a Chinese adoptee could have biased how I approached the interviews and analyzed the data.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the present study indicate that the majority of respondents identify culturally as “white” and correspondingly lack a strong ethnic identity. Adoptees reported experiences of others making assumptions about their ethnic identities. For the majority of participants, internalized “white” identities and other’s external perceptions of them as Asian created the experience of identity conflict.

Adoptees reported varying degrees of awareness of being Chinese growing up, meaning recognizing that Chineseness meant something more than place of birth or physical characteristics: those who grew up with consistent exposure to and interaction with other Asians, either informally (school or close friends) or formally (language and classes or through adoptee organizations) more often reported that they felt more aware of being Chinese growing up. Five out of six participants who reported feeling very aware of being Asian growing up were from Seattle, Washington, where there is a large Asian community as well as a large community of Chinese adoptees. Exposure to other Asians or Chinese adoptees growing up is relevant to the main findings of this study, as it led to an awareness or lack of awareness in participants that they were Chinese growing up. Participants who had consistent exposure to other Asians growing up were more likely to report being Asian growing up. Conversely, those who did not have consistent exposure to other Asians growing up more often reported not being aware that they were Chinese; however, some of these participants reported currently becoming increasingly aware of being Asian. This personal history of exposure to Asians or Chinese adoptees, and then as a result, awareness or lack of awareness of being Chinese may help explain how adoptees now navigate identity conflict as young adults. Two main ways participants

discussed navigating this conflict were either to distance themselves from other Asians or to explore own their ethnic identities.

Consistent with existing literature, all participants reported that their parents were transparent with them about adoption from the beginning, exposed them to (what the parents considered to be) Chinese culture, and maintained connections with other families who had adopted from China. By exposing their child to Chinese culture from childhood, parents communicated their support for their children to explore their Chinese identities. Unlike Korean adoptees, these Chinese adoptees did not report feeling alienated or experienced racial stigma. Although many lacked a strong racial-ethnic identity, more than half of respondents still indicated some pride in their culture and appreciation of being unique. All but one of the participants have gone back to China, either to visit their orphanages and hometowns with their families or to do volunteer work at orphanages. Two participants have studied abroad in China during college. The majority of participants voiced a desire to return to China again, either to view it with a more mature perspective or to show their future family.

None of the participants recalled their parents ever discussing potential racism they might face, although a few remembered their parents telling them about potential sexism. This suggests the possibility that white adoptive parents did not anticipate extra challenges beyond those associated with parenting any child and overestimated their child's comfort and ease with assimilation into white mainstream society; these assumptions may have reinforced the internalization of whiteness for adoptees (Tuan and Shiao 2011).

#### *Absence of an Ethnic Identity: Internalization of Whiteness*

Most of the participants spoke about growing up with and currently having white friends predominantly. A few reported feeling uncomfortable when surrounded by large groups of



Asians, as they were not used to being the majority. As most were raised by white parents, about half of the participants skipped the initial stage in Kim's (1981) Asian American Identity Development model (AAID), ethnic awareness. Despite some being exposed to Chinese cultural activities, the majority of participants lacked something ethnically positive and meaningful to associate with and were left to form their own conceptions of Chinese people based on images in the media and stereotypes, which most reported learning at school or from friends. Despite that limited exposure, half of the sample reported having an awareness of being Chinese growing up. Still, those respondents did not identify strongly with that identity; instead, all participants experienced the second stage in the AAID model, white identification.

For a handful of adoptees who said they were not aware of being Chinese growing up, at the time of the interview, their identities as Chinese or Asian American were merely informed by their place of birth and physical attributes. Maddie was raised by two white mothers in Seattle. She reported having mostly white friends growing up, mostly Asian American friends in high school, and mostly white friends in college. She recalled being called a "banana" by her friends, who were implying that she looked Asian but was actually white. Maddie felt this was an accurate statement: "I do feel pretty American... I grew up here, and my family is [here]. I feel like it's mostly physical or biological attributes that tie to me China or Asian culture..." Although Maddie's parents provided her with the opportunity to take Chinese language classes when she was younger, that was not something she was interested in; because adoptees lacked the "natural" opportunities of an ethnic family to explore what it means to be Chinese, and some did not want to explore through language or dance classes, the only ties adoptees like Maddie felt to China were physical characteristics.

Li Ming was raised in the suburbs of New York by her white mother and father. She had two older siblings (the biological children of her parents) and an adopted younger sister. Similar to Maddie, when asked how aware she was of being Chinese growing up, she responded “Oh, like very unaware.” When asked why she thought this was, she responded, “Because it just didn't really define me, it's like, the only Asian things about me were like my name, my looks, and my birthplace.” Li Ming had very little contact with Asians growing up and reported only interacting with them at restaurants or nail salons.

About half of the participants reported forgetting that they were Asian growing up. When asked about her closest friends growing up, Maddie recalled that whenever she saw herself in the mirror, she realized that most of the time she would “kind of forget that I was not Caucasian.” Lee was raised by a white single-mother in Seattle and grew up knowing many Chinese adoptees. Her experience was similar to that of Maddie and Li Ming. In response to a question about how she identifies when she looks in the mirror, she said that she sees herself as “your typical white girl”:

People have to remind me, "Hey Lee, you're Asian." To everyone else they look at me and automatically know I'm an Asian person, but that's not something I identify with...If I had been raised by Asian parents, or been exposed to that from a very young age I think it would have been different.

Lee recognized that being raised by Asian parents or being exposed to Asian or Chinese culture from a young age would have helped her feel more connected to her Chinese identity. Lee is one among a few adoptees who reported that it took being reminded by a friend or looking in the mirror to remember that they are not white and are not perceived by others as white. On the other hand, Lee reported a conflicting experience: “I was aware of the fact that I was different than everyone else, and hated that about myself.” It can be inferred that Lee has internalized a white identity and rejected her Chinese identity to manage the distress she felt

about being different and the hurt she felt from being treated as and feeling inferior; this included not feeling beautiful compared to white girls. Here the identity conflict that Kim (1981) discussed is clear: Lee was aware of being Chinese by being seen and treated as different, but rejected that part of her identity and internalized whiteness, sometimes forgetting she was Asian.

*Linguistic barriers.* Some adoptees reported not being able to speak Chinese as a reason they did not feel connected to Chinese culture. Janna was raised by a white single mother in Seattle. When asked how aware she was of being Asian growing up, Janna reported that while she is aware that she is Asian, the culture she was raised in was “very American”:

I don't even know if I would really know if I wanna use this term, “white-washed” a little bit, just in terms of the culture. Like I wear American clothes, I don't know Chinese, like, my identity is Asian, but like [laughs] make me speak Chinese? No, I can't do that for you.

Several adoptees realized they might not be seen by Chinese people as Chinese due to lack of cultural knowledge or linguistic competence. Leah was raised by a white mother and father in Kansas City, Missouri. She reported being “pretty aware” of being Chinese growing up but that she does not see herself as being Chinese due to her lack of knowledge about Chinese culture. Leah acknowledged the possibility that she would not be accepted in China as Chinese: “If I go over to China they're gonna say ‘Oh you're American.’” As voiced by Leah, some participants conveyed that they did not feel that they had enough connection to Chinese culture to be considered Chinese by other Chinese people.

#### *Assumption of an Ethnic Identity*

Consistent with existing literature, the majority of adoptees viewed themselves as “white-washed,” which is indicative of success at being partially seen as “American” despite the racial stigma that codes them as perpetually ethnic (Pyke and Dang 2003). Feeling white-washed, even

if viewed as a positive sign of social status, nonetheless contributes to the internal identity conflict many adoptees experience when their perceptions of themselves as culturally white do not align with the perceptions and ethnic assumptions others have of them that they are foreign.

*Identity denial.* More than half of the participants reported encountering instances of identity denial (Cheryan and Monin 2005), a situation in which an individual is not recognized as a member of an important in-group; in this case, Asian Americans are not recognized as fully belonging to American culture. Adoptees recalled instances of being reminded that others saw them as Asian, even if that is not how they saw themselves. More than half of the respondents reported that their identity as Americans has frequently been denied through questions, such as “but where are you *from*?” Assumptions are made and identities are imposed on them by others that deny their belonging to American culture. When asked where she was from at the end of her interview, Lauren remarked that in casual conversation, people will ask her, “Where are you from?” And she will answer someplace in the United States and they will follow up and say, “No no, where are you *from*?”: “If someone asks where I’m from and I answer like Tucson, I feel the need to include the fact that I am also adopted from China because I always feel like there’s this questioning, like really? You’re from here?” Similarly, Sylvia, who grew up in Seattle and has a white mother, father, and brother (the biological child of her parents) spoke about the need to clarify for people about her unique background:

I was at a Mexican restaurant that I go to all the time, and I was talking to this dude in Spanish, and he was like, “Oh de donde eres?” And I was like, I’m from Seattle. And he like looked at me, and I was like but I’m like adopted from China. I always feel like I have to say that or else they like don’t get it.

Consistent with previous research, both Lauren and Sylvia discussed how they experienced a social burden—the recurring need to respond to questions about their ethnicity

(Tuan and Shiao 2011). Sylvia reported being very aware of being Chinese growing up—her two best friends were both Chinese adoptees and she knew a lot of other adoptees. Perhaps because of this awareness, Sylvia was not not surprised when people questioned where she is really from and has developed quick responses.

Leah seemed less prepared than Sylvia: in response to the question of whether she had ever experienced racism, Leah recalled an instance in elementary school that made her very upset:

[Another Chinese adoptee and I] were both in this Spanish class... We were learning where are you from, and so it's like "soy de \_\_\_" and we were like "soy de Kansas City," cause like we've always been from Kansas City. And then our teacher was like no where are you *from* originally? And we were like Kansas City, we were just so confused cause it was like in 6th grade or something, and then I got really upset because I was like I know what she's trying to make me say but I don't want to say it, and she kept pursuing it, like no no, you're from China, you have to say that. It's kind of embarrassing but I think that's why I was so upset, because I've always thought I was from Missouri and Kansas City, and that's what I say to people because I don't feel like they're going to be like no no where are you actually from? [laughs].

Here, Leah's internal identity clashed with other's external perceptions of her, which denied her core identity. This exemplifies the identity conflict some adoptees experienced. Experiences like this made Leah aware of being Chinese from a young age. Sylvia and Leah's experiences demonstrate how attention is frequently drawn to a part of an adoptee's self that she does not necessarily identify with, but that matters in terms of how she may be treated by others.

Most participants felt it was important that their American identities and belonging to American culture be recognized. Becca was raised by a Chinese mother and white father in Seattle, Washington. She has one brother, the biological child of her parents, and two other sisters adopted from China. When asked what it meant for her to identify as Chinese American, Becca made it clear that although she was born in China and grew up with some Chinese culture, she wanted her American culture to be highlighted.

When I say that I'm Chinese people imagine that I have two Asian parents and I don't know, we light incense and eat a lot of Asian food, so I guess the American part is important to me because it highlights that I belong here too, like I was raised here. I was born in China but my childhood is like just like any other: American.

Becca described her upbringing just like the upbringing of other Americans, and that even though she looks Asian, she was not very aware of this growing up, and asserted that she belongs in American society as much as anyone who is white. By highlighting her American identity, Becca attempted to resolve identity conflict.

### *Identity Conflict*

The narratives of adoptees revealed that adoptees, just like non-adopted Asian Americans, negotiate the expectations, judgments, and stereotypes that others have of them based on their racial status (Tuan and Shiao 2011). However, a few participants reported feeling as if they could not consider themselves Chinese because they did not grow up with Chinese parents. Shelly grew up in Seattle with her sister, who was also adopted from China. She was raised by her mother, who is half Japanese and half white, and her white father. Shelly was exposed to a large network of Chinese adoptees in the Seattle area and made friends through language and dance classes. Although she reported that she was aware of being Chinese growing up and considered herself Asian American, when asked what sentiments she had towards other Asian Americans, Shelly responded that she feels different from Asians with Asian parents: “Maybe I acted different because I've been brought up with white parents...I guess I feel whatever white means. It's hard articulate but sometimes I say ‘oh my gosh I feel white,’ like more white than Asian, whatever that means to feel Asian...I just feel different.” Although Shelly had a difficult time articulating her thoughts, it was clear that although she has always been aware of being Chinese, she is still figuring out what it means to be Chinese American.

However, she did not indicate interest in exploring her ethnic identity. A handful of adoptees echoed the belief that to be Chinese American, one had to have Chinese parents, and to be American one had to be white. Lauren voiced this conflict between her identity and her race:

I grew up in America but I don't really feel American, I feel kind of stuck between these two, so I wouldn't quite call myself Chinese American because I always think of that as like somebody who...grew up in America with Chinese parents. Even though I count myself as Chinese because I came from China...Chinese-Chinese I think of as people who grew up in China, and so I guess if I were really to think about it, maybe I would describe myself as a Chinese adoptee because...I don't really fit like what I think of as Chinese American and I don't really fit as Chinese-Chinese so I must be something in between, and so the best explanation for that is because I'm adopted, so Chinese adoptee, now that I think about it.

Similarly, Wendy, raised by a white mother and father in Seattle, Washington, struggled with whether she identifies as Chinese or “white.”

I feel like that's one of the main things that's hard for me, whether I identify as like Chinese? Or I identify as like, in a way like white you know, cause my parents are white...I'm Asian but it's like I, but I don't know if I necessarily...identify that way...I can't really identify as white because like obviously I'm not physically white, but I can't really identify myself as Asian because I grew up in a white household and a white family, relatively upper-middle class...is it appropriate for me to like categorize myself as white?... It's hard for me to identify with one over the other, to identify with one culture, because I don't feel like I fit into either one particularly well...am I really Asian?

Most participants said they had never given serious thought to how they identify ethnically. Their responses indicate that there has always been confusion about their identities, but that confusion and conflict has never been articulated. As participants worked through this during interviews, it was revealed that adoptees are aware that they are not viewed as fully American by society, as being American is associated with being white.

Lauren reported not becoming aware that she is Chinese until middle and high school; she has actively explored her Chinese identity in college by taking classes in Asian studies and studying Chinese language in China. In contrast, both Shelly and Wendy reported having an awareness of being Chinese growing up; both were from Seattle and had consistent interactions

with other Chinese adoptees growing up. Although each participant articulated conflict in how they identify themselves, the majority of participants who reported awareness of Chinese identity had not explored what it means to be Chinese American and did not voice a desire to.

These examples demonstrate how not only is the identity conflict a result of the dissonance adoptees feel between internal and external perceptions of themselves, but is also enhanced by adoptees' own ideas of society's definitions of what it means to be Chinese or Asian American; this conflict can make adoptees feel as if they do not belong to any group. The data would suggest that the meanings participants attach to their identities are varied and subject to change and evolve as adoptees continue to negotiate their identities.

### *Negotiating Identity Conflict*

The way in which adoptees reported navigating identity conflict and working to resolve the dissonance they may have felt about their identities varied on an individual basis. Participants either reported being aware or unaware of being Chinese growing up. This awareness or lack of awareness was largely related to childhood exposure to other Asians or Chinese adoptees growing up. Generally, participants who reported becoming more aware of being Asian later in life communicated a current interest in exploring what that means to them. Conversely, participants who reported that they were aware of being Chinese growing up did not report an interest in exploring their Chinese identity. These respondents still reported experiencing identity conflict; however, rather than try to explore the Chinese side of their identities, a few navigated this conflict by distancing themselves from other Asians. Nevertheless, some adoptees who reported that they were aware of being Chinese growing up discussed both distancing themselves from other Asians while also becoming increasingly comfortable with and embracing their Chinese identities as a result of talking about it more with friends.



Although most participants asserted their belonging to American culture, they also recognized that people see them as Chinese because of their physical characteristics. About a third of participants reported that they navigated their identity conflict through the process of non-identification with their Chinese identity, namely by distancing and distinguishing themselves from other Asians.

*Distancing from other Asians.* A third of the sample reported feeling distancing themselves from other Asians to avoid being seen as a “stereotypical” Asian. Sylvia communicated that she wants the way people see her to align with how she sees herself: “I feel like I’m a white girl stuck in an Asian body. Culturally the way I grew up is very white, but like obviously I’m not white, I’m Chinese...I feel like I need to distinguish myself because like that stereotypical Asian person is not who I am...” Although Sylvia does not know why she feels the need to “prove that wrong,” it is important to her that she distinguishes herself from “stereotypical” Asians. By distancing herself from other Asians, Sylvia has engaged in the process of intraethnic othering, making an effort to resist a racially stigmatized status (Pyke and Dang 2003). In doing so, Sylvia also is engaged in a partial effort to resolve identity conflict.

Leah’s desire to not be grouped with other Chinese people is similar to the desire to not be seen as a “stereotypical Asian,” and to assert her sense of belonging to American culture. Leah voiced one reason she never actively sought out Asians as friends was because she does not want to be seen as having an Asian friend group:

I feel like a lot of people think like oh all the Asians hang out together...I like to be pretty independent with who I am and like not just be noticed like Chinese...I feel like if I hang out a lot with people who are Chinese it's like then I'm just going to be grouped in that.

Leah voiced the desire to be seen as more than just Chinese; she believed that associating with too many Asians would distract from other parts of who she is.

Findings are consistent with previous research, which has found that Asians are accepted by whites on the basis of being exceptions to popular assumptions about Asians, Asian Americans, and other nonwhites (Tuan and Shiao 2011; Brian 2012). Their “honorary white” status is an individually negotiated status that is based on social distance from other Asian Americans and non-whites. In disassociating from more “foreign” Asians, participants communicated a commonality with the white majority; because the dominant society does not recognize Asian Americans as culturally American, participants expended great energy in the construction of an identity that defies racial assumptions (Pyke and Dang 2003). The experiences of Chinese-adoptees indicate that being individually accepted by white peers and communities does not necessarily signal an acceptance of Asians as a group. Findings indicate that in an effort to resolve identity conflict, a few adoptees who reported having an awareness of being Chinese growing up were more focused on distancing themselves from “stereotypical” Asians and asserting their social belonging in American culture. Conversely, a handful of participants who said they were not aware of being Chinese growing up reported an increased awareness of being Chinese in middle and high school; these participants were less likely to actively distance themselves from other Asians and more likely to explore and embrace their Chinese identity. The remaining third of participants did not discuss either trying to distance themselves from other Asians or exploring their Chinese identity.

*Increased awareness of Chinese identity.* For about a third of participants, exploring, which included taking Chinese language or Asian studies classes or studying abroad, led to an increased awareness in their Chinese identity. Additionally, increased interactions with Asians or people of color, or by talking about racial differences with friends helped participants become more comfortable with their Chinese identities. A few participants reported that finding

communities of Asians, particularly in college, helped them feel more comfortable with being Asian. Annie, who reported only being “a little” aware of being Chinese growing up, reflected on her experience joining the Asian Student Union at her college: “I think in the sense of like finding a place to belong and feeling in a place that is comfortable enough to have those conversations and recognizing that me struggling with being Asian or being Chinese growing up wasn't something that I was alone in?”

Forming connections with other Asian Americans helped Annie feel less alone in her journey and allowed her to feel more comfortable being Asian American. Being able to talk about differences and feeling different with friends also contributed to adoptees becoming more comfortable with themselves as Chinese American. When asked how her identity has changed over time, Leah reflected on feeling more comfortable “identifying as a Chinese American instead of just being like an American who was adopted from China, and I think I'm more comfortable with just being different.” Additionally, she asserted:

I think just getting older and being comfortable with who you are and just kind of accepting that people are different...I've talked about it with friends, like being uncomfortable at the beginning but now I'm comfortable with it...also knowing that I might be different like culturally but other people who are white also feel different because of some other reason.

Participants such as Annie and Leah discussed how their social networks and talking to friends about being Chinese provided opportunities to better understand the complexities of their identities and become more comfortable with being different. While Annie reported not feeling aware of being Chinese growing up, Leah reported she was “pretty aware.” Although Leah did not report any intention of actively exploring, she is nonetheless becoming more comfortable with her Chinese identity through informal social interactions. In addition to increased comfort with their identities, a handful of participants spoke about a rising awareness of their ethnic

identity and being considered a minority. Li Ming discussed the process through which she realized she is a person of color:

All my international friends would get invited to like OMIS things, like office of minority and international students, and I always tagged along because I was just with all of them. But then I realized I actually fit into this group, like I'm a minority. And that never really occurred to me, which is kind of weird... This year when the Butler Center [her college's center for diversity] was having a people of color luncheon I didn't realize that like I could go until I went and was like no I really do, I am a person of color, which was a weird realization, like what??

For Li Ming, who reported not being aware at all of being Chinese growing up, this newfound awareness included an awakening to the reality that society does not view her as white, even if that is how she viewed herself until recently. This realization plays a significant role in navigating the identity conflict many adoptees face: by recognizing they are part of a minority group, it opens up the possibility that adoptees may embrace their Chinese identity and cultivate pride in that identity.

When asked what it meant to her to identify as Chinese American, Annie discussed how “...other people...can put a label on you, but ultimately you identify yourself.” She spoke about the realization that her identity is fluid:

I feel like it does mean I'm in this sort of group [Chinese American], but I don't consider it like as a confining box term um for me because it's very fluid. Not like saying 20 years down the road I wouldn't consider myself Chinese American, but maybe my relationship to that identity will change slightly, you know maybe there's less of an emphasis on the Chinese part, or maybe there's more.

A couple of participants reflected the realization that embracing their Chinese identity does not make them any less American – they can be both American and Chinese – and it is acceptable to be “different”; ultimately, it is adoptees who define their identities and the meanings attached to any labels.

The present study aligns with existing literature (Tuan and Shiao 2011), which found that college was a time when many adoptees experienced shifts that included redefining their identities as Chinese American. Only two participants reported actively exploring their ethnic identities in college, either by taking Chinese language or Asian studies classes, studying abroad in China, or participating in student clubs. Although most participants did not voice desires to actively explore their racial or ethnic identities, all discussed experiencing personal growth.

The experience of Chinese-adoptees is unique and cannot be fully understood through the lens of either American or Chinese culture alone. It is difficult, if not impossible, to develop a identity in isolation from other Asian Americans (Kim 1981). Furthermore, Kim (1981) argued that a degree of positive self-concept as a racial minority is imperative for the development of Asian American identity. If adoptees decide to embrace both their American and Chinese identities, it will be important to have more interactions with other Chinese or Asian people and be more exposed to “authentic” Chinese culture. Connecting with other adoptees and consistently talking about their experiences would further aid in understanding the identity conflicts they might feel and allow them to feel safe to critique the whiteness of their upbringing.

## CONCLUSION

The present study was guided by questions that explored factors that influence the development of a racial-ethnic identity, exploration of one’s ethnic identity, and negotiation of identity conflict. Findings are consistent with existing literature, which has found that family, friends, and social institutions, such as school and college, and other “lived experiences” influence the development of racial-ethnic identities for Chinese adoptees. The data reinforce the significance of parental support and ethnic socialization from a young age; findings also suggest the importance of having positive Chinese or Asian role models up through adulthood to further

instill in adoptees a positive self-image and more ethnic pride. In line with previous research, participants in the the present study did not report having a strong racial-ethnic identity (Tuan and Shiao 2011). Findings indicate that participants encountered an identity conflict as a result of the inconsistency between their internal and other's external perceptions of their identity.

While previous research has primarily focused on the adoptive parents who adopted from China, the present study focuses on the experiences of Chinese adoptees entering young adulthood. The study goes beyond the binary of whether or not adoptees have a strong racial-ethnic identity and explores the ways in which adoptees negotiated identity conflict. How adoptees navigated this conflict and their identities was largely individual, but was related to their exposure to other Asians or Chinese adoptees and their awareness of being Chinese growing up. About half of the participants reported that they were aware of being Chinese growing up, apparently as a result of consistent exposure to other Asians, including Chinese adoptees. A handful of these participants reported that they navigated their identity conflict through the process of non-identification with Chinese identity; they did this by engaging in the process of intraethnic othering and distancing themselves from other Asians. The other half of the participants reported that they were unaware of being Chinese growing up; more than half of these participants reported an increased awareness of and comfort with their Chinese identity as a result of maturity, increased interactions with other Asian Americans, and more conversation around being Chinese and other differences.

Very few participants were able to recall encountering racism beyond people making stereotypical assumptions about them, such as being good at school or math or being bad drivers. However, Pyke and Dang (2003) argue that just as whites do not need contact with racial subordinates to develop racist attitudes, racial subordinates do not need prior experiences with

overt racism to internalize racial assumptions. Even if they could not remember instances, responses suggest that most participants internalized that being perceived as Asian meant being part of a stigmatized group that invalidated their sense of belonging to American culture; a third of participants indicated that they chose to distance themselves from their idea of what is stereotypically Asian, and asserted their affinity to American culture.

Findings suggest that it is possible that the participants have not reached the stage in Kim's (1981) Asian American Identity Development model where they are able to recognize their status as a minority and then relate that to oppression that Asian Americans face in the United States. Consequently, they do not discern instances of racism as such. Asian Americans are becoming increasingly more vocal about the racial discrimination they experience in America (The Economist 2015). The present study raises the question how will Chinese adoptees' identities influence whether or not they participate in social action?

The present study may be particularly relevant because of the current political climate, where there has been an increase (Sutton 2017) in overtly racist hate crimes in the United States. A question that arises from the data is in what ways will the current political climate influence Chinese adoptees' identities—will it create more identity conflict for some? If so, how will adoptees (continue to) navigate this conflict—will they attempt to distance themselves even more from other Asians or will they be motivated to explore their Chinese identity? Future research is needed to understand how exposure to experiences of racial discrimination in post-college life will influence adoptees' identities.

Findings from the present study indicate that participants reported that their parents embraced their differences and exposed them to (their parent's idea of) Chinese culture, and did not report feeling alienated or racially stigmatized. However, participants also did not report

having strong racial-ethnic identities or racial pride. Research has indicated that it is important for racial minorities to engage in identity exploration to counteract shame or the development of a negative self-image from being considered undesirable or inferior by white norms, internalizing stereotypes, or developing resentment towards other Asians (Tuan and Shiao 2011). Tuan and Shiao (2011) argue that ethnic exploration is important because it enables racial minorities to make sense of who they are in a racialized society and gives them the opportunity to develop a healthy self-image. Data suggest that while progress has been made since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research is needed to explore what can be done to help Chinese adoptees develop strong racial-ethnic identities, help prepare them for a potential identity conflict when their internal perceptions do not align with other's external perceptions of their identities, and help them feel a sense of belonging to both American and Chinese culture.

Furthermore, in order to better understand the ways in which race and ethnicity influence adoptees' identities, future research is needed to examine if and how Chinese adoptees continue to explore their ethnic identities in adulthood, if the meanings they attach to their identities change as they get older, and if they develop more salient ethnic identities. Findings from the present study suggest that a longitudinal study would be useful in exploring identity development for Chinese adoptees, as this research indicates key turning points in adoptees' lives that affect how they explore their ethnic identities or negotiate identity conflict. This longitudinal study could also examine the effects of having a sense of racial-ethnic pride on aiding individuals in coping with racial prejudice and discrimination.

Comparative research is needed to further explore how social factors, such as socioeconomic status, the regions where adoptees grew up, family structure, and the college they went to influence whether or not adoptees explore their ethnic identities. Research comparing



non-adopted Chinese Americans raised in same-race families would inform how the cultural socialization experiences and ethnic identity development are unique for adoptees because of the transracial and transnational aspects. Furthermore, research examining other populations could be useful in understanding the differences or similarities in racial-ethnic identity development for different minority groups, for example African American children raised in white families. Additionally, future research could be helpful in informing adoptive parents and practices that would allow for transracial or transnational adopted children to form healthy, salient racial-ethnic identities.

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