THE RED THREAD: ADOPTEE FORMATIONS OF KINSHIP AND QUEER DIASPORIC TRADITIONS IN CHINESE AMERICA

by

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Chinese American adoptees exist in relationships that transcend racial, gendered, and physical borders as part of a tradition of non-normative kinship. Given the diasporic history of transnational adoption, Chinese adoptees seek meaningful relationships with one another to reconcile family and process diasporic trauma. Close relationships between adoptees provide foundational support through shared experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 adult adoptees (18 women, 1 man; ages 18-26), all of whom were born in China and adopted to the United States. Instead of generalizable results, research shows kinships are deeply complex and personal, which allows adoption discourse to settle into nuance. Adoptees are simultaneously generous and critical of parents when it comes to upbringing, conversations about race, and feelings of home and belonging, which accentuates the contradictory nature of adoptee experiences. Queer relationships with other adoptees (adoptee-adoptee) are particularly important for humanizing adoptee experiences, providing space for fluid identities, and coalition-building. Adoptee relationships form a constellation of kinships and restructure Asian American identity as political.

Keywords: *adoption, adoptee, kinship, relationship, queer, diaspora*

Land Acknowledgment

The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional Indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their indigenous homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, Kalapuya descendants are primarily citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, and they continue to make important contributions to their communities, to the UO, to Oregon, and to the world. In following the Indigenous protocol of acknowledging the original people of the land we occupy, we also extend our respect to the nine federally recognized Indigenous Nations of Oregon: the Burns Paiute Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Coquille Indian Tribe, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, and the Klamath Tribes. We express our respect to the many more tribes who have ancestral connections to this territory, as well as to all other displaced Indigenous peoples who call Oregon home.[1]

[1] IRES Department, "Honoring Native Peoples and Land."

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Positionality of the Author

I write this paper as a child of an adoptee, whose life has been greatly impacted by transnational adoption. My mother was adopted from Puli, Taiwan in 1972 along with her twin sister. They lived in Taiwan with their adoptive family until the age of 3 when they moved to the United States. I was raised in Portland, Oregon with the opportunity to learn Mandarin in school and surround myself with people in the adoptee community. As I write, I think of my own family, those who I am grateful to know and others who I someday wish to meet.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Introduction

The Chinese tale of the red thread (见红线) says, "When a child is born, invisible red threads reach out from a child's spirit and connect it to all important people who will enter the child's life. As the child grows, the threads shorten, bringing closer those people who are destined to be together."[2] While the tale specifically refers to the destiny of a couple to become married, the metaphor is often used by Chinese adoptee families to symbolize their fate to become a family. Red thread products have become very popular among adoption agencies, support groups, and other related communities to signify the connection of transnational families in the form of bracelets, wall hangings, and other ornaments of daily life. The symbol of the red thread can also symbolize all the connections adoptees will make in their new lives, including family, friends, and other adoptees. While the family is central to an adoptee's development of identity, the widespread acceptance of the tale of the red thread largely ignores the social and militarized construction of these stories. This paper will outline the sociopolitical context of Chinese adoption (the adoptee as political) as well as humanize individual adoptee experiences (the adoptee as personal). Additionally, this paper will examine the ways in which Chinese adoptees navigate identity in predominantly white families and communities, transcend traditional notions of kinship, and participate in the queering of relationships in biological, adoptive, and/or chosen families.

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[2] Frayda Cohen, "Tracing the Red Thread: Chinese-U.S. Transnational Adoption and the Legacies of 'Home.'" (Ottawa: *Anthropologica*, 2015), 43.

Transnational Adoption Embedded in the Cold War

The spike in adoption from Asia coincides with the increase of anti-communist rhetoric in the United States. The Cold War painted a picture of Asian countries as poor, corrupt, and in need of rescue. Namely, the American War in Korea, also known as the Korean War, the American War in Vietnam, also known as the Vietnam War, British occupation of Hong Kong, and the ongoing feud with communist China contributed to the increase in adoption from those areas. Many Asian countries experienced some form of direct occupation by the United States, which signifies a militarized humanitarianism.[3] Rescuing Asian children from war, poverty, political threats, and communism is a fundamental part of US international policy.[4] Given the United States' fear of global communism, there is a direct link between anti-communist fear and the increase in adoption from Asia.[5] Transnational adoption from Asia stems from wars in which the United States instigated.

In the mid-twentieth century, adoption from Hong Kong was a political move for Great Britain and the United States. Due to Britain's colonial presence in Hong Kong, the children of working-class people were viewed as a welfare burden to commerce and the growth of wealth, so many families were incentivized to put their children up for adoption.[6] For the United States, transnational adoption functioned as an anti-communist tactic, evident in their preference to adopt Chinese children rather than

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[3] SooJin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 38.
[4] Rosaria Franco, "Chinese Refugee Children and Empires: The Politics of International Adoptions in Cold War Hong Kong" (*The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Histo*ry), 12.
[5] Jodi Kim, "'The Ending is Not an Ending At All': On the Militarized and Gendered Diasporas of Korean Transnational Adoption and the Korean War" (*Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*), 813.
[6] Franco, "Chinese Refugee Children and Empires," 4.

allow them to live under communist rule.[7] In both cases, the majority of children placed in foreign homes were girls, due to the Chinese cultural preference for boys and the one-child policy.[8] At its core, adoption is an anti-communist and imperialist practice, in which individuals from Anglo-Saxon countries enact an imperialist mindset of "rescuing" children from across the globe.

Similarly, the political interests of the United States in the war in Korea led to a spike in adoption from South Korea. U.S.-Korean adoption is characterized through a militarized diaspora and the presence of the US military in the war.[9] Neocolonialism and the Cold War are part of the militarized and gendered diaspora; Korean adoptees, mainly women, are a product of the war in Korea. Transnational adoptees, who are sometimes considered refugees, represent the continuous legacy of US imperialism, global inequality, reproductive injustice, severed kinship, and gendered hierarchy, all of which are mediated through war. The efforts by Americans to adopt children from South Korea was mainly a mission to convert Korean kids into Christianity, as well as saving them from the effects of communism.[10] Instead of adhering with the dominant narrative of American heroism, adoption discourse recognizes the United States as the architect of the Korean adoption diaspora.

In her book *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States*, Kimberly D. McKee examines the transnational adoption industrial complex (TAIC) as "a neocolonial, multi-million-dollar global industry that

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[7] Franco, "Chinese Refugee Children and Empires," 11.
[8] Franco, "Chinese Refugee Children and Empires," 5.
[9] Kim, "The Ending is Not an Ending At All," 813.
[10] SunAh M. Laybourn, "Adopting the Model Minority Myth: Korean Adoption as a Racial Project" (Berkeley: Social Problems, 2021), 121.

commodifies children's bodies."[11] The TAIC, which originates from the military industrial complex, interrogates the state as an agent in the adoption industry, social welfare, and American legislation abroad. McKee draws on examples from the Korean adoption industry following the Cold War to reveal the United States' role in creating and maintaining a sociopolitical system in which children are continually placed in adoption.[12] Not only did this involvement in the Korean social welfare state strengthen the United States' interest in the war, but it also allowed individual families to embrace the containment of communism locally and abroad.

Furthermore, the TAIC implements a system of stratified reproduction, in which families (specifically mothers) of higher status are deemed fit to raise a child while families of subordinated class, race, or national origin, are stripped of the right to nurture their children.[13] In other words, rather than viewing parenting as a legal or biological duty, it becomes a politicized task. In the case of South Korea, stratified reproduction separates American families, who are deemed fit to parent, from Korean families, who are encouraged to give their child a better life elsewhere. McKee's work is specifically about Korean adoption, although the anti-communist sentiment and transnational notions of family can be applied to Chinese American relations as well. McKee's work is foundational to this paper.

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[11] Kimberly McKee, *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 2.
[12] McKee*, Disrupting Kinship*, 2.
[13] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship,* 3.

Why China?

Most of the previous research on Asian adoption has focused on Korean adoption. There has been much less investigation into Chinese adoption, partly due to its shorter history. Most people adopted from China were born after the one-child policy was implemented in 1979 to 2016. The peak in adoption from China is relatively more recent than in South Korea, so literature is only recently emerging as Chinese adoptees grow older. Due to the spike in adoption in the late 1990s through the 2010s, adoptees from China are generally younger than those who have been participants in prior research on transnational adoption.[14] Young Chinese adoptees grew up in a world completely different than those of previous generations. Today's youth have the power of social media to connect and learn, the growing solidarity following the #StopAsianHate movement in 2021, and adoptee mentors who were adopted from the same region, which allow them to connect with one another in ways that were unattainable in previous generations.

Theoretical Framework: Placing Family in Queer and Asian American Studies

The dominant heteronormative understanding of the family is to be genetically related, or to look alike. Parents and children are presumed to share similar phenotypic markers, such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, etc. Rather than being based on bloodiness or marriage, relationships defined as "family" value connectedness and

[14] Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee;* Franco, "Chinese Refugee Children and Empires"; Kim, "'The Ending is Not and Ending At All.'"

bonding.[15] Kin relationships are merely based on feelings of closeness.[16] Within queer theory, queer is defined as "a political practice based on transgressions of the normal and normativity."[17] In other words, queer families exist outside of the heteronormative, reproductive, two-parent, monoracial assumption of nuclear family. Queer families do not necessarily participate in reproductive practices; they form kin relationships without the biological or marriage component. For example, lack of reproduction in adoptive relationships is a queer form of kinship. Adoptive families exhibit deviant forms of kinship by challenging the racialized notions of the "real" family.[18] The adoptive family unsettles traditional kinship relationships as it challenges the continuity of whiteness and reproductivity. Kin relationships outside of the family, such as close relationships between adoptees, can also be queer.

Many adoptive families exist outside of heteronormative and racialized assumptions of kin. Children do not need to have two reproductive parents (i.e., a man and a woman of the same race) to be considered kin. Adoption fosters a new understanding of family that transcends racial, gendered, and physical borders. Instead, family relationships are based on feelings of connectedness through shared experiences and mutual understanding. Relationships are constantly negotiated to weave in and out of familial status.

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[15] Christine Jones and Simon Hackett, "Redefining Family Relationship Following Adoption: Adoptive Parents' Perspectives on the Changing Nature of Kinship Between Adoptees and Birth Relatives" (*The British Journal of Social Work,* 2012), 285.
[16] Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *"*All in the Family: The Familial Roots of Racial Division," In *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) , 29.
[17] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 61.
[18] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 63.

The idea of a multiracial family has historically been an oxymoron. Premises of what is considered "family" is often drawn along racial lines, suggesting that genetic and phenotypic similarities are synonymous with cultural similarities and mutual caring.[19] One of the main reasons for this assumption in the United States is due to Anti-Miscegenation laws that prevented the formation of interracial families through marriage.[20] These laws criminalized the act of marrying across racial lines, which in turn normalized the monoracial family unit. While the common understanding of "family" makes little room for multiracial families, adoptive families challenge this assumption of the phenotypically homogenous kinship relations.

Asian Americans have historically formed non-heteronormative relationships with one another at times of crises, which lays the foundation for Asian America. For example, early immigrants of Chinese workers, mostly men, lived in close relation to one another. Many Chinese settlers immigrated with the intention of working in the United States and returning home to their wives. Deviant heterosexuality within Chinese American "bachelor" societies notes the assumption of celibacy in monogamous heterosexuality and the queer relationships formed between workers.[21] Like adoptees, early Chinese immigrants participated in kinship relations with one another outside of the nuclear family. Chinese American "bachelor" societies in the 19th century are part of queer diasporic tradition that is at the heart of Asian America. Queer kinship relations are quintessentially Chinese American as a means of survival.

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[19] McClain DaCosta, "All in the Family," 20.
[20] McClain DaCosta, "All in the Family," 26.
[21] Jennifer Ting, "Bachelor Society: Deviant Heterosexuality and Asian American Historiography," In *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies* (Pullman: Washington States University Press, 1995), 278.

Queer theory attempts to disrupt reproductive futurism. Reproductive futurism is the notion that all human beings invest in the futurity of their kin.[22] With the idea of reproductive futurity, it comes into question whether the racialized child is considered kin. However, adoptive parents are encouraged to "raise them as their very own." Interracial families are likewise considered kinship, although they are not always biologically related. Regardless of reproduction, adoptive families can replicate normative kinship through futuristic parent-child relations. While adoptive families challenge reproductive futurity by engaging in kinships external from procreative reproductive sex, adoptees of color simultaneously exist to fulfill futuristic needs of adoptive parents.

Queer theory allows adoption practices to redefine American racial structures and what it means to be Asian American. The adoptive family expands the assumptions of the Chinese American family because they are a family not tied by biology, monoraciality, or shared historical relevance.[23] The adoptive family broadens Chinese American discourse beyond immigrant, blood-related families with shared histories. While adoptive white parents remain white, and Chinese adoptees remain Asian, the adoptive family unit as a whole is an addition to Asian American discourse. Adoption reinvents Chinese America. Similarly, mixed race families, who equally have a claim to authentic Asian American identity, reshape our understanding of Asian America.[24] Simply put, the adoptive family unit is part of Asian America.

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[22] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship,* 66.
[23] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship,* 75.
[24] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 76.

Methods

This research consists of 60-minute in-depth interviews with 19 consenting adult adoptees (18 women, 1 man; ages 18-26), all of whom were born from China and adopted to the United States. The participants vary in the age in which they were adopted; 16 participants were adopted under the age of three, one adopted at age five, one adopted at age nine, and one adopted at age thirteen. All participants were born in China, primarily southern regions including Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Guangzhou, and others. Participants were adopted to American families and lived on the West Coast (n=10), Midwest (n=6), and the East Coast (n=3), including some participants who lived in their orphanages in China until adolescence and then moved to the United States (n=2). Most participants were raised by one or two white parents, including one participant with a parent identifying as a Korean American adoptee. Most participants grew up in communities they described as middle- to upper-class and predominantly white. They self-identify as being an only child (n=2) or having one or more siblings (n=17), some of whom were also adopted from China. There are two sibling pairs within the sample: a pair of fraternal sister twins (age 19), and an older sister (age 26) and younger brother (age 21). Participants self-identify ethnically and/or racially as one or more of the following categories: Asian, Asian American, Chinese, and Chinese American. Participants self-reported varying levels of familiarity with China. Some have studied one or more Chinese languages in school, traveled to China either with family or for a school trip, many participated in summer culture camps, affinity groups, or martial arts.

Participants were identified through the University of Oregon Adopted Students United, word of mouth, and recommendations from previous participants. Interview questions consisted of background information about their upbringings, relationships with parents, relationships with siblings, connections to Chinese culture and language, relationships with fellow adoptees, and relatability to non-adopted Chinese Americans. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee online (n=18) and in-person (n=1). To protecting identity, participants were given the option to choose their alias, some selecting an English or Chinese name significant to them. Others are randomly assigned an alias. Table 1 shows the alias, age, and pronouns of each participant.

The method of interviewing allows adoptees to express their own life experiences in their own terms and to speak for themselves. Many academic writings paint adoptees within a sociopolitical context, alluding to their objectivity within militarized conflict. Yet, adoptees are real humans with real life experiences. This process allows adoptees to exist with more than a single identity. By utilizing direct quotes, the research frames adoptees as the experts on adoptee experiences, which humanizes adoptee narratives.

Alias	Age	Pronouns
Luna	18	she/her
Cecelia	18	she/her
Yun	18	she/her
Vera	18	she/her
Yanxing	18	she/her
Naomi	18	she/her
Jasmine	19	she/her
Jiangni*	19	she/her
Jiangya*	19	she/her
Autumn	19	she/her
Qingyu	20	she/her
Evelyn	20	she/her
Jiaonan**	21	he/him
Sammy	22	she/her
Carly	22	she/her
Donghua	22	she/her
Beiyin	25	she/her
Xue	25	she/her
Dina**	26	she/her

Table 1. Alias, age, and pronouns of all participants.

Notes: *Sibling Pair #1 (twins), ** Sibling Pair #2.

The Red Thread: Beyond the Traditional Family Unit

Previous research focuses primarily on transnational adoption in the 1970s through 1990s directly following the massive war efforts by the United States in Korea. The presence of adoptees in the United States in previous generations is characterized by the active military presence of the United States and ongoing militarized humanitarianism. Much of this research focuses on the political relationship between South Korea and the United States and the identity formation of Korean American adoptees. However, the current research examines primarily the relationships formed between Chinese adoptees (adoptee-adoptee) and the ways in which these relationships radically redefine familial ties and solidarity among adoptee communities.

To study the textures of kinship relationships, my original research questions were to examine the extent to which adoptees radically reimagine kinship as a legacy of Chinese American familial relations and live in relation to others that extend beyond the traditional family unit. Given these inquiries, I theorized that, given the diasporic history of transnational adoption, Chinese American adoptees reimagine kinship relations by unsettling monoracial heteronormative notions of kinship in families that challenge the continuity of whiteness and reproductivity. Adoptees seek kinship with people outside of their immediate family; close relationships between adoptees offer foundational support through shared experiences that parents cannot offer. However, close kinship relationships among racialized groups are deeply personal and complex. I quickly learned that it is impossible to generalize relationships into a single narrative, because while most adoptees share a similar origin story, their methods of interpreting, processing, and navigating the reality of their lives are vastly different. Rather than

seeking a concrete answer to the research questions, I hope to offer a glimpse into the complicated relationships imposed by transnational adoption, while still affirming my original theory regarding queer kinships between Chinese adoptees.

The objective of this study is not to generalize, but rather to examine the individual experiences of adoptees as they interpret their own relationships between birth family, adoptive family, chosen family, fellow adoptees, and other forms of kinship. The research frames adoptees as experts on their own experiences, attempts to humanize adoptee experiences, and allows adoption discourse to settle into nuance. Relationships connect Chinese adoptees to people with similar interests, provide the ability to build meaningful connections among adoptees and Asian America as a whole, and create space of advocacy. Chapter 1 examines how adoptees simultaneously feel appreciative and critical of their families and relationships; these feelings change over time in different contexts. Chapter 2 traces how adoptees navigate conversations about race with their families, often with parents using "colorblind" language. Chapter 3 investigates how adoptees provide support to one another that parents often cannot provide, leading to kin relationships with adopted siblings, friends, and acquaintances. Chapter 4 explores adoptees' complex understanding of home and belonging, due to their movement across borders. This paper highlights the textured reality of relationships across the diaspora and the importance of building and maintaining kinships between Chinese adoptees.

Chapter 1: Nuance in Parent-Child Relationships

Within the context of transnational adoption, there is a tendency to allow the common experience of adoption to overshadow individual experiences and interpretations. Most Chinese adoptees recall similar stories of the where they were found, typically outside a government building, a fire station, a police station, or a place with a lot of food traffic. They also describe similar environments in which they were raised, usually in predominantly white areas with white parents. Yet, the discourse on adoption condenses adoptee identity to a single layer, rather than allowing for nuance. When discussing relationships such as family and close friends, there are layers of complexity that cannot be reduced. Adoptees are tasked to categorize their own feelings as either "grateful" and "well-adjusted" or "ungrateful" and "maladjusted." However, adoptees have many feelings about adoption, they do not have to simply be "pro" or "anti."[25] It is important to provide adoptees the space to feel uncertain rather than finite, and these feelings can adjust over time rather than remaining static.

One example that shows the complexity of interpretations is the relationships adoptees have with their parents. Relationships are most complex when in close contact, such as a parent-child relationship. Adoptees can change their feelings about their familial relationships throughout their lifetime. Adoptees are allowed the space to think multiple things at the same time; they can show great appreciation for their parents and still be critical of their positionality.

[25] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 9.

Most participants describe strong relationships with their immediate family members, but struggle to communicate about racial identity and politics. Of all the participants, seven people recall the aspect they appreciate the most about their parents is their unconditional support and care for their children. Jasmine describes her appreciation for her mother, who has always been a consistent supportive figure in her life:

> She's done a really good job of taking care of me, nurturing me. She's always been really supportive of anything that I want to do...I think she does a good job of making sure that I do feel really secure in our relationship which I do really respect because any child is growing and making mistakes.

Jasmine recalls how her mother has always been present in her life, being a support system whenever needed. Jasmine has great appreciation for her mother. Similarly, Jiangni is thankful for her parents' willingness for her and her twin sister, Jiangya, to make their own mistakes as most teenagers would, and still have a support system at home:

> I really respect how they support us, like my sister and I, in anything that we do pretty much like they are very much the kind of people to let us explore who we are and make our mistakes and stuff because obviously that's our own decision to do those things.

Like any strong parent-child relationship, Jiangni has an appreciation for the space to be her own person and explore the world on her own, but always has support when she returns home. Yet even though Jiangni has appreciation for her parents, she still struggles to communicate with them about their polarized politics. She has initiated many tough conversations with her parents about several political topics, which "aren't

always fun to have." Jiangya feels similarly that they "can openly express different opinions within politics to an extent." Jiangni and Jiangya concurrently have great appreciation for their parents' unconditional support and still have critiques of their viewpoints. The appreciation does not invalidate the struggles, or vice versa. Rather, these feelings exist simultaneously and add to the nuance of adoptee relationships.

Despite the history of adoption, most children face differences with their parents. Yanxing points out that, while she has a great relationship with her parents, her struggles are simply the "typical teenager experience." Even within the queerness of adoptive families, adoptees seek a sense of normality, likely to cope with the inherently abnormality of their experiences. All children have critiques of their parents, but conversations about race and adoption are unique to adoptees and offer nuance to many parent-child relationships.

Interwoven appreciation and critique are a commonality among most children, regardless of adoption status. It is also incredibly generous for Chinese American adoptees to put aside their own struggles and provide space for their parents to make mistakes. For example, Dina is the third oldest child of 14 siblings, 12 of whom were adopted from China.[26] She was the first to be adopted in her family and was old enough to remember many of her younger siblings moving to the United States. Growing up in a household with many children, Dina recalls her frustration with her parents adopting many more children. As a child, she remembers thinking, "You're making all these drastic changes around me, and I have no control over them." Dina also struggles to

[26] Dina's younger brother, Jiaonan (age 21), is also a participant in this study.

relate to her white parents about experiencing the world as a person of color. She asserts, “They'll just never understand what it's like to be a person of color, and that's something that is a big struggle. I think my parents have a little bit of a white savior complex.” Yet, even with this frustration, she graciously recognizes her parents' sacrifice and support. Dina recalls, “My parents sacrificed a lot for us. You know, they did make good money, but also having 14 children definitely balances that out...I definitely feel supported, like my parents are very supportive. You know, they really are our cheerleaders.” Despite the hardships in her childhood, Dina is appreciative of her parents’ support. The ability to empathize with her parents, especially as a young child, shows great generosity and highlights the contradictory nature of relationships between white parents and Chinese adoptees.

Within parent-child relationships, there are varying levels of openness to conversations about adoption. In some cases, adoptees are forced to initiate conversations about race and adoption. On one hand, Naomi feels her parents adequately initiated conversations about adoption, “I guess where I think they did a really good job was making sure that we always knew that even though we were adopted, that their love for us wasn't any different.” She always feels support from her parents, who tried to normalize adoption in her upbringing. On the other hand, Xue struggles to bring up the topic of adoption with fear that her parents will disagree. She notes, “They think that we were meant to be, you know, the common discourse that they don't regret the adoption or anything like that. But, at the same time, I think it's kind of hard for them to navigate in between, like all the other problems associated with adoption too.” In Xue’s case, conversations about adoption fall onto her to initiate and

may not lead to the outcomes she wants. Similarly, Beiyin is appreciative of how her mother is hardworking, but is also very critical of her inability to engage in conversations about race and adoption:

> I think that deep down maybe she feels bad for putting us in such a white environment, because I don't think she realizes how much of a struggle it is. But it's hard to convey any of those things, and especially the way I feel about my family. If I was to express it now, my mom would be so hurt because she would think I hate my family, which I kind of do right now. But it's just like her insecurities. I think it's what kind of makes it hard to have an open conversation because I think she probably takes it as her fault. She probably takes it maybe like she should have never adopted me or things like that.... It just comes with the territory of being adopted. But she definitely was not equipped to have a kid of color.

Beiyin outlines her mother's insecurities when it comes to adoption. Perhaps her mother feels guilt for adopting two children from China and for raising them in a small town. These insecurities inhibit Beiyin's ability to express concerns to her mother and engage in any sort of conversation about race or adoption. While Beiyin recognizes hardships in her relationship with her mother, she is still able to see the situation from her mother's perspective. Even though most adoptees find appreciation for their parents, they do not owe it to them. Rather, it comes from a place of tremendous generosity.

The strength of relationships with parents could be based on the age of adoption. Beiyin, who was adopted at age 9, has a strained relationship with her family. She expresses her disappointment in her mother's avoidance of speaking out about race and adoption. Similarly, Donghua, who was adopted at age 13, does not feel the same connection to her parents as their biological children or those who were adopted at a younger age. She observes, "I feel like I don't really have that connection with my parents. It's hard. Sometimes it's hard for me to talk to them." Donghua feels support

from her parents, especially when it comes to advice about life. She finds comfort in speaking to them about her concerns, but still has some disconnects with her parents.

Adoptees have multiple feelings at any given moment and their interpretations about adoption and family can also shift over time. One example of this is in adoptees' interest in connecting with their biological families. When asked if they had interest in connecting with their biological families, one person responded a strong "yes," two people responded "no" because they already feel a strong connection with the family or fear the process of reaching, and 16 people responded they would be interested in seeking a relationship with their biological family at some point in the future. Reasons for future endeavors include obtaining the funds to seek family abroad because it often comes at a steep cost, learning the language of their family prior to reconnecting, or they are happy with their family and just do not feel the need to search at this moment in their life. Evelyn also explains that it's even harder to contact people abroad now because of COVID-19-related travel restraints. Rather than holding adoptees to their word, their feelings about reconnection can change over time. For that vast majority of participants, they do not currently want to search for their biological family, but it is something they would like to pursue in the future.

Furthermore, older adoptees are generally more critical of their life experiences and families. In other words, the longer they spent away from home, the more complicated their relationships with parents. Donghua (age 22), Beiyin (age 25), Xue (age 25), and Dina (age 26) have had much more time to reflect on their own experiences and adoption as an industry without the influence of their parents. Their interpretations of family, race, and adoption are much more critical because the time

spent away from home allows them to experience the world without perceptions of their parents permeating their thoughts. Compare this to a scenario in which a Chinese adoptee is eating dinner with their family. When sitting face-to-face with people whom they care about greatly, the tendency is to compromise and, at times, sacrifice their own true feelings to justify their parents' actions. To see their parents' perspective is to protect their relationship, despite the reality of the situation. Even in this situation, adoptees who seek to stay in good relation with their parents are no less valid. Neither critique nor appreciation is more authentic than the other.

This paper provides only a snapshot in the journey of adoptees to process their relationships with adoption and honors all steps of processing kinship relationships. Adoptees have the space to feel complicated emotions of family at any given moment, they are not limited to interpret their experiences strictly one way or another. Rather, their understanding of family can fluctuate and change over time. Part of the adoptee experience is negotiating these textures.

Chapter 2: Navigating Race in the Family

Unique to multiracial families, children of color are tasked to navigate race within the family, often with "colorblind" language used in the home.[27] Parents adopt for a variety of reasons, such as queer parents unable to have biological children and search to adopt abroad, single parents seek to adopt, having a fascination with China, parents who were also adopted seek to adopt children who share similar experiences to their own, among others. Regardless of interest in Chinese culture or aesthetic, white parents may or may not be equipped to raise children of color. Families who have adopted are a family unit within the home but are viewed and treated differently when in the outside world.[28] This is a reality in which children of color are starkly aware and parents often miss. Children of color are often in tune with their parents' inability to relate and communicate about race.

Before adopting, some parents attempt to learn about Chinese culture, learn the steps to take to immerse their child, and understand how race is an important identity for many racialized people. Qingyu notes how her parents did research about raising a Chinese child prior to adopting, with much of the information provided by the adoption agency themselves. They also had a community of other parents who adopted from China to envision how they would navigate race and culture with their own children.

[27] I recognize the word "colorblind" equates ignorance with ableism. Yet, the purpose of using this term is to critique the contradictions of the term itself. People describe themselves as colorblind as an attempt to include, which actually functions to exclude.
[28] Gina Samuels, "Building Kinship and Community: Relational Processes of Bicultural Identity Among Adult Multiracial Adoptees" (*Family Processes*, 2010), 31.

Despite preparation, white parents struggle to communicate about race and culture with their children. Jiangni and Jiangya (twin sisters) recall their struggles with their parents. As Jiangni describes, growing up in a predominantly white area makes opening conversations about race much more challenging, especially when their peers are not talking about race with their families. She recalls:

> I also just don't think they wanted us to feel like we were different from anyone else since we were adopted, so they tried to give us normality during our childhood. Now, I don't feel super connected to my Chinese culture, so that is why I am seeking that out later in life through my classes.

Jiangya similarly notes how their parents made little to no effort to connect them with their Chinese culture:

> They both kind of take on the "I don't see color" microaggression and have more right leaning political views on movements such as [Black Lives Matter]. I would say they did the bare minimum for introducing the culture such as food, new year, and kung fu.

Colorblind rhetoric is more common than not within interracial families. White parents may assume racial differences are transgressed when they live in the same home and have a close relationship between white parents and Asian children. But the problem with colorblindness is that race still exists and impacts the lives of adoptees. Colorblindness is passive when parents ignore racial differences, live in white neighborhoods without introducing them to cultural activities, and project whiteness onto their child. Passivity ignores the history of racialization in the United States and fails to see their child as a racialized being, an identity in which they will inevitably reckon at some point in their life. Active colorblindness exists when parents assume

their child did not have a life prior to adoption by ignoring questions about the child's country of birth or biological family.[29] Colorblind racism is taught by parents and internalized in the child. While white parents may not assume race is an important factor of an adoptee's life, the lack of conversations about race in the household only exacerbates racial tensions.

Despite the outlying few, most participants mentioned being in culture or language programs as a child and/or having open conversations with their parents about adoption to varying extents. Most participants mentioned attending one or more of the following in their upbringing: Chinese cultural camps for adoptees, such as the Hult Adoptee Camp through Hult International, language classes in K-12 education or Saturday school, traveling to China, and Lunar New Year celebrations. Evelyn, who was one of 5 participants to attend Chinese immersion schools in early education, is able to speak openly about race and adoption with her parents. She describes how her parents make sure to do their own homework to learn about the experiences of their children and always leave the door open for a conversation:

> My parents, I feel, are very on top of it and wanted to talk about adoption. And they put me through all the Adoption Mosaic workshops and they placed me in community with other adoptees because they're very understanding of the idea of like, maybe my sister and I wouldn't be the most comfortable talking with our parents when we're younger.

Adoptee comments suggest parents cannot ignore the presence of race, but also must be careful not to engage in ethnic commodification. Better experiences happen when adoptive parents not only encourage their children to explore their ethnic heritage, but

[29] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 64.

also seek experiences beyond merely celebrating an "authentic" Chinese-ness. Learning to navigate the world as a racialized being has less to do with eating fried rice than it does forming meaningful relationships with those who share similar experiences.[30] Ethnic commodification condenses racial identity to merely taking the steps to connect Chinese adoptees with Chinese culture, rather than fostering meaningful lasting relationships with those who share similar experiences. Racial identity is more complex than just eating the foods and celebrating the holidays.

The parents' hesitancy to openly discuss issues of race leaves the child to learn from popular culture, take courses, and find community outside of the home. One way to ensure the children have adequate support is to raise them around other Chinese American people, both peers and mentors. When raising children of color in a predominantly white area, it falls completely onto the parents to expose them to people whom they can discuss identity and issues surrounding race. Beiyin, who was raised in a predominantly white town in central Oregon, argues, "I think maybe it's possible if your kid is raised in an environment where they have a lot of other Asian kids." Parents can compensate for their whiteness by immersing their child in Chinese American culture. Xue similarly notes how merely learning about race and culture does not directly apply to raising an Asian child in practice:

> I think you can read as many books as you want about raising a child of color and like, exposing them to things like their cultural heritage or whatever. I think what I needed was to be around, like other Asian people…At the end of the day, I think it's still kind of immersed in white savior-ship…I think they tried their best.

[30] McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*, 73.

The consensus is that white parents "tried their best" at raising Chinese American children. Regardless of critique, adoptees in this sample are incredibly generous to the efforts of their parents. Adoptees simultaneously critique aspects of their upbringing, yet offer their parents grace, and oftentimes forgiveness.

The barriers white parents face in initiating or engaging in conversations about race with their child are not as prevalent when the parent is a fellow adoptee. Vera was raised by her mother who is an adoptee from Korea. Vera explains how her mother was "adopted for the wrong reasons. So she did the exact opposite with my sister and I. So I've always been super connected to her…I've always told her what I've been feeling and I just, I love doing things with her." The shared experiences of adoption between Vera and her mother create a communicative relationship. Vera's mother provided her children the opportunities that were unavailable to her. Because her mother was never offered the opportunity to learn Korean, she placed her children in a Chinese school to connect them to Chinese culture. Her mother also opened conversations about adoption and race to ensure her children had the ability to articulate their experiences with race, ethnicity, and culture.

The burden to open conversations about race falls most commonly onto the shoulders of Chinese adoptees themselves. In monoracial families of color, parents initiate conversations to help their children navigate the world because they experience the effects of race and racism themselves. However, Chinese adoptees who are raised by white parents do not have the privilege of learning from their parents. Rather, Chinese American adoptees are burdened to negotiate race and identity not only in the world, but also within their families.

Chapter 3: Adoptee-Adoptee Relationships as Kinships

Familial relationships exist between parent-child, both through biological and adoptive relations. Adoptees experience varied relationships with their parents that extend beyond the reproductive family unit. Beyond the family unit, Chinese adoptees also engage in kin relationships with fellow adoptees. Family is defined through feelings of closeness and comfort, so relationships outside of the immediate family can also be considered kinship. These relationships do not follow the pre-made mold of family. Rather, adoptees are able offer guidance to one another that white parents cannot access due to their whiteness. Children seek kinships outside of the home when parental relationships do not meet their needs. Adoptees experience relationships with one another similar to those of family, which fulfill connections to family and homeland.

One type of relationship where adoptees experience close relationships is with siblings who were also adopted. Adoptees share even more common experiences with siblings, especially those who were also adopted. In this sample, 15 participants have at least one sibling who was also adopted from China. They share common childhood experiences, family connections, many other interests, and can connect in a variety of ways. Xue shares that one of her favorite activities to do with her sister is eating Chinese food together. By sharing a meal, they form a connection to their shared culture and engage in conversation. Jiaonan and Dina, who are two of 14 siblings, describe how their ability to have conversation has only grown throughout life. Dina is 6 years older than Jiaonan, so it was not until they both reached adulthood and reflected on their experiences that they were able to have deeper conversations about their upbringing.

However, siblings vary in age, some of whom are many years older or younger, and some are in very different stages of processing their adoption. Even if siblings do not actively relate to one another about their shared experience of adoption or live under the same roof, there is still a mutual understanding that they are both available to connect, if needed. Jasmine is open to having conversations about adoption with her younger sister, who is 3 years younger, but her sister is not ready at this point in her life. Even though her sister is still actively processing her experiences, Jasmine makes it clear to her sister that she is available and willing to engage whenever her sister needs support. Even with a shared experience of adoption and having the same parents, some siblings are in a completely different stage of processing and have not yet connected about their experiences. Vera explains how it is hard to communicate with her sister because she hasn't processed her adoption yet, but she is ready to have a conversation about adoption with her sister whenever she is ready to do so. Additionally, siblings do not always talk about their adoption. Rather, most conversations between siblings do not involve the topic at all. Instead, siblings share about their passions, daily lives, discuss their families, or just enjoy each other's company. Sibling relationships between Chinese adoptees can be a space for processing and mutual support just as easily as it can also be a place to share mutual interests.

Aside from siblings, adoptees pursue relationships with people outside of their immediate family. These connections can be actively sought, intentional, sustained over time, or they can be unintentional and momentary. Either way, relationships between adoptees is a form of community building among people with similar experiences. Adoptees' ability to speak openly about their shared experience of adoption is unique to

them, which cannot be replicated among parent-child relationships. In the traditional reproductive family, parents pass on their cultural and racial identities. However, adoptees are tasked to explore on their own, without the guidance of their parents, which calls for the formation of kin relationships between adoptees.

For many, school is a place to connect with other adoptees. Sammy met one of her best friends in high school and another friend when studying abroad in China, both of whom are also adopted. Sammy states, “The two closest people in my life are both adopted. I don't know. Like, it just happened that way. Maybe I am kind of drawn to other adoptees. But it's not like a topic of conversation. So I think it's kind of random, but also maybe not.” While two of the closest people in her life are fellow adoptees, it is unclear whether they were connected based on their shared experiences. Upon reflection, Sammy recognizes she is drawn to other adoptees in her life, but contrary to popular belief, they rarely talk about adoption. Sammy explains, “I like to talk about [adoption] with them. Not super often, but like when we need to. It happens and we're comfortable with it. And we all share pretty similar experiences. Some pretty different perspectives on it.” The shared cultural and racialized life experiences between adoptees offer a mutual understanding that adoptive parents cannot access.

However, not everyone has the opportunity to meet other adoptees in their communities, especially in predominantly white areas. In many cases, parents place their children in cultural camps, language courses, or adoptee-specific communities. Adoption agencies also initiate group adoptions, in which multiple families travel together to the same orphanage to adopt their children together. Agencies also suggest keeping children in contact with other adoptees helps to have people in their lives with

similar experiences. Within this sample, Cecelia, Luna, Yanxing, and Yun were all adopted at the same time from the same orphanage. Originally a group of 10 families, five families continued to keep in touch, holding reunions every other year. The group still remains in contact and have fostered relationships close enough to call each other their "China sisters." Although, contrary to their parents' assumption, the sisters did not only talk to each other about their shared stories. As Luna recalls, her sisters were very important in her childhood because they were "literally adopted with me." However, when they are all together, they do not necessarily only connect about their shared early experiences and, instead, find themselves connecting as human beings:

> The more I thought about it, we don't talk about our adoption, like us sisters, we've never done that. We've never sat down and shared our adoption stories… My mom thinks we do but we don't. That's not weird, but definitely like out of our age group. Like that's not what people are age talk about, which baffles my parents.... We're going to talk about really dumb weird random crap that we did...Not because I'm uncomfortable but because there are definitely people who expect us to only talk about it together like that. We can't be individuals who talk about like, the weather, or like what we're wearing on Saturday. They're like, expecting to be talking about these deep personal, like 'holy crap' moments in our lives.

Rather than speaking only about their adoption, the sisters form connections apart from the identity that connected them in the first place. As another example, Carly met a couple of fellow adoptees through ultimate frisbee in high school. She says, "I wasn't necessarily drawn to them because they're adopted," rather just shared interest. While shared experiences may lay a foundation for a strong relationship, common interests are also an important factor in lasting relationships.

For adoptees who lived in their orphanage for many years, the relationships formed are foundational kinships. For example, Beiyin, who was adopted at age 9,

remains in contact with her friends from the orphanage in China. She communicates with a few of them on WeChat once or twice a year but finds language to be a barrier because she no longer speaks Chinese. She also notes that they now live very different lives. Beiyin grew up in a small town in Oregon, while her friends still live near their orphanage. Beiyin rarely communicates with her friends from her childhood, but still maintains lifeline connections across the diaspora. Although they are no longer in frequent communication, Beiyin's relationships formed in her childhood offers comfort and connectedness.

Another way adoptees seek relationships is through affinity clubs, such as adopted student groups. Activities in affinity groups range from sharing personal stories to going on outdoor trips. Qingyu is on the administrative board of the adopted student group at her university. Prior to college, she did not have many connections with other adoptees, but since joining the club she has formed great relationships with other adoptees. She notes, "It's definitely a place of comfort for like adoption, mainly because, you know, I know I can talk about it. I know that they understand where I'm coming from and other experiences that we've gone through." Student groups offer a safe space for adoptees to speak openly about their experiences, relate to one another, and form lasting relationships.

Vera's mother is an adoptee from Korea. She describes having a very close relationship with her mother because they can connect about their shared experiences. As a child, when Vera had questions about her adoption, her mother would be very open and honest about her birth parents and the reasons for her adoption. Vera recognizes how she benefited from the lessons her mother learned as an adoptee herself.

Although Vera's mother was able to speak fluent Korean when she first moved to the United States, she was not provided the opportunity to practice and quickly lost the language. She says it "changed how she raised my sister. And I guess she tried to put us in Chinese school. And she tried to keep us connected to that culture. And then also in terms of the way that she just spoke about adoption." Vera has a close connection with her mother. Not only are they able to have a parent-child relationship, but also an adoptee-adoptee relationship.

One major challenge in connecting with fellow adoptees is each individual's level of engagement. In other words, adoptees are all at different stages of processing their experiences, whether they are living at home with their parents or living on their own, or if they are isolated from other adoptees or surrounded by fellow adoptees. Individuals hold a unique understanding and level of processing. These differences hinder adoptees' ability to engage in conversations and connection. Xue, who studies adoption, is very critical about adoption and struggles to communicate with adoptees who have not yet "done the work." She explains, "I just kind of try to meet people where they are and not just tell them all of my thoughts on it...I don't want to say that my position is superior or something. I think it's just not life-giving to me to talk to people who need to do some work." Xue explains how she feels most connected to those who are likewise critical of adoption as an industry.

Relationships between adoptees are expansive and varied. Yet, they provide comfort to one another and mutual understanding that white parents cannot offer. When asked what they search for in a relationship, whether it be familial, friendship, or intimate, participants responded with a variety of answers. Of all 19 participants, six

people agreed mutual understanding is important in a relationship, making it the most popular answer. Specific to adoptees, it is important to have the ability to relate to one another through shared understanding of past experiences. Adoptee-adoptee relationships are kinships that extend beyond the heteronormative family unit to provide lasting familial connections. The next most answered characteristic, with five respondents, is connecting with people through a sense of humor. Adoptees, like most other people, appreciate people with whom they can laugh and enjoy each other's company. Less popular responses include comfortable, trusting, kind, independent, hardworking, loyal, respectful, honest, relatable, thoughtful, communicative, shared interests, and aware of their own positionality. Connections between adoptees are like other friendships in the need for humor, trust, respect, etc., but mutual understanding of childhood experiences makes adoptee relationships unique.

Adoptees engage in kinships with one another when their adoptive families do not share a familial background. Kinships between adoptees does not discount their relationships with immediate family, rather enhances the already expansive network of family created by transnational adoption. For Chinese American adoptees, other adoptees are the only people who share the experience of being born to a family unknown to them, placed in an orphanage until they were adopted by a family in the United States, raised in predominantly white communities. These shared experiences create a foundation for mutual understanding and support. In the adoptee community, there is a saying that "we are each other's homeland." This rings true in adoption discourse because there are varying degrees of disconnect with both adoptive and birth families, and the people who share most similar experiences are fellow adoptees.

Chapter 4: Coming Into Identity

Adoptees feel a sense of belonging in the United States because it is where they find a support system. Regardless of being born elsewhere, Chinese adoptees seek belonging in their communities because, as Autumns says, they "don't really identify culturally with anywhere else." Dina agrees that "there's societal and cultural things that you understand about America, because you grew up in America. And that's why you kind of have this connection and this belonging to America." However, within the lifetime of young Chinese adoptees, the COVID-19 global pandemic demonstrates the uncertainty of feelings of belonging, specifically for Asians and Asian Americans. The publicized racism towards Asians and Asian Americans in the media shifted a sense of belonging for many adoptees. Vera says her sense of belonging fluctuates but ultimately believes herself to be American. She argues, "I still consider myself to be American but it's more of if America is accepting of me. There's a difference." In their sense of identity, the country of birth is less important in a sense of belonging than the country in which they grew up.

Within the context of diaspora, a sense of home can be challenging to pinpoint. Adoptees identify home most often where their parents are or where they have the most connections. Major factors that influence the location of home are age of adoption (e.g. people who were adopted at older ages have a more complex understanding of home) and years spent away from home in adult life (e.g. people who have spent more years away from the place they grew up tend to feel a sense of home elsewhere).

Within this sample, 12 participants identify home as the place where they grew up and where their parents live. Dina, who grew up in Portland and still lives in the city,

says that Portland is home because “I haven't lived anywhere else. But you know, if I were to move out to Portland, I think home would still be where my family is, which just happens to be Portland. But if my family was somewhere else, I would say it's wherever my family is. It's wherever my friends are.” Dina was adopted at six months old as remembers very little from China. She does not consider the town where she was born in China to be home because “when I got to talking to people in China and kind of learning more about the culture and society, like wow, I think very differently than this.” Dina’s sense of home is strongly rooted in the culture where she was raised, rather than the place where she was born. Cecelia likewise feels the place where her parents live is home because she has “never really known any other place to be home.” She has no memories of China and had never felt like she did not belong in the United States.

Chinese adoptees live their first months or years only knowing China as home, but eventually transition feelings of home to the United States. Age of adoption is a factor in the transition between homes. When Jiaonan was first adopted, he spent many years thinking he was only temporarily living in the United States and would someday return to China. After many years, he eventually realized he was not going back to his orphanage. Jiaonan recalls:

> There's this building near the hill. It's like a school or something that we would drive by all the time to head back home from. I don't think from class but something. But it was at night, so I would be really sleepy. And it looks exactly like this building right next to my orphanage. So when I was really young, I would just be drowsy. I would think maybe we were heading back to my orphanage whenever we passed by that. And I definitely was eight or nine or so when we passed by that, I just didn't think that anymore. I can't pinpoint the exact moment when I stopped thinking we were heading back when I saw that building. Like I was pretty certain that like, this is just my life.

Jiaonan remembers his transition between homes, but now recognizes Portland as his home, where his family and friends live. Unlike Dina, Jiaonan remembers his transition between homes, likely due to the fact he was adopted at age 5 and remembers a substantial amount of his life in China. He aims to return to China in his adult life to reconnect with the language and culture.

Sammy returned to China for a year after high school. Oregon has been home for her whole life, but moved to China, in part, to seek a sense of home. She says:

> I think I did [want to make China feel like home]. When I went for the gap year, it was pretty eye opening and a brutal experience…I think I'm always gonna be a foreigner in China. And in that sense, I don't think it can be home, but also foreigners make other places home. So in the same sense any foreigner can, I could.

Although Sammy was born in China and is ethnically Chinese, she still feels like a foreigner. The contradiction between place of birth and place of home is a unique experience to transnational adoptees because Chinese adoptees look like most people in China but feel culturally American. The acceptance of "foreigner" status in their country of birth is heartbreaking.

Naomi also considers the place where she grew up to be home. Although she has moved away to college, she suggests, "I don't think it's necessarily like a specific spot, but it's where your support system is." Her support system is her family, which provides a sense of homeliness and comfort.

Many of the participants are current college students, who have moved away from their parents to attend school. Of all the participants, 4 people consider home to be both the place where they grew up and at their school. To Jiangni, she feels a sense of home in both places because she has community and support:

> I definitely feel like a person can have more than one home. I definitely view Minnesota as home because like, obviously I was raised there. That's where a lot of my family is all that. But I also feel like I have found a home in Oregon as well…Last year with the people I became friends with it definitely also felt like home here...I feel like those are things that definitely would make me feel like a place is home is that sense of comfort and familiarity.

Jiangni feels connected to people in both homes. She describes "comfort" and "familiarity" to be key requirements of home.

The remaining three participants identify home to be elsewhere. Beiyin grew up in a small town in Oregon, but now calls Portland home because she has friends and connections with similar life experiences in the city. Beiyin is 25 years old and has spent many years living away from her family. Her sense of home has shifted from the place where she lived with her family to her life in Portland. Donghua, who was adopted at age 13, describes how she does not feel a sense of home anywhere:

> I guess I've never really felt like anywhere was home, not even like China. Even though I was there for 13 years. I guess when I was younger, I thought maybe Hood River. But then my family moved houses and I just kind of felt like a guest ever since I moved out for college. Like when I go home it doesn't feel like home anymore. And that's probably like a universal experience... I don't really have a foundation like I don't really feel like I have a root anywhere.

Due to the transition between China and the United States as a teenager, Donghua struggles to find home. She describes China as her "home country for 13 years" but it no longer feels like home:

> I feel like home is more about the people. And I haven't been able to connect, or make that attachment to, like a family attachment. Like when I think about home it's like family and the people. And yeah, I guess I still kind of feel like I don't really have anything to depend on, even

> though I do physically with my parents. But emotionally I feel like there's still a gap between me and my family.

Additionally, Xue describes home not as a specific place, but as a space she shares with close connections. For example, Xue feels at home when sharing a meal with her sister. She also finds a sense of home in the adoptee community. She says, “I think that's what's unique actually about adoptees is that they like to belong to neither here nor there. I think it's like within the discourse of diaspora.” Xue can relate to Donghua’s experience of feeling in between homes. Navigating a sense of home across borders can feel trivial to transnational adoptees, but it is actually a shared experience between adoptees.

While a sense of home continues to shift throughout life, adoptee identity can change as well. Most participants understand their identity as an adoptee as an important factor in their life but recognize many other identities that are of equal or greater importance. Jiangya claims her identity as an adoptee does not “take the front burner” because she resonates more strongly with other identities. Yanxing similarly notes that adoption is “integral to my identity in that aspect. But I also realize that, you know, there's obviously a lot more to me than just that.” Adoptees are not condensed to a single narrative of adoption. Rather, they can have a multitude of identities that exist simultaneously.

When it comes to adoptee identity, Yun explains, “It's very important, but I do think it's not as important as the ethnicity part of me…Nobody out in the real world has to really know that I'm an adoptee.” In other words, Yun recognizes that she is perceived as Asian American first, and often does not need to disclose that she is

adopted. Furthermore, Yun identifies as queer, which is another important identity that greatly influences her life. When she does disclose her status as an adoptee, she says "it feels like a whole other coming out." Yun, like many Chinese adoptees, exist in the world with their identity as Asian/Asian American at the forefront of their interactions with others. Adoptee identity can hide behind the mask of Asian American identity.

Even when adoptee identity is not the most important influence, Chinese adoptees still recognize that it has led them to where they are today. Without the history of adoption, adoptees would be very different people living vastly different lives. Jiangni resonates with adoptee identity because if adoption was not a factor in her life, then she would not have her family:

> To be honest, I don't always think about the fact that I am adopted. However, it is a big part of my identity because it changed my life in so many ways. I was given so many opportunities because I was adopted and raised by a loving family, so I will always be grateful for this aspect of my life. Therefore, even though I don't always think about [adoption], it is still a part of me and my journey.

For Jiangni, adoption impacts her life because it has brought her the family, friends, and life she has come to know. Carly also notes adoptee identity is "relatively important just because being adopted got me to where I am today. Like if I hadn't been adopted, I wouldn't be here talking to you." Jiangni and Carly recognize their identity as adoptees to be important in the fact that it has brought them the life they know and appreciate.

Rather than identifying strongly with her identity as an adoptee, Beiyin resonates with growing up in an orphanage. She notes, "I think, in certain ways, the ways I am are because I grew up in the orphanage on my own for the first 10 years of my life. So I definitely think it's like a huge reflection of who I am." Beiyin carries

many memories of life prior to her adoption, which have greatly impacted who she is today.

For others, their identity as an adoptee has grown stronger in recent years. Qingyu, who is part of a club for adoptees at her college, recalls:

> When I was younger, I never really thought about the fact that I was adopted because I saw my family the same as others. Though now, as a college student and being on the executive board of [a student group for adoptees], I have become a lot more open about my adoption.

Since attending college, Qingyu has explored more of her adoptee identity and found a community with other adoptees.

While most participants found their identity as an adoptee to be very important in their life for a variety of reasons, Naomi finds that identifying with adoptee experiences negates her parents' position as her parents:

> I would have to say it's not a thing that identifies me on a daily basis. Just because I am always just like, my parents are my parents and that's that…Because I don't like when people are like, 'Oh, your adoptive parents,'or 'your birth parents, or 'your foster parents'...But I specifically don't like the phrase adoptive parents, because that makes it so there's this negative connotation that comes with that…And it makes it seem like they aren't your actual parents.

To Naomi, using the phrase "adoptive" parents challenges the authenticity of the relationship she has with her parents. Furthermore, adding modifiers such as "adoptive," "birth," or "foster" to the word "parent" implies a singular notion of the meaning of a parent. Instead of referring to "adoptive" parents, queering the family allows for parents to be just that. Although Naomi has different genetics than her parents, she still feels a parental connection to the people who raised her. While she finds her adoption to be

somewhat important in her life, she does not want that identity to overshadow her relationship with her parents.

Adoptee-adoptee relationships are especially important to foster in Asian American spaces because Chinese adoptees feel their experiences are vastly different than non-adopted Chinese Americans, especially when it comes to family. Participants note that their experiences are similar to non-adopted Chinese Americans outside of the home because society views them as the same. Dina says she can relate to non-adopted Chinese Americans because "on the outside, that's how America sees us. That's how society sees us. It all sees us the same." Their phenotypically Chinese presentation to the world makes their experiences very relatable.

However, there is a great feeling of separation with other Chinese Americans when it comes to their experiences inside the family. For example, the foods adoptees grew up eating in predominantly white households are very different from those of Chinese immigrant households. Jiaonan can relate to non-adopted Asian Americans about stereotypes they hear in public but "if we're going to talk about growing up in an Asian household, I can't relate to that whatsoever." The lack of shared experiences within the family is a big difference between adopted and non-adopted Chinese Americans. The estrangement from other Chinese Americans makes it challenging for adoptees to identify with Asian American racial identity. Xue feels a sense of separation with some other Chinese Americans because she was "never Asian enough" to be considered in-group. This separation is a space of tension for adoptees.

Identity and belonging are particularly important to the coming of age of adoptees because their experiences are unlike those of the dominant discourse of Asian

America. Like the nuance of familial relationships, adoptees have a fluid understanding of identity and belonging as they experience the world and grow. The separation with Asian America is merely a product of transnational adoption and can feel isolating. Yet again, we see the importance of relationships between adoptees to help each other navigate feelings of home and belonging, identity, and how they stake their position within Asian America.

Conclusion

Prior to holding conversations with Chinese American adoptees, I was hoping to find a generalizable understanding of the ways in which adoptees redefine familial relations by experiencing kinships with immediate family and fellow adoptees. I questioned the extent to which adoptees radically reimagine kinship that extends beyond the traditional family unit, as well as the ways adoption discourse pushes the boundaries of Asian America. I hypothesized that adoptees engage in relationships with other adoptees and offer foundational support through shared experiences that parents cannot offer. But after speaking with 19 adoptees, all from different family backgrounds, upbringings, and social circles, I have come to learn: it's complicated. There is no single way to condense adoptee experiences into a generalizable narrative while still accounting for ambivalence. When it comes to relationships with parents, Chinese adoptees have so many great things to say about the way they were raised and how their parents continue to support them. At the same time, many adoptees have struggles with their parents when speaking about topics such as race and adoption. The burden to initiate conversations about race at the dinner table, and sometimes even feel the need to defend themselves against their parents' white racial politics, is an experience unique to transracial adoptees and multiracial children. Yet, even with these experiences, adoptees are overall grateful to their parents and everything they have provided in their lives. Perhaps generosity towards parents is a way to sustain relationships with those closest in your life, while navigating foundational differences. Generosity towards parents is a defense mechanism to reconcile diasporic trauma and maintain familial relationships. This research highlights a gap between the way

adoptees ideologically frame their own lives and the reality in which they live. Adoptees experience moments of racialization within their relationships, with strangers and with family, and attempt to navigate these tensions all on their own. As a tokenized being, the ways adoptees imagine their relationships are different from the textures of day-to-day life and are richer than language can allow.

The Importance of Adoptee-Adoptee Relationships

The tensions of inherent racialization and isolation is precisely what makes relationships between adoptees so important. Relationships between Chinese adoptees are important for several reasons. First, close relationships between adoptees offer foundational support through shared experiences that parents cannot offer. Adoptees find connections with one another based on similarities unique to only the transnational adoptee community. They can relate about place of birth (when oftentimes the only thing they know about their life in China is where they are found and their orphanage), isolation from other adoptees (adoptees are often raised in predominantly white communities), navigating relationships with family with a "colorblind" worldview, an ambiguous sense of home, among others. Second, relationships help connect adoptees with similar interests outside of their shared diasporic history. Adoptees find community with one another based on communal interests as well as shared experiences; this type of connection cannot be replicated in relationships with non-adoptees. For adoptees, relationships simply provide space to share common interests such as academics, sports, etc., but they can also create solidarity with people who also share a history of adoption. Adoptees do not *only* talk about adoption together, but rather connect due to other interests and similarities. Relationships with adopted

siblings can be particularly meaningful as adoptees grow older because they have someone who shares the experiences of adoption, but also shares parents and family. Sibling relationships offer space to speak as much or as little about adoption, but the conversation remains open if they are inclined. Although, this does not discount the experiences of children who are raised as an only child. Third, adoptee-adoptee relationships provide the opportunity to build solidarity through organizations such as affinity groups and other organizations. Connections between adoptees help navigate racial and political identity. By being transnationally and transracially adopted, adoptees can help one another navigate the ambiguity of living between cultures and homelands, which can often feel lonely. Furthermore, many adoptees who grew up in predominantly white areas with white families attempt to mend relationships with Asian America broken by isolation. The construct of the family is a barrier to pan-Asian American solidarity outside of the home. The dominant narrative of what is considered to be Chinese American is often the typical story of immigrant families. However, adoptees have a very different reality of family. Language is also a barrier to solidarity, because adoptees often do not speak the language to make them "authentically" Chinese. With all the ambiguity, in the end, adoptees find that they are "each other's homeland." Lastly, relationships between Chinese adoptees open space for advocacy. When in relation to one another, adoptees can organize to advocate for their shared interests, whether it be advocating for adoptee rights in mainstream American discourse or creating space for Chinese adoptees in Asian American discourse. COVID-19 and the #StopAsianHate movement created more solidarity among Asian Americans, including those who were adopted.

There is no formula to follow for relationships between adoptees because the experience of adoption itself is isolating. However, Chinese American adoptees seek kinships with one another to alleviate the struggle. These relationships not only have the power to be kinships, but also to foster bonds of solidarity to challenge the isolating nature of transnational adoption.

Reimagining "Asian American" as a Political Identity

Adoption discourse shows racial identity not as biologically passed from parent to child, but as a political identity in which adoptees must explore outside of the family. In normative ideologies of the reproductive family unit, race is often presumed to be passed from parent to child through biology, culture, or a mixture of both. For example, two white parents will have a biologically white child, or two parents of different races will have a multiracial child. However, adoptive parents, who are often white, raise adopted children, who are ethnically Chinese. The adoptive family reimagines race, not as an identity passed from parent to child, but as something individuals must struggle to understand in a larger social context, based on the politicized identity of a given racial structure.

In the United States, race is not pre-decided based on phenotype or ethnicity. Rather, race is unpredictable, fluctuating, produced, and reproduced through political struggle. In other words, race is a socially constructed concept to reestablish reigning systems of power and domination. Race is invented through political struggle. For adoptees, racial identity is manufactured from the ground-up instead of a top-down model passed from parent to child. Adoption recenters Asian American identity not as biological or cultural, but as an identity within the politicized racial structure of the

United States. To be Asian American is not a pre-made manual for adoptees to follow based on existing racial structures. Rather, racialized beings, such as Chinese American adoptees, explore Asian American identity outside of popular racial discourse. Adoptive families are no less Asian American, rather they merely expand the boundaries of Asian American discourse. Likewise, multiracial families are part of Asian America. Adoptees are challenged to ask themselves: What does it mean to *me* to be Asian American? Race is an identity in which we *become*, rather than inherit.

Limitations and Future Directions

One major limitation to this research is that interviews were conducted one time with each participant. The scope of the results only shows a snapshot into the experiences of Chinese adoptees. To more accurately assess feelings about personal topics, it would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study of adoptees to reveal the changing nature of relationships. Another limitation is that language cannot adequately represent the textures of relationships. Even in a longitudinal study, it is difficult to find the correct words to articulate exact feelings and emotions of complex relationships. The most authentic way to engage in the topic as intimate as kinships is through meaningful relationships over time.

As for future directions, the legacy of adoption does not stop after the first generation. In other words, adoption does not just affect only one person; it impacts an entire network of people including adoptees' children, parents, friends, and other family members. Adoptees who are raised in the United States go on to have families of their own, which further continues their diasporic legacy. As Asian American identity is politicized, it continues to reinvent in the generations following the act of adoption. To

this I wonder, how is Asian American political identity reinvented in the generations following adoption? Children of adoptees, such as myself, are part of the legacy of adoption. My mother's transnational experiences are part of who I am and define my own relationship to Asian America. Adoption discourse constantly reinvents the terms of identity to incorporate all those in relation to Asian America. Relationships between adoptees sets the tone for Asian American solidarity across generations and builds the foundation for liberation.

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