

THE EFFECT OF GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED
STATES AND CHINA ON TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE ADOPTEE
IDENTITY FORMATION

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Abstract

Transnational adoption of children from China to the United States began in 1985, a practice that accelerated and expanded over the next two decades. While much attention has been given to the narratives of adoptive parents and industrial concerns, the voices of adoptees have been drowned out in the process. This thesis hopes to examine the impact of geopolitical tensions between the United States and China on adoptees through both a review of the current literature and an autoethnographic approach. A historical perspective reveals the basis for the United States' negative perceptions of China and its people today – perceptions that uniquely impact Chinese adoptees. International adoption as an economy both supports and complicates the relationship between China and the United States, subjecting adoptees to forces of commodification and misunderstanding. Finally, the exploration of identity formation, as it relates to the individual experiences of adoptees, elucidates how community-building efforts and return trips factor into the identity development of adoptees. This focus on the geopolitics of transnational adoption from China and its implications for identity formation expands current narratives and offers new insights for humanizing research that centers the Chinese American adoptee experience. Specifically, these insights inform educational experiences, mental health and psychological studies, and other subfields aimed at better serving transnational adoptees.

Key terms: transnational adoption, China, Asian American, geopolitics, economy, identity formation, community, autoethnography

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Introduction

Dry, dead grass – a seemingly mundane detail that I habitually recount when inevitably asked about my memories of China. But it is also my only memory of China, a vision that I clung to for years, willing at least one thing to stay. At just 14 months old, I was adopted from China to the United States of America. The transition between countries, often misunderstood as a clean break, was a transformative experience that continues to shape my life and identity. My experience as a transnational adoptee from China to the United States is uniquely shaped by personal circumstances yet shared by tens of thousands of others.

Transnational adoption¹ from China officially began in 1985, but the practice accelerated in the 1990s and early 2000s. China officially ended intercountry adoptions in the fall of 2024, marking a period of almost 40 years in which over 80,000 children have been issued U.S. visas as Chinese orphans (Johnston, n.d.; *Status of Intercountry Adoptions in People's Republic of China*, 2024). The relationship between the United States and China has been one of continuous shifts, and the perceived power balance between the two countries creates geopolitical tensions. China, as a sending nation, initially used international adoptions to engender favorable foreign relations after the Cold War. This outsourced intimacy served to politically deepen ties between the two countries while funding its child welfare system (Wang, 2016). However, as China's global presence grew over nearly four decades of transnational adoption, so too has the United

¹ Intercountry adoption and transnational adoption are interchangeable terms referring to parental adoption of a child from a country different than their own through permanent legal means, bringing that child to live in the parental country of residence (*Intercountry Adoption*, n.d.).

States' suspicion of the country (Aldrich et al., 2015). Adopted children are thus caught between China and the United States, pawns in a geopolitical game of chess.

Despite the prevalence of transnational adoptions from China to the United States, there has been insufficient research on how adoptees' identity formation process is impacted by the unique complexities of their adoption journey. The continuously shifting geopolitical relationship between China and the United States has serious implications on the adjustment of transnational adoptees, particularly as that relationship has deteriorated into a state of constant tension. Identity formation is the establishment of a unique sense of self, marked by coherent inner unity (Herman, 2011). Crucial factors related to the development of identity are "language, culture and society" (Aksholakova, 2014). Transnational adoption creates a distinct set of tensions, derived from language, culture, and other social factors that impact the identity formation of transnational adoptees (McKee, 2022).

The growth and decline of the transnational adoption network reflects larger geopolitical relations between the United States and China (C. Huang et al., 2024; Johnston, n.d.). Thus, the identity formation process of transnationally adopted children from China is subject, at least in part, to the volatility of U.S. attitudes towards their country of birth. Although the phenomenon of adoption from China has been of significant interest to scholarly investigation, these analyses rarely include the voices of the adoptees themselves, focusing more on the parental or government interests. Further, the subject is rarely approached from an interdisciplinary perspective that incorporates both global phenomena and individual experiences.

Expanding the stories that are told will allow those of all disciplines to fully understand the complexities of transnational adoption from China and its impact on adoptees. Doing so will offer novel insights for improving educational experiences, mental health and psychological

studies, and other subfields aimed at better serving communities. I will be utilizing an autoethnographic framework for this research, drawing on my own lived experiences as a transnational adoptee from China to the United States. Autoethnography is a research approach grounded in an understanding that interrogating the self is a valid site of research. It is a reflexive and iterative practice in which the researcher thinks, reflects, and writes about one's experience in relation to a larger phenomenon, taking advantage of the unique insights that an individual possesses, incorporating and connecting their personal perspective to the academic field of interest (Poulos, 2021).

My approach to autoethnography started with a review of the current literature regarding transnational adoption from China, identity formation, and the geopolitical relationship between the United States and China. From this analysis, several key themes emerged for which I formulated related, interview-style questions. I then interrogated myself, speaking freely into a voice recording software with transcription capabilities. This approach allowed me to visualize the connections between my lived experiences and literature review. Acknowledging that all research is influenced by human intervention and negotiation of knowledge while challenging notions of scientific objectivity, autoethnography provides the research framework to interrogate oneself, experiences, and perspectives. As an individual who has undergone transnational adoption, my experiences are worthy of study.

In this thesis, I will investigate how my own personal experiences as a transnational, transracial Chinese American adoptee reflect the social, cultural, and economic historical and contemporary geopolitical relations between the United States and China. Firstly, China and the United States have a long, evolving history that complicates and informs the United States' increasingly negative attitudes towards China in the contemporary age. Secondly, international

adoption is an inherently economic enterprise, and financial considerations shape the journey of every adoptee, especially when economics contour the relationship between China and the United States. Finally, the individual experiences of transnational Chinese American adoptees represent unique determinants of identity formation, including dual liminality,² community building efforts, and return trips. These three concerns—political history, economic intersections, and individual experience—are the guiding themes of this thesis. In the first section, I will provide a brief historical overview of the relationship between China and the United States before identifying how that relationship has impacted Chinese adoptees. Then, in the second section I will discuss the international adoption industry and the economic considerations of adoption networks as they relate to Chinese adoptees' identity formation. Finally, the last section will focus on community building and contact with China and other Chinese adoptees.

² Liminality locates the positioning of individuals “betwixt and between” hegemonic classifications in cultural space (Beech, 2011; Turner & Abrahams, 2017). Dual liminality refers to the experience of betweenness in two different spaces or identities—in this case, the positioning of Chinese adoptees between white American identities and Chinese American identities (Dao, 2017).

Shifts in the China-United States Relationship

It was five minutes before the start of class, and the idle chatter of middle school boys filled the room. The topic of conversation shifted to China as it was loudly proclaimed that Chinese people are just evil communists. Heads turned my way, and I was frozen in place. A normal day of history class became a striking moment of exposure, my fractured identity laid bare. At once, feelings of both shame and confusion flooded my psyche. It was the first time I'd had to reckon with the negative perceptions of China and how they are projected onto me. How could a country with which I felt no connection have such tangible impacts on my life? Guilt compounded on guilt, over being Chinese but also over not wanting to be Chinese. One thought dominated my mind: it would be so much easier to be white – it's how I feel on the inside anyway.

A Brief Overview of China-United States Relations and Transnational Adoption

Although the presence of Chinese immigration to the United States dates back to the 1850s, I am most concerned about the Cold War period and onwards in this work because this era signified a shift in the geopolitical stance of the United States towards China. The War Brides Act of 1945 permitted the foreign wives and children of U.S. servicemen to enter the country, while other forms of immigration were heavily restricted (J. H. X. Lee, 2016). Prior to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, Asian adoptees, alongside military brides, were granted unique access to the United States in the context of broader exclusionary measures against all other Chinese immigration. Rather than a sense of altruism, however, this exception was granted on the basis of Cold War diplomacy (McKee, 2022). The United States, engaged in both physical and ideological battles against the Communist power of the Soviet Union and its

allies, nurtured a culture of moral superiority that manifested in significant, diverse ways for Asian Americans. U.S. adoption from China followed a precedent set by the transnational adoption of South Korean children that started in the aftermath of the U.S. involvement in the Korean War (Tuan & Shiao, 2011). What started as a response to war-related child displacement eventually transformed into a robust industry, offering new avenues for both family and nation building efforts (Kim, 2010).

Following Mao Zedong's 1949 Communist Revolution, China was cast as a dangerous Soviet ally, diametrically opposed to U.S. ideals of freedom and capitalism (Minami, 2024). Thus, intercountry adoption efforts focused on U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea whose orphans were viewed predominantly as war orphans. In fact, these adoptions were viewed favorably by the United States as strengthening political ties with their Asian allies against a threatening Communist enemy (Cheng, 2007). Chinese adoption, however, was not completely absent from the picture. Over one hundred Chinese children were adopted out of Hong Kong in the wake of China's Communist Revolution (Choy, 2013). They joined the thousands of other adoptees in the public's perception as victims in need of saving. U.S. ideals of saviorism and rescue, in addition to key legislative exceptions to immigration law, facilitated the efficient placement of these Asian children into waiting homes.

Nonetheless, Chinese adoption to the United States was a relatively minor phenomenon while the two countries remained at odds. It was not until Mao's death and President Deng Xiaoping's rise to power that Chinese relations with the United States began to thaw. Partnering with Beijing allowed the United States to put pressure on the Soviet Union to advance Strategic

Arms Limitations Talks,³ taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet split⁴ (Minami, 2024). This flip in China's allegiance was concurrent with the infamous One-Child Policy that generated an unprecedented population of orphaned Chinese children, particularly females in rural localities. The synchronicity of the two phenomena set the stage for strategic diplomacy, an exchange of both children and trust. China officially opened its doors to international adoption in 1991, hoping to address a surge in abandoned children resulting from crackdowns on domestic adoptions (Johnson, 2020). The political significance of this was evident in the U.S. briefing reports for prospective parents. These reports stressed the importance of cultural sensitivity to China more strongly than those related to transnational adoption from other countries (Andrew, 2007).

China positioned itself as a favorable international adoption hub, and Americans flocked to this new source of babies in the face of declining orphan populations stateside. Both sides benefited from this exchange, as China could offload the economic burden of caring for a huge orphan population while U.S. families received “racially flexible”⁵ children (Dorow, 2004; Wang, 2016). This racial flexibility was a significant selling point for Asian children at large, as there had been backlash by activists regarding transracial adoptions of African American children by white families (Volkman, 2020). Asian children were seen as more easily assimilable, and the risk of birth parent interference was mitigated by an ocean's worth of distance. By the 1970s, China was no longer seen as a dangerous foreign enemy but rather a potential new ally on the rise (Minami, 2024). Following President Deng Xiaoping's policies of

³ These talks were an effort to maintain roughly equivalent nuclear capabilities between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both countries reached an agreement in 1972, aided by the United States' outreach in China.

⁴ The Sino-Soviet split was the breakdown of relations between China and the Soviet Union, the result of ideological differences and a border conflict.

⁵ Chinese babies were seen as “different but not too different” in direct opposition to the construction of Black babies as “too different”. Asians, as a model minority, were more acceptable as entrants into the white family (Dorow, 2006a).

reform and opening, a tentative peace was reached between the United States and China (Minami, 2024). Adoption from China grew steadily during this time, reaching an annual peak of 7,903 adoptions in 2005 (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

As the two countries became more politically and economically enmeshed, China's position rose on the world stage. What was once considered a developing country was quickly establishing itself as a major economic player. China's unprecedented GDP growth and their growing trade deficit with the United States began to shift the U.S. perception of China back to the negative. The global financial crisis of 2008 marked a significant change in the United States-China relationship. While the United States and Europe struggled to respond and recover from the setback, China weathered the storm with surprising resilience. As a result, China narrowed the economic deficit between the United States while solidifying their place as a genuine world power (Garrett, 2011). Both China and the United States resorted to protectionist policies and sentiments, despite the two countries' increasing economic interdependence (Prasad, 2009). In the face of deepening geopolitical tensions, the adoption industry between China and the United States remained relatively stable, staying in a reliable range between 2,000 and 3,000 adoptions per year from 2008 to 2016 (Y. Huang, 2024).

Since then, relations between the United States and China have gradually devolved as a result of President Xi Jinping's increasingly aggressive foreign policy and President Donald Trump's commitment to a hardline approach (*Timeline*, n.d.). Adoptions from China were halted in 2019 due to the global pandemic, but this was simply an abrupt end to an already declining practice. The industry failed to recover, as only 16 visas were issued for intercountry adoptions from China in 2023. The nail in the coffin came in September of 2024 when China officially halted international adoptions (*Status of Intercountry Adoptions in People's Republic of China*,

2024). Little explanation was provided by the Chinese government, as a spokesperson for their foreign ministry claimed the move was to align with the spirit of relevant international covenants (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). International adoption and geopolitics are intricately intertwined with each other, and it is only through examining their points of intersection that their histories might be understood in benefit of those affected. Chinese adoptees, often brought to the United States below the age of three, are uniquely shaped by those histories and the dynamic perceptions that result.

Adoptees Within American Perceptions of Asian Americans

Chinese adoptees in the United States predominantly join white families where they are raised in the absence of any direct connection with their birth culture (Volkman, 2020). Despite having tangential contact with Chineseness or Asianness, adoptees are subject to the very same stereotypes that are applied to other Asians and Asian Americans. Two of the most dominant stereotypes are the perpetual foreigner myth and the model minority myth.

The Perpetual Foreigner

The perpetual foreigner myth traces its roots back to the very first major immigration of Asian people to the United States, primarily Chinese laborers in the 1850s. For over a century since, Asian Americans were vilified and otherized. Asiatic Exclusion restricted Asian immigration to America while the courts continued to exclude them from civic participation, labeling them unequivocally not white and thereby not American (E. D. Wu, 2016). These policies, in addition to Orientalist attitudes, cemented the general public's perception of Asian Americans as unassimilable foreigners (A. Wu, 2023). While categorically untrue, the perpetual foreigner myth is a pervasive, often implicit attitude applied to all Asian Americans, regardless

of actual immigration status. Adoptees to the United States have a complicated relationship with foreignness, as they have very few memories of their uniquely foreign origins. Yet it is that foreignness, shrouded in the haze of infant memories, which defines so much of how Chinese adoptees are perceived.

“Where are you really from?” is a loaded question often aimed at Asian Americans who are perceived to be foreigners in the United States. Its micro aggressive implication is that Asian Americans are assumed to be outsiders in their own country. The question contains an additional layer of tension for Chinese adoptees who have even less concrete standing with regard to their birth and origins. Adoptees’ sense of belonging, already a sensitive topic, is particularly prominent in those moments of questioning. In this way, the anti-Asian stereotype of perpetual foreignness directly complicates Chinese adoptees’ sense of identity and belonging (Ashlee, 2019).

The recent coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic brought this perception of foreignness to the forefront, exacerbating the mismatch between adoptees’ foreign origins and their American identity. The pre-existing negative views of China in the United States made transferring blame to all Chinese and Asian people an easy transition. Adoptees in a study by Wing and Park-Taylor (2022) reported an increased awareness of their racial perception as Asian due to the hypervisibility of Asian Americans during the pandemic. Like the majority of Asian Americans, Chinese adoptees were subject to racism and a persistent sense of danger. Despite their intimate ties to whiteness through their parents, the pandemic forced some adoptees to challenge the pervasive colorblind narrative, sometimes even coming from their own parents.

The Model Minority

The model minority myth spawned, in part, due to the arrival of many highly-skilled Asian immigrants to the United States under the auspices of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (E. Lee, 2016). Because of this sudden influx of Asians working high-paying jobs in STEM fields that would boost the United States' global standing during the Cold War, a new image of Asian Americans was born. Moreover, the model minority myth allowed Americans to discount the structural barriers to success experienced by other minority groups (E. D. Wu, 2016). Highly publicized examples of Asian American success furthered discourse that discredited the existence of racially motivated barriers to success. At a glance, the model minority myth seems innocuous, perhaps even flattering. But in reality, it sets highly unrealistic expectations for Asian Americans while obfuscating the diversity of actual Asian American experiences.

Success for Chinese adoptees is situated within the model minority stereotype of other Asian Americans as high achieving, straight-A students. The success of Asian Americans was chalked up to hard work, innate intelligence, and strict, “tiger parenting.” Chinese adoptees who externally present as any other Asian Americans with tiger parents are expected to perform to these same unrealistic standards while also acting as representatives of their birth country.

A study by Tan (2018) investigated the performance of Chinese adoptees to model minority expectations, finding that adoptees in America generally outperformed their white and other minority counterparts. Despite not being raised in an Asian household—generally purported as responsible for Asian American children’s success—Chinese adoptees matched their performance academically and socially. This could be due to parents and educators’ projected model minority expectations on the Asian American bodies of the children. It has also

been proposed that two “hyper selectivity” mechanisms might explain this phenomenon. The first is selection of the most promising orphans for adoption by the Chinese government in a bid to present well through their exported children. The other is selection of the most successful, well-suited parents for access to adoption from China, optimizing the chances for adoptee success (Tan, 2018).

The United States’ Perceptions of China and Adoptee Experiences

While the transnational adoption industry is beholden to the national interests of sending and receiving nations, transnational adoptees are more often impacted by their immediate environment. Public perceptions of China in the United States generally mirror those at the governmental level. A 2024 Pew Research Center study surveyed a nationally representative panel of U.S. adults and found that many Americans think that China is growing in influence and power. Further, they say that counteracting this is a high priority. These results reflect a larger trend of increasingly negative attitudes towards China from Americans. Since 2012, a larger percentage of Americans have reported negative attitudes toward China rather than positive attitudes, a trend that reached its lowest point in 2023 with only 14% favorable and 83% unfavorable (C. Huang et al., 2024). The majority of Chinese adoptees have experienced this decline during their lifetimes, most of them during a formative period of growth and identity development.

Some adoptees in an ethnographic study by A. Zhang (2024) detailed their experiences with this negative perception of China. For many, their first memories of learning about China involved Western-centric condemnation of their birth country, lamenting China’s deplorable conditions and inhumane laws. A common experience of transnational adoptees is being told that

they are so lucky to be in the United States. Although most would claim this statement comes from a place of admiration, it is most often felt as pity. In receiving this pity, adoptees are forced to accept negative perceptions of their birth country, distancing themselves from their Chinese ethnic identity (A. (Yang) Zhang, 2024). In the face of these tensions, Chinese adoptees have reported a desire to either distance themselves from Asianness or to fulfill the stereotypical role of a “good” Asian American. Both desires, however, result in adoptees conforming to model minority expectations.

It is not untrue to say that some adoptees do experience a great degree of upward economic mobility as a result of their adoption. From their perspective, it might seem like an incredibly lucky thing indeed. But what does being lucky entail? One of the strings attached to this luckiness is an expectation of gratitude and success as a result of being uniquely chosen. Adoptees are constantly being asked to prove their worth. They must justify the effort and capital involved in their supposed rescue by generating return on that investment through a lived model minority experience (A. (Yang) Zhang, 2024).

Economic Intersections

I can still picture it now, a shiny gold sticker placed haphazardly beneath the foot of my plastic panda figurine. In neat, black italics, the text read, “Made in China.” It was a sticker that I often felt belonged on my own body, representing some warped sense of kinship between myself and the manufactured objects around me. Like my toy panda, I was something made in China – something that could be bought and just as easily returned. Commodifying forces molded my place in the United States as conditional, predicated upon the vagaries of exchange between my adoptive home and my country of origin, China. How does one form a sense of identity as a person when their experience is so closely tied to the material economy of objects and capital?

China’s Growing Economic Presence

China has been on a steady uphill climb, exploding in GDP growth rate since 1978 (World Bank Group, 2025). While its GDP per capita is still relatively low, China has solidified its place as a key economic player in the global economy. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, which invests in infrastructure projects of surrounding countries, further cement this position as an economic hub. Meanwhile, “the [United States] is direly trying to rejuvenate and sustain its economy” (Zaidi & Saud, 2021). The United States is still the most economically powerful country in the world, but China’s rapid growth has already allowed it to compete directly with the United States on several fronts. China’s new position as an economic threat has contributed to the negative perceptions of the country and its people. Moreover, the economic relationship between the two countries has shaped the landscape of transnational adoptees and their experiences.

Transnational Adoption as an Economy

Transnational adoption is, at its heart, an economic proposition from which familial bonds are formed (Kim, 2010). As an industry, revenue estimates for transnational adoption are as high as one billion dollars (Quiroz, 2012). Adopting a child from China is a costly ordeal on its own. An average price ranges between \$12,000 and \$20,000, not including hotels or airfare (Andrew, 2007). The lucrative nature of transnational adoption and the favorable diplomatic relationship it encourages have been major contributors to the development and growth of the adoption industry between China and the United States. Behind these talks of dollars and cents, though, adoptee voices have been drowned out.

China's international adoption program developed, in part, out of the inability of local governments to care for the burgeoning orphan population. When surveyed, Chinese government officials reported a thoroughly positive view of international adoption, directly citing its benefits to adoptees themselves (N. Luo & Bergquist, 2004). Welfare institutions in China shared similar beliefs, focusing on the financial advantages of giving children to foreign families. Adoptive parents paid mandatory donation fees of around \$3,000 U.S. dollars, all of which were required to go towards improving orphanage care and conditions. For overburdened welfare institutions, international adoption represented a much needed cash injection in the face of an ever growing orphan population (N. Luo & Bergquist, 2004).

The rise of transnational adoption from China coincided with the rise of China as an export-driven economy, taking advantage of a huge surplus in labor and raw materials (Wei et al., 2017). Just as consumer products were being manufactured for developed nations, so too were babies. Chinese children, like these products "Made in China," were commodified for a Western consumer market of prospective adoptive parents (Y. Luo, 2021).

Relative to the U.S. population, parents who decide to embark on the journey of transnational adoption are predominately of higher socioeconomic status. Educational achievement, too, is overrepresented in the population of internationally adopting parents. While only 68% of U.S. families with children reported themselves as finishing high school, an overwhelming 95% of internationally adopting parents reported the same statistic (Compton, 2016). Given the exorbitant cost of adopting internationally and the complicated paperwork involved, this correlation is no coincidence; only parents who have the proper educational background and financial means can adopt internationally from China. While this privilege often translates directly to material benefits for the adopted child, it is not always the wholly advantageous position that it seems. The stark racial, economic, and cultural differences between adoptive parents and their adoptive children creates a mental disconnect, challenging the relationship and children to adapt (Briggs & Marre, 2009).

The Commodification of Adoptive Children

Adoptees gain knowledge of China and Chinese culture primarily through their adoptive parents, often through superficial “cultural tourism.” Deeper, intentional engagement with the children’s origins fosters the development of more complete cultural identities. This “culture keeping,”⁶ as opposed to cultural tourism,⁷ avoids the commodification of adoptees and their birth cultures but is often lacking in the discussions of adoptive parents (Quiroz, 2012). Not only are adoptees commodified as they are exchanged between countries, but their culture is as well. The commodification and conditional value of adoptees based on their performance to competing

⁶ Culture keeping is a form of cultural socialization that results in a retained sense of native group identity (Jacobson, 2008).

⁷ Cultural tourism is the formation of identity in the context of selectively appropriated and commodified cultural artifacts, symbols, and events (Quiroz, 2012).

norms of both cultural connection and assimilation have a profound impact on identity formation.

Surrounding the economy of transnational adoption is a culture of consumption. This cultural tourism, as described previously, commodifies the experience of Chinese adoptees into marketable products. Quiroz (2012) argues that the commodification of culture into artifacts like books promotes culture keeping as an optional, superficial process. This avenue of children's literature marketed to adoptive parents is an example of capitalism's reach into the experience of adoption. Rather than deeper, intentional engagement with communities of Chinese Americans and other Chinese adoptees, this approach presents a commodified version of Chinese culture to adoptees. For instance, very few adoptive parents interviewed by Jacobsen (2008) initiated or retained cultural contact with members of their child's racial or ethnic group. Neither did they locate themselves within spaces related to their child physically, geographically, racially, or culturally.

M. Kleinbardt et al. (2024) take a more moderate stance on cultural commodities, recognizing the potential for children's literature to present diverse representations of Asian Americans and adoption to adoptees. This representation might foster healthy communication between adoptees and their adoptive parents while promoting healthy ethnic identity formation. However, the existing children's books about transnational adoption from Asia tend to focus on the adoptive parents' perspective rather than that of the adoptees, likely a symptom of the authorship. These books also tend to present an overly optimistic image of adoption without recognizing or acknowledging the more difficult aspects of that experience (M. Kleinbardt et al., 2024). By ignoring the complications that arise from transnational adoption, children's literature denies the complete experience of the very adoptees that are consuming its stories. It is buoyant,

miraculous love wrapped up in a neatly packaged product, promising acceptance and connection without any of the messy strings attached.

This optimistic image, most likely a selling point for adoptive parents, can be described as a fairy-tale narrative which serves to ease parental anxieties over the unique nature of their parenthood. China is portrayed as a pre-modern, far away place and is often given a mystical, Orientalizing characterization. The adoptee moves from a destitute situation in China to the loving, idyllic arms of their affluent American parents. This rescue narrative is a familiar one, as it is commonly employed to justify the act of adoption, especially in response to accusations of imperialist predation and commodification of their adopted children. Parental anxieties over these racial and power differences with their adopted children are thus countered by the economic privilege that they can provide (Y. Luo, 2021). Ironically, by portraying adoption as an altruistic, non-commodifying process, these books are superficializing the experience of international adoption itself and generalizing it to a single, simplistic narrative of altruistic rescue. Moreover, it perpetuates the understanding of transracial adoption through white saviorism (Goss, 2022), an ideology that establishes the intention of white actions as alleviating the suffering of people of color (Hughey, 2014).

Adoptive parents continue to participate in the commercialization of international adoption through their trips to China. The initial journey to China follows a fairly consistent schedule: travel to the location of their prospective child, meet their new child and finalize the adoption papers, visit tourist sites and attractions throughout China, and finally leave from Guangzhou where the children are given a medical check and a U.S. visa (Dorow, 2006b). Given the complicated nature of adopting from China, most parents opt to travel with an agency or facilitator whose job is to ensure the adoption process proceeds smoothly and that parents enjoy

their time in China. In fact, for an additional fee, the adoption tour package will include visits to cultural sites and local restaurants (Dorow, 2006b). An entire industry has sprung up in Guangzhou's Shamian island where the U.S. consulate is located, including a luxury hotel and countless storefronts hawking adoption-specific goods and mementos (Dorow, 2004). The adoption experience has been commodified and tailored to the specific desires of adoptive parents by simultaneously offering them a smooth transition to parenthood and the opportunity to tour an exotic location.

Following the initial adoption, families might choose to travel back to China on what are commonly referred to as return trips or heritage tours. These tours have been strongly supported by the Chinese government as an avenue to develop relationships between adoptees and their Chinese "home." Return trips have been marketed as "visits to important cultural sites, cultural performances and, of course, shopping," making their capitalist intentions fairly obvious (Cohen, 2015). The legitimacy of these trips and their benefit to adoptees is discussed later, but it is important to note these commodifying ties.

Homeland return tours typically last between one and two weeks and include visits to major cities and tourist sites like the Great Wall of China or a panda reserve. Thus, the culture of China and adopted children's reconnection with it is distilled into superficial, temporary encounters. They may also incorporate adoption-specific itineraries such as visiting an adopted child's former orphanage or searching for original paperwork. It is often in these more rural locales that the poorness of China is exaggerated, a direct contrast to the American prosperity that adoptive parents feel they provide to their children (Powers, 2011). This ties directly to the narrative of rescue, assuaging worries of adoptive parents and ensuring that their adoptive children will not determine China as their real home. In tailoring return trips to the concerns and

whims of adoptive parents, companies and organizations ensure a satisfied customer base and steady profits.

Individual Experiences

Glancing up from the chapel lectern, I was met with the expectant faces of my peers filling the pews. Somehow, the responsibility of educating my high school class on the traditions of Chinese New Year had fallen upon my shoulders. Adding to the anxiety of public speaking was a separate fear – that I would be exposed as a fraudulent Chinese American. Given that most of my presentation came from internet searches rather than actual lived experiences, it felt like a legitimate concern. My identity as a Chinese American was destabilized as every insecurity surrounding my cultural competence was bared to the public.

Ethnic Identity Formation

For transnationally adopted children, ethnic identity is a complex concept to navigate. Ethnic identity is defined as how an individual perceives themselves and their experiences through the lens of ethnic points of origin (Sternhell & Maisel, 1995). Understanding their own ethnicity and how it relates to an adoptee's sense of self is a key aspect of their development, and a positive sense of ethnic identity has been associated with positive psychological adjustment and self-esteem in transracial adoptees (Basow et al., 2008; Yoon, 2000). However, ethnic identity formation is complicated by the differences between adoptees' ethnicities and that of their adoptive parents.

In a study of college age transracial adoptees who identify as Asian, Hartlep et al. (2024) found that the adoptees tended to associate most with the culture of their adoptive parents—including values, norms and language—but they often racially identified with the race of their birth parents, producing a unique tension for a lot of the adoptees. Confronting this distinction is essentially inevitable, as racial differences between parents and children are readily and

physically apparent. Ethnic exploration, the active pursuit of discovering and understanding their ethnicity, can be a valuable avenue to normalize the consciousness of being visibly different (Mohanty & Newhill, 2006; Song & Lee, 2009; Yoon, 2004), but it also exposes adoptees to other, potentially stigmatizing experiences (Alvarez et al., 2006; Fisher, 2003; Phinney, 2006). A Chinese adoptee in a study by Tessler and Gamache (2012), for example, felt embarrassed learning about China in class when her classmates made fun of the Chinese names. Exploration of her Chinese ethnic identity was tainted by the stigmatizing remarks of her peers.

Baden (2012) defines this process of ethnic exploration more specifically as “reculturation,” describing it as the transition from adoptee identification with their parents’ white culture⁸ to the investigation and reconnection with their culture of origin. The six stages of this model for transnational adoptees include: (1) initial cultural immersion in birth culture; (2) temporary care in the absence of birth parents; (3) adoption and beginning of cultural assimilation; (4) immigration from country of origin; (5) continued assimilation to adoptive parents’ culture; and (6) reculturation. All six stages are an inevitable part of the international adoption experience. However, it is the sixth stage, reculturation, that is of particular concern to Baden (2012), as this process of exploration and reconnection with their birth culture occurs to varying degrees in each adoptee’s experience.

A study by Shiao and Tuan (2008) investigated ethnic exploration in Korean adoptees to the United States and found that the exploration process occurred largely during early adulthood. When investigating this same process in Chinese adoptees, however, Tessler and Gamache (2012) discovered that early adolescence was the more critical period. This disparity was accounted for by the chronological difference between adoption from Korea and adoption from

⁸ Baden (2012) focuses exclusively on white parents and adoptees of other races.

China. While Korean adoptees often got their first opportunity to socialize with other Koreans and explore their cultural heritage in college, Chinese adoptees had a much broader and earlier introduction to Chinese culture. This is attributed to the time period difference between large-scale Korean and Chinese adoptions. Chinese adoptees' later adoptions coincided with technological advances that allowed adoptees and their parents to explore Chinese culture, online communities, and learning opportunities. Further, Tessler and Gamache found that both cultural heritage exploration and social exposure to co-ethnics or other Chinese adoptees were equally important contributors to the ethnic exploration process.

The Value of Ethnic Exploration

Whether or not ethnic exploration is an empowering process depends largely on the social support that adoptees receive and how they are culturally socialized. For example, many Chinese adoptees reported more positive feelings about their adoptions when their parents engaged with Chinese culture and made an effort to celebrate their children's heritage. Although acquiring an in-depth understanding of Chinese culture was unnecessary, adoptees needed to establish a fundamental level of cultural competence before they could feel comfortable having meaningful social interactions with their Chinese heritage (Tessler & Gamache, 2012).

Transnational adoptees' experience of their birth culture is distinctly different from that of non-adoptees who have been raised by parents of the same culture. This creates opportunities for adoptees to confront and struggle with their uniquely bifurcated identity. A common example is how Chinese adoptees' ability or inability to speak Mandarin Chinese conflicts with the assumptions other people make based solely on their physical appearance. Differentiating

cultural barriers to exploration and ethnic identity formation create dissonance for Chinese adoptees that they must contend with during the process of ethnic exploration (Baden, 2008).

The value of ethnic exploration is further complicated by the increased perception of stigma and greater feelings of loss that often accompany the process. Tessler and Gamache (2012) found that Chinese adoptees with higher levels of ethnic exploration perceived a higher level of discrimination and stereotyping while also feeling more self-conscious of their Chinese appearance. These adoptees also reported greater sadness about losing their birth parents. In fact, greater positive feelings about adoptees' Chinese origins were found to be associated with difficulty accepting the circumstances that facilitated their adoption, such as China's One Child Policy or the relative valuing of sons over daughters (Greenhalgh, 2004; Riley, 1997). Despite the discomfort that it produced in Chinese adoptees, ethnic exploration was ultimately an indicator of personal strength that gave adoptees an outlet to contend with feeling different from their peers (Tessler & Gamache, 2012).

Racial Socialization

Adoptive parents must not only prepare their children for cultural exploration but also the harsh realities of racism – an experience that they themselves might not be familiar with. White parents of transracially adopted children often struggle to recognize the discrimination that their children face, preferring a color-blind approach to parenting. This parental color-blindness manifests in an ambivalent attitude towards their child's birth culture while promoting assimilation into white American culture (Barn, 2013). While this inclusion into hegemonic culture may be beneficial to adopted children because they are given the tools to successfully

navigate within dominant culture, the feeling of inclusion is challenged when transracially adopted children encounter racist incidents for which they are not prepared (Langrehr, 2014).

Exposure to racism is not necessarily overt, and many Chinese adoptees more often experience it in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2009). In a study examining microaggressions among transracially adopted children from China, researchers found that almost half of the participants, aged five to nine, had experienced incidents of microaggression (E. Zhang et al., 2019). These microaggressions could target their adoption or consist of racially motivated incidents. In both cases, the transracial aspect of the parent-child relationship is critical for recognition and incitement.

Lee (2003) offered the first definition of this “transracial paradox,” describing the contradictory inclusion of transracial adoptees into mainstream, hegemonic society on the basis of their adoption while still remaining racial/ethnic minorities. The extent to which adoptees identify with either group is reliant upon their individual experiences and structural factors like geographic location, family composition, age of adoption, etc. Research by Adams et al. (2005), suggests that school diversity has a seemingly paradoxical effect on Chinese adoptees’ positive associations with Chinese identification. In contrast to the researchers’ initial hypothesis that a diverse school environment would encourage adoptees to develop positive associations with Chinese identification, their findings suggested that diversity had the opposite effect of incentivizing stronger identification with white peers. Given their unexpected observations, Adams, et al. (2005) hypothesized that this contradiction might stem from the adopted children

having more in common with white peers due to similar socioeconomic status than with the minority group peers.

Conversely, participants in a study by Reynolds (Taewon Choi) et al. (2021)⁹ reported that growing up in diverse communities was important for them to stimulate cultural growth and development. For them, the diversity promoted reculturative activities and facilitated greater adoptee socialization. Their consciousness of difference was likely reduced in more diverse spaces and therefore may not have been as salient an issue for these adoptees. Additionally, diverse cities offered more opportunities to interact with specifically adoptee-focused events, something that might not be possible in a typical white suburban neighborhood.

Chinese Adoptee Communities

R. Lee (2006) argues that Chinese adoptees represent a diaspora rather than a traditional immigrant population. Although there is no singular definition for the term, a diaspora is loosely defined as “being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes dispersed people who retain a sense of their uniqueness and an interest in their homeland” (Shuval, 2000). Chaliand et al. (1997) posit an additional element of forced dispersion. Indeed, adoptees are involuntarily displaced from their original homeland with no guarantee of return. They also exemplify many of the key elements of a diaspora, including the maintenance of a collective memory of the homeland, real and symbolic return trips, ethnic group consciousness as Chinese adoptees, the experience of racial and ethnic discrimination, and group solidarity (R. Lee, 2006).

⁹ The first author of this work is a transracial intercountry Korean American adoptee who has reclaimed his Korean name, a common practice among intercountry adoptees.

For many international adoptees, connection with other adoptees from the same country of origin is an integral source of support. Often taking the form of organized family communities, the intimate bonds that Chinese adoptees form with each other are deepened by their uniquely shared experiences (Reynolds (Taewon Choi) et al., 2021).

The formation of Chinese adoptee communities is challenged by the nature of transnational adoption itself. Adoptive families are geographically dispersed across the United States, prohibiting local adoptee communities from forming with the exception of large city centers (Fitzpatrick & Kostina-Ritchey, 2015). Physical isolation from others necessitates an alternative method of collective identity and kinship formation. The internet, for instance, has been a powerful mediator of kinship formations, allowing a network and virtual space for producing Chinese adoptee identity and connection. Adoptee kinship is defined as “relationships of intimacy and identification actualized through and necessitating continued practices of care and reciprocity” (Kim, 2010).

Korean adoptees, often serving as the vanguard for later-adopted Chinese adoptees, have formed a vast network, fashioning new identities and kinships in ways that reflect their unique experiences and personal histories. New forms of identity formation and connection have been developed by adoptees, emphasizing their imperative to create a counterpublic. This counterpublic, as described by Warner (2002), is a form of “world-making” that carves out and defines a unique space to which some Korean adoptees belong. World-making by the counterpublic of adoptees negotiates the multiplicity of experiences and connections, often within a public rather than private sphere. This lack of a private, intimate space for discussion arose directly out of the unique transnationally adopted experience (Kim, 2010).

Chinese adoptees, unlike their Korean predecessors, were able to utilize the internet much more immediately, as transnational adoption from China emerged concurrently with the rise of accessible internet. Mailing lists for those within the Chinese adoption network were generated and tailored to a host of different specifications within the community, and communication between adoptees now had a facilitating medium (Volkman, 2020). In addition to these digital methods of community formation, physical institutions were created to foster greater kinship within the Chinese adoption community. The largest of these is Families with Children from China (FCC), or Chinese Adoptee Alliance (CAA) depending on location, which has branches throughout the United States (Volkman, 2020). The diversity and scope of Chinese adoption communities in the United States offer support for adoptees to explore their heritage and connect with shared histories.

The Value of Return Trips

Following their adoption, many Chinese adoptees and their families opt to embark on a return trip back to China. Return trips offer the opportunity for transnational adoptees to reconnect with their country of origin, and a study by Santona et al. (2022) found that they generated mostly positive feelings towards adoptee's past history and birth cultures. But the value of return trips has been called into question. Homans (2007) argues that searches for a biologically determined identity more often lead to fractured and fictionalized understandings of adoptee origin. Return trips intended to complete the identity formation of adoptees have the opposite effect, splintering the self-concepts of adoptees who must confront the loss and inscrutability associated with their origins. Adoptees who have broken clean from their birth country are then forced into an obligatory search for an identity that might not truly exist.

Yngvesson (2003) brings together the established, dichotomous views of transnational, transracial adoptees as either broken clean from their country of origin or as uprooted subjects missing a crucial piece of their identity. Yngvesson asserts that the cultural identity of these adoptees is neither independent of nor contingent upon roots in their country of origin. Within this framework, the value of return trips is negotiated, as these trips require adoptees, their adoptive parents, and sometimes their birth parents to confront uncomfortable truths regarding identity and belonging. Whether this confrontation is ultimately significant in a positive or negative way seems to be dependent on the adoptee, both sets of families, and broader sociocultural factors. Regardless, Yngvesson's work clearly demonstrates that a more nuanced approach to how transnational adoption is characterized and operated is necessary to fully encompass the complexities of identity formation for transnationally adopted families.

Recently, the possibility of embarking on a return trip has been threatened. Travel to China was heavily restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many are still wary of the trip (Wing & Park-Taylor, 2022). While coronavirus is no longer an intensely salient concern, the United States has placed China in Travel Advisory Level 2, recommending increased caution. The underlying rationale is the arbitrary enforcement of local laws in China, particularly in banning exit from the country (*China Travel Advisory*, 2024). Given the devolving relationship between China and the United States, it is hard to predict when travel between the two countries might be completely safe. But the diminishing chance to experience a return to their origins could prove challenging for Chinese adoptees as they continue to explore their unique identities.

Future Research

In this section I provide a brief overview of a future research direction in each of the areas that I have considered in this thesis. First, with respect to geopolitics, the relationship between the United States and China is continually evolving. Given the current decline in international relations and attitudes towards China in the United States, future research should monitor how these changes impact Chinese adoptees. Additionally, this framework can be applied to international adoption from other countries, tracking the implications of global relations for transnational adoptees in the United States. A historical comparison and disentanglement of transnational adoption from China and Korea in the context of Cold War relations, for example, is a possible avenue for exploration. Second, concerning economics, other cultural artifacts of commodification might be examined outside of literature and adoption tourism. Lastly, in consideration of individual experiences, expanding the stories that are told allows for broader, more nuanced discussion of transnational adoption from China. Further research should focus on centering the voices of adoptees in the narrative and study of adoption.

My autoethnographic vignettes are the beginning of my journey in making sense of my own adoptee experience in relationships with broader socio-political phenomena. Moving forward, I might develop these vignettes into part of an anthology, collecting stories from other Chinese adoptees as well.

Conclusion

Investigating my identity as an adoptee from China was a deeply uncomfortable yet rewarding experience. Difficult memories that I had disregarded as inevitable fragments of reality were brought to the forefront, forcing me to contend with their undeniable impact on my life. Through articulation, I began to unwind the complexities of thoughts and feelings that had tangled themselves in my psyche.

I often encountered an innate reluctance to approach the autoethnographic portions of this thesis. Past anxieties over my identity and whether or not I fit into American or Chinese standards were replaced by new anxieties of whether my experiences would fit with those of other Chinese adoptees. What I could easily describe in other's terms was almost impossible to encapsulate on my own.

Insecurities emerged over the emotional value I placed on my experiences; how serious were they and what qualifies as impactful? Moreover, focusing on the moments of disjuncture or fracture within my experience as a transnational adoptee felt in some ways to be a betrayal to my adoptive parents. How could I complain about such a wonderful existence? As questions were answered and experiences validated, so many more were engendered. As I was reaffirmed in my identity, I was simultaneously disavowed of the notion that my identity would ever be resolved or singular.

The practice of transnational adoption from China to the United States has always been shaped by geopolitical relations between the two countries, and the identity formation of Chinese American adoptees reflect these social, cultural, economic, historical, and contemporary geopolitical relations. Broadly, three themes were investigated: shifts in the China-United States

relationship, economic intersections, and individual experiences. Autoethnographic reflections provided an entry point to each theme, centering an adoptee voice rather than parental or governmental attestations.

As the relationship between China and the United States shifted from the hostility of the Cold War to warm, economic enmeshment, transnational adoption from China became a viable and favorable exchange. While these adoptions offered a humanitarian avenue to foster positive foreign relations, Chinese children were treated as mere pieces of a geopolitical puzzle. The adopted children in the United States are subject to dual scrutiny against both people from China and Asian Americans despite being brought up in predominantly white families. Contending with increasingly negative perceptions of China by Americans and the stereotypical expectations to be perpetual foreigners and model minorities is a struggle that might not be understood by their adoptive families.

China has risen as a global economic power, rivaling the United States in several economic factors which has contributed to the aforementioned rise in negative attitudes towards China. Transnational adoption functions as an economy itself, circulating capital, commodities, and human lives. The expense of adoption from China limits the practice to relatively wealthy adoptive parents. This has the complex effect of privileging adoptees economically but distancing adoptive parents emotionally from the experiences of their children. The experience of transnational adoption has also been commodified, manifesting in a cultural tourism of superficial interaction between adoptees and their birth culture.

Ethnic identity formation for adoptees is reliant on the extent and type of ethnic exploration they engage in after their adoption. This exploration is benefitted by living in diverse

communities and being prepared by adoptive parents for the realities of racism. They are also aided by engagement with Chinese adoptee communities and return trips to China.

Ultimately, this thesis has contributed to developing further understanding of adoptee experiences in order to improve existing and future practices. It has also been an extremely valuable personal opportunity to explore and express my own history. I sincerely hope that what I have shared and the research that I have presented is helpful for others who share similar experiences.

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Author Biography

Katherine Cowser is a Biochemistry major and Asian American Studies minor in the Polymathic Scholars Honors Program at the University of Texas at Austin. She grew up in Dallas, TX, but was originally born in Wuhan, China before being adopted with her twin sister to the United States at 14 months old. It was this experience that shaped her interest in the field of transnational adoption from China.

At UT Austin, she has served in the Polymathic Scholars Leadership Panel for three years in the Small Events committee which she chaired for one year. In her free time, she enjoys having fun with her friends, embroidery, and watching sports (Formula 1, basketball, and football). After graduating, she will be applying to medical school in her gap year working at an ophthalmology clinic.