

# “Unspoken Understanding”: The Evolution of Chinese American Adoption Communities

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“My name is Jenna Cook. I was born in China at an unknown time in the winter of 1992, and my American mother adopted me on June 9, 1992. I believe adoption is more than a singular event — more than what happened to me when I changed hands on June 9th. For me, being adopted is an identity category — just like student, scientist, Chinese American, daughter, sister. I am also adopted. It is a constantly evolving, lived experience. I believe that adopted people share an unspoken understanding with each other.”<sup>1</sup> Jenna Cook, 2012.

In April 1992, China implemented the law permitting international adoption that made Jenna Cook one of the first Chinese American adoptees just two months later. Since then, over 90,000 babies and children have been adopted from China by U.S. families.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the nearly three decades since, those whose lives have been touched by adoption have experienced a “constantly evolving” journey defined by a search for answers to a growing set of common questions. Many parents wondered how to talk about adoption and race with young children. *Will my child feel out of place in our family? What can I do to help my child connect with Chinese culture? How do I explain why she was adopted?* As adoptees grew up, they began asking their own set of questions, too. Like Jenna, most don’t know exactly what time or what

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<sup>1</sup> Jenna Cook, “Reflections on Founding ‘Adopted Yalies,’” *Yale Daily News*, November 2, 2012, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2012/11/02/reflections-on-founding-adopted-yalies/>.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Department of State reports a total of 81,637 intercountry adoptions from China to the U.S from 1999 to 2018. The database does not include adoptions from 1992 to 1998, which other data suggest total over 10,000. “Adoption Statistics,” U.S. Department of State, [https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt\\_ref/adoption-statistics1.html?wcmmode=disabled](https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/adoption-statistics1.html?wcmmode=disabled); “Adoption: China,” Brandeis University – The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, accessed February 16, 2020. <https://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/adoption/china.html>; Chiaki Moriguchi, “The Evolution of Child Adoption in the United States, 1950-2010: An Economic Analysis of Historical Trends,” *Economic Review* 63, no. 3 (July 2012): 265-285, <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:hit:ecorev:v:63:y:2012:i:3:p:265-285>.

date they were born. Like Jenna, adoptees have no knowledge of their family medical history (except for the information that can be gleaned from DNA tests). And many, like Jenna, wonder what it might be like to meet their biological parents, find biological siblings, or have biological children.

The concentrated wave of Chinese American adoptions beginning in the early 1990s enabled adoptive parents to come together in communities to provide each other with mutual support in the adoption process and, later, in the parenting of adoptees. These groups drew on and added to a large body of resources through which parents propagated a created form of Chinese culture and the adoption narrative that they viewed as valuable for their children. Over time, however, the first cohorts of Chinese American adoptees began to reflect on the incongruities between these paradigms and their own needs and understandings of themselves. They began to diverge from these models, searching for new ways to understand their stories and their identities. These adoptees have since chosen to seek out their own communities based on shared experience growing up adopted, rather than shared heritage or Chineseness.

### **Celebrating nontraditional families**

In the early 1990s, some parents of Chinese American adoptees began to develop small-scale communities. At first, these communities were largely situational – that is, they formed as subsets and later offshoots of existing parent groups. Even before China legalized international adoption, a burgeoning population of single mothers was making headlines throughout the 1980s. From 1980 to 1990, the birthrate among unmarried white women between the ages of 30 and 34 surged 112%, and 104% for those between 35 and 39.<sup>3</sup> Vice President Dan Quayle brought single motherhood into America’s “culture wars” during the 1992 campaign when he attacked the “poverty of values” behind the character and story of TV’s *Murphy Brown*’s choice to become a single mother.<sup>4</sup> The relative generational cohesion of these new mothers enabled them to form connections with each other around the ongoing experiences they shared navigating the decision to have a child alone and their struggles to do so. Single Mothers by Choice was an organization started in the living room of Jane Mattes, a private practice psychotherapist from New York City and single (though not adoptive) mother.<sup>5</sup> The New York chapter, which started with eight members at its founding in 1981, reached 500 by 1998, and nationwide there were 2,000 members in the organization’s 20 chapters that same year.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Birth Rates for Unmarried Women by Age of Mother, According to Race and Hispanic Origin: United States, Specified Years, 1940-55 and Each Year 1960-2003,” National Center for Health Statistics, Center for Disease Control, 2003, accessed December 20, 2019, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/natfinal2003.annvol1\\_18.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/natfinal2003.annvol1_18.pdf); Jill Smolowe, “Last Call for Motherhood,” *Time*, Fall 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 198-99.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lipsyte, “Single Mother’s Helpers,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/10/nyregion/coping-single-mother-s-helpers.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Rivituso, “...And Baby Makes Two,” *Manhattan Spirit*, April 9, 1998, 10; Lipsyte, “Single Mother’s Helpers.”

This growing wave of same-sex and single-parent households added to the demographics of parents adopting from China, especially as rising numbers of women were waiting longer to have children and thus struggling with infertility.<sup>7</sup> “And Baby Makes Two” was the title of an article in *The Manhattan Spirit* in 1998 and a documentary produced in 1999, both chronicling the surge of New York single mothers pursuing adoption.<sup>8</sup> Single motherhood was already integral to the New York City zeitgeist at the time, and international adoption, specifically from China, became salient by association. Upon the group’s founding, none of the Single Mothers by Choice had adopted internationally, but about ninety mothers (one-fifth of the New York chapter) had by 1998.<sup>9</sup> This rise fueled the growth of more specifically adoption-oriented organizations, such as New York Singles Adopting Children.<sup>10</sup> While single mothers did not comprise all or even the majority of parents adopting from China, their preexisting organizational structures created a model that could then be utilized by all adoptive parents.

Throughout the 1980s, a very specific demographic of single mother emerged – “middle class, affluent and educated, usually white, often professional and typically over 30.”<sup>11</sup> In having the privilege and resources to access new fertility technologies and bring a child into the world “without the benefit of a father,” many (though not all) of these women initially sought to replicate the traditional model of pregnancy, birth, and biological motherhood as their first choice – adoption emerged as an alternative when faced with frustrating infertility. The issues specific to adoption from China were from the outset, therefore, very tightly intertwined with other questions of parenthood and family formation at the end of the century. Since adoptive parent groups descended directly from groups of single mothers (as well as gay partners and couples experiencing infertility), issues surrounding nontraditional family became increasingly relevant to adoptive parenting.

These parents thus devoted considerable emphasis to establishing the legitimacy of the adoptive parent and the normalcy of the adoptive family. One of the core teachings found in the literature for adoptees and their families is that there is no such thing as a “real” parent. The biological parents are referred to with the prefix “birth,” and if no qualifier is included, the speaker is presumed to be referring to the adoptive parents. While nomenclature may seem trivial, adoption awareness activism has created a qualifier for “birth” parents as a way to push back against dominant societal norms imbuing biological kin with greater authenticity.<sup>12</sup> Parents

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<sup>7</sup> Sara Dorow, “Why China?: Identifying Histories of Transnational Adoption,” in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, ed. Wu Jean Yu-wen Shen and Chen Thomas C. (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 294.

<sup>8</sup> Rivituso, “And Baby Makes Two”; Lawrence Van Gelder, “Independent Mothers Aren’t Alone,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/25/movies/film-review-independent-mothers-aren-t-alone.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Rivituso, “And Baby Makes Two.”

<sup>10</sup> Rivituso, “And Baby Makes Two.”

<sup>10</sup> Rivituso, “And Baby Makes Two.”

<sup>11</sup> Anita Micossi, “Just the Two of Us,” *Savvy*, September 1987, 44.

<sup>12</sup> The magazine *OURS*, originally a newsletter founded in 1968 by Adoptive Families of America, published a guide to “Positive Adoption Language” in 1992 that featured two juxtaposed lists of positive and negative terms. Positive: “birthparent,” “biological parent,” and simply “parent.” On the negative side: “real parent,” “natural parent,” and “adoptive parent.” “Positive Adoption Language,” *OURS*, May/June 1992, 26.

of Chinese adoptees reaffirmed this vernacular, making sure the distinction remained clear in children's books and any conversations about adoption.

Adopted children largely normalized this language, but it certainly needed to be taught. Failure to extinguish deeply ingrained biological definitions of family was permanently recorded in the short letter eight-year-old Hope wrote to her mom that was published in the Families with Children from China Kids Issue.<sup>13</sup> Hope explained that she was in an orphanage as a baby because "They didn't know where my real parents were," and that's why she got adopted.<sup>14</sup> Despite the clearly positive message that Hope felt lucky that her mom adopted her, the use of the term "real parents" opposes so many efforts of adoptive parents to teach their children that adoptive parents are real parents.<sup>15</sup>

While parents may have done everything they could to validate nontraditional family structure, adoptees still understood the societal importance of biological authenticity and the desire of parents (even their own, by attempting donor insemination) to pursue it. Adoptees also noticed other impacts of non-biological kinship on their lives and families, such as a feeling of being misplaced. In her 2010 Kids Issue essay, "A Challenging Problem and How I Solved It," fourteen-year-old Eliza wrote, "Every year at Thanksgiving when my parents and I go to Boston, I feel uncomfortable because I do not look like my family. Most of my family has dirty blond hair and grayish bluish eyes... I have dark brown hair and dark brown eyes. At Thanksgiving I sometimes think that I don't belong there because I'm not blood related to them, but they welcome me in as if I were, so I am very grateful for that."<sup>16</sup> Although Eliza concludes that she is grateful for her adoptive family welcoming her, the qualifier "as if" concedes the notion that biological ties are the standard, of which adoptive ties are merely an imitation.

Many adoptees did grow up with nontraditional families normalized and free of stigma, but this experience was mediated by privilege and environment. Seventeen-year-old Abigail published "A World of Different" in the 2011 FCC Kids Issue, in which she wrote about how her family is normal to her: "Alternative families surround me. I am part of one of these

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<sup>13</sup> Since 2003, the FCC branch of Greater New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey has published an annual Kids Issue – a magazine containing the works of FCC adoptees as young as 4 or 5 and as old as 14 or 15. These works include drawings, photographs, poems, short stories, journal entries, and written reflections by adoptees. Each piece is accompanied by the full name, Chinese name, hometown, birth town and province, and (sometimes) photo of the author. Although the publication is specifically by and for adoptees, the pieces contained in it do not necessarily pertain to adoption. Rather, they range from the kinds of creative images any child would produce – self-portraits of themselves as princesses and a high volume of panda and other animal drawings – to direct reflections on the adoptee's understanding of Chinese culture or relationship with their nascent adoptee identity. As of Fall 2015, the publication, now published jointly with FCC New England and FCC Northern California, has rebranded itself *VIEW* and includes more work from teenaged and young adult adoptees. Note: The last names of authors in the FCC Kids Issues have been omitted to preserve the anonymity of the children who published in these magazines.

<sup>14</sup> Hope S., "I Feel Lucky to Know You!" *FCC Kids Issue*, Summer 2007, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Four years later, in the 2011 Kids Issue, an even older adoptee – fifteen-year-old Rosa G. – published a poem that opens: "I miss my true parents / I long for their love and affection."<sup>15</sup> While Rosa's sentiments of missing, wondering about, and longing for her birth parents were normal and common, referencing "true parents" and a "true family" similarly implies an inherent value to biological connection that the adoptive family lacks. Julie Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 9; Berebitsky, 75-101; Rosa G., "My Mother and Father," *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2011, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Eliza S., "A Challenging Problem and How I Solved It," *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2010, 50.

unconventional families. My mother adopted me from China as a single parent when I was three months old. I was never sad that I didn't have a dad. I have no siblings, and do not resemble my mother in any physical sense. But we both worry, we both love dogs, we both have a dry sense of humor, so it's clear to me that we were meant to find each other."<sup>17</sup> The privilege of growing up in Berkeley, California, an area where alternative families surrounded Abigail, was not accessible to all adoptees, but likely played an important role in her eventual understanding of such families as common. Even if an adoptee appreciates the bonds she has with her parents, she will notice and may feel uneasy if no other families in her school or town look like hers. However, parents had varied and often limited abilities to ensure they would raise their adoptees surrounded by other single-parent or multiracial families.

Access to early parental networks and communities was indeed limited by geography and class in ways that mirrored the distribution of resources supporting parents through adoption itself. Many adoption agencies, such as Spence-Chapin in New York City, devoted resources to workshops, discussions, panels, and counseling to support adoptive families throughout various stages of adoption and parenting.<sup>18</sup> Some programming was relevant to both domestic and international adoption, such as a workshop on "Talking to Your Child About Birth Parents," but eventually, these existing support systems were transformed to target more specific populations.<sup>19</sup> In the late 1990s, Spence-Chapin facilitated discussion groups on "Tough Issues in International Adoption," such as abandonment, gender politics, rumors of stolen children, and "motherland" trips.<sup>20</sup> Travel groups – groups of adoptive parents and sometimes close family or friends who traveled together to adopt babies from the same orphanage at the same time – also served as situational communities that were highly specific to the shared experiences of adopting from China (and usually returning to a shared hometown to raise children).

The communities created by chance encounters among the first parents of Chinese adoptees, however, quickly worked to make it easier for future parents to deliberately seek out support even before they adopted their child. Jana Wolff, mother of a domestic transracial adopted son, wrote "Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother" in 1997, an article (later a book) that examined the types of emotional quandaries being discussed openly for the first time. Wolff voiced the feeling of being "woefully unprepared" to pursue a path that society had done little to groom her for. "I was on uncharted ground emotionally, with no road maps or role models," she wrote.<sup>21</sup> The level of comfort with publicly expressing novel feelings is key: this is how

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<sup>17</sup> Abigail S., "A World of Different," *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2011, 31.

<sup>18</sup> "Spence-Chapin – The Adoption Resource Center," Spence-Chapin, Dec. 12, 1996, *WayBack Machine* archives, <https://web.archive.org/web/19961212090006/http://www.spence-chapin.org/arc/scarc.html>. <sup>19</sup> Spence-Chapin, "The Adoption Resource Center," Dec. 12, 1996, *WayBack Machine* archives.

<sup>19</sup> Spence-Chapin – The Adoption Resource Center," Spence-Chapin, Dec. 12, 1996, *WayBack Machine* archives.

<sup>20</sup> Spence-Chapin, "The Adoption Resource Center," Dec. 12, 1996, July 9, 1997, February 11, 1998, *WayBack Machine* archives.

<sup>21</sup> Jana Wolff, "Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother," *Adoptive Families*, November 2000, 17.

adoptive parents were able to find and connect with a cohort of like-minded, engaged parents willing to guide them.<sup>22</sup>

Parents like Wolff coalesced into more deliberately connected, formal communities dedicated from the outset to serving parents' emotional and practical needs. Families with Children from China (FCC) was originally founded explicitly as a parent support group, though the group quickly expanded to embrace a multifaceted mission.<sup>23</sup> A pamphlet distributed at the 2000 Chinese Culture Day event, "FCC's Beginnings: Three Personal Histories," shed light on the motivations and mindsets of the organization's founders, and FCC's view and portrayal of its own origins.<sup>24</sup> The document confirmed the narrative that these communities grew from a few "fortuitous" meetings and word of mouth. These encounters and connections brought FCC's founders together even before they adopted their children. In fact, the daunting process of international adoption, illegible to many parents like Wolff, prompted many parents to open up to the advice and help of strangers they might never have connected with otherwise.<sup>25</sup>

The language and structure of FCC's mission statement, first formalized in the October 1996 edition of their quarterly newsletter, reflect the original reasons why adoptive parents came together. FCC characterized the ways in which adoptive families supported one another as "nurturing" – but interestingly, they emphasized the nurturing of "parenting," while the desire to nurture children was expressed only later, in the third portion of the mission statement. The overall goal of legitimizing non-biological kinship and the drive to create communities of nontraditional families were tightly intertwined, and together, these shaped early approaches to parenting adopted children.

## Constructing Chineseness

The 2012 documentary *Somewhere Between* profiles four teenaged adoptees and chronicles their experiences navigating complex issues of identity as they grow up in predominantly white communities, meet other transracial adoptees, travel back to China, and even search for their birth families.<sup>26</sup> The documentary's title itself embodies the struggles faced by many adoptees – the feeling that conventional or expected labels don't quite fit. Are adoptees

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<sup>22</sup> Wolff says talking about her uncomfortable thoughts and feelings led her to "good company." Wolff, "Secret Thoughts," 17.

<sup>23</sup> Families with Children from China is a name shared by several regional organizations across the US that are distinct from one another and administratively independent. FCCNY was the first such chapter to be created and has developed separately from the other chapters, which also have slightly varied goals and activities. In this paper, FCC will be used to refer largely to FCCNY, though much of the analysis is applicable to other FCC branches as well. "Families with Children from China Greater New York – Who We Are," Families with Children from China, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://fccny.org/about>.

<sup>24</sup> Aileen Koger, Susan Caughman, and Laurie Heineman, "FCC's Beginnings: Three Personal Histories," in *Families with Children from China Recognizes its Founding Members: Chinese Culture Day 2000*, Families with Children from China, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Wolff, "Secret Thoughts," 17.

<sup>26</sup> "Somewhere Between – About the Film," *Somewhere Between*, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://somerwherebetweenmovie.com/about-film>.

Chinese or American? Can they even claim a Chinese American identity? Is an adoptee more white or more Asian, or some combination of both? Many parents of Chinese American adoptees strove to anticipate and learn how to address these questions, but adoptees found that there was no easy answer and continued to grapple with their racial and cultural identities throughout adolescence and young adulthood.<sup>27</sup> The evolution of this problem was partly defined by the goals and strategies of adoptive parents' communities.

Parents of Chinese adoptees began to answer questions of culture, race, and ethnicity in parenting in the mid-1990s. The FCC mission statement references a desire to "integrate," but not with the assimilationist approach taken by an earlier generation of transnational, especially Korean American, adoptees – race-blind erasure of the adoptee identity in favor of instilling a completely American identity.<sup>28</sup> Notably, as elucidated by Barbara Melosh, those who adopted Korean children during the first post-war waves did so on the tail of a movement within domestic adoption to deliberately "'match' parents and children by race, ethnicity, religion, and other characteristics, thereby creating the 'as if begotten' family – one closely approximating biological kinship."<sup>29</sup> While the strategy may have worked for placements of white children within white middle-class families, this attitude towards adopted kinship was ill-suited for the incoming transnational adoptees. The documentary *First Person Plural* (2000), directed by an adult Korean adoptee, highlighted the conflicts of identity and unanticipated racial issues she faced later in life, spurring discussion that prompted the next generation of adoptive parents to take a different approach. Rather than integrate by emphasizing sameness, parents of Chinese American adoptees reversed that model and strove instead to "celebrate our cultural and racial differences." In doing so, parents hoped to avoid the cognitive dissonance many Korean adoptees experienced when they were raised to view themselves as no different than their white families and neighbors, while a long legacy of Asian exclusion prevented them from being recognized as authentically American by much of the country. By attempting to actively acknowledge and engage in Chineseness, adoptive parents effectively placed their children in that "somewhere between," telling them that they could be both Chinese and American at the same time.

While Asian American parents could passively integrate culture into everyday life, adoptive parents relied on "culture bites" to create ways for their very young children to access and understand "Chineseness."<sup>30</sup> In her essay "Embodying Chinese Culture," Toby Alice Volkman goes further to argue that the adoption community invented the very idea of a "birth culture" in the first place, and along with that concept came the implicit need to preserve and

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<sup>27</sup> The director and producer of *Somewhere Between*, in fact, was a parent of a Chinese American adoptee.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Phantom Lives, Narratives of Possibility," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Alice Volkman (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 219.

<sup>29</sup> Lisa Cardyn, "Review of *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* by Barbara Melosh," *Law and History Review* 22, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 671.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Anagnost, "Scenes of Misrecognition: Maternal Citizenship in the Age of Transnational Adoption," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 8, no. 2 (2000): 413.

acknowledge it.<sup>31</sup> However, in trying to directly remedy the isolation of Korean adoptees, parents of Chinese adoptees drew criticism for their treatment of culture as well.<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Alice Honig argues that transnational adopters homogenize culture without nuance, creating an “official fiction” that there is some “true” sense of culture.<sup>33</sup> Instead of portraying the complex politics of adoption (i.e. the domestic realities for Chinese parents that counter the “tightly held fantasy” that western adoption was the only and best option), parents prefer telling their children cultural stories that enable those parents to avoid any responsibility.<sup>34</sup> To compensate for facilitating the removal of the child from the birth culture, parents crafted a new form of culture that was presented as an equal (or at least sufficient) substituted replica of that culture.<sup>35</sup>

These invented forms of culture tended to rely on the visible and tangible. In 2001, the Long Island and Queens newspaper *Newsday* published an article called “The Chinese Connection,” which included large color photos embodying multiculturalism in the adoptive home: Chinese calligraphy and American toys juxtaposed as home décor, and a mother and daughter both wearing traditional Chinese attire. The overlaid caption stated that the mother wants her daughter to “absorb Chinese Culture” and that “both are learning the Chinese language.”<sup>36</sup> Although perhaps stereotypical, these aesthetic performances of Chinese culture were fairly common in Chinese American adoptive families. One of the featured families, the Patricks, also chose to give their adopted daughters Chinese first names, which were more often retained as middle names behind American first names. The Patricks are quoted stating that in Flushing Chinatown, their children can “blend into the Chinese community.... If they decide to live their life in an ethnic way, marry Chinese or locate to a Chinese neighborhood, the last thing we would want is for them to feel like outcasts in their own community. If they someday decide they have no interest in their heritage, that will be their decision to make, but we will have provided all the information they need to help them make that decision.”<sup>37</sup> The language used by the Patricks (i.e. referring to Chinese culture as “ethnic”) and the assumptions they make (that their children “feel most comfortable” where they blend in racially) would be challenged by scholars and, later, adoptees themselves. Granted, adoptive families had varying capacities to fulfill the FCC community’s goals of fostering appreciation for their children’s heritage, and the literature and media often criticize parents’ imaginative production of Chinese culture for a lack of authenticity. However, the “radical new openness about both race and adoption” apparent in these adoptive parents’ willingness to provide their children with “all the information they need” about their adoption and their heritage represented a sharp departure from previous attitudes.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Toby Alice Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North American,” in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Alice Volkman (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 97.

<sup>32</sup> Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture,” 83.

<sup>33</sup> Honig, “Phantom Lives,” 217.

<sup>34</sup> See work by Kay Johnson.

<sup>35</sup> Honig, “Phantom Lives,” 217.

<sup>36</sup> Sorah Shapiro, “The Chinese Connection,” *Newsday*, March 31, 2001, G5.

<sup>37</sup> Shapiro, G5.

<sup>38</sup> Toby Alice Volkman, “Introduction: New Geographies of Kinship,” in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed.

To a limited extent, parents' efforts have been acknowledged as incrementally age-appropriate ways of establishing a positive foundational sense of cultural identity. FCC's Chinese Culture Day, an annual event centered around celebrating different aspects of Chinese culture, is often discussed by scholars as particularly emblematic of parents' reductionist approaches towards culture.<sup>39</sup> The 1999 Culture Day program, for example, featured a number of traditional Chinese dance performances by the NY Chinese Cultural Center and a Chinese theater workshop on Peking opera. Many adoptive parents also sought the "authenticity" of an ongoing engagement with Chinese culture by forming ties with Chinese and Chinese American members of their communities.<sup>40</sup> Mei-Yin Ng, "a professional dancer, choreographer and teacher of Chinese descent," served as that bridge to "authenticity," creating a program – the Laurel Project – encouraging "appreciation and understanding of Chinese cultural heritage, language, customs and folklore" that was specifically customized for Chinese American adoptees.<sup>41</sup> Although not explicitly stated, the programming provided by the Laurel Project was heavily pitched to adoptees' developmental stages, and the strategies employed were age-specific, including "music, dance, drawing, creative movement, games, story-telling, family events and outings to festivals."<sup>42</sup>

Although one might find fault with adoptive parents' approach from a strictly anthropological perspective, it is also worth acknowledging the intentions and emotional strategies behind these practices – chief among them, to boost children's self-esteem. Some adoptive parents were psychotherapists, social workers, and anthropology professors, but many had no training in how to handle complex issues of race and culture in child-rearing before adopting. The suggestion that by having Chinese calligraphy in the home, wearing traditional Chinese clothes, or learning Chinese dance, it is possible to simply "absorb" Chinese culture might be far-fetched, but the ultimate (though less talked-about) goal was still meaningfully worked towards – to "celebrate" Chineseness and difference so that children wouldn't feel shame or embarrassment about their identities as adoptees. This attitude of openness and continued sense of navigating a rapidly changing and novel territory kept parents engaged in active dialogue to improve the ways they could help each other and their children.

Adoptees' own reflections similarly track the shifting goals of parents throughout their development. They tend to enthusiastically describe the ways in which Chinese culture was celebrated in their families at younger ages, while teenagers have more nuanced (and emotionally conflicted) relationships with their Chinese identities. Ten-year-old Claire, for example, offered lengthy descriptions of Chinese New Year and the Chinese Zodiac as emblems of China's "rich and varied culture" in her 2008 contribution to the Kids Issue.<sup>43</sup> Claire wrote

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Toby Alice Volkman (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>39</sup> Andrea Louie, *How Chinese Are You?: Adopted Chinese Youth and Their Families Negotiate Identity and Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 47; Volkman, "Embodying Chinese Culture," 90-91.

<sup>40</sup> Louie, 93; Louie, 35.

<sup>41</sup> Families with Children from China, Brochure for *FCC Culture Day 1999*, June 19, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> Brochure for *FCC Culture Day 1999*.

<sup>43</sup> Claire D., "Chinese Culture," *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2008, 17.

that her family celebrated Chinese New Year, often by going out for “a Chinese meal” with friends. As an added treat, Claire says, “My mom always buys us a new T-shirt. This year it will be the rat!” Claire’s excitement and animated descriptions of Chinese cultural traditions clearly reflect both the positive attitude towards Chineseness that adoptive parents sought to imbue their children with, and a confinement to visible practices and traditions that mirrored the limitations of what white parents could convey of a culture that wasn’t their own. Parents’ reliance on food, material goods, and folk legends ultimately formed the basis of what Chinese culture meant to many young adoptees like Claire.

Wrapped up in complicated relationships with Chineseness were issues of what China, the birth country, meant to adoptees. Eleven-year-old Rosa wrote in the 2007 Kids Issue, “My homeland is China because I was born there.”<sup>44</sup> Despite only living in China for nine months, Rosa accepted the notion of an intrinsic stake in or significance of her place of birth – a value that is heavily constructed, rather than innate.

Overall, young adoptees tended to reflect the positive self-esteem and lack of embarrassment about difference initiated by their parents. Specifically, nine- and eleven-year-olds Ruby and Alexandria explicitly refer to themselves as “special” for being adopted, an attitude reminiscent of the FCC mission.<sup>45</sup> As older adoptees grew into new developmental stages dominated by questioning and redefining identity, they took new approaches to these cultural narratives. Fifteen-year-old Madeleine, for example, understood that her eyes are “the first thing that people see,” and that they “define” her as Chinese. However, she also pushed back against the dominance of this ethnic identity, wanting to be defined in other ways too – as “a dancer, a friend, a cheerleader, a student, a daughter and much much more” – traits that have nothing to do with Chineseness or adoption.<sup>46</sup> Despite parents’ efforts to normalize difference, many adoptees, as they grew older, came to understand the ways in which race was inevitably perceived by others, and some, like Madeleine, wished to transcend this external racial identity because it did not adequately align with their internal identities.

Although ostensibly “somewhere between,” many adolescent and young adult Chinese American adoptees wrote about feeling “whitewashed.”<sup>47</sup> At sixteen, Abigail published an essay called “Racial Identity” in the 2009 Kids Issue. Although Abigail never considered herself as “that different,” feeling white-washed by her family and community meant that she didn’t match the assumptions strangers made based on her race. Lia, age seventeen, wrote a reflection on her experiences living in China but unable to speak Mandarin as some locals assumed: “When I tell people I don’t understand or that I can only speak Chinese a little, I know they are disappointed. Heck, I’m often disappointed in myself for not being better in Chinese. This one man told me, ‘You’re Chinese so you should know Chinese.’ His words stung.”<sup>48</sup> Although

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<sup>44</sup> Rosa G., “My Trip to my Homeland,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Summer 2017, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Ruby M., “Being Adopted,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2010, 61; Alexandria O., “Top 10 Reasons I Love Being Adopted,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2008, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Madeleine D., “My Eyes,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2008, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Abigail S., “Racial Identity,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2009, 25.

<sup>48</sup> Lia P., “Being Adopted,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2011, 20.

many adoptive parents enroll their children in Mandarin lessons, adoptees often don't reach advanced, let alone fluent, proficiency, and Lia's case speaks to the feeling of insufficiency with regards to the authenticity of her Chinese identity. Notably, Lia's greater comfort with and pride in her "heritage" only came after living in China, suggesting that perhaps her first-hand experience provided a level of ownership unreachable through learning Chinese dance and characters. These stories demonstrate that identifying as Chinese has become a much more complex and fraught issue for many adoptees, tied in with their struggles with feeling like outsiders whether they are in the racial minority or part of the racial majority. Chineseness is not always something that can be relegated to Chinese New Year and mooncake season – it can affect adoptees in their everyday interactions.

However, whether adoptees are affected by their Chineseness and whether they actively identify as Chinese – or even Chinese American – are two separate questions. Later in her reflection, Lia states, "I categorize myself as Chinese-American but sometimes I feel like I can't even rightfully call myself that. Yes I am Chinese by birth but I don't really have any direct connection with my Asian heritage apart from the occasions when my family goes to Boston's Chinatown with friends for the Spring Festival."<sup>49</sup> While adoptees may have been ascribed the Chinese American identity by their parents, they also felt excluded from or lacking in affinity towards the broader Chinese American population.

The complicated emotions and questions surrounding adoptees' racial and cultural identities, however, should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that adoptive parents have failed in their efforts to nurture their children's multifaceted identities. Chinese American adoptees would have likely felt much greater otherness and internal confusion if they had not had a chance to practice, even if in rudimentary form, talking about their heritage and multicultural lives. Such was the case for many Korean American adoptees, for whom robust and organized efforts to collectively explore identity and, especially, race did not exist until many were already adults.<sup>50</sup> Because parents had varied approaches to multicultural childrearing, not all Chinese American adoptees will relate to their racial and cultural identities in the same way, but their interrogation of how race and Chineseness affect their lives is shared.

### **Crafting the adoption story**

Parents of Chinese adoptees drew on a large body of existing resources (such as social workers, books on transracial and transnational adoption, and adult Korean adoptee advocates) in an endeavor to create a new culture of Chinese American adoption. Since not all parents were intrinsically cognizant of how to achieve this, however, part of this culture building involved the large-scale production and proliferation of new resources designed primarily to support parents' efforts. In line with the new adoptive family tradition of story-telling, *Our Chinese Daughters*

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<sup>49</sup> Lia P., 20.

<sup>50</sup> Eleana Jean Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010), 85.

Foundation (OCDF), an organization like FCC, published an anthology of stories in 1997 written by single mothers who had adopted one or two daughters from China.<sup>51</sup> For many adoptive parents – and especially single mothers who were challenging multiple societal norms at once – having their own experiences, doubts, and worries reflected back at them from the stories of others was likely a source of strength and affirmation.

Other books and parenting aids were produced for a joint audience of parents and children that celebrated and canonized the adoption story itself.<sup>52</sup> These books were frequently publicized on the websites of groups like OCDF, along with exhaustive lists of Chinatowns, Chinese holidays, and Chinese language learning materials.<sup>53</sup> These types of resources were in high demand by parents seeking to immerse their young children in created Chinese culture right from the start. Similarly, books like *Let's Talk About It: Adoption* by Fred Rogers and *Beginnings: How Families Come to Be* by Virginia Kroll, both published in 1994, alongside allegories of animals that adopt animals of a different type, like *Stellaluna* and *The Mulberry Bird*, contributed to children's normalization of nontraditional families.<sup>54</sup>

The growing Chinese American adoption community fueled the production of books that replicated an increasingly archetypal version of the specific stories of Chinese American adoptees – a story that was, at least at first, heavily idealized, politicized, and gendered. Between 1999 and 2018, 85% of the children adopted from China were girls, a percentage that would be even higher for adoptions between 1992 and 2005.<sup>55</sup> This overwhelming trend is paralleled in the books written about American adoption of Chinese babies, which feature almost exclusively female adoptees. Moreover, these books were heavily geared towards an audience of children in preschool-kindergarten, who could read these books with their parents as their first stories about adoption, a framing that significantly affected their tone and content.<sup>56</sup>

A basic formula for the adoption story was established. First, most children's books about Chinese American adoption focused on the events immediately surrounding the adoption event – the decision to adopt, the process of waiting, the first encounter, and the short-term readjustment upon return to the U.S. – while periods of conflict in the family or turmoil (and later resolution) were left out.<sup>57</sup> Also, children's adoption books tended to portray “uniformly positive” reactions of family and friends to the adoption event, which is consistent with the larger aim to boost children's self-esteem with respect to their adoption.<sup>58</sup> *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*, the story of a single mother who adopts a baby girl from China, does just this: upon arrival back in the U.S., the adoptee's new family is all waiting “with lots of hugs and

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<sup>51</sup> “Our Chinese Daughters Foundation – Home,” Our Chinese Daughters Foundation, Jan. 17, 1999, *WayBack Machine* archives, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990117100321/http://indtech.itilstu.edu/~Liedtke/OCDF.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Jacki Fitzpatrick and Erin Kostina-Ritchey, “US Families’ Adoption of Chinese Daughters: A Narrative Analysis of Family Themes in Children’s Books,” *Family Relations* 62, no. 1 (February 2013): 61.

<sup>53</sup> Our Chinese Daughters Foundation, “Home,” Jan. 17, 1999, *Wayback Machine* archives.

<sup>54</sup> Fred Rogers, *Let's Talk About It: Adoption* (New York: PaperStar, 1994); Janell Cannon, *Stellaluna* (New York: Scholastic, 1993); Anne Braff Brodzinsky, *The Mulberry Bird* (Indianapolis: Perspectives Press, 1986).

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Adoption Statistics.”

<sup>56</sup> Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey, “A Narrative Analysis,” 61; Fitzpatrick and Kostina Ritchey, 58.

<sup>57</sup> Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey, 66.

kisses. Everyone wanted to look at you.”<sup>59</sup> One of the powerful tools employed in *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* is the use of the first and second person to tell the adoptive mother’s and adoptee’s stories, respectively. This strategy makes the book’s audience and purpose clear: for an adoptive mother to tell her daughter her story – their story.

While books geared towards younger children were centered around positivity and the love of the adoptive parents, more difficult and complex issues surrounding adoption also had a place in books geared towards slightly older adoptees for whom such issues are salient.<sup>60</sup> “Mommy far, Mommy near: An Adoption Story,” for example, portrays a young adopted daughter asking questions about her adoption – such as why there wasn’t room for her in China, and whether her birth mom loved her.<sup>61</sup> While these children’s books might be subject to critiques of oversimplification or a focus on a parent-created narrative, they are also representative of adoptive parents’ efforts to actively and openly discuss adoption with their children, which is important in and of itself.

The conversations started by parents and supplemented by children’s books and other resources like children’s workshops were absorbed and processed by adoptees, who later replicated these interpretations of their adoption narrative in their own writing.<sup>62</sup> Juju was twelve when her piece “Before/During/After my Birth” was published in the 2008 Kids Issue.<sup>63</sup> Juju clearly distinguished between the terms “birth mom” and “mom,” and imbued each of her two sets of parents with characteristics and identities common to adoptee narratives (and some that are unusual). The birth mother was acknowledged as carrying the adoptee (“I was being made in my birthmother’s stomach”), while the adoptive mother was depicted as having “worked hard” (presumably to apply for adoption, or even to simply afford becoming a parent) and made “happy” by the birth of her eventual daughter.

The parallel narratives of the birth mom having a child and the adoptive mom waiting for a child were assimilated directly from children’s books to adoptees’ own storytelling. For example, *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* begins, “Once upon a time in China there was a baby girl who lived in a big room with lots of other babies... each one was missing something – a mother. Far across the ocean was a woman who also had many friends, but she was missing something too – a baby.” This language evokes the narrative of longing that many single mothers used in describing their motives for pursuing single parenthood, and applies that emotional context to the adoptee, by stating that the adoptee was also missing something. Thirteen-year-old Melody practically replicates *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* in her story called “My Adoption:” “My Mom was working then but she felt someone was missing in her life. She

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<sup>59</sup> Rose Lewis, *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Boston, Little, Brown: 2000), 22.

<sup>60</sup> Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey, “A Narrative Analysis,” 67.

<sup>61</sup> Carol Antoinette Peacock, “Mommy Far, Mommy Near: An Adoption Story,” accessed December 20, 2019, <https://www.carolpeacock.com/mommy-far-mommy-near.php>.

<sup>62</sup> Social worker Jane Brown created and ran “Playshops” designed to engage children of all ages in reflection on their adoption through a series of age-appropriate activities and exercises, and to empower them with positive understandings of their lives as adoptees. Volkman, “Embodying Chinese Culture,” 105; Volkman, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>63</sup> Juju C., “Before/During/After my Birth,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2008, 41.

wanted a child.”<sup>64</sup> By translating this type of storytelling to their own writing, Juju and Melody crafted their own adoption narratives within the frameworks of the communal stories they had read and heard.

The One Child Policy was often part of mainstream media narratives surrounding Chinese adoption as a leading explanation for why the adoption was necessitated in the first place and was therefore incorporated into adoptees’ understandings of their stories. In the decade following China’s legalization of international adoption, writing on adoption often included reference to the One Child Policy and infant abandonment. *New York Magazine* published an article in 2000 called “Red Diaper Brigade” profiling New York families with children from China. The article explained why Chinese babies were abundantly available by invoking the familiar refrain that “Chinese families preferred boys.” “The Baby We Can’t Ignore,” a 2001 article published in the women’s magazine *Marie Claire*, included a shocking and disturbing image of a baby girl’s dead body lying in a road, ignored by those who passed by.<sup>65</sup> Calling the baby “unwanted” and “dumped” is partly framed as a critique against the government’s policy, but inevitably places blame with individual families and a stereotyped conception of Chinese culture as well. Very few children’s books mentioned the policy by name, preferring the softer narrative that birth parents couldn’t keep the adoptee because of poverty, but it was widely discussed among parents, who sought to transmit the politically and emotionally charged reality to their children in more accessible and age-appropriate ways.<sup>66</sup> This popular narrative would not be substantively challenged, even after work done by Kay Johnson in the 1990s revealed the domestic realities faced by many Chinese families who wanted a daughter but needed a son, or wanted to adopt but were legally prohibited from doing so.<sup>67</sup>

American presumptions of widespread sexism in Chinese culture caused the dialogue surrounding China’s family planning policies – and adoption itself – to be highly gendered. For example, the figure of the birth mother significantly overshadows that of the birth father in storytelling. In *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*, the adoptive mother describes a moment with her baby after the whirlwind of attention: “I held you tightly, kissed you softly and cried. The tears were for your Chinese mother who could not keep you.”<sup>68</sup> Although no background is provided (and likely no information is known) about the circumstances of the baby’s birth, it is assumed by default that the primary figure who bore the burden of giving up a beloved child for lack of better options is the birth *mother*.

Tales such as these construe birth mothers as protagonists in painful stories of loss – a version of the narrative often told to adoptees because it removes blame from both the birth

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<sup>64</sup> Melody H., “My Adoption,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2011, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Abigail Haworth, “The Baby We Can’t Ignore,” *Marie Claire*, June 2001, 72-73.

<sup>66</sup> Lois Mellina, “Parents advised of ways to explain abandonment to children,” *Adopted Child* 15, no. 2 (February 1996).

<sup>67</sup> Kay Johnson, “The Politics of the Revival of Infant Abandonment in China, with Special Reference to Hunan,” *Population and Development Review* 22, no. 1 (1996): 86; Kay Johnson, “Chinese Orphanages: Saving China’s Abandoned Girls,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 30 (1993): 64.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis, “Crazy Cakes,” 30.

mother and the child, and instead places it on the government and society.<sup>69</sup> Emma wrote a poem at age eight that begins, “When I lived in China there was a rule. / You were only allowed to have 1 baby. / So my 1 mom took me to the orphanage... / My 2<sup>nd</sup> mom wanted a child so much... / So she took a plane to China and when she got me she swung me in the air.”<sup>70</sup> Emma displayed a clear understanding of the One Child Policy as the main reason for her adoption, and of the assumed prominence of the birth mother (her “1 mom”). While she did not express any sadness, blame, or hurt at having been taken to the orphanage, Emma used the word “happy” three times in her short poem to describe the feelings of her adoptive mom and herself in relation to the adoption. The other socially sanctioned way that adoptees understood abandonment was that the birthparents had no choice – the phrase “My birth mother couldn’t keep me” is widely employed in narratives and has a similar function in diverting blame.

Juju reflects a transition towards added emotional complexity in her expression of mixed positive and negative feelings about her story. Contrary to conventional narratives centered around the struggle of the birth family in the face of the One Child Policy, Juju wrote more optimistically that her birth mother “couldn’t wait” for her, and that her birth family “cheered” when she was born. In addition to repeatedly expressing that her birth mom “took good care” of her, Juju also wrote: “during my birth I was a burden.” This brief statement suggests that Juju was able to hold two competing versions of the story in her heart at once – the one in which she was wanted by her birth mother, and the one that wasn’t so simple. Although subtle, the implicit responsibility Juju directly assumes upon herself in the statement “I was a burden” runs counter to the teachings of countless parents, social workers, psychologists, and Chinese adoption experts that emphasize the blamelessness of the child. Despite these efforts, Juju and many adoptees like her could not so easily shake the guilt and feeling of having been a “burden,” which sometimes remained tucked away until the adoptee reached the developmental stage at which these underlying feelings resurfaced.

Adoptees frequently expressed a strong sense of missing what they never knew – their birth parents<sup>71</sup> – and voiced the fundamentally unanswerable questions that children wish they could ask their birth parents: “I may never know you but I wonder who you are, and what you look like. Do you wonder too? ... Why did you leave me? ... Do you think of me?”<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth, age twelve, wrote a poem addressed to her birth mother that concludes, “I pray someday we shall meet / Forever / Then my life will be complete.”<sup>73</sup> With these three lines, Elizabeth took the language used by adoptive parents to describe the incompleteness of their lives without the adoptee, and repurposed it to apply to her feeling that her birth mother is the thing missing from

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<sup>69</sup> *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Love and Loss* is a collection of stories about Chinese women who gave up daughters, based on accounts told personally to the author. Some were abandoned by boyfriends, some were cornered by China’s land allocation laws that only recognized male heirs, and many were trapped by poverty. Xinran, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother* (New York: Scribner, 2011): 13, 52.

<sup>70</sup> Emma M., “The First Time I Met My Mom Who Adopted Me,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2009, 41.

<sup>71</sup> Eliza D., “A Challenging Problem and How I Solved It,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2010, 50.

<sup>72</sup> Carrie Kitze, *We See the Moon* (Warren, NJ: EMK Press, 2003), 8-23.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth M., “Ode to My Chinese Mother,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2008, 42.

her life. This sense of longing is so strong that many teenaged and young adult adoptees are now actively searching for their birth parents.

The stories adoptees told about themselves and their adoptions thus reveal complex and fluctuating attitudes towards adoption and their identities. Despite the significant level of active engagement with and celebration of adoption undertaken by many families, some adoptees saw themselves as normal American kids and did not identify strongly with their pasts. This is evident in a number of “Where I’m From”-style poems in which adoptees claim to be from “mismatched socks and Converse shoes,” “Dad’s fried rice and Mom’s baby back ribs dripping with barbecue sauce,”<sup>74</sup> “mezuzahs, an American Girl doll,”<sup>75</sup> and a host of other quintessential symbols of their American lives. However, although young adoptees may not fully understand how their lives were changed by adoption until they are older or return to China, the sense of being lucky already exists. Juju knew she was put into a “fantastic home,” even if the process of understanding the significance of this was still in nascent stages and would continue throughout her life. Young children relied heavily on perspectives and information relayed to them by their parents, and constructed personal narratives built on details they could not possibly remember themselves.

### **Remaking the adoptive community**

While the created culture of Chinese American adoption had certain persistent motifs, it was not as static as it is often portrayed – as certain parenting issues rose and fell in salience, so did efforts to address them within the adoption community. Attempts to understand how to adopt a baby were followed by struggles to adjust, which were issues distinct from learning to engage a young child in Chinese culture, and later handling questions of identity in the teen years. Professionals recognized that adoptees’ needs were constantly evolving, and advised parents on how to navigate emotionally charged conversations with their children at different stages of development through workshops and articles, such as Lois Mellina’s “Talking With Children About Adoption.”<sup>76</sup>

Recently, an even larger change in the culture of Chinese American adoption has taken place as adoptees have transitioned into a new phase marked by significant and novel independence from parental involvement. Just as their parents before them found themselves situationally aligned within a community of international adopters, Chinese American adoptees have also formed a generational cohort. And just as their parents shared many experiences related to the adoption process, so do many adoptees share an upbringing shaped by their parents’ vision of adoptee culture. The first instances in which the adoptee herself can be heard are the documented results of parents’ efforts to encourage their children’s engagement in

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<sup>74</sup> Liane C., “I am From Mismatched Socks and Converse Shoes,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2011, 50.

<sup>75</sup> Dhalia S., “Where I’m From,” *FCC Kids Issue*, Fall 2011, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Spence-Chapin, “The Adoption Resource Center,” December 12, 1996, *WayBack Machine* archives; Lois Mellina, “Talking With Children About Adoption,” *OURS* (1991).

adoption, such as in the FCC Kids Issues. Since then, Chinese American adoptees, no longer children, have created new spaces for dialogue amongst themselves. With the transition into young adulthood, many have continued to actively engage with their identities, building upon the deliberate efforts of their parents to foster community. Even though communities of parents were not originally organized to listen to the voices of their very young children, the values that guided their parenting have ultimately enabled the vibrant communities and independent voices of adoptees today. The voice and agency of the Chinese adoptee has been largely absent from institutional and academic interpretations of adoption issues in the past, but that is beginning to change.

In some ways, these new adoptee communities have been created directly upon and within the foundations laid by adoptive parents. The idea of coming together in a community based on shared experience has been a common motif among many marginalized groups in American society (such as immigrants, religious groups, feminists, or single parents) seeking solidarity throughout history. Just as parents adopting from China built on the foundations laid by overlapping affinity groups for single parents and especially single mothers, so are adoptees now utilizing the institutional frameworks created by their parents to construct their own, connected but distinct, formal networks. The FCCNY Adoptee Board is a strong example of an established organization run by and for adoptees, building on a model developed by parents. Founded in 2017, the Adoptee Board includes sub-committees focused on specific projects (such as journalism and social media) and organizes regional events to bring adoptees together.<sup>77</sup> While the members of the Adoptee Board collaborate chiefly amongst themselves and are responsible for brainstorming and planning, the activities of the Adoptee Board are ultimately subject to the approval of the broader FCCNY Board.<sup>78</sup>

FCC as an organization, however, seems to be working towards more directly representing the voices of adoptees themselves. In fact, the current director of the Adoptee Board, Lisa Gibson, is also president of FCCNY, a break from the organization's history of being founded and run by parents. To explain why she is involved in FCC and Adoptee Board leadership, Lisa has stated she wants FCC "to remain relevant and to provide a platform for other Chinese adoptees to lead, create community, and be represented."<sup>79</sup> More adoptees are reaching young adulthood and new adoptions are declining, and Lisa suggests that this maturation of the Chinese American adoptee population has implications for the continued relevance of FCC.

The Adoptee Board strives to create a community geared towards adoptees' specific needs. According to their website, "The mission of the FCCNY Adoptee Board is to advocate

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<sup>77</sup> "Families with Children from China Greater New York – Adoptee Board," Families with Children from China, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://fccny.org/AdopteeBoard>; Families with Children from China Adoptee Board, Minutes from First Meeting of the FCC Journalism Committee, October 27, 2019; Families with Children from China Adoptee Board, Minutes from Journalism Committee, 2017-2018; Families with Children from China Adoptee Board, Adoptee Board First Meeting Agenda, October 16, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Mary Child and Gary Matles, *Mary Child and Gary Matles (Co-Presidents, FCCNY) to Adoptee Board*, 2017, Letter.

<sup>79</sup> Families with Children from China, "Adoptee Board."

for Chinese adoptees. Guided by our own experiences, we aim to explore the evolving intersection of our Chinese, American, adoptee, and other personal identities. Through this lens we will bring representation to, and strengthen our relationship with, the wider adoption community.”<sup>80</sup> The goals of the Adoptee Board are, while similar in some regards, notably distinct from the mission of FCCNY as a whole. While FCCNY has sought to connect families formed through adoption from China, the Adoptee Board is more concerned with connecting adoptees with each other – this is reflected in events organized specifically by the Adoptee Board, such as the monthly Young Adult Eat Ups for “Adoptees and Friends 18+.”<sup>81</sup> Even the use of Facebook and Instagram as primary forms of publicity (as opposed to mailed newsletters, for example) demonstrate the novel focus on engaging adoptees themselves.<sup>82</sup>

Adoptees are also looking to individually and collectively engage with their identities in new ways. Two key aspects of the FCCNY mission are omitted in the Adoptee Board’s mission statement: “to celebrate and educate” (Chinese culture, heritage, and the adoptee identity).<sup>83</sup> These ambitions represent some of the most controversial issues in the literature on adoptive parenting – the criticism that white adoptive parents cannot authentically understand or transmit “Chinese culture,” perhaps due to the inherent need to construct it as something visible and different.<sup>84</sup> Despite inundation throughout childhood with efforts to celebrate Chinese culture and the adoption narrative, adoptees are choosing to break out of the “celebrate and educate” model and instead explore a multiplicity of identities.<sup>85</sup> This paradigm shift can be viewed as a direct response to the sometimes essentializing efforts of parents to instill “Chineseness” in adoptees, in favor of a new model based around dialogue among adoptees and continued growth and development of the “adoptee identity.” While parents involved in FCC took their children to Culture Day or Chinese painting workshops, teens and young adults are attending conferences with other Asian American and adoptee organizations and creating video projects documenting one another’s stories.<sup>86</sup>

Reflections and short biographies of each of the twelve adoptees on the 2018-2019 Adoptee Board on the FCCNY website speak to their motivations for joining the board. Of the twelve biographies, ten explicitly mention the importance of creating a community of, or connections among, Chinese adoptees, and the other two reference sharing “stories of other

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<sup>80</sup> Families with Children from China, “Adoptee Board.”

<sup>81</sup> “Families with Children from China Greater New York – About Us,” Families with Children from China, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://fccny.org/about>; “August Eat Up,” Families with Children from China (@fccny), Instagram photo, August 11, 2019, [https://www.instagram.com/p/B1B1\\_8DBKx2/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B1B1_8DBKx2/).

<sup>82</sup> FCCNY Young Adults 18+, Private Facebook Group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fccny.ya/>; Families with Children from China (@fccny), Instagram page, <https://www.instagram.com/fccny/>.

<sup>83</sup> Families with Children from China, “About Us.”

<sup>84</sup> Louie, “How Chinese Are You?” 183.

<sup>85</sup> Sara K. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 42; Families with Children from China, “Adoptee Board.”

<sup>86</sup> “Families with Children from China Greater New York – FCCNY & OCA Present: APA Women’s Conference,” Families with Children from China, April 28, 2019, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://fccny.org/event-3317516>; Families with Children from China Adoptee Board, Minutes from Journalism Committee, 2017-2018.

adoptees” and creating a “space” for “fellow adoptees.”<sup>87</sup> These adoptees are fundamentally interested in the value they can derive from contact with one another and the ability to pursue the common goal of exploring an “evolving intersection” of identities. Meanwhile, a shared Chinese culture is not among the adoptee’s priorities. In contrast to the priorities of the larger FCC parent organization, only one of the twelve adoptee biographies mentions “culture,” and even then, only in the context of fostering discussion about “adoption, culture, and identity.” The overwhelming consensus about the importance of the adoptee experience as a nexus, rather than Chineseness, represents a key shift in organized community building.

The concept of the “adoptee experience” encompasses a wide array of complex issues surrounding how adoptees relate to themselves and society, and adoptees are increasingly turning to one another to unravel them. Maya Delaney, another adoptee on both the Adoptee Board and FCCNY Board, wrote about importance of the Adoptee Board in addressing issues of erasure from Asian American communities and desire for representation in society and everyday life.<sup>88</sup> Other Adoptee Board members shared similar sentiments. Lucy Murray discussed grappling with the reality that her biological relatives are somewhere out there, and stated that this curiosity led her to become active in “online groups revolving around adoption, transracial adoption, and specifically, Chinese adoption.”<sup>89</sup> One such group is China’s Children International (CCI), “one of the first international support, networking, and community organizations *created by and for Chinese adoptees*.”<sup>90</sup> The altered identity of the group is clear merely from its chosen name, which highlights the centrality of adopted “children” as opposed to adoptive “families.”

CCI runs an adoptee-only Facebook group designed for adoptees to ask each other questions and share their experiences in a safe space of solely other adoptees. Many of the posts are simply adoptees introducing themselves to the group and inviting others born in the same province or living in the same area to make contact or even meet in person.<sup>91</sup> Often, adoptees share anecdotes of incidents related to race or adoption when they felt stereotyped, outcast, uncomfortable, or conflicted. Posts can be about racially insensitive comments, controversial news about Chinese policies, or simply broader questions about how adoption affects others’ dating lives or mental health.<sup>92</sup> These are the kinds of complex questions that adoptive parents were poorly poised to answer – questions that are now driving adoptees together in a search for resolution.

To some extent, adoptees’ new reflections on their personal identities are still descendants of the habits and practices of their parents. The very existence of the FCC Kids Issues demonstrates the importance many adoptive parents placed on encouraging their children

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<sup>87</sup> Families with Children from China, “Adoptee Board.”

<sup>88</sup> Families with Children from China, “Adoptee Board.”

<sup>89</sup> Families with Children from China, “Adoptee Board.”

<sup>90</sup> “Who We Are – CCI,” China’s Children International, accessed December 20, 2019, <http://chinaschildreninternational.org/who-we-are>.

<sup>91</sup> China’s Children International Adoptee-Only Group, Private Facebook Group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CCIadopteeonly/>.

<sup>92</sup> China’s Children International Adoptee-Only Group, Private Facebook Group.

to engage with their stories and their adoption.<sup>93</sup> Although the approaches young adults are taking to engage with their identity might be distinct from the forms of exploration that were available to them as children, the underlying goal of striving to engage with the meaning of adoption has remained constant.

Adoptees have also been able to benefit from these communities even if their families did not participate in them throughout childhood. Jin, another member of the Adoptee Board, felt that she lacked a strong sense of community growing up, but the existence of FCC's organized efforts meant that she could participate once she had the resources and agency to do so.<sup>94</sup> This suggests that, on the whole, adoptive parents endowed their children with a set of tools that are remaining useful even as adoptees go on to challenge and further explore the meaning that adoption has had for them. Bonding with fellow adoptees at events organized by parents and openly talking about adoption throughout childhood enabled some adoptees to build and lead the new communities that are emerging today.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

At age fifteen, Jenna Cook was featured in the documentary "Somewhere Between," in which she discusses the effects of being adopted on her everyday life.<sup>96</sup> In her sophomore year of college Jenna founded Adopted Yalies, Yale University's first student group for adoptees, and today she is pursuing a PhD in sociology at Harvard with a research emphasis on kinship, adoption, and gender in China.<sup>97</sup> Jenna is one remarkable representative of a growing generation of Chinese American adoptees who are expanding and reinventing the culture of adoption created by their parents. Jenna has directly contributed to the rise of adoptee-founded communities, and she is one of a cohort of adoptees who are engaging in critical scholarship of the social phenomena that have shaped their lives.<sup>98</sup>

The birth of these communities can be traced to the rise of support groups for those building nontraditional families. Once adoption from China was made accessible in 1992, families adopting from China created their own communities, like FCC, centered around sharing resources and strategies for parenting adoptees. However, the discrepancies between

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<sup>93</sup> The FCC Kids Issue was renamed *VIEW* in 2015 in order to reflect the growth of adoptee "kids" into young adults, and the magazine's goal of sharing their "views."

<sup>94</sup> Families with Children from China, "Adoptee Board."

<sup>95</sup> "Families with Children from China Greater New York – FCC Girls Connect 2019-2020," Families with Children from China, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://fccny.org/event-3495832>.

<sup>96</sup> "Somewhere Between – About the Cast," Somewhere Between, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://somerwherebetweenmovie.com/about-cast>.

<sup>97</sup> Jenna Cook, "Adopted Yalies"; "Jenna Cook – Doctoral Student in Sociology," Harvard University Department of Sociology, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/people/jenna-cook>.

<sup>98</sup> LiLi Johnson, daughter of Kay Ann Johnson, is one such adoptee. Her dissertation studies the role of technology and non-biological kinship in Asian American family formation. LiLi is currently an Assistant Professor of Gender and Women's Studies and Asian American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Research – LiLi Johnson," LiLi Johnson, accessed February 16, 2020, <https://lilijohnson.com/research/>; LiLi Johnson, "Searching in Photographs: Photography and the Chinese Birth Parent Search," *Adoption & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2018): 116-134.

parents' intentions and adoptees' own realities – especially regarding the navigation of racial difference and the complexity of the adoptee identity – have prompted Chinese American adoptees to form their own communities and contribute to the growing scholarship on the adoptee experience, thereby giving voice to the adoptee herself.

As with other attributes such as gender or religion, individuals who share an identity as adoptees still have highly diverse lived experiences and perspectives. However, although their answers may be different, adoptees share many of the same questions about their pasts and how their pasts affect their lives now. Today, some are creating and others are joining communities that enable them to start conversations about these issues with their peers. The growth of these forums and resulting amplification of the adoptee voice is a cycle of positive feedback that will, going forward, empower adoptees to reflect on their evolving needs and connect with others to collectively fulfill those needs. The well-studied resources established by parents constitute the foundation of what adoptees are now making their own – an identity and community that, perhaps five or ten years from now, will be the subject of another history paper, written by another adoptee.

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