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Adoptees Revisiting China

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## **Abstract**

Since 1991, more than 80,000 children from China have been adopted to the United States. This thesis describes the circumstances that led to those adoptions and focuses on 17 Chinese adult adoptees' return trip reculturation experiences. In doing so, this study reveals the impact of these trips on the transracial adoptees' identities. Return trips significantly impacted adoptees with factors such as age during return trip, length of trip, linguistic fluency, and prior cultural knowledge greatly affecting trip experiences. Because of the ages of this cohort of adoptees, return trips may become more popular in the coming years as they enter adulthood, so this research will provide a lens to understand this form of reculturation for other Chinese adoptees embarking on this journey.

## Introduction

In 1991, the first year of legalized international adoptions from China, only 61 children were adopted to the United States.<sup>1</sup> That number has drastically increased, peaking at 7,903 Chinese adoptions to the U.S. in 2005. More than 80,000 Chinese children entered the United States since the early 1990s, making the US the largest receiving country of Chinese adoptees worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these adoptees entered white families, making these adoptions transnational as well as transracial.

From growing up in transracial families, these adoptees will likely undergo reculturation, particularly when they enter adulthood. Reculturation, as coined by Amanda Baden, Lisa Treweeke, and Ahluwalia Muninder, refers to the acculturation of transracial adoptees with their heritage cultures.<sup>3</sup> There are many forms of reculturation including heritage language learning, heritage culture classes, or immersing oneself in spaces with racially or ethnically similar individuals. This project centers on adoptees' return trips to China because it is important to learn more about how this type of exploration impacts them and their cultural identities as these journeys increase in popularity. I am interested in understanding how adoptees' perceptions of China and cultural identity may change as a result of returning to their birth country.

An examination of the history behind these adoptions is necessary to understand this group of adoptees. Therefore, this thesis first delves into how China's one child policy and cultural preference for sons worked together to generate the need for international adoptions. To grasp the policies behind adoption, I discuss Chinese domestic and international adoption policies and American sensationalism that led to the growth of adoptions from China to the

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China."

<sup>2</sup> "Adoption Statistics." ; Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia, "Reclaiming Culture."

United States. Following this historical background, I explore transracial Chinese adoptees' bicultural identities. Finally, I analyze the reculturation experiences of Chinese adoptees from adoptee responses to a survey on return experiences. This thesis serves as a budding piece of literature on Chinese adoption written by a Chinese adoptee, similar to adult Korean adoptee scholars whose research or films revolve around Korean adoption.<sup>4</sup>

### **Underlying Conditions for Adoption: One Child Policy and Son Preference**

The one child policy emerged as a method of Chinese population control, which had long been discussed as a problem in China. As early as 1964, the Chinese government established the Population Control Committee.<sup>5</sup> Nearly twenty years later, in 1982, the government announced that birth control was a “basic state policy.” Then after Mao’s death, policymakers began to want more drastic measures. In 1978, a year before the one child policy was unveiled, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) released a document encouraging one child families and discouraging having more than one child. Finally, in January of 1979, the CCP announced through the two national news sources, Xinhua News and People’s Daily News, that families will have “at most two” children and no more.<sup>6</sup>

It’s critical to understand that the one-child policy was never a formal law, but instead it was an open letter to be interpreted and implemented by local governments.<sup>7</sup> The policy, thus, was unevenly implemented and more strictly enforced in cities than in rural areas. Common consequences for parents who had second children included not being allowed to register their

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<sup>4</sup> See: McKee, *Disrupting Kinship*. Park Nelson, “A Decade of Korean Adoption Studies.” Prébin, *Meeting Once More*. Borshay, *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*.

<sup>5</sup> Feng, Cai, and Gu, “Population, Policy, and Politics.”

<sup>6</sup> Feng, Cai, and Gu.

<sup>7</sup> Feng, Cai, and Gu.

child for education or health care, potential loss of jobs, and harsh fines. As a means of protecting this policy, many women would receive forced intrauterine devices after their first birth.<sup>8</sup> However, there were a number of exceptions to the policy, including but not limited to: ethnic minorities could have two children; rural families could have two children if their first child was a girl; and if both parents were single children themselves then they could have more than one child without incurring the penalties. The policy was overall unevenly executed, but remains very influential and drastically changed the concept of the Chinese nuclear family. The Chinese government claims that the one-child policy prevented an estimated 400 million births.<sup>9</sup> Although the policy was amended to the two child policy in 2015, its aftereffects will continue for generations, especially when it combined with China's preference for males and left many young girls abandoned.

A preference for sons is not unique to China. Son preference is also seen in other countries such as India and the Republic of Korea, and Western societies may also be patrilocal and patrilineal. However, the origins for son preference in China are attributed to a variety of factors. China is traditionally patrilocal and patrilineal, so women would move to their husbands' towns after marriage and be moved onto their husbands' lineage.<sup>10</sup> In the case of ancestor worship, female children do not fulfill the task of continuing the family line because some families only worship male ancestors.<sup>11</sup> In addition, men were seen as more economically useful. For rural families, men's agrarian labor was highly valued. They also are traditionally the ones who were expected to maintain employment and care for their parents in old age. At the same

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<sup>8</sup> Shi and Kennedy, "Delayed Registration and Identifying the 'Missing Girls' in China."

<sup>9</sup> Parkinson, "Five Numbers That Sum up China's One-Child Policy."

<sup>10</sup> Das Gupta et al., "Why Is Son Preference so Persistent in East and South Asia?"

<sup>11</sup> Das Gupta et al.

time, Confucian values are often used to explain son preference with men viewed as strong princes and women as docile and obedient.

Although women gained more freedoms since Mao Zedong took power in 1949 and many women had the means to also earn wages by the turn of the twentieth century, effects of son preference persisted, especially in rural communities.<sup>12</sup> This can be seen in the China's sex ratio at birth (SRB). In 2010, the SRB was 118 males for every 100 females in China, which is much higher than the world average of 105 males for every 100 females.<sup>13</sup> This marked a rise in China's SRB from 108 in 1982 and 112 in 1990.<sup>14</sup> This difference means that many girls were 'missing' and begs the question, what happened to the missing girls?

The one child policy increased the need for a family to want to choose their child's gender. Some parents ensured a male heir through female infanticide or by not reporting the births of daughter or delaying their legal registration. It seems that China recognized this as a problem because the government tried to crack down by deeming the use of ultrasounds to determine gender illegal. However, this law was unevenly implemented from province to province.<sup>15</sup> Abandonment was also common, which can be seen as Chinese orphanages experienced an influx of children. Leslie Wang writes, "In the first government survey on orphans in China, which was released in 2005, stated that 573,000 orphans were spread across the country with the vast majority (86.3 percent) residing in rural areas."<sup>16</sup> She then noted that a follow up study in 2010 by UNICEF found that China had 712,000 orphans. With so many children in need of care, China severely lacked resources. It may, therefore, not come as much of

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<sup>12</sup> Das Gupta et al.; Greenhalgh and Li, "Engendering Reproductive Policy and Practice in Peasant China."

<sup>13</sup> Shi and Kennedy, "Delayed Registration and Identifying the 'Missing Girls' in China."

<sup>14</sup> Shi and Kennedy.

<sup>15</sup> Wang, *Outsourced Children*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Wang, 7.

a surprise that China turned to international adoption in this time of crisis. But it certainly took multiple factors to come together with adoption policies and cultural values to produce the cohort of adoptees from China in the United States today.

### **Chinese Domestic and International Adoptions**

In 1991, China created adoption laws applying to both international and domestic adoptions. These laws stated that only couples who were both over the age of 35 and did not have previous children could adopt.<sup>17</sup> Adoption laws were strict in order to enforce the one child policy, but these laws were not in the best interest of abandoned children. In the case of domestic adoption, people would sometimes find foundlings and want to take care of them, but were not allowed to because the government worried that these cases would encourage citizens to have their own children and claim them as foundlings. This sometimes ended in adoptive parents either keeping these foundlings in their homes illegally as “hēi házi” (“black children”) or to abandon them once again because the government would question their status as foundlings or birthed children.<sup>18</sup> In 1999 the laws changed to allow those above the age of 30 to adopt and allowed legal status to some of those “illegal” children.<sup>19</sup>

As for why China turned to international adoption, China did not have the resources to keep up with the number of orphans in their institutions. When international adoptions increased, so did the flow of money into these social welfare facilities. International adoption in the 1990s resulted in orphanages receiving, according to Kay Johnson, \$3,000 USD in direct donation for a child.<sup>20</sup> This fee increased overtime, with Wang reporting that each orphanage received \$6,000

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson, “Chaobao.”

<sup>18</sup> Johnson.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China.”

<sup>20</sup> Johnson.



USD per child in 2016.<sup>21</sup> The increased income caused many social welfare institutes to want to become eligible for international adoptions. In addition to bringing in revenue, Wang argues that these adoptions act as a form of soft power for the nation.<sup>22</sup> These adoptions place intentional international immigrants who have some relationship with China in Western countries, which could bring more influence to China or more money to China through travel. For these reasons, Chinese adoptees became an export worth billions of dollars each year.<sup>23</sup>

The flow of money into orphanages caught the attention of Chinese citizens. By 2000, orphanages actively wanted babies to come to them and would give \$500 USD to people who found them.<sup>24</sup> This created a new market for some who would illegally take children and sell them to orphanages. In 2005, this practice was exposed in a highly publicized trial in Hunan province. The trial revealed that the Henyang Social Welfare Institute was “at the center of trade where officials began purchasing babies from traffickers in 2002.”<sup>25</sup> After that trial, the number of children adopted abroad from China significantly dropped. In 2005, the number of adoptions from China peaked at nearly 8,000 adoptions to the United States, but dropped to less than 2,000 in 2017.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, Chinese adoption laws encouraged international adoptions to the United States as these families lacked the pressure of the one child policy. Those with less traditional families who were prospective single parents, gay and lesbian parents who typically adopted as single parents, or just prospective adoptive parents over the age of 35 were able to adopt. Some of these prospective adoptive parents viewed U.S. domestic adoptions as more

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<sup>21</sup> Wang, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Wang, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China.”

<sup>24</sup> Wang, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, 49.

<sup>26</sup> “Adoption Statistics.”

precarious because there were reports in the 1990s about domestic birth parents who would reclaim their children prior to adoption finalization.<sup>27</sup> Adoptions from China were regarded as easier because people thought they would be guaranteed a healthy baby girl within approximately one year of beginning the adoption process and without interference from birth parents.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to policies, race played a part in encouraging adoptions from China in the United States. In the 1960s, the stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority compared to other non-white races began, and this subsequently affected adoptive parents' perceptions of children from China.<sup>17</sup> Sara Dorow interviewed parents who adopted from China and found that some parents believed that Chinese children would have an easier time assimilating into white culture in comparison to African American children. Some of these prospective adoptive parents even viewed Asians as not a separate race from white, but merely a different ethnicity.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Elizabeth Raleigh's research suggests that parents will pay \$38,000 USD more to adopt a child that is not African American.<sup>30</sup> There is also the stereotype within America that "all Asians are beautiful" or "all Asian children are beautiful," which was another reason behind some adoptions.<sup>31</sup>

Media also encouraged adoptions from China. In 1995, a documentary called *The Dying Rooms* was released in the West, which depicted terrible conditions in state-owned Chinese orphanages. This film and subsequent sequel, *Return to the Dying Rooms*, released the following year, spread internationally through communities of prospective adoptive parents.<sup>32</sup> It evoked

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<sup>27</sup> Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Wang, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Dorow, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Wang, 55; See also: Raleigh, *Selling Transracial Adoption*.

<sup>31</sup> Dorow, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Dorow, 54.

their sympathy and encouraged them to adopt the seemingly helpless children from China who were abandoned because of the one child policy. The highly sensationalized reports concerning orphanage conditions and Western media's reporting on the one-child policy worked in combination with favorable conditions for prospective adoptive parents. These factors worked together with Chinese policies and culture to make the United States a very popular destination for Chinese adoptees.

It's worth noting that policy changes greatly changed the landscape of adoption from China to the United States in recent years. Lowering the age of who could adopt domestically to 30 years old in 1999 resulted in, for the first time, the number of domestic adoptions exceeding international adoptions in 2000.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the Chinese government started a campaign in 2003 to encourage family members to keep their girls.<sup>34</sup> This was largely unsuccessful, but illustrated once again that the government saw a problem with the gender imbalance. In December 2015, China allowed for all of its unregistered domestic adoptees to legally register for citizenship. And then in 2015, China allowed for all of its residents to have two children. These policy changes resulted in primarily male children with intellectual or physical disabilities representing the majority of children in orphanages beginning as early as 2007 or 2008.<sup>35</sup> With this recognition, the cohort of adoptees to which this study refers are those adopted from mainland China to the United States between the years of 1991 and approximately 2006. This group's bicultural identities are examined in the following section.

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China."

<sup>34</sup> Wang, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, 9.

## Chinese Adoptees' Transnational Identities

Chinese adoptees often must navigate what it means to be Asian American in a white family. This journey is difficult because Chinese adoptees in the United States are outwardly viewed the same way as other Chinese Americans by American society.<sup>36</sup> Laura Williams captures this feeling in a study with Chinese American adoptees. In response to the question, “Was there ever a time where you felt ‘so adopted,’ where you looked around and thought, wow, I feel very adopted right now?” one interviewee said, “[It] is when I'm with other Asian people who are not adopted, talking about their life. Like, we are from the same place, but we are not from the same world even though we are Asian.”<sup>37</sup> Adoptees experience this incongruence between their perceived racial identification and to their upbringing and therefore often have a variety of racial and cultural identifications.

Adoptees may feel more white or more Chinese at some points in their lives, and their identifications can change over time. A study on these mixed identities produced the Bicultural Identity Integration (BII).<sup>38</sup> According to the BII model, reaching a high BII is a state where people feel that their ethnic identities are harmonious while a low BII would view the two identities as separate and culturally distant.<sup>39</sup> As adoptees are exposed to their birth and adoptive cultures to varying degrees, they may experience a pull from each culture and eventually come to a satisfied cultural state where they may identify stronger with one culture than the other, identify with them both evenly. They may even identify more with adoptive culture than white culture or their birth culture.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Dorow, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, “The Missing Peace.”

<sup>38</sup> Manzi et al., “Bicultural Identity Integration of Transracial Adolescent Adoptees.”

<sup>39</sup> Manzi et al., “Bicultural Identity Integration of Transracial Adolescent Adoptees.”

<sup>40</sup> Baden, “The Psychological Adjustment of Transracial Adoptees.”

Cultural and racial identity development may vary depending on exposure to Chinese culture while growing up, which can differ greatly from family to family.<sup>41</sup> For white families with parents who did not view Chinese children as a different race from themselves, adopted children may have a harder time viewing their cultural identity as Asian. This may be especially true at younger ages. Adoptees from Williams's study mention feeling white while growing up. One said "I grew up considering myself white, today I don't... I check the box Asian."<sup>42</sup> Another adoptee responded that she felt like a "white girl in a Chinese body."<sup>43</sup> A very similar sentiment is also seen in the documentary *Somewhere Between*, a documentary following four Chinese adoptees living in the United States, when Hailey Butler says she is a "banana"—"white on the inside and yellow on the outside."<sup>44</sup> These statements support that Chinese adoptees may feel closer to their family's white heritage while growing up.<sup>45</sup>

Contrarily, some parents actively bring Chinese cultural elements to their Chinese adopted children through forms of artifacts in the home, language classes, exposure to other Asian Americans, and even return trips to China.<sup>46</sup> This exposure can also change between regions as some metropolitan areas like the San Francisco Bay Area or New York City have more opportunities to engage with Chinese culture than cities in the Midwest or South or rural areas. It's also difficult for white parents to introduce a culture that was not their own to their child and may sometimes be viewed as inauthentic. This is because white parents typically have

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<sup>41</sup> Manzi et al., "Bicultural Identity Integration of Transracial Adolescent Adoptees."

<sup>42</sup> Williams, "The Missing Peace."

<sup>43</sup> Williams.

<sup>44</sup> Goldstein Knowlton, *Somewhere Between*.

<sup>45</sup> Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia, "Reclaiming Culture."; See also: Carrollo, "How Being a Transracial Adoptee Shaped — but Nearly Shattered — My Self-Identity.", Adams, Tessler, and Gamache, "The Development of Ethnic Identity Among Chinese Adoptees.", Bagley, "Chinese Adoptees in Britain.", Chatham-Carpenter, "It Was Like This, I Think."

<sup>46</sup> Louie, "PANDAS, LIONS, AND DRAGONS, OH MY!"; See also: Ponte, Wang, and Fan, "Returning to China."

limited access to Chinese culture to pass on to their children, unlike those who grew up with a Chinese cultural background.<sup>47</sup>

Because of this bicultural identity, Chinese adoptees may want to explore their birth identities when they grow older. Baden, Treweek, and Ahluwalia write in *Reclaiming Culture*, “As transracial and international adoptees engage in the identity process, they may struggle with their cultural affiliations and the need to resolve the dissonance they experience between their physical appearance and their lived practice and affiliation. Resolution of the dissonance may involve the need to reclaim their birth culture. Thus, alleviation of this dissonance defines the process of reculturation.”<sup>48</sup> This reculturation process may include learning about one’s birth country history, taking culture classes, and traveling back to birth countries. Return travel to one’s birth country type of reculturation can, therefore, affect adoptees’ identities.

### **Implications of Return Trips in the Lives of Chinese Adoptees**

There are many possible outcomes of return trips and many reasons for adoptees to take them. My findings shed light on the experiences and outcomes of return trips to add to the limited research on the topic regarding Chinese adoptees’ experiences post adoption.<sup>49</sup> This analysis is based on Qualtrics survey data of 17 Chinese adoptees. The survey was disseminated solely through Facebook postings in various groups including the China’s Children International (CCI) Adoptee Only group, Subtle Asian Traits, and my personal page. The survey was available for seven weeks in the beginning of 2019. Broadening the survey dissemination period and where the survey was advertised would most likely have resulted in a wider range of

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<sup>47</sup> Louie.

<sup>48</sup> Baden, Treweek, and Ahluwalia, “Reclaiming Culture.”

<sup>49</sup> Ponte, Wang, and Fan, “Returning to China.”; See also: Bagley, “Chinese Adoptees in Britain.”; Williams, “The Missing Peace.”; Wang.

perspectives and broadened the pool of respondents to a larger sample size. The survey questions and recruitment message can be viewed in the appendices of this paper.

In order to participate in this study, individuals must be adopted to the United States from China, currently live in the United States, and traveled to China at least once after adoption. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 26 years old, with an average age of 21. The average age of first travel back to China was 13 years old with the youngest at 3 years old and oldest at 22 years old. On average, participants were adopted at one and a half years old, with the youngest adoption at four months and oldest at six years. Respondents' current locations are Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin. They were adopted from eight (Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Guanxi, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang) of China's 23 provinces. Survey questions focused on adoptees' exposure to Chinese culture before trips, experiences while on trips, and their cultural identifications. These questions support my analysis of the trips' importance in adoptees' lives, the collective experiences of trips, and how factors including age of first return, length of trip, type of trip (e.g. study abroad, volunteer, personal travel), previous exposure to Chinese culture and language impact experiences while in China, and feelings of identity beyond return trips.

The number of times these adoptees visited China and their recommendations to return again demonstrate the overall value of return trips. Only a quarter of participants returned one time, while more than two-thirds of them returned two to three times. Two participants even traveled back to China more than four times. All participants recommend other adoptees visit China, with many suggesting that their trip(s) "brought healing" and allowed them to learn about the culture as well as themselves. In addition, 88% of respondents said they planned on returning again to China. Only two respondents said that they felt it was not necessary, with one saying

that they did not feel they belonged because of the language barrier and the other saying that they did not have concrete plans to return. Yet, they still noted that it could still be a “valuable experience” nonetheless. Among those who said that they would return, many reasons were cited for additional return trip plans including: heritage exploration purposes, search or connect with birth families, studying abroad in China, and possibly living and working in China. These responses suggest that return trips may be on the rise in the coming years with adoptees wanting to take more than one return trip in their lifetimes. Moreover, as adoptees age and begin careers, they may have an increased financial ability to travel back to China. Overall, these responses expressed that return trips had significant impacts on these Chinese adoptees.

Adoptees cited various reasons for embarking on return trips. About two-thirds of respondents identified cultural immersion, study abroad, and language immersion as the main reasons behind their trips. Additional reasons included taking heritage tours and traveling back with their adoptive families to adopt other siblings. Study abroad has more than tripled in popularity in the United States within the last two decades, which may explain why there were five respondents who said they studied abroad in China, as this means of travel is generally becoming more common.<sup>50</sup> In regards to heritage tours, organizations like China Children Adoption International (CCAI)’s heritage trips and China Center of Children’s welfare (CCCWA)’s homeland and heritage trips offer adoptee-centered return trips.<sup>51</sup> Similar to the popularity of Korean adoptee motherland tours, these Chinese heritage tours may become more popular as the Chinese adoptee community enters adulthood.<sup>52</sup> There are also volunteer trips like

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<sup>50</sup> Naddaf, “Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students Who Study Abroad in an Area That Is Representative of Their Heritage.”

<sup>51</sup> “CCCWA Summer Tour – LegacyJourney China Homeland & Heritage Tours.”; “China Adoption - Heritage Tour - CCAI China, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Latvia and Taiwan Adoption Services.”

<sup>52</sup> Kim, “Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea.”



AGBOST through Adopteen for adoptees to visit China.<sup>53</sup> In this study, one respondent specifically mentioned participating on the AGBOST trip and another mentioned CCAI's trip.

There were also commonalities across trip experiences. Respondents visited China for varying durations ranging from two weeks to a year. The average length of the longest trip was 10 weeks. As for whom adoptees traveled with, 40% of respondents traveled with parents on their first trip back while others traveled with were friends, siblings, and adoption groups. During their visits, 94% of respondents reported visited famous landmarks while on their trip, 52% visited their orphanage, 41% enrolled in language classes, and 18% took cultural classes. In addition, the majority of respondents, 70%, had visited their birth city. Other activities mentioned were volunteering at orphanages and participating in heritage tours. Yet, their accommodations in China varied with 38% of adoptees staying in a hotel for their longest visit to China, 33% with host families, and 14% in dormitories.

Adoptees may also participate in a birth family search. Although, this was not a common activity among respondents with only five adoptees referencing that did so in person by going to the local police station, hanging signs, or talking with local new stations. Nonetheless, 53% of all respondents reported that they had searched for their birth family through any means, many of whom had used an internet DNA service like 23&Me or Taproot and shared their results online using social media like WeChat. One respondent hired a birth family searcher.

Interestingly, no respondents answered their birth family searching as their purpose for returning. This could be that this was not a main purpose for adoptees in these trips, especially at young ages. However, searching for birth families may increase in coming years as adoptees have their own financial means to return to China. One respondent mentioned, "Before I went to

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<sup>53</sup> "Adopteen Website."

Taipei, I went searching for my birth parents, and I was able to locate them and live with them for about a week or so. This had its own impact on my identity as a Chinese adoptee, and it solidified my identity as both Chinese and American.” If adoptees find success in finding birth families, this may also increase the number of return trips in the coming years. There are many important parts of return trips and birth family searching may be a topic for further investigation. Having considered the trip experiences, we’ll take a look at how adoptees felt about these experiences and how they impacted their cultural identities.

### *Identity Negotiation and Return*

The survey asked participants how they identified before, during, and after visiting China—American, White, Chinese, Chinese American, Chinese adoptee, and Chinese American adoptee. It’s notable that only five respondents identified as Chinese American adoptees prior to return to China, but this increased to ten participants after their visits. The increase may be explained by the reculturation process, as one outcome is feeling more connected to adoptee culture.<sup>54</sup> One respondent captured this feeling, writing, “I grew up in white community so there was no one I could share my thoughts and feeling about adoption. Since my trip to China, I realized there are lot of us in the world. I started to [plug into] the world of [the] Chinese adoptee community.” Adoptees may identify more as a Chinese American adoptee upon returning because adoptees feel that they are most connected to other adoptees than to either heritage.

The feeling of being American or White grew from 11 respondents before trips to 14 during trips. These identifications could be related to culture shock. The phases of culture shock are contact, the excitement of a new experience, disintegration, confusion and frustration with

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<sup>54</sup> Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia, “Reclaiming Culture.”

the new culture, reintegration, rejection of the new culture, autonomy, transition of comfort, and independence.<sup>55</sup> Adoptees may vividly remember the disintegration phase of their trips and therefore had felt a closer pull to their American roots. However, the feeling of being “American” dropped from ten respondents to seven before and after visits, respectively. This could be explained by the reculturation outcome, “reclaimed culture,” where adoptees identify stronger with their birth cultures after reculturation experiences and would therefore feel less strong identifications with their American identity.

Most notably, nearly 60% of respondents changed their identity selections from before their return trips and after their return trips. This suggests that return trips impact identity, but these trips can have varying effects on adoptees. Consequently, they may not cause change to every adoptee’s ethnic identity.

#### *Factors impacting trips experiences*

Involvement in Chinese culture-related activities prior to returning to China affected participants’ experiences. The majority of respondents (88%) participated in at least one of the following activities language classes, heritage classes, Chinese cultural immersion in America, and Chinese culture camp. The most popular were language classes, heritage classes, or a combination of multiple. One respondent said, “While it's great to want to connect with your heritage, being in China comes with a strange dysphoria of feeling like you also don't belong there. It's like the Chinese-American experience but on steroids. This experience is especially true if someone has not had previous language/cultural exposure to China.” Another respondent who only took language classes prior to their first return trip said that if they could change

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<sup>55</sup> “The Transitional Experience.”

anything about their return trip, they would, “Be able to connect more with locals.” Their experiences align with Mariana Naddaf’s study examining students who traveled back to countries of heritage for study abroad.<sup>56</sup> Students in her study who had more background knowledge of their heritage culture felt that they could blend in easier by knowing more of the language or customs or slang. A stronger cultural knowledge prior to return trip may help mitigate some feelings of not belonging. This is not to say that those with little prior cultural exposure will have negative experiences. For example, a respondent with no previous cultural experiences before returning said that “It’s cool to experience the culture and history” and planned on returning to China again. However, this certainly seems to be a factor in experience on return trips.

In addition to cultural knowledge, previous language knowledge affected feelings of belonging while on return trips. 70% of respondents reported that they had prior knowledge of a Chinese language before their first return visit. Among those respondents, all said they had below intermediate level knowledge, with most reporting that they only had knowledge of a few phrases before their first visit. One respondent with higher previous Chinese linguistic knowledge said, “I’d recommend if possible taking a year or so of Chinese before you go, so you don’t feel totally alienated. Once I felt like I could navigate China / live in the city independently, it mitigated the feeling of ‘not being Chinese enough.’” People with lower fluency linked language ability to their negative experiences. One respondent said, “I didn’t feel like I belonged, language barrier.” Another said, “My first time back alone was difficult for me because my language skills were at a beginner level and my white friends were more fluent. I felt ashamed to look the part, but not act it.” Multiple participants mentioned that if they could change anything

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<sup>56</sup> Naddaf, “Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students Who Study Abroad in an Area That Is Representative of Their Heritage.”

about their trips, that they would increase their language fluency. Similarly to prior cultural experiences, higher linguistic knowledge allowed adoptees to fit in more with the culture on their return trips. Therefore, language knowledge impacted trip experience.

Operating in combination with cultural understanding and language fluency is the role of a return trip's length in affecting adoptees' experiences. One respondent whose longest trip was three weeks reflected, "Going back to China was an incredible, life changing experience for me... going to China didn't fix everything for me but it brought experiences and insight that helped me process my past better and brought tremendous healing." Another respondent whose longest visit back was four months long stated, "The fourth trip was a four month homestay in Beijing. It was here that I really improved my Chinese and became comfortable navigating the city independently." Both of these reflections support that even though the lengths in trip times differed, that positive experiences could be seen from either end of the spectrum, although a deeper understanding of culture may be had on a longer trip. In addition, several respondents wrote that if they could have changed anything about their trip, they would have stayed for a longer period of time. Thus, length of trip is another factor that can influence a return trip.

Age during return trips also seemed important to note as a factor on return trip experience. Some return trips occur with families when adoptees are children and others happen when adoptees are adults. One respondent mentioned that when it comes to recommending return trips, "Depends on the person... Also definitely not at a super young age. It's really intense!" Another respondent stated, "I think I was too young at the age of eight to really understand, or analyze and reflect how I truly felt." For young adoptees, this may support Ponte and Wang's argument that travel at young ages may not help adoptees as much as it helps parents. Ponte and Wang interviewed five families on these return experiences with young children and found that

parents wanted to give their adopted children with a realistic experience of China instead of an idea in their heads.<sup>57</sup> The adopted children who were interviewed seemed somewhat ambivalent to the experience. This is not to say that early return trips do not still have a positive impact on adoptees to understand their culture at a young age because those who first traveled back at the youngest ages had positive reflections on returning again, but young adoptees returning may not fully grasp the experience. Meanwhile, those who returned at the oldest ages had feelings of not belonging. For instance, one respondent among whose first return visit was at 22 years of stated, “I didn’t feel like I belonged” This shows that adult return trips may be more emotionally difficult to go on, but still rewarding as the same respondent still recommended that adoptees return, “to help understand themselves.” Of course, these circumstances can also very well differ from person to person, but age definitively changed the experience of a return trip.

Overall, many factors including prior cultural and linguistic knowledge, length of return trip, and age at time of return trip all contributed to positive and negative experiences for adoptees on their return trips. While it was not possible to determine which of these factors impacted identity specifically because the survey did not ask respondents to explain what factors contributed to changes in their identities, this data provides an overview of common experiences among adoptees. This information will be useful to Chinese adoptees considering returning to China.

## **Conclusion**

It’s evident that adoptees find return trips important because all of the adoptee participants would recommend return trips to other Chinese adoptees. Yet even as the majority of

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<sup>57</sup> Ponte, Wang, and Fan, “Returning to China.”

respondents had positive experiences, some factors impacted experiences more than others. Multiple respondents mentioned that they wished they had more cultural knowledge or linguistic command before going to China. This echoes Naddaf's findings that study abroad students felt that they identified more with their heritage nation when they felt they could blend in the most.<sup>58</sup> Adoptees sought this same experience of blending in and it was difficult for some when they were unable to fit in with these expectations.

In regards to how these trips impacted identity, some adoptees felt that their cultural identity changed a lot because of their return trips and others did not. For those who felt that their identities did change, they typically felt more Chinese or more drawn towards adoptee culture post return. Both of these were found as possible outcomes of reculturation. And for the few who did not see much change in their identity from their return trips, this could be for a variety of reasons including trip experiences or personal differences.

Previous cultural knowledge and previous linguistic knowledge seemed to impact trips similarly. Those with both higher cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge seemed to have the ability to blend in easier while on their return trips. Although, those with lower prior linguistic and cultural knowledge still found trips useful, they certainly had impacts on return trips.

Age while on return trip and length of trip also defined experiences. Those who went at a very young age for their first return trips did not remember these very well, while others went back to China for the first time as adults and have vivid memories of these experiences. Stage of life may be a consideration for adoptees when they return. At the same time, those who sought to spend a long period of time in China trying to assimilate to the culture had differing experiences

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<sup>58</sup> Naddaf, "Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students Who Study Abroad in an Area That Is Representative of Their Heritage."

than others who were there for a shorter period of time. Length of return trips or whether one returned multiple times may be factors for adoptees to consider when deciding to embark on return trips.

Overall, return trips provided some adoptees with closure and others with a lifelong connection to China. Some adoptees had active plans to travel back while others were satisfied with their current experiences. This could be for a variety of reasons, and I recommend that more research is done to determine cause and effects of feelings towards return trips. For example, a collection of oral histories could yield a more detailed account of which factors on a trip impacted identity. Oral histories, or more qualitative survey questions, could capture other factors of a trip that adoptees felt were important, but were not included in the survey questions. Nevertheless, this study should serve as a basis for how Chinese adoptees feel about return trips.



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## Appendix I

### Recruitment Message

Survey recruitment message:

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Kelly Hancox. I am an undergraduate student majoring in Computer Science at Grand Valley State University. This study, “Adoptees Revisiting China,” will focus on adoptees from China who have returned since their adoption, for any reason, and how that trip has influenced perceptions of identity. You may be a candidate for this study if you meet the following criteria:

1. Adopted from China to the United States
2. Returned to China since your adoption
3. 18 years old or older
4. Currently live in the United States

The survey will be available from January A, 2019 – February 28, 2019.

If you are eligible and interested in participating in the survey study, please access the following link: [INSERT LINK].

The survey will take an estimated 25-30 minutes to complete.

This research could potentially help adoptees from China understand their travels more and their emotions once this research is completed. It could also inform other adoptees who have not yet traveled back to China of what other adoptees have experienced.

For more information concerning the survey, please contact me via email (hancoxk@mail.gvsu.edu). If you would like to contact my faculty advisor, please contact Dr. Kimberly McKee, Department of Liberal Studies, Grand Valley State University via email (mckeeki@gvsu.edu) or phone (616-331-8196). For information concerning your rights as survey participants, please contact the Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee via email (hrrc@gvsu.edu) or phone (616-331-3197).

Thank you in advance!

## Appendix II

### Survey Questions

1. How many times have you visited China?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2-3
  - c. 4-5
  - d. 6-7
  - e. 8-9
  - f. 10 or more
2. How old were you when you first traveled back to visit China?
  - a. \_\_\_ years \_\_\_ months
3. What was the purpose of your visit? (referring to your longest visit if you've visited multiple times) (check all that apply)
  - a. Study abroad
  - b. Cultural immersion
  - c. Language immersion
  - d. Searching for birth family
  - e. Visiting city or province of birth
  - f. Adopting other siblings with family
  - g. Fun
  - h. Other:
4. How long was your visit back to China? (referring to your longest visit if you've visited multiple times)
  - a. \_\_\_ years \_\_\_ months \_\_\_ weeks
5. On your first visit to China, who went with you? (select all that apply)
  - a. Friends
  - b. Parents
  - c. Siblings
  - d. Other:
6. If you visited China more than one time, who went with you? (select all that apply)
  - a. Friends
  - b. Parents
  - c. Siblings
  - d. Other:
7. What were your living arrangements when you re-visited China? (referring to your longest visit if you've visited multiple times) (select all that apply)
  - a. Host family
  - b. Dorm

- c. Apartment
  - d. Hotel
  - e. Other:
8. What activities did you participate when you returned to China? (referring to all visits if you returned multiple times) (select all that apply)
- a. Visiting famous areas (Beijing, Great Wall, Himalayas)
  - b. Visiting your birth city/province
  - c. Visiting your orphanage
  - d. Language classes
  - e. Other:
9. Have you visited the city of your birth since being adopted?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
10. Have you tried searching for your birth family in any capacity?
- a. Yes
    - I. List ways:
      - 1. Talking to the police station
      - 2. Hanging signs
      - 3. Talking to local news stations
      - 4. Other:
  - b. No
11. Did you have prior knowledge of Mandarin, Cantonese, or another other Chinese dialect before your first visit back to China?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
12. If you had prior knowledge of Mandarin, Cantonese, or another other Chinese dialect before your first visit back to China, how would you have rated your fluency?
- a. Fluent
  - b. Advanced
  - c. Intermediate
  - d. Beginner
  - e. Knowledge few words and phrases
  - f. Other
13. Before your first visit back to China, what other activities had you taken to connect with the Chinese culture?
- a. Language classes
  - b. Heritage classes
  - c. Chinese cultural immersion in America
  - d. Chinese culture camp
  - e. Other:



14. Before visiting China, how did you identify? (check all that apply)
- a. American
  - b. White
  - c. Chinese
  - d. Chinese American
  - e. Chinese adoptee
  - f. Chinese American adoptee
  - g. Other
15. During your visit to China, how did you identify? (check all that apply)
- a. American
  - b. White
  - c. Chinese
  - d. Chinese American
  - e. Chinese adoptee
  - f. Chinese American adoptee
  - g. Other
16. After your visit to China, how did you identify? (check all that apply)
- a. American
  - b. White
  - c. Chinese
  - d. Chinese American
  - e. Chinese adoptee
  - f. Chinese American adoptee
  - g. Other
17. Do you plan to visit China again?
- a. Yes
    - I. Why?
  - B. No
    - I. Why?
18. Would you recommend re-visiting China to other adoptees from China?
- a. Yes
    - I. Why?
  - B. No
    - I. Why?
19. Before you left to visit China, what were your feelings towards China?
- a. Mostly positive
  - b. Neutral
  - c. Mostly negative
  - d. Other:

20. After coming back from your first visit to China, how have your feelings towards the country changed?

- a. Shifted more positively
- b. Shifted more negatively
- c. Other:

21. If you could change anything about your visit back to China, what would it be?

22. Do you have any further reflections on your trip back to China that you would like to share?

23. Age at time of adoption

- a. \_\_\_ years \_\_\_ months

24. Current age

- a. \_\_\_ years \_\_\_ months

25. Province from which you were adopted

[Chinese provinces listed]

26. Current State

[US states listed]

27. Would you like to be sent a copy of the research paper based on this study when it is complete?

- a. Yes
  - I. If yes, please input email address:
- b. No