The Lost Daughters of China: Narratives of Adoption through the Lens of Five Adoptees

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Introduction

"The three most dangerous words heard at the birth of a child are: 'It's a girl'"
(Davis, 2012, 1:37-1:39). In traditional societies, boys grow up to be breadwinners while
a woman's worth is measured by her reproductive ability and domestic skills. Even
today, girls are less valued than boys in India and China and are frequently abandoned
by their birth families. Many of these children are adopted into families around the
globe. Although growing up in a family is preferable to being institutionalized, the trauma
of their early lives has a lifelong effect on these adoptees. Accordingly, the present
study examined: How do interracial and intraracial adoptees' experiences differ in terms
of feelings of belonging and mental health outcomes? In-depth interviews and an
autoethnography were used to explore how the experiences of adoptees fit into the
larger narrative around adoption. Findings suggest that an individual's level of maturity
and understanding of adoption, who they choose to surround themselves with, and their
perspective on why they were adopted affected their mental health.

History

Due to the cultural pressures to have a boy, giving birth to a girl has historically
led to violence in India and China. The shame of having a girl results in abortion,
infanticide, and the murder of young girls, who represent a financial drain on their
families. There is a cultural preference for boys in India and China because of their
economic contributions and their responsibility to their parents as they age. Additionally,

sons provide financial protection and perpetuate the family line. Brides become part of their husbands' families to share these responsibilities, particularly that of producing a male heir. Men are more economically and socially valuable, giving them more power and innate value due to their gender. As a result, abandonment, neglect, abortion, or even murder are common practices for parents to rid themselves of the "burden" of having a daughter.

Families who had multiple children when it was illegal remain traumatized from coercion and fear. They may have aborted a wanted child, abandoned a girl, or tried to hide a second child. According to an article from NPR, the One Child Policy in China was lifted in 2016 to allow two, and then three, children per couple (Feng, 2021). However, people are not interested in having more than one child because having only one child has become a cultural value. Additionally, having multiple children is expensive. The population in China is aging, and there are fewer people in the labor force. The One Child Policy means there are fewer young people to support this aging population. The declining population will have serious economic implications for the country.

Literature Review

Past research has explored the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders in adoption from the micro to the macro levels, including those of adoptees, adoptive parents, social workers, and the broader community. The history of adoption has been influenced by cultural values and larger global contexts, It is more complicated than a straightforward win-win situation, and comes with feelings of loss.

Adoption is shaped by society's cultural values and larger global contexts. Community attitudes toward adoption practices remain ambivalent; different narratives are considered for viewing it positively and negatively. There are negative ideas about those involved in adoption. For example, women engaging in premarital relations are frequently looked down upon, especially by certain religions. Thus, adoption is a "solution" for their "wrongdoing" (Henderson, 2002; Wegar, 2000). Henderson (2002) adds to the bigger picture by examining how and why multiple narratives of adoption are formed. Through a macro-level lens, adoption is the "answer" to births deemed illegitimate due to the lack of marital status of the birth parents. Adoption, especially "same-race" adoption, erases a birth mother's actions and maintains the narrative of legitimate families.

Lucifer-Keller (2021) examines the history of social work in creating "successful" adoptions in which characteristics such as race or intelligence are taken into consideration for the placement of children. The value of the nuclear family, which refers to a heterosexual couple and their children, is prevalent in American culture, which impacts what successful adoptions look like. Race-matching was considered the "correct" term for intraracial adoption. There is still no term that adequately describes intraracial adoption.

Larger global contexts, such as war, have contributed to interracial adoption, which has paved the way for the idea that Americans are "rescuing" foreign-born children. Gill's (2012) study was specifically centered around White/Asian interracial adoptions. One of the questions asked was why parents chose to adopt Asian children. Interestingly, Gill found that one of the responses was related to the cultural norms of

America. Several mothers reported choosing an Asian child because of the positive prejudice surrounding Asian Americans.

Adoption is more complicated than the Feelgood Model (Henderson, 2002) or a win-win situation (Toland, 2024; Wegar, 2000). Henderson (2002) introduces the Feelgood Model of adoption, in which all stakeholders, including the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees, face positive outcomes because of adoption. Adoption can be romanticized as a win-win for all stakeholders, which can lead to an oversight of the nature of the process.

Loss is a part of adoption. Existing literature suggests that a majority of interracial adoptive families involve white adoptive parents and minority adoptees. Consequently, adoptees do not receive racial socialization that prepares them for bias and discrimination. Leslie and colleagues (2013) examine the moderating effects of racial socialization on transracial adoptees' experiences of discrimination and related stress through self-report measures. Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that increased experiences of discrimination were positively correlated with levels of stress. Additionally, the level of racial socialization by parents negatively correlated with stress levels based on the frequency of discrimination. The researchers' work will inform the present study by helping guide interview questions.

Past research has not compared the experiences of interracial and intraracial adoptees. There is a lack of research on intraracial adoption. While this theory of lack of research remains presumptive, the lack may be due to intraracial adoption being considered normal, and therefore not needing further information. Building on past research, this study aims to examine the similarities and differences between interracial

and intraracial adoption. I predict interracial adoptees will experience greater feelings of loss of culture in comparison to intraracial adoptees. This study was exploratory because, to the author's knowledge, no research has been conducted to compare these groups.

Methodology

Rationale

A review of the existing literature finds that qualitative methods such as interviews and surveys have primarily been used to examine adoptees' experiences. Quantitative methods provide limited insight into an individual's lived experiences, while interviews allow participants to offer information that was not directly asked about. Through participants' elaboration beyond the structured questions, researchers such as Zelčāne and Pipere (2023) gained more insight into potential overarching themes and trends. Interviews also offer researchers the opportunity to explore macro and meso-level links, which contribute to theory, and to uncover information that is not observable (Gerson & Damaske, 2021).

As with any method, there are limitations. One potential disadvantage of in-depth interviews is the social desirability bias: the phenomenon that describes an individual altering their behavior to what they believe is "right" or expected of them, given the presence of a researcher or another individual. Despite this limitation, first-person accounts and adoptees' lived experiences remain the best method to address the present study's question. Existing literature also suggests that adoption is a difficult construct to study, given the confidentiality of the adoption process. This also affects the sampling process. While adoptees are not a protected group in themselves, the

confidentiality surrounding the process and identification of their adoptee identity can be difficult to obtain (Henderson, 2002). Protecting participants' rights in research is of utmost importance, however, gatekeeping of certain populations can result in a lack of knowledge, which is a detriment to society and those communities.

Present Study

The present study used qualitative measures, including autoethnography and interviews, to comparatively examine the experiences of interracial and intraracial adoptees. An autoethnography limits the knowledge produced to the researcher's experiences, whereas combining interviews and autoethnography yields multiple experiences. According to the literature, a pluralistic approach to qualitative methods provides researchers with a more holistic view of the construct of interest (Zelčāne & Pipere, 2023). Interviews were the best method for measuring the current research question, which centers around adoptees' lived experiences. The interviewees read and signed an informed consent document, which permitted the researcher to audio record their interviews for transcription. An hour-long interview was conducted using a protocol, or a list of questions, written for the present study. Participants received compensation in the form of their favorite candy.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to obtain participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18, for consent purposes, and be an interracial or intraracial adoptee. Interracial adoptees were defined as adoptees identifying as a different race from their parents, and intraracial adoptees were defined as adoptees identifying with the same race as their parents. Participants who fit the inclusion criteria and had an

existing rapport with the researcher were asked to participate. Interviewees may have felt uncomfortable disclosing their experiences with someone unfamiliar due to the nature of the topics being discussed. Additionally, participants' knowledge of the interviewer being adopted likely increased their willingness to disclose experiences. This resulted in a sample of five Chinese female participants who identified as Asian American. One of the participants was an intraracial adoptee, which aligned with the comparative nature of the study. Due to geographic constraints, all interviews were conducted over Zoom, a video telephony platform.

Findings

The demographics of the sample fit into the larger narrative around adoption. All participants reported being adopted between 13 and 24 months of age. This aligns with the One Child Policy, as many families do not relinquish a girl until the woman becomes pregnant again, hoping to have a boy. Three major themes were found across the interviewees' experiences: belonging, identity ambiguity, and mental health.

One theme that emerged from the interviews was a desire to belong. All five adoptees interviewed wanted to fit into the community they grew up in, which was predominantly White. While growing up in a majority White community was the norm for all the participants, and they all therefore self-identified as White, it was still difficult for them to feel included. One participant said:

> I would forget that I'm Chinese because I'm around all of these White people all the time. And so, I wanted to be White. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be like my family. But I wasn't and I'm not, and there's nothing I can do about that.

The nuclear family is considered the ideal family structure in America. Many adopted children are raised in a nuclear family, but even within that aspect of normalcy, participants understood from a young age that they were different from their parents in some way. I experienced this personally when I was younger. I always preferred going to the grocery store with my dad because his hair was black like mine, but as I got older, I realized I was Asian, and he was White. I knew that, but I thought our hair color would make us look like we belonged together, so people would not stare. One participant's family looked closer to "normal" because her adoptive mother was Chinese, however, she still felt a lack of belonging and a loss of culture. This was because

> they didn't really socialize me a lot. It didn't really seem like they wanted to take me places and have me experience that culture like in downtown [local Chinatown]…it was just a big disconnect from them. And seeing her [mother's] side of the family was for holidays, so I wouldn't say there was like a big, cultural aspect being put on me.

One common question from people observing an interracial family is, "How much did she cost?" Participants in the study viewed this as an ignorant comment, rather than a statement of overt racism. This unintended ignorance extended to comments made by other children, who viewed adoptive families as different. One participant recalled, "One time I got bullied in third grade. And he just said, 'Adoptive families are weird.' And so, I told the teacher, and then once I told the teacher, I started crying."

Circumstances in the world outside their families also made participants feel as though they did not belong. A few participants discussed a lack of representation in the media and consumer products, such as toys. One explained:

Even in the media, for example, there weren't a lot of Asian representations for any of us. And that was kind of hard because the only Asian representative was Mulan. And I feel like, yes, Mulan is amazing, I love Mulan, but growing up, it would have been nice to have more racial mirroring.

A lack of representation and holding themselves to the standards of those they did see, who were mostly White people, likely led some adoptees to become critical of their appearances. One participant explained, "I would look at myself and I'd be like 'I don't like this person that I see' but now looking back older, I'm like, 'I'm freaking adorable.' It's heartbreaking to me that at that age I couldn't see that."

Racism, while not often thought of as a major problem for Asians, conveys a clear message that Asians do not belong in America. One adoptee recounted an instance of blatant discrimination she faced:

I don't know how the conversation turned, but she [the woman] started talking about how the country was built and saying how the Europeans built this country, and that there have been a lot of illegal Chinese immigrants in the country.

More often than blatant racism, Asian Americans often experience ambivalent prejudice in which there are both positive and negative stereotypes about them. The benevolent prejudice around Asian Americans is viewed as good because it is the belief that Asians are intelligent in educational settings and successful at work. One stereotype about Asians is the model minority myth. This myth is harmful in many ways, and not only to Asians. Although it appears as a positive stereotype, it sets an exceptionally high standard for Asians, while making them an example of a minority that could "achieve" the American Dream. Asians are held up as an example to other minorities, who may

become resentful and feel that they are in competition with Asians. One participant explained:

>I want to do my best, and I want to be really good at what I am doing and stuff with that. And if I fall short, then I feel like I'm failing and I'm not good enough. So I push myself in everything, you know, it has to be perfect.

Striving to live up to the model minority myth and the high standards set by Whites in the media and their local communities left many of the participants with the impression that they must achieve perfection.

The model minority myth has contributed to some Asian groups, such as those from India, having the highest median income in the nation, but has also led to disparities in economic achievement, with immigrants from Myanmar earning considerably less. Because of these positive stereotypes and generally high financial status, many White people consider Asians to be the next people of color to be considered White. Consequently, Asians are often underrepresented or excluded from diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations. However, because of the negative stereotype that Asians are foreigners, Asian Americans in general have difficulty navigating where they fit into American society. Even when Asians are acknowledged, it is through one-time events such as Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

Many participants reported experiences of racism about being foreigners. Unfortunately, despite the model minority myth contributing to a seeming lack of prejudice, old biases still exist. Especially during COVID-19, racism against Asian people spiked and emphasized the idea that they do not belong in America. Several

participants reported fear of backlash during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a few experienced it. One participant recounted:

> "I was raised here," and then they were like, "Well, don't you have any family members that are Chinese?" and all that. And I was like "That has nothing to do with this virus." So now I feel like there's a lot of fear in people just walking down the street because of that.

Identity ambiguity during childhood was a common experience among participants. This evoked anger and grief. One participant said, "Everyone goes through that phase where you're just immature, but you're told to handle mature ideas, but you might not be ready and have the maturity to handle that healthily." My experience reinforces this idea of maturity as important for the development of a more complete understanding of the circumstances surrounding my adoption. Rereading my own finding documents caused me to change my perspective on my birth parents from believing they abandoned me recklessly to realizing they did the best they could and left me somewhere they knew I would be found. This was a common realization among participants, as one participant reflected, "I bet my mom loved me a lot, but maybe she was just in a circumstance where she wasn't able to take care of a child. I think that's the maturity part of understanding adoption." The intraracial adoptee's experience mirrored the identity ambiguity of the other participants.

> My uncle is Chinese, but I just don't really feel like part of the culture. I kind of feel White, like a White Chinese, you know?...I feel like it's kind of difficult to come into the culture when you're already, you know, an adult.

While perspective changing over time is a common experience for everyone, it is especially important for an adoptee's mental health.

Participants' mental health in terms of adoption varied. Their perspectives on their adoption likely affect their mental health. One participant succinctly put it: "She [participant's sister, also adopted] viewed it as an abandonment, and I viewed it as they couldn't take care of me." Participants whose mental health was more negative mentioned statements consistent with an abandonment perspective. For example, questions such as "Why me? Why wasn't I good enough?" came up in interviews. Conversely, those who were able to frame their adoption more positively had more positive experiences with their mental health. One participant recalled watching a documentary that offered a perspective of adoption from birth parents. "It shows that it's not that they just abandon you and give up. It's not something parents want to do; it is the circumstances that made them do it." During childhood, participants had more negative mental health experiences with fitting in and not looking like their parents, regardless of present contentment. After the trauma of being abandoned, many adoptees are appreciative of having a family, although this comes with its own set of emotional conflicts. Feeling like they should be grateful can cause guilt in adoptees. One participant shared:

> I kind of wish that was something that people understood. It kind of seems that people think it's not a trauma. They're like, "You should just be grateful that you have parents." I am grateful that I have parents, but it's still something that will affect your mental health and sense of self and belonging growing up.

Even participants who reported being content in the present with their sense of self had mental health issues and trauma to work through. Another echoed these conflicting feelings:

> I have concerns about the people, the orphans, and stuff like that that are still in China, especially the significant needs ones. And I do have concerns for them about how they get resources and just stuff with that. But also, at least they get to stay in their birth culture, at least they get to stay in their birth country and learn that language. And of course, I'm not saying this because I'm so ungrateful or anything like that. I'm not an ungrateful adoptee, I promise. Because I didn't really get to have that experience, I'm always mourning that.

Social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner propose Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals surround themselves with people from their in-group or those who share a salient identity. All participants reported having friends or family who were also adopted or identified as Asian. One participant explained that she naturally gravitates toward individuals who share the same racial identity as her. Another explained that she is most comfortable being with her cousin, who is also adopted from China. Of the participants who have siblings who were also adopted, adoption is not a frequent topic of conversation. However, they felt an increased sense of belonging and understanding with their siblings.

In contrast to the present hypothesis, results indicated that the intraracial adoptee experienced feelings of loss of culture similar to those of interracial adoptees.

Discussion

One of the greatest limitations of this study was the convenience sample used to recruit participants. Finding participants was difficult, given the specific inclusion criteria. This resulted in a homogenous sample identifying as Asian and female. While the present study hoped to offer a comparative perspective on the experiences of interracial and intraracial adoptees, a limited sample size compromised this. Additionally, there was limited time and resources, resulting in a lower sample size. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized much beyond this study.

Further replications or continuations of this research would benefit from a larger, non-convenience sample. Accordingly, conducting this type of research with a more representative and random sample would be beneficial for external validity. Examining the perspectives of other stakeholders involved in adoption, such as adoptive parents and, if feasible, birth parents, would be important for contextualizing and understanding the larger narrative of adoption. Additionally, findings from studies focused on adoptive and birth parents could inform mental health care for adoptees.

It may seem unimaginable to women in Western countries that women in India and China would be willing to submit to such restrictive reproductive policies. However, the division in the United States following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* illustrates how entrenched the patriarchy is, even in cultures that claim to value equality. In other cultures, policies that control births were the result of systemic gender inequality. These policies inflict lifelong trauma on women. Adoptees will struggle with belonging, identity, and mental health. Furthermore, the fear of abandonment remains a lifelong shadow for adoptees. Just as women in this country are pushing back against male-dominated decisions concerning women's health, so too are a few in China and India. The One

Child Policy in China was a "resolution" to the overpopulation crisis that left people with too few resources. Conversely, India approached population control through non-restrictive measures. They launched a family planning program that offered contraception and other health services (Muttreja, 2023). Outdated policies can be changed through activism, policy, and legislation. Unfortunately, progress happens slowly.

Conclusion

Both interracial and intraracial adoption remain under-researched. The present study examined the experiences of five interracial Chinese adoptees through in-depth interviews. All participants identified as female. While most participants reported present contentment, all had negative mental health experiences during childhood regarding belonging and self-esteem. The implications of the past, present, and future research on adoption are that more mental health resources need to be available for adoptees. For example, there could be more resources for adoptive parents and family counseling for interracial and intraracial adoptees.

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Appendix A

Protocol

Section 1: History

1. Tell me about your adoption story.

    a. FOLLOW-UP:

        ■ How did your adoption shape your identity growing up?

2. Do you have any siblings?

    a. FOLLOW-UP: If YES

        ■ Were they also adopted?

        ■ What is your relationship like with them?

3. Tell me about how you learned you were adopted.

    a. FOLLOW-UP:

        ■ Were your parents open about the fact that you were adopted?

4. Tell me about how your parent(s) tried to keep you connected to your "birth culture".

5. Tell me about how your friends reacted to knowing that you were adopted.

6. Tell me about how your extended family feels about your adoption.

7. How might having parents of your own race have changed your experiences?

8. Have you had the opportunity to meet your "birth parents"?

    a. FOLLOW-UP: If YES

        ■ Tell me about your experiences meeting your "birth parents".

    b. FOLLOW-UP: If NO

        ■ How does not being able to meet them affect your mental health?

9. How do you feel about the language around adoption such as "birth parents", "real parents", "blood relations", etc.?

    a. FOLLOW-UP:

        ■ What language could replace these terms?

Section 2: Present

10. Tell me about how adoption has affected and contributed to your concept of families.

11. Tell me about how adoption has affected your mental health.

    a. FOLLOW-UP:

        ■ Have you ever sought help from mental health professionals? Why or why not?

12. Have there been specific moments or events related to your adoption that have impacted your mental health?

13. Can you tell me about any experiences of racial injustice you may have experienced?

    a. FOLLOW-UP:

        ■ How did your parents help you process these experiences of racial injustice?

        ■ Tell me about how your experiences might have differed in comparison to being raised by someone who shares your race.

14. How do you think interracial and intraracial adoption differ? In what ways are they similar?

15. Tell me about your cultural identity.

      a. FOLLOW-UP:

           ■ Does your ethnicity, or cultural identity match with your race?

Section 3: Future

16. Tell me about what you think the future of adoption will look like.

17. Tell me about what you wish people understood about adoption.

18. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences with adoption?

Anything that you think I've missed or that I should know?