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Overlooked Asian Americans: The Diaspora of Chinese Adoptees

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Building upon the review article by Hoshmand, Gere, and Wong (2006, this issue), this discussion article addresses the unique historical and racial experiences of Chinese children adopted internationally into predominantly White families in the United States. Using a diaspora framework and an Asian Americanist perspective, a few developmental and clinical issues are highlighted in the ways in which Chinese adoptees and families negotiate the racial and ethnic realities of transracial and transnational adoption.

There has been a dramatic increase in the annual rate of international adoption to the United States from 7,093 in 1990 to 22,728 in 2005 (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Additionally, the demography of internationally adopted children has changed substantially in the past decade. Prior to 1995, the top country from which to internationally adopt was South Korea, but China, Russia, and Guatemala have since supplanted South Korea. In 2005, 7,906 children were adopted from China, followed by 4,639 from Russia, 3,783 from Guatemala, and

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1,630 from South Korea (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Perhaps more impressive, children adopted from China now represent approximately 15% of the annual number of Chinese legal immigrants to the United States (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005). Yet despite these increasing numbers and greater visibility in society, Chinese adoptees, like Korean adoptees before them, remain an overlooked and understudied part of the Asian American population.

Given the demographic shifts in migration, Hoshmand, Gere, and Wong (2006, this issue) make a cogent case for the need to recognize, understand, and study Chinese adoptees and their families. In this article, I elaborate upon the notion of diaspora that was briefly referenced by Hoshmand et al. to better understand the lives of international adoptees. Additionally, I examine international adoption from an Asian Americanist perspective that positions the adoption experience as an example of the intersecting complexities of ethnicity, race, and culture. It is through these complementary viewpoints that I hope to raise greater awareness and, more importantly, to provoke new lines of inquiry in the psychological study and counseling of Chinese adoptees and their families.

Racial Politics of Adoption

There are numerous push-and-pull factors that have contributed to the increased rate of international adoption. Hoshmand et al. (2006, this issue) elected to focus mostly on social conditions and policies within China (i.e., push factors), but an equally important reason is simply the greater interest by Westerners in international adoption (i.e., pull factor). Hoshmand et al. commented that this greater interest is due to the limited availability of children for domestic adoption. However, this explanation is only partially accurate and obscures the racial politics that rest below the surface of most discussions.

It is true that domestic private adoption in the United States is not readily available, but there is ample opportunity for foster care adoption. The annual number of foster care children, including many younger aged children, available for adoption is over 100,000 with 36% under 5 years old in 2003 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). However, Barth (1997) found in a study of California's foster care system for children less than 6 years old that White children were more likely to be adopted than African American or Latino children. By contrast, the argument typically is made that most adoptive parents are seeking to adopt younger aged children, preferably infants. Yet nearly half of the children adopted annually from China are between 1 and 5 years old (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005). Taken together, it is clear that there remains a tremendous stigma toward foster care adoption. A less stated reason for White adoptive parents choosing international adoption is the possible bias against adopting a racial minority child from foster care.

Another unspoken racial issue surrounding the popularity of international adoption is the racial stereotype of Asians in the United States that encourage people to adopt from countries like Korea and China. These stereotypes may seem benign on the surface (e.g., Asian children are smart and well-behaved), but they characterize Asians as model minorities and obfuscate the possibility of psychological and social problems and the racism and discrimination that Asians experience on a daily basis (Yoo & Lee, 2005). This racial fact does not discount the love of adoptive parents toward their children, but it nevertheless remains an issue that needs to be acknowledged and addressed, as attempted to some extent in the Hoshmand et al. (2006, this issue) article.

A related issue to the dilemma described above is the *transracial adoption paradox* (R. M. Lee, 2003). The transracial adoption paradox

specifically refers to the contradictory yet true set of experiences of being raised within a White family with all the associated privileges of Whiteness, as well as being perceived and treated by family, friends, and oneself as White, and, at the same time, being perceived and treated by society at large as a foreigner, immigrant, and racial minority. Register (2005), an adoptive mother of two children from Korea, addresses this controversial set of issues in her book, *Beyond Good Intentions*, in which she challenged adoptive parents to examine their own racial attitudes and how these attitudes inform their intentions and affect their parenting practices. Critically examining the racial politics behind international adoption allows adoptive families, along with adoption scholars and practitioners, to look beyond essentialized portrayals of Chinese adoptees as either similar to Chinese immigrants or no different from the majority White culture in which they were predominantly reared.

Diaspora of Chinese Adoptees

I posit that a diaspora framework is a more useful lens than traditional immigration models to view the Chinese adoptee experience, because it articulates an accurate yet complex historical context that informs our understanding of the psychological mechanisms that contribute to the adaptation and adjustment of adoptees. The major features of a *diaspora* are a sense of involuntary or forced displacement from one's home country, subsequent dispersal to multiple host countries, and the impossibility of returning to one's homeland (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991). Secondarily, displaced people retain vestigial memories of the homeland that are often accompanied by a yearning for that which was lost. In lieu of a return home, people make collective efforts to recreate aspects of the culture in their host country, while at the same time not necessarily feeling fully welcomed and accepted by the host country.

Although these secondary features of a diaspora are evident in immigrant communities as well, it is the former major features which clearly distinguish diaspora from traditional immigration. In the case of international adoption, adoptees did not voluntarily choose to emigrate from China. Instead, adoptees were displaced to a wide array of Western countries. This dispersal is exacerbated by the reality that nearly all Chinese adoptees have a complete loss of birth family. That is, the possibility of a birth family reunion is incredibly low due to the fact that most children were abandoned or relinquished as infants and accurate birth records are not available. By contrast, immigrants typically emigrating at an older age, often as young adults seeking a better life, tend to retain some familial connections to the homeland.

Miller-Loessi and Kilic (2001) provide further examples of international adoption as a variant of diaspora. Drawing upon the writings of Cohen (1997) and Safran (1991), they specifically highlighted six defining aspects of Chinese adoption that correspond with the diaspora phenomenon. First, Chinese adopted girls are dispersed worldwide and, importantly, this displacement from the homeland is viewed as involuntary. Second, adoptees, mainly through the efforts of adoptive parents, attempt to maintain a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including the creation of birth family stories and the collection of Chinese cultural objects and artifacts. Third, there is the development of a real and symbolic return to one's ancestral roots, as exemplified by homeland tours and efforts to maintain ties with orphanages. Fourth, there is a strong ethnic group consciousness that is manifested by adoptive family organizations, such as Families with Children from China and other organizations mentioned by Hoshmand et al. (2006, this issue). Interestingly, the ethnic consciousness that is fostered is intertwined with an adoptive consciousness, such that Chinese adoptees identify strongly as both Chinese and adopted (i.e., as a "Chinese adoptee"). Fifth, adoptees and their families experience

ethnic and racial discrimination, in addition to the stigma of adoption. This discrimination is inflicted on multiple fronts by Whites, non-adoptive parents, and the immigrant Chinese community, thereby serving as a reminder that adoptees are not fully welcomed and accepted by the host country. And sixth, Chinese adoptees, although still young, are finding solidarity with other transnational and transracial adoptees via online support groups and local adoptee/adoptive family organizations. Collectively, these life experiences reflect the ways in which Chinese adoptees form a unique diaspora community.

Importantly, diaspora is not only about the displacement experience. It also is about the ways in which displaced individuals make meaning in their lives despite their losses. A diaspora framework, therefore, allows for an understanding of Chinese adoptees as not only objects of displacement but also active change agents. As Anderson and Lee (2005) articulated in regard to displaced persons, "[They are] conscious 'subjects' who take on an active role in carving out their new lives, making their own decisions along the way as they face new situations and cope with new contingencies" (p. 15). Put another way, it is important to not view Chinese adoptees as merely passive victims of pre-adoption adversity who have received the unconditional benefits of benevolent adoptive families — despite the fact that this view remains the dominant narrative in the adoption literature. Instead, Chinese adoptees are transnational and transracial individuals who can play an active role in defining and shaping their lives.

Some Developmental and Clinical Issues

Building upon Hoshmand et al.'s (2006, this issue) psycho-educational and counseling recommendations, I present a few additional lines of inquiry that illustrate the utility of combining an Asian American perspective with a diaspora framework as a way to challenge conventional understandings of adoptee development and to gain more

culturally relevant insight into their lives as both adoptees and as racial minorities. These examples do not represent the experiences of all adoptees or adoptive families and they are not necessarily solutions to developmental and clinical problems. Instead, they are simply meant to encourage adoption scholars and practitioners to think more contextually about the transnational and transracial experiences of adoptive families.

First, it is important to recognize that there has been a shift in the personal reasons for international adoption that complicate the racial and diaspora experiences of adoptees. Historically, couples adopted internationally out of humanitarian concerns for war-orphaned and neglected children and as a stop gap measure for inadequate child welfare (Bartholet, 1993). However, the past two decades has seen the emergence of a familial entitlement by adoptive parents. Here, I define *familial entitlement* as a valuation of familial or parental needs above those needs of the child. In this case, the need of individuals and couples who want to have a daughter from China outweighs the need of the child to be raised within her birth culture. Children are no longer displaced solely due to child welfare concerns. Familial entitlement arguably takes precedence. This shift complicates adoptees' efforts to reconcile their adoption experience. It leaves open questions about what was lost in terms of family and culture and how one might have lived if not displaced from their homeland. The resultant cognitive dissonance may lead adoptees at an early age to elect a personal narrative of gratitude toward the adoptive parents and/or indifference toward China as a personal heritage to claim. In effect, adoptees may be more inclined toward assimilation of mainstream White culture as a means to reconcile these discrepant diaspora experiences. Surprisingly, although human rights issues associated with international adoption are considered, the attitudinal and behavioral correlates of familial entitlement and its potential effects on child development are hardly ever addressed in the international adoption literature.

Second, as Hoshmand et al. (2006, this issue) noted, many adoptees are now coming of age as adolescents and, as such, are in the midst of forming their own distinctive personal and social identities, oftentimes irrespective of whatever socialization efforts made by adoptive parents. The majority of adoptees likely will embrace their ethnicity and race or will elect to distance themselves from their ethnic roots in an effort to assimilate into mainstream White society (R. M. Lee, 2003). Other adoptees, however, may seek a third space (Bhabha, 1994) in which to situate their identities that better reflects their diaspora experience. Hűbinette (2004) has argued that Korean adoptees, who in many respects serve as a vanguard to Chinese adoptees, have located their identities between and apart from Korean and Western cultures, thereby creating a hybrid identity that is not fixed or uniform. By creating a third type of identity, adoptees are in a position to subvert the traditional notions of ethnicity and race, of citizenship and nationality, and of family and kinship. Thus, to view adoptees as no different from Chinese immigrants or as no different from White children is simplistic and misleading. Instead, the identity development of adoptees is wholly unique.

Third, adoptive families need to critically examine the socialization practices and experiences that are aimed to address the loss of birth culture and birth family and to promote positive ethnic identity development (R. M. Lee, 2003). An ongoing struggle for adoptive parents is to determine the best means to transmit knowledge and appreciation of the child's birth culture. Often, adoptive parents procure Chinese cultural objects and artifacts in the home to ease feelings of displacement and loss and to encourage the enculturation process. However, such efforts can inadvertently reflect what I refer to as *oriental adoration*. In the context of international adoption, oriental adoration refers to a parental perspective of the child's birth culture and heritage that is seemingly benevolent but actually objectifies the

individual and culture by reinforcing a sense of exotic and otherness. This essentialized focus on traditional Chinese culture commodifies the Chinese cultural experience and dismisses the modernity of China today, thereby neglecting the more pressing and complex reality of Chinese adoptees as American citizens and racial minorities in this society (R. G. Lee, 1999).

Hoshmand et al. (2006, this issue) provide numerous everyday examples of ways in which adoptive families and adoptees may negotiate these cultural and developmental challenges. The intention, process, and outcome of these efforts to promote resilience and well-being, however, need to be carefully considered. For example, some cultural activities may function more to ease parental concerns and worries than to foster healthy development in children. Other activities, such as play groups and culture camps, may provide adoptee youth with a sense of ethnic belonging and pride but these experiences, especially when poorly implemented or executed, may make some adoptees feel more different and uncomfortable. The scant research available on these individual, family, and community interventions makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions on their efficacy and effectiveness.

Summary

Hoshmand et al. (2006, this issue) should be commended for the review of both the historical and political contexts for the rise in international adoption, as well as the conceptual and research literature on international adoptees and their families. The growing presence of children adopted internationally from China challenges us as scholars and practitioners to acknowledge and understand the different historical and racial experiences of this overlooked Asian American population. A diaspora framework in conjunction with an Asian American perspective is one additional lens through which to frame the lived experiences of Chinese adoptees as both transnational and transracial

individuals. Clearly, as Hoshmand et al. detailed, adoptive families and adoptees will need to respond with creative and sustained efforts to nurture a sense of safety, belonging, and pride in the context of their unique cultural and adoption histories.

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備受忽視的亞裔美國人：離散的中國籍受領養者

基於 Hoshmand, Gere, & Wong（2006，本刊）的評論文章，本文探討在美國主要受白人家庭領養的中國籍兒童的獨特歷史及種族經驗。本文根據離散框架及亞裔美國人的觀點，指出了領養家庭與中國籍受領養者在面對跨種族、跨國籍的領養時，所遇到有關種族與族群現實的衝擊。