

Transracial East Asian Adoptees: Navigating Identity as Cultural Frankensteins

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ABSTRACT

Transracial adoption, which is commonly understood as the adoption of a child of a different race than their adopted parents, has been researched thoroughly in the context of international adoption, but little research has been conducted to investigate transracial adoptees' experiences with their adoptive families. To understand more about transracial adoptees' identity formation and create more ways to assess the adoption adjustment process, it is important to explore the factors that cause possible struggles in forming transracial adoptees' identities. Using two films— *Abandoned Adopted Here* and *Approved for Adoption* – which center around the lived experiences of East Asian transracial adoptees, I explored the potential consequences on identity formation that transracial adoptees pose. This paper examines themes of “cultural frankensteins,” and the formation of cultural identity. In addition, this paper expands current understandings of the transracial adoptees' experiences and potential struggles many transracial adoptees may face in everyday life regarding identity.

Keywords: transracial adoption, adoption identity, cultural identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The definition of transracial adoption is “the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families” (Silverman 104). Transracial adoption is often the result of many political and social struggles such as war, poverty, domestic policy, and political stability. This process began in the largest numbers after World War II. Nearly 3,000 Japanese children were adopted by white Americans between 1948 and 1962 (Weil 276). Subsequently, the Korean War and Vietnam War spurred interest in transracial adoption due to the large number of displaced children. For example, many Korean children were born of American or European soldiers which stigmatized them as “illegitimate children” in the eyes of many Koreans. Since the 1950s, roughly 200,000 Koreans have been internationally adopted (Approved for Adoption 2012).

This paper addresses the following questions regarding the effects of transracial adoption.

Research Question 1: To what extent is the process of transracial adoption beneficial to the adoptees themselves?

Research Question 2: How do transracial adoptees navigate their ethno-cultural background and their adopted parents' culture?

I find that the transracial adoption process can fail to support the transracial adoptees and the process can negatively impact transracial adoptees' mental health and cultural identity formation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Transracial adoption has been a contentious subject to debate, but it is important to study because it provides information to the entire adoption process (Bartholet 89). Families formed through transracial adoption must confront the divergent identities that are present in the family. As opposed to adoption between adoptive parents and adoptees that share the same race, transracial adoption is also known as visible adoption, “families in which members' racial characteristics provide visual evidence of a lack of biological ties

both to insiders and outsiders” (Harrigan and Braithwaite 128). It is important to acknowledge that members of families formed from transracial adoption may potentially face different challenges than those formed through same race adoption, “For instance, because most internationally adopted children leave their country of origin during infancy, these children may find it difficult to make sense of their particular ethnicity or group to which they trace their heritage” (Harrigan and Braithwaite 128).

Continuing, to understand and improve the transracial adoption process, we need to investigate further the adoptees’ lived experiences in their adoptive families. Many critics of the process claim that it is unjust to relocate and deprive a child of their birth culture (Bartholet 97). In doing so, they would also deprive themselves a complete sense of themselves (Feigelman and Arnold R. Silverman 589). In addition, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) outright opposes the transracial adoption process by referring it to a “cultural genocide” (Godon and Ramsey). Debates have questioned whether the process is beneficial to the well-being of these adoptees who are left in a cultural no man’s land. In addition, The Child Welfare League of America’s National Council of Latino Executives (1998) disagreed with the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA), asserting that “consideration of race in determination of the best interest of the child in placement and adoption decisions” (De Haymes and Simon 253). Due to the rise of adoptees of color in the United States adoption system, the lack of minority homes cannot keep up with the demand. This issue led to efforts to increase transracial adoption by eliminating the barriers in the system so more children of color can be adopted, while simultaneously attempting to attract more minority foster families to adopt (De Haymes and Simon 253).

MEPA was passed in 1994 to streamline the transition process by reducing the amount of time that children of color remain in the foster care awaiting adoption. However, the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP) that was passed in 1996 changed many of MEPA’s conditions, “IEP prohibited any agencies who receive federal funds from delaying or denying the

placement of any child on the basis of race, color, or national origin” (De Haymes and Simon 254). It is important to note that both MEPA and the IEP Legislation have worked towards promoting transracial adoption and eliminating the barriers to the process but fails to institute support services for families in transracial adoptions (De Haymes and Simon 251).

Many who argue against transracial adoption believe that due to their uprooting, transracial adoptees are more inclined to suffer from a multitude of mental health issues, identity struggles, low self-esteem, isolation, and “will be unable to effectively cope with the hostility and rejection of white society” (Feigelman and Silverman 589).

2.1 Who are the Real Beneficiaries of Transracial Adoption?

China’s One Child Policy produced adverse consequences concerning family policy, sex imbalance, discrimination against Chinese girls, and the large number of Chinese transracial adoptees. In 1979, China implemented this policy to reduce the size of families after the Cultural Revolution. China’s government saw this population containment strategy as their best option to improve their economy and living standards, “At the time, China was home to a quarter of the world’s people, who were occupying just 7 percent of the world’s arable land. Two thirds of the population were under the age of 30 years, and the baby boomers of the 1950s and 1960s were entering their reproductive years” (Hesketh et al. 1171).

The large number of female Chinese adoptees is a consequence of many factors. China’s persistent preference for male children differs from other countries whose cultures also prefer birthing sons rather than daughters. Beginning with the social organization of the country, the desire for a son in China existed because a daughter could not inherit the family’s land, “the basic organizational logic of these kinship systems, which lies at the root of discrimination against daughters” (Das Gupta et al. 8). This differs from European history where a daughter and their husband could inherit land if there were no sons able to do so. There was flexibility in the inheritance system and patrilineal

kinship that was nonexistent in China (Das Gupta et al. 7).

The gender bias in China's history can also be seen in China's old age support systems and beliefs. Historically, Chinese sons were the caretakers of their parents when they became of old age, "kinship systems create economic incentives for son preference... the majority of the old live with married children, and these are overwhelmingly sons" (Das Gupta et al. 15). It is important to point out that this preference for sons for old age support is a product of Chinese's unique culture; older Chinese couples rarely lived with their married daughter. China's One Child Policy was combined with China's unique social order, family systems, and cultural factors heavily centered around Confucianism values which provide insight on the daughter and son societal expectations "with men viewed as strong princes and women as docile and obedient" (Hancox 7). China's One Child Policy did have success in certain areas, "Chinese authorities claim that the policy prevented 250 to 300 million births" (Hesketh, Lu, and Xing 1172). However, it would be wrong to ignore a consequence of this policy, the large amount of abandoned children. These abandoned children that were adopted by overseas families were almost all baby girls, "Ninety percent of the children in China's orphanages are female (the rest are mainly disabled children)" (Grice 125).

China's One Child policy created an increase in Chinese transracial female adoptees due to the abandonment of children at Chinese orphanages which had limited resources. Their solution was turning to international adoption, which unfortunately became a profit-oriented business, "According to Kay Johnson, international adoption in the 1990s resulted in orphanages receiving, \$3,000 USD in direct donation for a child. This fee increased overtime, with Wang reporting that each orphanage received \$6,000 USD per child in 2016. The increased income caused many social welfare institutes to want to become eligible for international adoptions" (Hancox 9). These Chinese social welfare institutions monetized these vulnerable homeless children in the pursuit for personal revenue. In addition, China used this international adoption as a "soft power" for the country by "[placing] intentional international

immigrants who have some relationship with China in Western countries, which could bring more influence or more money to China through travel. For these reasons, Chinese adoptees became an export worth billions of dollars each year" (Hancox 9). In addition, a corrupt market emerged where Chinese citizens began to illegally capture and sell children to orphanages because of the new financial incentive, "By 2000, orphanages actively wanted babies to come to them and would give \$500 USD to people who found them" (Hancox 9). Many orphans became transracial adoptees who were never abandoned in the first place due to the international increasing demand for adoptees. This scandal was investigated in 2005 through a trial in Hunan Province which found that the Henyang Social Welfare Institute was guilty of purchasing babies from traffickers (Hancox 9). The Henyang Social Welfare Institute case is evidence of entrenched interests trumping the best interests and welfare of the transracial adoptees. China's own interests in generating more revenue and reducing the number of orphans in their orphanages resulted in baby trafficking that harmed Chinese adoptees.

The case *Adam Crasper vs. The Republic of Korea and Holt Children's Services Inc.* also demonstrates how national governments failed to support transracial adoptees. In 2019, Korean adoptee Shin Song-hyuk whose adopted name is Adam Crasper filed "a petition with the Seoul Central District Court against the Korean government and Hold Children's Inc. for violating his rights during his adoption process" (Kyung-eun). He was detained and separated from his wife and kids by the United States government in Vancouver, Washington.

The plaintiff alleged illegal acts by both the Holt Children's Services Inc. and of the Republic of Korea. Holt Children's Services facilitates both domestic and international adoptions and is a world-renowned private adoption agency that began in the 1970s. The plaintiff presented the rights violations he suffered from as well as alleged acts of each party. He accused negligence by the Korean government on fulfilling post-adoption monitoring after his adoption and auditing the practices of adoption agencies. He also stated that he suffered physical, mental, and emotional abuse from his adoption process and

failed to secure his right to know his true identity “due to the fraudulent falsification of his orphan registration” (Kyung-eun). South Korea, “was then at the height of a so-called “child export” frenzy pushed by military dictatorships that focused on economic growth and reducing the number of mouths to feed. There was no stringent oversight of adoption agencies, which were infamous for aggressive child-gathering activities and fraudulent paperwork as they competed to send more children abroad at faster speeds” (Associated Press).

This unprecedented civil suit has been the only attempt by an intercountry adoptee to hold the Korean government accountable for their insufficient and dangerous adoption and child protection practices during the 1970s. Thousands of other Korean children were sent to the United States and other Western nations without securing their citizenships and face fear of deportation like Crasper. This case also points to inter-country adoption programs being held accountable for their violations and the injustices against transracial adoptees (Kyung-eun).

3. METHODS

This paper two films— *Abandoned Adopted Here* and *Approved for Adoption*— to understand the lived experiences of transracial adoptees.

The 2016 independent film, *Abandoned Adopted Here*, was selected because of its historical meaning and its mission that director Lucy Sheen explains in her director statement, “To illicit interest in people and circumstances that many times and oft[en] are side barred or ignored”. This film tackles subjects such as identity, transracial adoption, and what it feels like as a British-Chinese citizen from these Hong Kong adoptees’ perspectives. This documentary is heavily interview based with voices from different Hong Kong Project adoptees, including Jo Wright, Chris Atkins, and Sheen herself. This film is centered around the effects of the International Social Services United Kingdom Hong Kong Adoption Project on identity development by focusing on the specific adoptees brought over to the United Kingdom from Hong Kong. This group of 106 children, mostly abandoned babies and girls, was the first group to be transracially adopted by white

British families during the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this time, Hong Kong had an overwhelming number of children in orphanages resulting from the influx of refugees fleeing China due to communism. More than 50 years later, starting in 2009, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) began a follow up research study on 100 of the adult adopted women, and interviewed 72 of them. Researchers said that this study would investigate “the long-term importance of ethnicity within adoption and how issues of race and cultural identity manifest themselves during childhood and adolescence and into middle-age” (Townsend). The most encompassing finding of this study was that race was a contributing factor to the women’s wellbeing with “findings that challenge the government’s proposal that “ethnicity should not be a primary consideration for adoption agencies” (Townsend).

Sue Jardin, a 60-year-old Hong Kong Adoptee struggled deeply with the repercussions of being a British Chinese transracial adoptee, and “eventually turned to therapy to help overcome her sense of “disconnection and isolation” and moved to multicultural London to blend in”. Her race contributed to her feeling disconnected, being the target of racism, and feeling isolated in her formative years while living in Hertfordshire, England with her white adoptive family.

According to the study, race appeared critical to the girls' well-being. For many, childhood and teenage hood were traumatic with 54% feeling uncomfortable about the comments people made regarding how different they looked from their adoptive parents; and 75% wishing they looked “less Chinese”. The race-based harassment and discrimination adversely impacted most of them to a substantial extent. As they matured, the women gradually became more comfortable with looking Chinese (Townsend). This study demonstrates how transracial adoption can negatively affect adoptees’ cultural identities and confidence in their physical appearances.

Couleur de Peau: Miel (Color of Skin: Honey) also known as *Approved for Adoption* is an autobiography animated documentary that was released in 2012. This film walks the viewers through the adolescence of the filmmaker Jung

Henin, a Korean child adopted into a white Belgian family of 4 kids. Adult Jung, a cartoonist tells his story while returning to his birth country, South Korea, to connect with his roots. The viewer is taken along many pivotal moments in Jung's life starting from the Holt International Adoption Program, his adoption at 5 years old, the car ride to his new home in Belgium, and his adolescence and family life. This film was selected because that film is told from the adoptee's perspective and touches on subjects of identity, cultural integration, and rootlessness. By selecting this film, I am highlighting a Korean transracial adoptee's experiences who was adopted as a result of the Korean War. State failures such as incomprehensible family planning resources and patriarchal/misogynistic views towards women only exacerbated the post war situation. Another

reason why South Korea heavily pushed for overseas intercountry adoption to the west after the Korean War is closely related to the country's instilled belief of pure Korean bloodlines. Korean children born from Korean women and American soldiers, or U.N. soldiers were viewed as outcasts as well as the Korean mother. The Korean babies were sent to France, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Australia, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Italy, England, the United States, and Belgium. The Korean War is mostly known for demonstrating the power struggle between North Korea and South Korea. However, the Korean War should also be known for its influence on intercountry adoption and as one of the first massive waves of transracial adoption (Levine).

4. RESULTS

I argue that transracial adoption is detrimental to adoptees because of the uprooting of the individual from their birth culture, feeling of isolation, and negative effects on their mental health. *Abandoned Adopted Here* demonstrates how transracial adoption negatively impacts their identity development. Similarly, *Approved for Adoption* highlights the tragic stories of Korean adoptees who suffer from mental health issues.

4.1 Insecurity of Ethnic Features/Skin Color, Confronting Racism

Abandoned Adopted Here displays how East Asian transracial adoptees' desires for whiteness and white privilege play an important role in their identity development. In *Abandoned Adopted Here*, Sheen tells her own adoption story and personal experiences of living in rural England as an East Asian adoptee through narration but also uses public speeches and acting. In her director statement she shared, "One could say that from that point it was all downhill. My formative years revolved around trying to get to grips with who and exactly what I was". This idea of being unsure of one's identity is echoed by other transracial adoptees. Jo Wright, a Hong Kong Project Adoptee, explained her own struggle of connecting with others in her community due to her unique adoptee

experience while being British- Chinese, "For me personally, there has been and there will always be a feeling I'm always different...It's not been a revelation, but wherever I go... you as a proper racial minority will nearly always be the only Chinese or virtually the only Chinese person there. And if there is another Chinese person there, I will not be able to connect with them properly because I will not have the cultural connection. So you are in a sense on your own." Wright touches on how being the only Chinese person in a predominately white English setting alienated her and forced her to feel like a foreigner in her own birth country. She expands on her opinion by specifying how even more isolating it can be when there are virtually no other British-Chinese adoptees.

Not only are identity issues at play here, but there are insecurities about physical appearances. Wright points to how many of these Hong Kong adoptees had difficulties with adapting to their new lives in England, which also meant conforming to be like those around them. Sheen spoke about trying to alter her appearance in order to fit in with her white counterparts, "I took to going to sleep with a wooden clothes peg on my nose to straighten and elongate it. I stuck plasters to my eyes to widen them... the result, I nearly suffocated, and I got a very severe eye infection". Through dangerous and drastic efforts, Sheen's confession aligns with the BAAF's research finding that 75% wishing they looked "less Chinese". With teenage girls

concerned about their body changing and caring more about society's beauty expectation of women, this additional internalized racism Sheen felt demonstrates how transracial adoption can affect an adoptee's self-confidence and acceptance of ethnic features. Chris Atkins, another Hong Kong adoptee, shared this same struggle, "Wishing and praying that... you'd wake up the next morning and you would be white. Washing vigorously was another one... in the hope of... if I wash enough, it would change my skin color". Physical appearance being one of the most obvious contributors to feeling like an outcast from most people around you. However, similar to Sheen's drastic efforts to want to change her appearance to fit in with others, Atkins thought similarly she needed to change her Chinese features or skin to fit it with her English counterparts.

Furthermore, Sheen shared her struggles with confronting racism, "Racism, whether you're adopted or not, looking different from those who surround you can be a constant source of pain". Confronting racism during their adolescence is a common experience and struggle that not only transracial adoptees face, potentially in their schools, but also in their families, with internalized racism included as well. Growing up alongside individuals who look physically different than themselves, and being in predominantly white spaces, transracial East Asian adoptees have opened up about their identity struggles. It can be difficult for transracial adoptees to navigate their identities with these circumstances, "If there aren't people like you reflecting back to you the possibilities of who you might be in the future, you only have two choices: either fade into the background or try to fit in", said Sheen. With mindsets similar to Sheen's, transracial adoptees can feel isolated in the social spaces where there are less to no other individuals similar to them regarding culture or race. In addition, transracial adoptees can feel pressured to change their appearance due to extreme insecurities about their ethnic features or distinctions.

Sheen narrates towards the end of *Abandoned Adopted Here* what her experience is as a transracial adoptee. Sheen emphasizes how identity shapes an individual and can be taken for granted for those who will never have to question their place in society. Her transracial adoption not only impacted her identity which she considers

unrecognizable and disconnected her between two distinct cultures but also, "condemned me to a no-man's land existence of being a cultural Frankenstein". The transracial adoption process can affect a transracial adoptee in a multitude of ways for the rest of their life. This can potentially leave identity struggles or complicated relationships between their birth culture and the culture of the country they were adopted in.

4.2 Biological Parents and Biological Parents' Family History

Explored in *Approved for Adoption*, a common theme is Jung imagining his biological mother. Jung's biological mother was displayed by a woman but with no face because he fails to remember what she looks like. Early on in the film, Jung lays in a field by himself while flipping through his sketchbook filled with sketches of his biological mother and himself, later curling and hugging the book as if it were a blanket. Jung's passion for drawing enabled him to create a new story for them and live out an imaginary parent to child love, "You can't love an imaginary mom, you can just dream of her" and "Not knowing your biological parents has an upside, they can be just the way you like". His romanticized idea of his biological mother contrasted with his adoptive parents, specifically his adoptive mother with whom he had a more difficult relationship. This could potentially be because of Jung's high expectations for what his mother should be, comparing her to an unrealistic, unattainable, and perfect vision he had of his biological mother.

This theme of imagining a relationship with the adoptees' biological parents was not seen in the same light in *Abandoned Adopted Here*. Sheen mentioned briefly in a narration that she was jealous of having no family history, "The fact that I cannot put a face to those who created me will haunt me to the end". These two films display how different adoptees in general view the trauma of not knowing your biological family or the empty feeling of missing family history.

Transracial adoptees struggled with their connection to their birth culture, adoptive parents' culture, and other Asian cultures. In *Abandoned Adopted Here*, transracial adoptees navigated their British-Chinese identities and in *Approved for*

Adoption, Jung navigated his Belgian-Korean identity.

4.3 Connecting to a Culture

In the beginning of the film, *Approved for Adoption*, adult Jung narrates his own relationship with his birth country, “For forty years, I disowned Korea and its people. I even held them responsible for my uprooting”. Many Korean transracial adoptees such as adult Jung have sought to reconnect with their Korean culture or travel to Korea when they are adults. However, some expressed feelings similar to young Jung’s sentiments towards his birth country. Some Korean adoptees from the Korean War have lingering feelings of the war’s consequences on their lives and Korea’s Confucianism belief systems. While some Korean transracial adoptees were placed into stable loving homes, some were placed in abusive homes.

Young Jung needed to relate to a culture from the far East. Instead of connecting with his birth Korean culture, he turned to Japanese culture, “I don’t want to be Korean, I want to be Japanese”. Jung would steal the breadboards in his home to practice his karate skills. This interesting brief connection to a culture different from Korean culture shows how transracial adoption can affect a child’s opinion of their own country. These opinions or feelings of a transracial adoptee’s birth country can differ from disconnection, carelessness, or resentment.

In *Abandoned Adopted Here*, Atkin’s relates to this confusion in connecting with a specific culture, “I don’t think I’ve ever fully felt, or do feel, that the UK is my country”. This reflection reveals a severance of cultural connection that many adoptees feel when they are split between two different cultures. This also exemplifies the conflicts of dual identities.

4.4 Is Transracial Adoption Beneficial for the Adoptees?

Both films touch on the underlying impacts transracial adoption can potentially inflict on transracial adoptees as they get older in terms of their state of mental health and their outlook on transracial adoption.

For example, in *Approved for Adoption*, Jung shared a depressive time in his adolescence when he “wanted to end it all” and felt hopeless. Jung mentions that other adopted Koreans he met at his school also experienced this, “will to end it all”. Jung lists the different individuals and how their situations all looked different from each other, “Michèle, who spent time in a psychiatric hospital... Anne, who took too many pills”. Jung names these fellow Korean adoptees to show that other adoptees struggled like him during their childhoods. While he does not disclose any details about their situations or their full names, the first names humanize these individuals. We understand that these adoptees could have suffered from mental health issues that adoptees are more susceptible to have, such as erratic behavior, depression, or self-esteem issues.

Sheen closes out the documentary by inserting her personal belief on transracial adoption, “I personally believe that society should do all that it can to ensure children remain in the country of their birth. This should always be the prime objective”. She justifies her belief by sharing that when a child is removed from their birth country, they lose “family, language, culture, history, and roots.... we irrevocably sever the DNA of that child’s identity”.

Abandoned Adopted Here almost poses philosophical and foundational questions to the viewers about the implications of transracial adoption. On the other hand, *Approved for Adoption* explores the direct affects transracial adoption can have on an individual’s mental/behavioral health and aspects of a transracial adoptee’s childhood. Both films show that for many adoptees, in the future, they spend time trying to heal the break that was caused through their adoption or embark on a journey of rediscovery or reconnection with their past. Both films present adoptees trying to embrace their stories and adoptee experiences and find some sort of acceptance of their adoption.

5. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

The results of the research project demonstrate some of transracial adoption’s implications on transracial adoptees’ mental health and cultural identity formation. By analyzing personal accounts of transracial adoptees in the two films, it is clear

that the transracial adoption process's harmful effects can endure for the rest of the adoptees' lives as they grow to be adults.

All transracial adoptees deserve to receive high quality and accessible mental health resources when they are navigating their unique identities, especially when they are growing up. From past research on transracial adoptee identity development, the two analyzed films, and transracial adoptees personal stories/experiences, I conclude that transracial adoptees should receive adequate resources to help navigate their unique identities. Adoption trauma and specific struggles that transracial adoptees can face such as displacement and racism should be acknowledged. Necessary resources can range from educating parents regarding possible struggles their adopted children can face due to their race, or increasing the number of specialized mental health professionals who identify as adoptees that can work with adoptive families and adoptees.

As a transracial adoptee myself, I can relate to some of the internal struggles the Hong Kong adoptees and Jung felt, such as feeling confused about my cultural identity and wandering thoughts about my birth parent history. Living in a racialized world and growing up in predominantly white spaces as well, every day I can see how transracial adoption has affected me as a person and my identity. I hope this project contributes to the research pushing to care about all transracial adoptees' well-being and safety so they can live fulfilling lives.

I also hope this research opens more people's ears and hearts to transracial adoptees' lived experiences and feelings regarding transracial adoption that they were subset to by no choice of their own. The dialogue surrounding transracial adoption has prompted philosophical questions. Is transracial adoption beneficial for the children? Should transracial adoption be a last resort? Should children only be adopted by parents of the same race/culture? When adoption systems (both domestic and international) can be infiltrated with for-profit industry mindsets with supply and demand models, it is important to emphasize the true goal of adoption. This goal should be to provide safety and security for all transracial adoptees. These discussions must be centered

around and amplify transracial adoptees' voices and lived experiences.

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