Proceedings of ICEIPI 2026 Symposium: Psychological Resilience, Motivation, and Well-Being in Educational Contexts
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.NS33472

Narratives of White-Adopted Chinese Women: Identity, Parenting, and Agentic Coping

Mohan Zhao

Keystone Academy, Beijing, China
zhaomadeline947@gmail.com

Abstract. This qualitative study examined five White American adopted Chinese women through semi-structured interviews using an inductive analysis. Three patterns have emerged from the data: (1) permanent disconnection between internal American identity and external Asian appearance, leaving participants permanently situated between two cultures without fully belonging to either; (2) active harm from colorblind parenting, as dismissal of racism invalidated children's experiences and exacerbated identity confusion; (3) agentic coping strategies including community-seeking, cognitive reframing, language learning, and selective disclosure (deliberately withholding feelings to avoid managing parental guilt). Findings validate existing research on prolonged identity crisis and cumulative microaggressions within the literature on American adopted Chinese women. In the meantime, it challenges the assumptions that microaggressions inevitably cause lasting damage and that colorblind parenting is benign. This study centers adoptees' voices, offers critical implications for culturally competent adoption practice and mental health support, and provides contemporary data on COVID-19 racialization and online community-building.

Keywords: Transracial Adoption, Identity Disconnection, Colorblind Parenting, Selective Disclosure, Coping Strategy

1. Introduction

Between the 1990s and 2000s, China's One Child Policy led tens of thousands of Chinese girls to be adopted into White American families. These children have now come of age, yet their voices remain underrepresented. Existing literature documents their growth, development, and struggles, but gaps remain: (1) Mental challenges, such as identity crisis, are studied in isolation. (2) Adoptee perspectives on parenting are missing. (3) Coping strategies are treated as static. This study asks: What challenges do adopted Chinese girls face? How do they perceive family influences? What coping strategies do they develop?

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.NS33472

2. Literature review

2.1. Personal mental struggles

Adoptees experience ethnic marginality, feeling they belong fully to neither Chinese nor White American culture [1]. Many describe themselves as "banana" (a term for those outwardly Asian but culturally Western) or "white-washed" (a term for those who feel culturally Western at the expense of Asian heritage). Neider et al. argues this identity crisis extends beyond adolescence into adulthood [1], though Berman et al. found no significant mental health differences between Chinese and White adoptees raised by White parents [2]. Adoptees also face lifelong grief over lost biological connection, including "what-if" scenarios and ambivalence that deepens over time [3,4]. Yet many hold predominantly positive feelings about adoption [5]. Ultimately, whether adoptees struggle or thrive depends not on adoption itself but on their ability to integrate it into a coherent life narrative [6].

2.2. Societal inequality

Racial microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional slights that accumulate over time and communicate hostile messages to people of color [7]. Transracial adoptees frequently experience these, most commonly being treated as foreign-born despite being raised in the United States, and such experiences intensified during COVID-19 as anti-Asian sentiment rose [8-10]. However, self-blame moderates the relationship between discrimination and mental health; in its absence, the effects of discrimination on mental health become nonsignificant, meaning microaggressions do not always predict poorer outcomes [11]. Within families, White adoptive parents may unknowingly commit microaggressions against their own children; even when parents recognize such slights from strangers, this awareness does not prevent them from making similar comments themselves, with color evasiveness, such as "I do not see color", being most common [12]. Asian American women also face stereotypes of being exotic, submissive, and sexually available, a set of assumptions called the "oriental feminine" or "Asianization," despite women's frequent resistance [13].

2.3. Coping strategies

Reculturation is conceptualized as the self-directed effort to connect with birth culture through travelling to China, learning Chinese, or building relationships with Chinese or Asian American communities [14,15]. Building friendships with other adoptees provides validation and reduces isolation [14,15]. Narrative construction and "what-if" exploration help adoptees process loss [3]. Some use DNA testing to find biological relatives, though outcomes are unpredictable and may create new confusion [3]. Developing racial literacy reframes racism as the perpetrator's problem [7] while parental cultural efforts (e.g., hosting au pairs) risk backfiring when lacking genuine understanding [1]. Race-conscious parenting, actively addressing rather than avoiding race, produces better outcomes than colorblind approaches, which correlate with later discrimination reports [16,17]. Open, age-appropriate conversations normalize adoption within family narratives [4], yet parental confidence and personal attitudes matter more than mere knowledge of racial identity development [18].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.NS33472

2.4. Gaps

Four gaps remain in past literature. First, challenges are examined in isolation rather than as intersecting pressures. Second, we know little about how adoptees perceive their parents' efforts. Third, coping strategies are described as static rather than evolving. Fourth, much research predates COVID-19 and social media shifts.

3. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Chinese women adopted by White American families between the 1990s and 2000s. Participants were aged early twenties to early thirties and raised in predominantly White communities. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis proceeded through open coding, focused coding by research question, and pattern synthesis. Pseudonyms were used to protect interviewees' confidentiality.

4. Results

Five participants' narratives—Bella, Annie, Helen, Selena, and Kayla—reveal three patterns.

4.1. Internal identity-appearance disconnection

Participants described a persistent split between internal self and external appearance. Bella explained that until she sees her reflection, she does not feel Chinese. Annie grew up knowing herself as American, but she knows her face tells a different story. This disconnection drives rejection of Chineseness in childhood. Annie explained that many adoptees wanted to fit in as white or American. Kayla believed boys would not like her because she was not white. Annie's childhood stories featured only white protagonists, revealing she could not imagine herself as worthy of narrative. These women inhabit a permanent position between two cultures. Helen named feeling "in between cultures" as her biggest challenge. Selena described it as a lifelong question of where she belongs. In the Chinese communities, they face exclusion for not speaking the language. In the White communities, they face equal rejection due to their appearance. As Annie recognized, even fluent Mandarin would never be considered local. The question "Where are you from?" crystallizes this dynamic. Kayla captures the impossible choice: if she says California, she thinks, "Actually, I'm from China." Every participant found it loaded and negative.

4.2. Parental and community invalidation

Parents acted on the 1990s advice to assimilate children, which led to their colorblindness in parenting. Bella said her parents' ignorance of race hindered her from leaning into her racial identity. Annie described a racist incident that happened right in front of both parents, yet neither noticed. However, even when parents do notice, they dismiss. Annie's parents told her to let it go. What these women needed was witnessing and company, not fixing. As she put it, "no one can really fix it after the fact." Helen's mother questioned why she wanted to make mooncakes, a traditional Chinese dessert, asking what the point was since she grew up in America. Helen's mother saw American culture as sufficient; Helen experienced it as incomplete. Yet effective parenting exists. Selena's parents moved cities for a Chinese immersion program and acknowledged her difference directly. When extended family made racist comments, her parents dealt with them immediately. Where parents fail, the adoptee community becomes essential. One participant said, "You don't have to

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.NS33472

explain everything." With other adoptees, explanation effort vanishes due to shared experience and understanding.

4.3. Active coping and identity reclamation

Community-seeking is pursued with determination. Annie tracked down five of her six orphanage cohort members. Helen joined a Chinese church. Selena's family deliberately built a community of color in a predominantly white city. Specifically, cognitive reframing is a learned skill in this process. Selena trained her mind to interpret "Where are you from?" as a neutral question. Kayla uses yoga to remind herself that discomfort is temporary. Annie's repeated realization that fitting in does not really matter liberates her from needing universal belonging. In addition, language learning reclaims identity. Helen found that improved pronunciation makes Chinese people share their life stories, culture, and food with her. Selena returns to China specifically for language purposes, treating the homeland as a destination for growth. The most universal strategy is talking to others who understand. Annie explained that sometimes she just needs to say that someone stopped her on the street and she is angry. The relief is recognition that she is not alone, and her reaction is not crazy. For those who found their biological family, resemblance healed. Kayla saw family members turn red when drinking—"because typically that's only me." The face finally matched.

5. Discussion

Our findings validate and extend multiple theoretical frameworks. Building on Neider's hypothesis, we show that identity crisis is not merely prolonged but reactivated by transitions (college, relationships, workforce), while challenging the "banana" characterization by demonstrating active cultural reclamation through language and travel—even among those who rejected their heritage in childhood [1]—thus extending Tan and Jordan-Arthur to show that positive adoption feelings coexist with complex grief [5].

Drawing on Sue et al.'s [7] and Feasel et al. [11], we confirmed that characterization of microaggressions as cumulative harm, but challenge the assumption that microaggressions inevitably cause lasting damage. Despite experiencing racial mockery, participants developed cognitive reframing skills that protected their well-being. Synthesizing parenting research [1,12,16,17,19], we validate that colorblind approaches cause tangible harm while race-conscious parenting fosters support, but challenge Baden et al.'s focus on color-evasive statements by identifying dismissal—parents minimizing racist incidents rather than witnessing them—as a distinct intrafamilial microaggression [12]; we also confirm that superficial cultural efforts backfire while supporting that adoptive families can flourish when parents actively prioritize education and directly acknowledge difference. Extending reculturation scholarship [1,14,15], we demonstrate this as lifelong maintenance requiring continuous effort, with community-seeking reducing isolation by relieving the emotional labor of explanation. Most significantly, we identify selective disclosure as a novel coping strategy absent from existing literature: participants withheld feelings not from shame but to avoid managing parental guilt, complicating Brodzinsky emphasis on open communication by reframing withholding as self-protection when parents respond defensively to adoption-related grief [4].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.NS33472

6. Conclusion

This study found that adopted Chinese girls experience identity-appearance disconnection, parental invalidation despite good intentions, and active coping, including selective disclosure —a strategy meriting further study as adaptive rather than relational deficit. For parents, colorblindness is harmful; acknowledging racial difference and validating children's experiences of racism are essential. For clinicians, assessment should attend to coping resources adoptees have developed rather than struggles. For researchers, selective disclosure merits further study as an adaptive strategy rather than a relational deficit. Limitations include a small sample size and self-selected participants. Ultimately, these women are not simply wounded by their circumstances but actively construct meaning, community, and resilience.

References

[1] Neider, E., Wang, X., & Guan, T. (2025). Navigating identity: the experiences of Chinese women adopted into families. Frontiers in Sociology, 10 , 1615777.
[2] Berman, A., Ruderman, M. A., Ordaz, A. C., Waterman, J., & Langley, A. (2025). Belonging and Reclaiming Identity: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Youth Adopted From Foster Care in Transracial Families. Adoption Quarterly, 1–29.
[3] Quist, S. R. (2022). Ghost kingdoms and phantom worlds: Narrative strategies in adoptee autofiction [Master's thesis, Texas Woman's University]. TWU Digital Repository.
[4] Brodzinsky, D. M. (2011). Children's understanding of adoption: Developmental and clinical implications. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 42 , 200–207.
[5] Tan, T. X., & Jordan-Arthur, B. (2012). Adopted Chinese girls come of age: Feelings about adoption, ethnic identity, academic functioning, and global self-esteem. Children and Youth Services Review, 34 (8), 1500–1508.
[6] Grotevant, H. D., Lo, A. Y. H., Fiorenzo, L., & Dunbar, N. D. (2017). Adoptive Identity and Adjustment from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: A Person-Centered Approach. Developmental Psychology, 53 (11), 2195–2204.
[7] Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. American Psychologist, 62 (4), 271–286.
[8] White, E. E., Baden, A. L., Ferguson, A. L., & Smith, L. (2021). The intersection of race and adoption: Experiences of transracial and international adoptees with microaggressions. Journal of Family Psychology, 36 (8).
[9] Baden, A. L. (2015). "Do You Know Your Real Parents?" and Other Adoption Microaggressions. Adoption Quarterly, 19 (1), 1–25.
[10] Wing, H. M., & Park-Taylor, J. (2024). Female Chinese transracial adoptees' racial awakening amid dual racial pandemics. Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 30 (2), 395–403.
[11] Feasel, S. H., Dover, T. L., Small, P. A., & Major, B. (2022). Effects of discrimination versus self-blame attributions on health: A longitudinal study. Stigma and Health, 7 (3), 289–299.
[12] Baden, A. L., Sharma, S. M., Harrington, E. S., White, E. E., Zhang, X., & Pinderhughes, E. E. (2024). White adoptive parents of children from China, microaggressions, and parental awareness of bias. Journal of Family Psychology, 38 (4), 582–594.
[13] Wing, J. Y. (2007). Beyond Black and White: The Model Minority Myth and the Invisibility of Asian American Students. The Urban Review, 39 (4), 455–487.
[14] Baden, A. L. (2008). Contextualizing race, culture, and identity for transracially and internationally adopted persons: Lessons from a personal and professional journey. Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, 17 (1-2), 106–125.
[15] Shiao, J. L., & Tuan, M. H. (2008). Korean adoptees and the social context of ethnic exploration. American Journal of Sociology, 113 (4), 1023–1066.
[16] Killian, C., & Khanna, N. (2019). Beyond Color-Blind and Color-Conscious: Approaches to Racial Socialization Among Parents of Transracially Adopted Children. Family Relations, 68 (2), 260–274.
[17] Morgan, S. K., & Langrehr, K. J. (2019). Transracially adoptive parents' colorblindness and discrimination recognition: Adoption stigma as moderator. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 25 (2), 242–252.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.NS33472

[18] Pettis, S., & Sonnentag, T. L. (2024). Is knowledge of racial identity development necessary? White transracial adoptive parents' intentions to promote Black adoptees' racial-ethnic identity. Social Development, 33 (1), Article e12705.
[19] D'Angelo, N. (2023). Children adopted from China: Cultural socialization practices, parent-child relationship, and social-emotional behaviour [Master's thesis, Trent University]. Trent University Repository.