

Naomi Ji: I have been educated publicly. In the UK, public school is not the same as the US, I believe. In the UK, state school is public school, which means it's run by the government. It's free. I attended private school. I also attend public school, which is same as private school, but it's a slightly more old-fashioned term of using it. I did also go to boarding school as well, very, very English, very British. It's very traditional institutions I went to. As I mentioned, my [indiscernible] father and my parents, there was a lot of jobs so I could get a really good education. Afterwards, I had a gap year. Then I went to university.

Jena Heath: Where you are now?

Naomi: Yes. I'm at university now.

Jena: Do you want to say where, or you prefer not to?

Naomi: I'd prefer not to, honest.

Jena: Somewhere good? I'm getting the feeling you're very smart.

Naomi: Thank you very much. Let's hope I don't disappoint. [laughs] It's somewhere in the north. I'm just going to say that.

Jena: What are you studying? What are you reading?

Naomi: I'm reading linguistics.

Jena: Ah-ha. Do you speak Mandarin?

Naomi: No. I've taken some classes in Mandarin this year, took a short course. It was one of those intensive, put it all together, try and learn as much as you can. It was very intense and a lot of work. I did really enjoy it. I'm able to have limited conversation. Mandarin's actually my fourth language. My second language is French. My third language is Spanish. Then Mandarin's actually my fourth language. When I finally get to grips with Mandarin and everything, then that will be my fourth language.

Jena: That's very impressive. How old were you when you started studying Spanish and French?

Naomi: I was about eleven. I was really lucky actually because where my mom worked, there happened to be a French family where she was working. I had lessons with them a lot in their family home. We actually became really good friends. As well, I was lucky because my school had a French exchange. I got on really well with my exchange. We ended up meeting up together many years after the exchange ended. We're still really good friends now. We still see each other. I was really lucky with that. Then after I finished school, I went to get a job in France. That helped as well. I also got the chance to baccalaureate, which is the international -- they do it in the US as well. My teacher was French there as well. That

was a very different story. Then Spanish, I started Spanish a bit later when I was about thirteen. Again, I was lucky because my school had a Spanish exchange. They were really very much encouraging of learning other languages and promoting that. My parents were as well. I wasn't really good at anything else.

Jena: Being good at languages is plenty.

Naomi: That was basically it.

Jena: You took your gap year in France?

Naomi: The beginning of my gap year, I was working for six months. I was just working some regular jobs, try and get some money together, just working summer jobs. After that, I went to volunteer as a teacher in Fiji, which was a really amazing experience. I'd definitely recommend it if anyone [indiscernible] company. It was really interesting for me. I went to volunteer at a Muslim school. Fiji's split between two cultures. The indigenous Fijians have been there for hundreds of years. There's also the Indian Fijians that actually the British brought over to work on the sugar plantations. There's two cultures and two languages there. There's a lot of conflict over that. I was with the Indian Fijians. That was really eye-opening for me. It was the first time I'd been out of Western countries for a long time.

It's when I started to come across questions from people asking about where I'm from. I'd say I'm from England. When my host family first saw me, they said, "On the paper it said you were Chinese." I said, "Yes, I am Chinese." They said, "So how long was the plane from China?" I said, "No, I didn't come from China. I came from England." They said, "But you look Chinese." I said, "I am Chinese." They couldn't understand the duality. I constantly run into people when I was in Fiji, they say, "Where you from?" I say I'm from England. "Oh, but you look Chinese." "Yes, but I am Chinese." "But you just said you were from England." It was quite hilarious.

I remember one specific incident where I got rejected to use my card. This woman said, "We're not taking international cards today. It's only Australian and something else cards today." I said, "I've got an English card. It says here that you can take English cards." She said, "Is that definitely English?" I said, "Yeah, it is. It's [indiscernible] Bank. It's originated from the UK." She said, "We don't take Chinese cards." I said, "It's not a Chinese card though." She was looking at my face. She couldn't understand how I had an English card. To me, it was frustrating obviously. I was like, "Please let me use this card. I would like to buy this item." It was interesting.

Jena: It is funny when you tell it in that people keep saying -- it's sort of like a comedy routine. "But you said you're from England." "No, no." On the other hand, I can imagine it must have been, also, difficult. When you were growing up in England, what was the culture like around Chinese adoption? I know in this country, the Families with Children from China chapters are very active, especially when kids are younger. We all drag our kids off to the Dragon Boat Festival and the lanterns and everything. Then you move into your teen years.

There are more and more resources now, like what you're doing, adoptees for adoptees. What's the culture like in Britain for Chinese adoptees? Is it the same kind of thing?

Naomi: I would have to say no, not at all. The US seems to be a lot more proactive from what I've seen about it. Obviously, I'm just one person. My perception of being an adoptee is shaped by my experience because I grew up in the countryside. I grew up in areas where I was mostly the only person of color, especially my schools because I went to private schools. Typically, the private schools I went to, I was one of about three people of color maybe, if not more. As for adoptee stuff, when I younger, yes. I was part of a bigger group that was based around the London area, which is a lot further away from where I live. We used to meet up for Chinese New Year and I'd say biannually. As I got older, as I was about eight or nine, people moved on and stuff. I didn't really see a lot of them anymore. I'd say that's when it stopped after that. There's still some adoptees I spoke to, but there wasn't any kind of big group of anything. We didn't talk about adoptee stuff. We moved on and we were talking as friends. It wasn't central to that.

That's one of my main reasons for starting this. In the UK and elsewhere, it's really important to talk about that. Conversations about this do need to be discussed. There are adoptees in the UK. There are Chinese adoptees and other Asian adoptees and other transracial adoptees. Talking about this would really help. Someone like me, from my experiences growing up, would really benefit from something to talk about, essentially not the narrative that they are the one only. It's difficult. It's limited with what you can do. You can't really criticize parents because there aren't resources around. They can't do anything. There's only so much you can do. There's only so much the child is interested with. When I was six, I was interested in it, maybe. For me when I was six, other kids weren't Chinese. I wasn't that interested. It was, "Yeah. Okay. We do this occasionally." It wasn't something where I really set my heart on or something I really talked about a lot.

Now that I'm older, I do want to talk about it a lot more. It's more important. In the UK as well, talking about my videos and things, the idea of the British Asian community, I do find that it's really, from my perspective, it would be nice if we could bring that together, and we could have that togetherness, and there could be unity in that. That would be really great. That's what I'm trying to do at the moment. I feel that there isn't that togetherness. Everyone's quite separate on that. If those things could come together, if that could be there for adoptees as well, the community of people who have grown up in the West but are the same race as you or they are the same background as you, as well as the community of adoptees, if you have two of those together, that would be great. Obviously, that's two working things.

I've always known that I look different. When [indiscernible] transracial adoption, you can't hide it. It's apparent. People ask questions. It is a thing. It's something you know. As long as I can remember, I've always known that I'm Chinese before anything else. I never thought about what that means or how that's different from my parents not being Chinese. Growing up, I did feel different. I did feel out of place. That's normal for a child. Everyone goes through that sense of "I don't belong anywhere. Who am I?" I do think in some ways, adoption is a slightly different question of "Who am I?" There are those gaps missing. There

are those questions which aren't answered and those things that with biological children you don't see. Parents can say, "This is where I come from. This is how I carried you." With adoption, there's not that conversation. You can't have that similarity. I noticed it a lot when I was a child. I was involved with those adoptee stuff, so I still could talk about it with them. Obviously when I got older, I'm going to drift more from that.

I went to different schools. I was in areas which, like I said, there weren't many people of color. I noticed people's reactions towards Asian people, towards Chinese people, questions. People ask me a lot of questions. Honestly, they're not mean or anything. They're just curious. It's those sort of things that I started noticing people ask me. As a child growing up, you know that people asking you these questions are people thinking of you in a certain way because of a certain thing. You do vaguely know why. You don't know how to articulate how that feels. You don't know how to articulate what that does to your emotional self, or what that does to your sense of identity, or sense of self-esteem, or sense of how people view, "You're from a certain culture. You're a certain way."

Jena: What kind of questions would people ask you that would hit you, but you just didn't quite know what to do with?

Naomi: There's quite a lot of common questions. I've got quite small feet. "Do you bind your feet? I heard they still do that in China." I got congratulated by some of my teachers for my accent. I also got asked if I wanted to do a talk in front of the international students to talk about moving into English culture.

Jena: Wow. Was this in high school? Was this at university?

Naomi: Yes.

Jena: This was in high school?

Naomi: No, it wasn't at university.

Jena: This was in high school?

Naomi: Yes. People as well, they have a lot of comments about how Asian I am, as if Asian is a scale. I don't know where this idea of it's a scale, some people are really Asian, some people are not Asian, even though it's something that you are or you're not. You're not really, really not. You're really not, not. It sounds like an odd thing to say. People are like, "You're a failed Asian. You're not really an Asian," or "You're so Asian." I'm the only Asian person at my secondary school not to take further maths. Everyone found that really funny. There's a lot of other things such as people would joke, "You dishonor your nation." It's things in reference to stereotypes about how Asian people are.

Jena: You dishonor your nation by not being in advanced math because everybody Chinese is in advanced math. [laughs]

Naomi: Of course. Of course they are. It seems about not being what people's perception of Asian is, or people's ideas about old China with binding feet and stuff, or everyone Asian is your brother or your mom. People would get on the bus two stops after I got off and they'd be like, "Is that your mom?" I'm like, "I don't know this woman. I'm not even from this city."

Jena: Did you board at high school? You were in a different community?

Naomi: [indiscernible] for the last two years of school.

Jena: Did most of this happen where you were boarding?

Naomi: It happened before I went away to boarding school. It happened more in my own community and then I went to school in the county next to me. It wasn't the same county. It happened in that one a lot. It was really in my own area.

Jena: I was hoping for your sake that this had been two isolated years when you were off at some boarding school somewhere. I was hoping it wasn't in the community in which you lived essentially.

Naomi: Yeah, it was that one.

Jena: I got to tell ya, those are doozies. The binding feet, was that a joke?

Naomi: Several people have asked me about binding feet. Several people have said, "Is it because your feet were bound?" Genuinely, several people have asked me that. It's things about my hair. I was born with double eyelids. I know that's a very uncommon thing. People ask me if I've had surgery for that, as it's been common in Asia, and other things about my appearance, about not being a stereotypical this or that, or about eating rice all the time or something. Here's a good one. "You don't speak your own language. What an insult." That's a problem adoptees face often, is perceptions of how they should be. That's why they feel personally attacked or personally confronted by this. Some people, not everybody, some people have ideas of how they should be. I've had a lot of people say to me that I should speak Chinese and it's bad that I haven't. When I've come across this, it's something I've had to explain to people. I haven't grown up speaking Chinese because my parents are English. I didn't have the access to that. There were some Chinese classes I did join. Then they stopped in the local community. Then I joined another school. They did start out having Chinese classes, but as soon as I joined, the Chinese teacher left.

I just never had the opportunity before going to university to really learn Chinese. Some people haven't really understood this idea that I just haven't had the opportunity to learn it. It's not something I'd come across. It wasn't something I was interested in before. There are lots of people in England who are British-born Chinese who don't speak Chinese. I don't think that they should be expected to, that it's a bad thing if they don't. Many people in the UK are from Irish heritage or Italian heritage. The same thing applies to them. The question

about language is often one that adoptees get. It's the thing that separates you from your culture. That expectation isn't positive, isn't helping adoptees to move forward. It's a personal choice if you want to learn it or not. I did want to learn it later on. That's what I'm doing now. When I was younger, when I was six or seven, I wasn't that interested. There wasn't a local Chinese school. Sometimes there's weekend classes. There wasn't that around. It wasn't available. I had nothing to go to. Then when I got older, there was some things. I wasn't super, super interested as I am now.

Jena: It sounds like when people ask you this question, what's difficult about it is that rather than a question, it feels like a judgement.

Naomi: Yeah. Sometimes it's perceptions of how people ought to be. Sometimes it can come across that way rather than just being curious. For example, I have had comments in the past about, "You're a loud person." That transforms into, "You're a loud Asian person." I don't understand why there's the need to put that prefix in there as well, "I'd never met a loud Asian person actually," rather than, "I just haven't met a loud person like you." It has to be about "[indiscernible] Asian person like you," or "I've never met a 'something' Asian person like you." I don't really know how to respond to those. I don't really know what you can say. You can't say anything apart from "Okay. Yay. I am the first."

Jena: I'm thinking about myself. I have a short fuse for dumbness. I can be very undiplomatic, not my greatest quality. On the other hand, there are times when I'm sort of glad I'm that way. I wonder, do you ever just want to turn around and let the person have it? How do you restrain yourself from getting really mad? Or do you? Maybe you don't.

Naomi: [laughs] Right. I have a lot of really nice friends, so I just tell them about it afterwards. Thank you, lovely friends. It is difficult. People can lash out. That's when comments like, "This really aggressive Asian person," those comments come up as well. Obviously, that doesn't help the situation, the two forces against each other on that. I've had times where I've been really frustrated and really angry with this situation. I've been annoyed at some of the comments I've gotten. I've always wanted to turn around and give them this long spiel about, "By the way, your perception of me as this, this, and this is wrong because this, this, and this." But really, that's not going to help anybody, is it? It's not going to help anybody if I come back and go with anger about it. As annoying as it is, it's talking about it calmly and saying, "I'm not x, y, z."

One of them was when I told some people at university that I was taking the Chinese beginner's course. Some people said, "Well that's an easy choice for you. Just go hang out." Everyone said, "That's going to be no hardship for you." I said, "Actually, I don't speak Chinese." They assumed. You can see why they did that. I guess it's a case of talking to other people. That way you can kind of not feel angry about your own later. If you just silently take it and don't say anything at all, me personally, I know that I would go back to my room and be really annoyed for a long time. If you just calmly explain to the person, say, "Hey look, by the way, I'm adopted. I don't speak Chinese. This is actually a really interesting cultural exploration for me. It's not me just taking the subject for the easy way

out,” then that really helps give the person and yourself more. I agree. It is easy to just lash out sometimes. There's a lot of good music out there.

Jena: It sounds like sometimes though, if you take the opportunity to, in effect, educate the person -- although it's probably no fun walking through the world feeling like to some extent you've been assigned this mission to educate people that you didn't ask for, but you've got it - - it sounds like you do that and it can -- maybe, tell me if I'm wrong -- it sounds like it can lead to some good conversations. Maybe you've helped people understand something that they didn't understand before. It seems to me that's what you're doing with your videos and with the media that you're putting out there. I wanted to talk a little bit about that. I thought it was interesting that you were saying you weren't really able to articulate to your parents some of how isolating and how unpleasant some of this stuff was. You can send that message out into the universe with these videos.

How did you decide to start doing this? Have your parents seen your videos? What do they think?

Naomi: I really, really, started to become very sad with my feelings about being adopted. I was at a point in my life where I felt very isolated anyway. I was really a lost soul with myself about how to feel about it. I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. I'd watched a video on the Korean adoptee, Dan aka Dan. I don't know if you've seen his video. This whole world of talking about it openly and stuff just blew open my mind. Whoa. Look at that guy. Oh, my goodness. I thought about how he'd found his birth parents. I actually contacted him. He wrote back to me. He was so lovely. Thank you, Dan aka Dan. That happened. I didn't think about it again for another year. It was slowly [indiscernible] my mind. It really got to the point where I wanted to talk about it with a lot of people. Your friends, you do want to talk about things that are affecting you at the moment, but you don't want it to become obsessive. You don't want to become overrun. You don't want to become that person that's dragging the conversation down.

I thought, “I need to have a way to make this positive.” I was talking to my parents about it. They could see that I was really feeling down about it. I felt almost felt heavy. It felt like a heavy weight. Like you said, I'd been assigned this mission to go through my life and do all these things. I didn't feel like I'd chosen it. I didn't feel like it was necessarily fair that I had to deal with this. [indiscernible] adoption, two of the major choices in my life weren't made by me. I felt really almost cursed by this. After that, I started the adoption group online. I started looking out there in the media and what was there more. I realized that it wasn't there as much as I wanted it to be. Things on your blog and stuff are really great, and some other people I've seen recently as well, The Adopted Life and then [indiscernible] as well, and some other people who are talking about it more. This is great.

I was talking about it with my parents. I was saying, “I do feel that I have missed out on some of the cultural aspects. I do feel very odd about it. I do feel conflicted about my feelings about this.” My mom said, “Okay. We understand. We want to make this right for you. We want this to be okay for you.” Then we talked about it. My mom was saying, “Why

don't you make the video? Why don't you do that? Why don't you put that out there? Why don't you try and help other people? Why don't you be the one?" I was like, "I don't know, Mom," typical things. Honestly, it was that point that I really decided to do it. She was right. These things do need to be talked about. I've got a hundred percent personal experience of this. Obviously, everyone has fears about putting things online. Who's going to see it? It's going to be there forever, pretty much. You can't take things back. Who am I to say this? Who am I? I'm not somebody famous. I have a story that's very similar to many thousands of people out there, thousands of other people. People who aren't adopted as well have similar experiences of similar feelings. I have friends that weren't adopted but have similar things about their family, or people from different cultures or people from mixed backgrounds. All backgrounds can relate in some way, I believe. Talking to my parents about it, about my feelings, about feeling out of place and isolated, growing up it had been quite difficult without that presence, without that open right to discuss.

Then I decided to do it. I had to swallow my own pride about whether it was good enough or whether it was this or that. It's really important to do. It's something that I care a lot about. You're going to be really excited to do it. Then I just started doing it. I didn't really know what I was doing. I still had my old camera. I left my phone next to the camera so there was a lot of beeping and muffled noises. It's all okay now. Actually, straightaway I received some positive feedback from some adoptees. I thought, "This is what I've got to do. This is what I've got to continue doing and continue trying to help out and trying to make a difference." Even if just one person sees it and if just one person has a good experience from it and one person says, "I watched this video. I can totally relate. That's me in the video. Thank you for bringing it up," then it's all good, even if it's just one person. It's important to that one person. There are lots of individuals, like I said, who have been affected by this. Even if I only reach five of them, but I reached them in a profound way, then that's great.