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Introduction

I sometimes feel guilty on Sunday mornings when I think about how some of my son’s Chinese American friends are at Chinese school learning to read, write, and speak Chinese while he stays at home tinkering with his Legos. It’s not that we have not considered Chinese school. When he was five, he expressed interest in learning Chinese along with some of his friends. I was excited that he wanted to learn the language and thought this would give him an opportunity to spend time with other children of Chinese background who were his age. We tried out a kindergarten-level class, one where parents were allowed to sit at the back of the room to monitor behavior and help children with books, supplies, and snacks. But he barely made it through the two-hour session, which was geared toward children who spoke Mandarin at home. The instructor spoke only in Chinese and assumed a working knowledge of the language, including colors and other basic vocabulary that my son did not have. The class involved the rote memorization and reading of Chinese phrases such as duibuqi (sorry) and bukeqi (you’re welcome) and on-the-spot recitation. My son was lost and frustrated, only chiming in when the teacher had the class sing “Liang zhi laohu” (Two tigers), a song he had learned from watching a YouTube video.

The following year we decided to try a Chinese as a second language class run by a different Chinese school. He fit in better with this group because none of the other children were native Chinese speakers, but the class met from six to eight o’clock on Saturday evenings, and the first homework assignment, practicing the characters of the zodiac, seemed rather demanding. We could have stuck with it, and he probably would have done fine, but ultimately we did not feel strongly enough about him learning Chinese to follow through with the class. Maybe next year, we thought. Or perhaps he could learn Spanish instead.

Our ambivalence stemmed from our uncertainty about whether learning Chinese should be a priority for our son. What was it that we
really wanted him to get out of Chinese language class? Was it our goal for him to become fluent in Chinese, or to merely be exposed to another language? More broadly, we wondered how important Chinese language was for fostering his sense of Chinese identity or as a general skill for him to possess as a Chinese American individual. Neither we nor his grandparents speak Chinese fluently, if at all. Our son, who is our biological child, is actually three-quarters Chinese. When he was around five, he declared that since he was three-quarters Chinese, that must mean that he knows how to say three words in Chinese. Indeed, he had learned to say ni hao (hello), zai jian (good-bye), and xie xie (thank you) when we went to China, but has since forgotten. His first words were actually in Spanish, a language that his half-Chinese father, who grew up in El Salvador, had attempted to speak with him since birth. But Spanish soon fell by the wayside. By age two, our son increasingly responded “Speak English!” to his father while pressing an imaginary button on his head to make him switch back to English. After all, he hears only Boston-accented English when he visits his maternal grandparents, who speak village dialects unintelligible even to Cantonese speakers; and he hears Kentucky-accented English (and sometimes fluent but Kentucky-accented Spanish) when he visits his paternal grandmother, who is of Scottish and Irish stock, was born and bred in Kentucky and later married a Chinese man from El Salvador.

As I try to help my son craft his identity, I make choices for him that reflect my own ideas about which aspects of Chinese (or Chinese Salvadoran/Kentuckian) cultural heritage he should be exposed to and about how to balance these activities with others that are not necessarily related to his heritage.

Chinese Culture Exposure

Each year since he was two, I have brought my son to the annual Chinese New Year celebration hosted by the local Families with Children from China (FCC) organization, which is run by adoptive parents. These celebrations have been criticized by parents I interviewed in the San Francisco Bay Area, mainly Asian American ones who were the primary focus of that set of interviews but also some white parents. They
had critiqued their local FCC chapter’s events for being artificial and inauthentic. To them, seeing a group of white parents eating Chinese food with their Chinese children dressed in silk outfits seemed somewhat unnatural. They respected the well-meaning efforts of their fellow adoptive parents to create an environment where their children could be with other kids adopted from China, and be exposed to Chinese culture, but they thought the event seemed disconnected from other Chinese people and also from the deeper historical and cultural traditions that are ingrained within that community. Though critical of these FCC events, the Bay Area parents I spoke with did not necessarily refrain from attending them. They participated so they and their children could meet others like themselves. However, these parents felt that there were numerous other opportunities to experience Chinese and Chinese American culture in the Bay Area, from sending one’s child to Chinese school to spending time with Chinese American friends.

I could see why some might view such events as lacking in historical and cultural depth. At the gathering I have regularly attended with my son, the walls of the rented church room are brightly decorated with shiny paper and foil cutouts of dragons and Chinese characters, the tables graced with centerpieces that look like miniature fireworks displays with plastic gold coins spread around them. A thirty-foot span of rectangular tables holds the potluck feast, consisting of take-out chow mein, dumplings (jiao zi), sweet-and-sour chicken, home-cooked dishes, and desserts. Most of the children, and some parents, are dressed in colorful, silklike Chinese outfits. Two craft tables are set up at the back of the room. The children receive red envelopes (hong bao) with chocolate Chinese coins inside, and more coins and other goodies are distributed at the end of the event. The entertainment program usually features a performance by a Mandarin-speaking, ethnic Chinese singer. However, the highlight of the event is the lion dance, during which the children march around the room, with three or four at a time wearing the scaled-down costumes. Next come the “faux fireworks,” which involve the spreading out of an industrial-sized roll of bubble wrap and the distribution of battery-powered fiber-optic wands. At the signal, the children enthusiastically stomp on the bubble wrap and wave the wands around, creating an auditory and visual approximation of fireworks being set off.
New Traditions?

While many may not consider the FCC Chinese New Year celebration “authentic,” in some ways it has become a new tradition. The celebration was meant to signify a positive identification with Chinese culture, and it was more hands-on than more formal New Year celebrations such as the parades and lion dancing that one might find in Chinatown community festivities. Through their participation, children were able to embody and take ownership of these traditions. Children remembered the lion heads, the noisemaking instruments, and the bubble wrap from past years and looked forward to partaking in the activities again. Although attending such celebrations alone is not sufficient to create a sense of Chinese or Chinese American identity, or to address issues of race, the events do represent an opportunity for adoptees to form friendships and be exposed to the variety of ways of being “Chinese.”

I wonder, too, how this celebration was any different from the presumably more “authentic” lion dance my family and I attended on Chinese New Year in 2010 at a local Chinese restaurant. Hosted by the restaurant’s Chinese American owners and featuring a kung fu group headed by a Hong Kong–born sifu (master teacher), this event focused on the consumption of dim sum and the spectacle of Chinese lion dancing. In attendance was a diverse crowd, consisting of both Chinese and non-Chinese. Interestingly, none of the performers was Chinese, though they had been trained by the sifu in the art of lion dancing and Chinese kung fu styles. Both the Chinese and non-Chinese restaurant patrons seemed intrigued by the kung fu demonstration, crowding around the performers, the Chinese-speaking couple behind me enthusiastically recording the performance.

I had made reservations for a group of twenty, including both adoptive families and Chinese families with first-generation immigrant parents and bilingual children. The event was a chance for families to get to know one another better in a context that disrupted certain notions of Chinese cultural authenticity. A form of “traditional” Chinese culture was being performed by non-Chinese, and appreciated by Chinese and non-Chinese alike. The social interactions among the people in our group, a third of whom were children, formed the basis for the creation of new friendships and the sharing of knowledge. In this context, the
immigrant Chinese who grew up in Communist China were not necessarily the authorities because many had not previously seen the lion dance in China. After most people had left, some of the children performed their own version of the lion dance under a long, down coat with fur-ruffled hood borrowed from one of the mothers, a “tradition” that had debuted the year before to the applause of the lion dancers who were having a bite to eat after their performance.

New Identities?

Attending such events alone is clearly not sufficient to provide children with a well-rounded sense of Chinese identity. But what part do these events play in adoptive parents’ efforts to expose their children to Chinese culture? The highly sensory experience of seeing, hearing, and tasting representations of Chinese culture that characterized the New Year’s party resonates with how a young child explores and experiences his or her world. For better or worse, it is also consistent with how most adults experience their surroundings and understand and appreciate cultural diversity in our media-driven world, in which we are constantly bombarded by signs and symbols. How do such moments feed into the broader context of identity formation?

Like many Chinese adoptees (and other Chinese Americans) I’ve met, my son is still sorting out what it means to be Chinese, and being Chinese is only part of how he defines himself. At times, he has seemed alarmingly clueless about it. One day when he was in first grade, I picked him up from his after-school program. I asked one of the boys he was playing with whether they were having a battle with their toys. The boy responded, seemingly out of the blue, that he was Korean, not Chinese. Another boy then proclaimed that he was Malaysian but explained that he spoke Chinese and went to Chinese school. I then asked my son what he was, and he replied, “Nothing.”

On our walk home, I asked him whether he thought he was white. “No,” he replied. I asked whether he was black, and he again answered, “No.” We have talked on many occasions about how he is Chinese American or Asian American. Many of his friends are also Chinese American or Asian American, and many are children of color, so his confusion raised some interesting questions. What exactly does make him Chi-
nese American? He does not identify with mainland China, nor does he speak Chinese. Nor did he at that age identify strongly as a Chinese American or Asian American racial minority. His conception of what it means to be Chinese is likely based on popular notions of identity and culture that root Chineseness in histories, places, cultures, language, and perhaps “race.” Clearly, a Chinese American identity was something that needs to be both created and reinforced.

I can understand his confusion. Though I identify strongly both as a Chinese American and as an Asian American, in the context of my daily life, I do little that could be considered specifically “Chinese.” I do not speak Chinese very often (or very well), cook much Chinese food, or participate in a Chinese church or other organization. Some of the Chinese cultural practices that I follow were learned not from my parents but from friends and relatives in Hong Kong and mainland China, where I spent time teaching English and doing research. I married a man who is half Chinese but who identifies primarily as Salvadoran, or perhaps secondarily as Kentuckian. Yet I teach courses about China and in the field of Asian American studies, and my research has focused on questions of Chinese American identity and transnationalism.

I have come to understand that though there is no question as to whether my son will be seen as a Chinese American or Asian American, it is also up to me to help him understand this identity. Because of his lack of identification with China, Chinese language, and Chinese customs, I will need to help him separate Chinese identity from common notions of cultural authenticity related to language ability and descent that often become tied to it. In many ways our family already disrupts these notions of Chineseness that imply that there are specific, authentic ways to be Chinese and to practice Chinese culture. We are of Chinese descent, but my son is fourth generation and mixed race, with cultural influences from not only U.S. locations but also El Salvador.

Sometimes I wonder how important it is for me to teach him about Chinese culture at all. In the context of a multicultural United States, this question can be broadened and asked with regard to other forms of cultural heritage. But more than exposing my son to Chinese culture, I am concerned with preparing him for the complex forms of racism and discrimination he may face because he is Chinese American. He will encounter a host of stereotypes based on his “Asianness”—that he
is foreign, passive, and weak; that he is good at math, plays the violin or piano, and is proficient in the martial arts; that he will become an engineer or scientist; and that he can speak an Asian language. While some of these stereotypes may not seem overtly negative, they will certainly play a role in how he sees himself, perhaps as images he tries to live up to or against which he tries to define himself. Whether or not my son learns to speak Chinese and regardless of how much he knows about China, he will be viewed as racially Asian. As Chinese American parents, his father and I hope that we may be more attuned to the multiple and often subtle ways that racism and discrimination are manifested. Though we may not always feel confident about being able to handle situations in which racism or discrimination arise, or to teach our son how to deal with them, we can draw upon our own experiences and our networks of other people of color for support.

I am also cognizant of the fact that the process of identity building is something over which I will not have total control. My son will be influenced by other family members, teachers, and peers whose views on these issues, like my own, emerge from their own experiences and identities and are framed more broadly by a shifting politics of multiculturalism and race; all of this will shape what representations of “cultural diversity” he is exposed to and how issues of race and racism will be addressed (if at all). His own ideas will also likely be reworked over time, just as my own have been, as he grows older and wants to develop and express his identity in other ways.

Chinese Cultural Authenticity?

In this sense, we represent just some of the diversity that constitutes the Chinese diaspora. Academic works on Chinese identity in mainland China and in the diaspora note that even within mainland China itself, a wide variety of cultural practices are deemed Chinese, and that these have varied across time and place (Cohen 1994; Wu 1994). Similarly, ethnic Chinese populations outside of China have been found to interpret and practice their Chineseness in a number of ways that are often framed by geopolitical factors, historical trajectories, and local racial and ethnic politics (Siu 2005). A global or diasporic perspective on Chinese identity opens up possibilities for many different ways of
being Chinese that are not reducible to ideas about racial or cultural purity. Children adopted from China can be seen as representing yet another part of this diaspora.

Yet despite the actual diversity found within the Chinese diaspora, many of the white adoptive parents whom I interviewed operated on assumptions about how “real” Chinese Americans behaved: that they likely spoke Chinese at home, cooked Chinese food, spent time with other Chinese people, celebrated Chinese holidays, and practiced Chinese values of frugality, humility, respect for elders, and hard work. These ideas about authenticity to some extent also shaped the ideas of Chinese American adoptive parents, as well as their critiques of white parents’ attempts to re-create Chinese American practices.

But if this is the case, how can we understand the significance of newly invented Chinese traditions, such as those created by adoptive parents and carried out by FCC organizations around the United States? Can they be seen as merely mimicking the activities of ethnic Chinese communities, or can they be understood as part of a variable and changing set of practices that constitute the landscape of Chinese and Asian American culture today? How can they be read within the broader context of Chinese American and Chinese adoptee cultural production that I address as part of my reframing of Chineseness as something produced rather than just inherited?

In order to understand Chinese cultural identity as something produced, I share an example from my own family. Every year that her health allowed, my grandmother used to make faat-go-ti (a type of brown sugar–sweetened muffin eaten during Chinese New Year) and distribute them to family members. A few years ago, my aunt, who had learned the recipe from my grandmother, invited a group of my cousins and their children over to her condo after they asked her to show them how to make them. My cousins paid close attention, and though they are still never sure whether the muffins will turn out correctly, making them represents the continuation of a tradition started by my grandmother. In this sense, the production and performance of Chinese identities involves a degree of reflexivity about how to translate a family’s past so that it becomes meaningful for its future. In the context of adoptive families who are incorporating aspects of cultural tradition and identity that are not part of their own family traditions, Chinese identities are
worked out through the imagination and reinvention of both parent and child identities as they “triangulate” with Chineseness.¹ I argue that this is by no means unique to Chinese Americans but can operate within other ethnic and religious traditions.

Preemptive Parenting and the “Privilege of Authenticity”

As I grapple with how to expose my son to the various aspects of his heritage, I do so within the context of broader questions about parenting. In this age of conscientious child rearing, activities such as sports, dance, and playing a musical instrument are carefully selected to produce a well-balanced child by middle- and upper-class parents trying to provide their children with a competitive head start (Hays 1996; Friedman 2013). But where do Chinese language, cultural events, and the making of faat-go-ti fit in? These questions surrounding Chinese language and culture are not unique to our family but become part of a broader set of decisions that go into raising a child with attention to his or her developing identity, as well as family heritage and identity as whole. Furthermore, they become intertwined with parents’ own values and perceptions regarding both parenting and identity, Chinese or otherwise.

I have realized that many issues I have faced as a Chinese American parent relate to the experiences of adoptive parents and their children, and to parenting more broadly. First, how can one as a parent proactively and preemptively address issues of cultural and racial identity to meet the challenges of parenting a Chinese American child in today’s world? Second, what combination of self-exploration, family tradition, and invention characterizes the formation of today’s Chinese American identities and cultures? And how do these processes of identity development and negotiation work, initially under the guidance of parents and later on one's own? Third, how do these identity formations work in relation to other discourses defining Chinese, Asian American, and other aspects of identity, as well as within the broader structures of a changing U.S. racial politics?

Being a parent presents numerous challenges that accompany the decisions that must be made in shaping one's child's future. I acknowledge that raising an adopted child creates additional challenges and sparks
a host of anxieties for parents. After all, adoptive parents, whether Asian or white, negotiate issues of culture, race, and adoption not as discrete and compartmentalized issues but as interconnected within a broader context of meanings and practices. The interplay of these issues is shaped by parental class, racial, and ethnic identities; ideas about “family”; and, most important, the ways that the racial and cultural “difference” of Asians, particularly Asian females, has historically been understood and acted upon in the United States.

My son does not have the close ties to China that many children adopted from there have, though if he decides he wants to connect with his roots, he will have access to relatives, as well as information about family history, genealogy, and the ancestral village. He will not have to grapple with the weighty issues of abandonment and of being transracially adopted that many adoptees may encounter. As a male, he will have to deal with a very different set of stereotypes than those that impact Asian women and female adoptees. The adoption of children from China is highly gendered. Not only are there misconceptions about the position of women and girls in Chinese society that appear to be verified by the fact that a high percentage of adoptees are female, but there is also an abundance of stereotypes regarding Chinese and Asian women that circulate in the Western media and popular culture to which these children will be subjected, both as Asian Americans and as Chinese adoptees more specifically. Particularly strong are discourses about female Chinese adoptees having been rescued from a culture and society where the only thing they did “wrong” was to have been born a girl (Evans 2008). As I discuss in chapter 3, the China-based adoption coordinators I interviewed lamented the fact that many adoptive parents did not fully understand the complex circumstances that led to Chinese people relinquishing their children. While there have been notable efforts to counter these discourses with more informed readings of the situation in China, such as Kay Johnson and Amy Klatzkin’s Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son (2004), less nuanced notions of the gender oppression that Chinese girls and women face fit more neatly with the Orientalist ideas that pervade Western understandings of Asia and Asian people as exotic and “other” (Said 1979). As Chinese adoptee girls grow up in the United States, they continue to be subjected to assumptions based on their race and gender. As Dorow observes, “‘Identity issues’ of postadoption are
not just the result of leftover feelings of loss and rejection or individual experiences with racial prejudice; rather they surface because the historical raced, gendered, and classed conditions of abandonment and adoption are still present” (2006b, 25). From being referred to as “China dolls” as young children to being stereotyped as exotic and submissive as teens, Chinese adoptees are exposed to ideas about Chineseness that are powerfully gendered, and these ideas are repeatedly imposed on them, whether consciously or not, by well-intentioned parents trying to cultivate an “authentic” sense of Chinese identity or, on a number of other levels, from everyday interactions with teachers, peers, and strangers.

In addition to not having to be concerned with gendered and sexualized constructions of Chineseness in relation to my son in the way that parents of female Chinese adoptees must be, as a Chinese American biological parent, I have what I call the “privilege of authenticity,” the flexibility to shape my son’s exploration of his identity without my intentions or authenticity being questioned. We can choose to teach him Spanish, Chinese, or nothing at all, and his identity as a Chinese American will likely not be questioned, nor will my parenting choices regarding his Chinese cultural education be scrutinized.

My Research

The experiences I have just described inform the ethnographic study of Chinese adoption that I present in this book. I certainly did not begin this study thinking about parenting and identity issues in the same ways that I do now. Rather, this study developed in tandem with my experiences of being a parent to a child whose identity I now realize is so much more than just “Chinese,” along with my own developing academic interests and interactions with adoptive parents and their children. While I was initially hesitant to bring my personal background and experiences into my research or this book, I have realized that this context provides a reference point from which to lay out the main themes of my study and the development of the questions I ask within it. My positionality as a Chinese American parent frames this study. In my relationships with adoptive families, their preconceived notions about “Chineseness” and Chinese people shaped our interactions. These ideas included conceptions about the ways Chinese American parents with biological children
raised their children. In many ways, Asian Americans constitute an “other” to white adoptive parents. As a group that possesses an imagined “authenticity” against which adoptive parents’ practices are implicitly compared, Chinese American families, both adoptive and not, served as a model of comparison for many white adoptive parents as well as those who observe them.

Parents’ approaches toward creating Chinese culture are shaped by their understandings of how “authentic” cultures can be created, “passed on,” and practiced, and thus shed light on parents’ conceptions of ethnicity (and its relationship to race and racism), identity, and family (Dorow 2006a, 2006b; Jacobson 2008). In many ways, adoptive parents’ improvisational yet strategic approaches to Chinese culture may make these processes of cultural production seem too slippery and flexible, without acknowledgment of their limits. However, I argue that it is necessary to move beyond debates about cultural authenticity to examine what is actually being produced, how it reflects broader contexts and processes for identity production, and how it affects adopted children and their parents, perhaps in different ways. I want to delve further into the ways adoptive families’ expressions of Chinese culture reflect broader processes of cultural production in the context of contemporary multiculturalism and ask whether it is possible to understand these constructions of Chineseness so that they can be seen not as devoid of meaningful content but as potentially both reflecting and reshaping contemporary discourses on race, culture, and family. What can we learn from examining how they play out as part of a broader set of discourses of Asian American identity as parents and children negotiate, contest, and revise these meanings as they practice Chinese culture in the context of their daily lives?

Throughout this book, I discuss how new family identities—incorporating forms of whiteness and Chineseness, and ideas about multiculturalism and race—are being created out of the practices surrounding Chinese adoption. Chinese adoption can also be seen as leading to new forms of Asian American cultural production. But what is being produced, how, and by whom? How are these processes both similar and different for white versus Asian American adoptive parents, and how are the meanings of these productions renegotiated over time by their children? To answer these questions, we need to rethink what
constitutes Chineseness in the context of U.S. and broader global society and consider how parents, both white and Chinese, approach the construction of Chinese cultural and racial identities for their children. How is the “difference” of Chinese adoptees as Chinese or as Chinese Americans (people racialized as Asian living in the context of a white America) conceptualized as adoptive parents imagine and construct Chinese identities for their children? These questions have implications for new possibilities for defining whiteness and its relationship to nonwhiteness.

Rooted in extensive ethnography, this book takes as its core premise that all Chinese Americans, including Chinese adoptees, craft their own forms of “Chinese and Chinese American” cultural capital as they negotiate the politics of race, class, and culture in the United States. Chineseness is not produced in a vacuum, nor does it play out in a vacuum. Therefore, parents’ productions of Chineseness become part of, but not the entire, context within which their children will sort out their own relationships to their Chinese identities. I focus on the complex and varied ways that parents approach these issues and explore how adoptive families work within and around the constraints of U.S. racial and multicultural politics.

Through my ethnographic research, I also aim to unpack the imagined “authenticity” of the Chinese American “other” found in public discourses regarding issues of cultural authenticity, and against which adoptive parents implicitly compare themselves. The idea that there is a correct context for Chinese culture misrepresents and misunderstands the heterogeneous practices that constitute what is considered to be “Chinese culture” and the processes through which it is dynamically produced and negotiated over time and within various contexts. Yet discourses of Chinese culture in the West essentialize ideas about Chineseness in ways that do not leave room for multiple ways of being Chinese or practicing Chinese culture, and do not consider the context of unequal power relations that shape productions of Chinese culture and racial identity. The objectification of Chinese traits and values can be viewed as part of a strategy to lay claims on Chinese cultural authenticity and in the process deny it to others. Taking ownership of Chineseness and turning it into a form of cultural capital may be a way to revalue Chineseness in relation to the negative stereotypes associated
with it as a racialized label in U.S. society. Lok Siu’s book *Memories of a Future Home* (2005) discusses the role that varying ideas about Chinese cultural authenticity played in a Central American Chinese beauty pageant. The debate that arose between the newer immigrants who valued markers of “pure” Chineseness such as Chinese language fluency and stereotypical “Chinese” physical features, and those who appreciated the hybridity of the mixed-race contestant who was born and raised in Central America, illustrates the divergent interpretations of Chineseness as a form of cultural capital.

In my ethnography, I examine the ways that both Chinese American and white adoptive parents, and their children as they become teens, approach issues of Chinese identity, as they draw on a variety of resources in crafting “Chinese” identities. I explore the ways that even those productions of Chinese culture that may appear to be constructed out of traditional Chinese historical and cultural contexts become salient for those Chinese adoptees who are living them, particularly as they bump up against alternative forms of Chinese identity and are negotiated in relation to other axes of identification. I show that these productions become “messier” than originally conceived as they play out in the context of everyday lives, reflecting the complex and multilayered nature of families, culture, and identity. In other words, I explore the forms that representations of Chineseness take and the work that they potentially perform as they are employed by adoptees and their families.

Examining the ways that Asian American parents engage in these processes of cultural and racial identity production provides comparative insight into the ways that culture, race, and adoption intersect for different groups. Asian American parents’ negotiations of Chinese culture and identity may be seen as emerging from but not wholly constituted by existing Asian American and Chinese American subcultures. In analyzing their practices, we can also begin to understand how white adoptive parents and their families fit into this mix, as they produce their own forms of Chinese American culture that interact with other forms created by a heterogeneous group of Asian Americans. More broadly, a comparative examination of Chinese adoption can help us understand how the racial positioning of Chinese Americans and Asian Americans may be changing vis-à-vis other minority groups and whites. I focus on how the construction of identities for adopted children by white parents
reveals parents’ assumptions about how race works and how to defend against racism, about culture and its relation to race, and about identity and how to shape it. The celebratory focus on Chinese culture is often presumed to occur at the expense of teaching children about race and racism, with these two processes being mutually exclusive. However, I argue that some parents can come to new, more nuanced understandings of how race affects their children’s lives and that what may begin as essentialized, symbolic forms of culture in the lives of adoptive families may have the potential to become something more complex and subject to negotiation.

The adoption of children from China into U.S. families has implications for the changing future of U.S. racial and cultural diversity, as it plays out on an everyday level in the ways that parents and children experience, interpret, and reshape meanings of race, culture, and family. Parents draw on both local and global sources, crafting identities that are on the one hand flexible and inventive, and on the other, weighed down by historically rooted discourses defining family, race, and cultural difference. While parents’ understandings of Chineseness may both be shaped by and reproduce existing power hierarchies and racial meanings, in the process of the everyday parenting of their children, adoptive parents are negotiating broader issues of difference, both racial and cultural, or what Dorow terms “the impossible contradictions of colorblind or even multicultural projects of identity” (2006a, 360).

My project focuses specifically how white and Asian families deal with the attention brought to Chineseness as a form of both racial and cultural difference, and how they imagine the Chineseness of their children both in a midwestern context and in a Pacific Rim city, in relation to blacks, whites, Asians, and other groups. Relationships to China and Chinese culture will differ dramatically for these two groups, as well as within them, shaped by factors such as immigrant generation, location of residence, religious affiliations, exposure to other Chinese and Asian Americans, experiences with China, and ideas about China and Asia more broadly that circulate within popular culture and history. The Asian American adoptive parents I interviewed approached issues of Chinese cultural heritage and race in diverse ways, and this reflects the fact that even the practice of “birth culture” by Chinese Americans who did not adopt from China is highly variable.² However, the approaches
of Asian American adoptive parents were characterized by a flexibility that stemmed from the fact that as Asian Americans, the authenticity of their practices is not questioned in the same way that the activities of white parents is scrutinized (Jacobson 2008). In reading Chineseness as a form of cultural capital that can be invoked in a variety of ways, we can shift the discussion from viewing Chineseness as an essentialized, biological trait and set of practices and traditions to something that can be understood as a performance and assertion of identity. This is not to say that Chineseness does not include cultural practices and family traditions that have been passed down, nor that the ways that Chinese Americans are racialized as Asian does not affect their daily lives. But Chinese cultural practices are also reinterpreted and recontextualized as they are practiced by each new generation.

An Ethnography of Chineseness and Parenting: Key Themes

Racial and cultural origins of Chinese adoptees are a central focus of their upbringing for many adoptive parents. But where did these concerns originate? And what forms do the cultural and racial identities being fostered in these children take? As noted earlier, concerns about raising a child with a strong sense of identity affect almost all parents. Nevertheless, many scholars and adoption professionals have emphasized the importance of cultivating a sense of racial and cultural identity for adoptees. They, along with adult adoptees, have also expressed concern that adoptive parents’ focus on abstracted forms of Chinese culture may make racial difference and the system of inequality within which it is made meaningful less visible to them (Anagnost 2000; Dorow 2006b; Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000).

Thus, three key issues emerge:

1. What conceptions of China and Chinese culture inform the symbolic, flexible, and performative ways with which many adoptive parents construct Chinese culture for their children? For white parents, in what ways do these constructions reflect the position of white privilege from which they approach cultural and racial difference on behalf of their children? For Asian American par-
ents, in what ways do these constructions reflect their “privilege of authenticity”?  
2. What are the limits and potentials of these constructions to effectively address issues of cultural and racial identity for children adopted from China? More specifically, how does the focus on cultural construction relate to, or perhaps distract from, attention to issues of race?  
3. How do parents and children negotiate, contest, and revise these meanings as they practice Chinese culture in the context of their daily lives? And how do these identities reflect the production of new Asian American forms of culture and identity?  

This ethnographic study builds upon the body of important work by scholars who have examined the production of Chinese cultural and racial identities by white adoptive parents (Anagnost 2000; Dorow 2006a, 2006b; Eng 2010; Jacobson 2008). Some studies on adoption are optimistic about new, hybrid forms of identity that these families create as they explore birth cultures, and the work that these cultural productions may do in resolving important adoption-related issues such as the longing for the birth mother (Volkman 2005). Another body of critical social science literature examines the practices of adoptive families within the politics of race and culture in the United States, noting that white parents’ performances of Chinese birth culture may exercise a flexibility in constructing identity that their racial minority children may not actually have. Written by academics, adoption professionals, adoptees, and adoptive parents themselves, these works interrogate the broader contexts of power and privilege that shape relations between adoptees and others, including their parents (Anagnost 2000; Dorow 2006a, 2006b; Eng 2003; Shiu 2001). Some works focus specifically on how white adoptive parents deal with issues of “culture-keeping” (Jacobson 2008) and the ways they are positioned within a broader political economy and in relation to ideas circulating about race, gender, and citizenship (Dorow 2006b).  

Dorow and Jacobson lay an essential groundwork that enables me to pursue the questions I explore in my own study. Dorow’s multisited, ethnographic project focuses on the construction of racial and cultural
identity for Chinese adoptees within broader social and historical contexts. She analyzes the political economy of adoption and the narratives surrounding Chinese adoption, focusing on the “impossible contradictions” created by transnational adoption. She astutely observes that regardless of which strategy parents use in creating Chinese identities for their children, “they must all deal with the ghosts of difference and unsettled relationships of power . . . stirred by the dislocations and relocation of their children” (2006b, 32).

She notes that key to parents’ approaches to crafting Chinese identities for their children is the “imagined ‘flexibility’ of Chinese children that figures into adoptive choices” (2006b, 212). Importantly, she asks, “How flexible are they, really? When is there ‘too much’ difference?” (212). Like Dorow, I explore the contradictions and tensions that arise from transnational adoption and the variety of approaches that parents use to deal with the cultural and racial “difference” of their children. Many of my findings not surprisingly echo Dorow’s, particularly those on the ways that these questions may “reflect, reproduce, and potentially challenge” existing power relations (214). However, I am particularly interested in issues of cultural authenticity and processes of cultural production that operate within the cultural and political economy of Chinese adoption that Dorow so nicely lays out. Although I share concerns with those who worry that Chinese culture is being decontextualized or observed in celebratory ways without sufficient attention to historical context, race, or contemporary Chinese communities (Anagnost 2000; Eng 2010), I am also interested in looking at what is being produced out of these often limited representations and understandings of Chineseness.

Jacobson’s work on “culture keeping” also employs a methodology that is comparative and ethnographically based, focusing on adoptive parents of children from China and Russia in the Boston area. Her inductive study focuses on how white adoptive mothers’ ideas about “culture keeping” are a product of broader societal ideas about race and kinship (Jacobson 2008, 12). Her comparative perspective is important in that it focuses on the adoption of same-race versus transracial adoptions, and the ways that white middle-class mothers’ assumptions about how race and ethnicity work shape their approaches to “culture keeping.” She argues that white mothers of Chinese adoptees feel compelled
to expose their children to a form of birth culture that is also meant to double as a defense against racism. They do this in part because of their perceived loss of their children’s Chinese homeland, what she terms an “interrupted ethnic identity” (78), and in part due to their assumptions about the “ethnic expectations” (citing Tuan 1999) that Asian Americans possess rich culture, even those raised by white American parents. She also notes that while parents viewed their children’s Chinese identities as fixed and primordial, they also exercised “ethnic options” in how they crafted these identities. In contrast, the parents of Russian adoptees were less compelled to engage in “culture keeping” because they did not feel the same sense of urgency to provide their children with a cultural identity as did parents of children from China.

Jacobson’s insightful ethnography covers many of the issues I explore in my own study and provides a valuable framework for understanding what motivates and structures “culture keeping” for white adoptive parents, particularly the way that the racial origins of the child fit in. However, in my research, I bring in a different comparative focus, looking at both white and Asian American parents, in both a midwestern site characterized by white and black racial politics and a West Coast site with a large Asian population. I also look longitudinally at how these conceptions of Chineseness are negotiated by parents and children over time.

Thus, despite there being some overlap with the work of previous China adoption scholars, my positionality and the framing of my study enable me up to focus on different but related questions that build upon and complement their work. Dorow’s primary research was conducted beginning in 1998, and though she has done follow-up work, most of the data in her book Transnational Adoption (2006b) are based on interviews conducted during that very important period when many families had young children and many more were in the process of adopting. Jacobson’s research was conducted during a slightly later period, in 2002–3. My data come from an even later time, from 2001 to 2009, and encompass both parents who had adopted in the middle to late 1990s and those who had just brought their children home. Toward the end of my study in 2009, the rate of new adoptions had begun to slow as waiting times increased. The children who had been six or seven during the early years of my study were now in their teens, and I was able to interview some from this cohort, some of whom I had met earlier when
I interviewed their parents. My study had become longitudinal, necessitated in part by funding issues as well as job and family responsibilities. In many cases, this longitudinal time frame allowed me to talk to some adoptive parents and their children at multiple points in their lives and to gain insight into how identity issues shifted as children grew older and they and their parents gained new experiences, both individually and as a family. While Dorow also interviewed both Asian American and white adoptive parents in both the San Francisco Bay Area and the Midwest, I structured my study more deliberately around a comparison between white and Asian American adoptive parents in these areas and from that vantage point focused on the processes surrounding the construction and negotiation of Chinese cultural identities.

My previous work on renegotiations of “Chineseness” among American-born Chinese American youth involved an exploration of issues of identity construction in the context of changing discourses of race, multiculturalism, and belonging in the United States, and of changing attitudes toward the Chinese abroad in the wake of the Open Policy and Economic Reform (Louie 2004). In many ways, my current study’s approach follows my previous inquiries into the construction of Chinese identities as shaped by discourses of family, kinship, and nation. China is a product of the imagination, as a place of origin and ancestral homeland.

China is also very real in its continued influence on Chinese Americans, particularly in the form of discourses created about and by China (Said 1979). In the United States, both past and present, Chinese Americans, whether adopted or not, are often involuntarily associated with China, and much of what they learn about China is filtered through a Western lens. In both studies, I am interested in exploring processes of identity construction and negotiation. However, for Chinese adoptees, relationships to issues of race, ethnicity, and nation are complex and multilayered in a different way than for the nonadopted, American-born Chinese Americans I studied previously. This is in part due to their histories as adoptees but also to the practices of their parents, which, though varied, are enacted in specific ways because of the fact of their adoption.
Background Literature

The second half of this introduction focuses on providing a context for my study by reviewing some of the literature on transnational adoption on China that frames my research and by laying the foundation for my examination of Chinese adoptive families. I discuss the production of new forms of Chinese adoptee identities, with special attention to ideas of Asian cultural authenticity and cultural difference within contemporary racial and multicultural politics. I then examine how these identities are crafted as part of preemptive parenting strategies. Finally, I provide an overview of my use of the concept of ethnic options for both white and Asian American parents and lay out the multilayered (local, national, and transnational) contexts for understanding Asian American cultural production.

White and Asian American Adoptive Parents

At the center of this analysis is a comparison between white and Asian American adoptive parents.\(^5\) Though 92 percent of U.S. parents who adopt internationally are white (Vandivere, Malm, and Radel 2009),\(^6\) as mentioned previously, Asian American adoptive parents are an important comparative group. I investigate the ways that both Chinese American and white adoptive parents engage with issues of Chinese cultural authenticity in different ways, as they draw on local, national, and transnational resources in crafting “Chinese” identities for their children. By more closely examining the experiences of Asian American adoptive parents, we can further examine how they address race and ethnicity in their parenting choices. While I initially began doing ethnographic interviews with white adoptive parents, I soon realized that parents’ approaches to crafting Chinese cultural identities were informed in part by their perceptions of how “real” Chinese or Chinese American parents raised their children. Many parents expressed concerns about whether their children would fit into the larger (if imagined and homogenized) Chinese community, whether in China itself or among Chinese immigrants to the United States. They also expressed concern about whether or not children would be raised with a strong sense of Chinese identity, and they believed this sense of identity was
important to retain as a form of birth culture. What this Chinese identity should consist of was another question, and this ambiguity only added to the anxiety that many adoptive parents felt about raising their children. This concern stemmed in large part from parents’ attention to critiques made by earlier generations of transracial adoptees, many from Korea, regarding their general lack of exposure to information about their countries of birth (Tuan and Shiao 2012).

In my interviews, I found that many Chinese American adoptive parents engaged in practices that essentialized Chineseness. However, because they enjoy the “privilege of authenticity,” they exercised more freedom and flexibility in making choices for their children and escaped some of the pressures that white adoptive parents faced. Therefore, examining the ways that Chinese American adoptive families approach culture may help demystify some of the unrealistic standards to which white adoptive parents are being held, or are holding themselves. The comparison of white and Asian American parents’ approaches to Chinese identities allows us to further examine how their respective understandings and experiences of racial and cultural difference affect parenting practices. It also allows us to examine assumptions about similarities and differences between Asian American and white communities, particularly in light of the in-between (neither black nor white) racial status of Asians in America (Dorow 2006a; Zhou 2004), and to examine notions of Chinese cultural authenticity circulating in U.S. society.

The Production of Chinese Adoptee Culture and Identities under Multiculturalism

Many adoptive parents, both white and Asian, have engaged in concerted efforts to address both the racial and the cultural aspects of their children’s identities. Having sought out resources from adoption experts, fellow parents, adult Korean adoptees, and others, many of today’s adoptive parents are engaging in a type of preemptive parenting. They have numerous resources at their disposal, including a growing market (often including goods marketed for and by adoptive parents themselves) of Chinese educational materials (Dorow 2010; Traver 2007), clothing, toys, books, and adoption-related goods. The most active and visible
of these parents organize playgroups, guest speaker events, and cultural events.

As Jane Brown, a social worker and white adoptive parent of children from Korea and China who specializes in adoption issues, observes: “Sometimes parents want to celebrate, even exoticize, their child's culture, without really dealing with race. . . . It is one thing to dress children up in cute Chinese dresses, but the children need real contact with Asian-Americans, not just waiters in restaurants on Chinese New Year. And they need real validation about the racial issues they experience” (quoted in Clemetson 2006).

As reflected in Brown’s words, in constructing Chinese cultural identities for their minority children, white parents may merely be reproducing the myth of contemporary multiculturalism, which focuses on the celebration of diversity while avoiding issues of white privilege, racial politics, and power. Though the narratives that adoptive parents construct for their children attempt to do the important work of creating a past for the child that connects her to both her birth parents and her adoptive parents, some scholars worry that parents’ focus on the visible, commodified aspects of Chinese culture may occur at the expense of more contextualized, deeply rooted understandings of race and power. Anthropologist Ann Anagnost (2000) calls these bits of commodified and decontextualized Chinese culture “culture bites.”

Cultural studies scholar David Eng discusses the broader discourses that frame parents’ approaches. He argues that in the context of what he terms “neoliberal multiculturalism,” “which is based on the rhetoric of choice, the idea of abstract individualism, and the premise of race constantly appearing as disappearing” (Eng 2010, 110), the racial difference of adoptees is “absorbed” or erased within the context of white adoptive families. Eng asserts that Asian adoptees fulfill specific needs for the white families who adopt them, performing what he calls “affective labor” as they help create families and the “feeling of kinship.” This “work” stands in contrast to that of previous generations of Asian immigrants who engaged in wage labor (108). According to Eng, the deep losses experienced by adoptees, of “homeland (126), family, language, property, identity, custom, and status, “combined with the inability to mourn these losses within the exclusionary context of U.S. racial politics, lead to a permanent state of “racial melancholia” (126), which he
defines as a “psychic condition by which vexed identification and affiliation with lost objects, places, and ideas of Asianness, as well as whiteness, remain unresolved.”

Here, Eng is speaking primarily of Korean adoptees, many of whom he encountered as teens or young adults, but he extrapolates his arguments to include young Chinese adoptees today, as in his analysis of the John Hancock commercial showing a lesbian couple bringing their baby home from China. However, while his argument is compelling on many levels, it also presents a rather dismal picture for Asian adoptees, whose racial and cultural origins are largely absorbed and erased within the intimate realm of kinship and family. Furthermore, because he relies more on secondary sources, he does not employ an ethnographically grounded, inductive approach to examine how things may play out both within and outside of the home and over time. Nor does he engage with the ways parents and children may rework discourses of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, whiteness and Asianness, family and identity as the children grow older.

In my study, I turn my attention to the ways that these discourses unfold in a variety of ways as they are enacted within parenting strategies and children’s responses to them, some of which may reflect more flexible processes of the negotiation of identity production. Will these children have the same vexed relationship to both Asianness and whiteness that some have characterized for Korean adoptees of an earlier generation? Are their Chinese origins being erased or absorbed, or is something else happening?

Anagnost both cautions us about invented, celebratory approaches to cultural difference seen in some of the decontextualized representations of Chinese culture produced by adoptive parents, and points to the ways that this flexibility may represent a potential area for the production of new Chinese adoptee cultures:

Celebratory representations of cultural difference, which are often detached from immigrant histories in the United States, may not only pose problems for adopted children in developing an understanding of their racialization, but this dehistoricization also maintains the separations that constitute racialized boundaries in US society historically. . . . If constructions of race and culture are contingent processes that are his-
torically open-ended, then we need to consider how current adoption practices do not merely fit in to what is historically given, but in themselves produce race in a new form. This process is rife with possibilities, some of which may be politically progressive in exploring the problem of identity and difference, but it also presents the danger of producing it anew. (2000, 390, 412-13)

The tension between the reproduction of existing racial structures versus the potential for “politically progressive” change that Anagnost points out is one that is carried throughout this book. In noting its “ever-widening circulation as a powerful discursive tool,” Anagnost also asks, “What is at stake and who is empowered when culture is invoked?” (2000, 412–13). Another way to frame this question is to ask how we can move beyond rigid ideas about Chinese cultural authenticity to acknowledge culture’s potential to both reproduce and transform existing structures.

To further understand what the future may hold for Chinese adoptees and their families, it is important to ask how, why, and for whom “Chineseness” is produced, and investigate how formations of Chineseness play out within the context of family, community, and nation. While these productions may be framed by white privilege and Orientalism, it is nevertheless necessary to more fully examine how the constructions of Chinese culture and identity created by white adoptive parents can shed light on the broader dynamic between race and culture, whiteness and Chineseness. After all, how can we understand the multifaceted nature of whiteness and the modes of power within which it operates without looking at productions of Chineseness crafted in relation to it? These productions are not mutually exclusive, particularly if we consider that adoptees’ identities are being integrated into those of their adoptive families. However, few studies of whiteness or adoption have examined Chineseness, and I assert that by examining productions of Chineseness and Asianness by Asian American adoptive parents, we can gain comparative perspective on the relationships between parenting, ethnic and racial identity, and adoption.

Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain’s work on mixed-race Japanese American beauty contestants shows that these young women continue to be affected by notions of race both as whiteness and as “Japanese
Americanness,” and that these ideas of race as both social and biological are enmeshed with ideas about gender and ethnicity (2006, 33). She addresses the ways that these young women who wish to gain access to Japanese American cultural capital through claiming Japanese American identities negotiate meanings of “race” and “culture.” Though as mixed-raced individuals their racial legitimacy is sometimes questioned, they engage in “race work”—a series of social actions related to “deportment, dress, action, language, food practices, accent” (23)—to perform their Japanese identities.

Though Chinese adoptees are usually perceived to be phenotypically Chinese, their parents and others may ascribe to them both racial and cultural characteristics based on their Chinese origins, which are also imagined as both racial and cultural. This “race work” is performed by parents, and others, on their behalf, with the hope that it will enable adoptees to fit into an imagined Chinese or Chinese American community. Notions of race as whiteness and Chineseness/Chinese Americanness thus affect them in ways similar to those that affected the young women in King-O’Riain’s study. They may identify with the white culture (and perhaps the racial phenotype) of their white parents but also may view Chineseness as a form of cultural capital in which they can selectively participate.

**Ethnic Options?**

Most white ethnics, including white adoptive parents, think of race and ethnicity as separate from one another. They are used to viewing ethnic identity as something that can be crafted as one chooses, and race as something that they themselves do not have. However, the idea of ethnic options works in different ways for white and Asian American adoptive parents.

Mary Waters (1990) originally developed the term “ethnic options” to describe the flexibility with which white ethnics approach ethnicity, with the ability to pick and choose aspects to display as forms of symbolic ethnicity. According to Waters, white ethnics perform practices that symbolically represent the aspect(s) of the cultural heritage with which they choose to identify. For example, Irish Americans may eat corned beef and cabbage or wear green on Saint Patrick’s Day because
these practices effectively represent Irish culture in the context of the United States. But Waters emphasizes that while white ethnics have the luxury to choose these representations of their heritage, and where and when to perform them, racial minorities do not. Rather, their “racial” features connect them to historical legacies of racism and oppression, which may leave them few options for selectively creating and displaying ethnic and racial identities. In a later piece, Waters observes how many white ethnics tend to attribute the flexibility that they are able to exercise as white ethnics to racial minorities, thus conflating racial and ethnic differences:

The symbolic (white) ethnic tends to think that all groups are equal; everyone has a background that is their right to celebrate and pass on to their children. This leads to the conclusion that all identities are equal and all identities in some sense are interchangeable—“I’m Italian-American, you’re Polish-American. I’m Irish-American, you’re African-American.” (1996, 449, quoted in Song 2003, 15)

However, while it is a privilege for white parents to be able to consider their racial and ethnic identities as separate, for their racial minority children, these identities are inextricably intertwined.

So what happens when the dimension of transracial adoption is added in, with white parents adopting nonwhite children? How might the idea of ethnic options apply to white adoptive parents who are used to having options in thinking about and enacting their ethnic identities?

It is important to consider how the concept of ethnic options works within new contexts, as whites embrace nonwhite identities, whether more generally or in the context of transnational adoption, and as they use their privilege for the production of what they view as cosmopolitan identities. In other words, the terms have changed for white ethnics who are crafting their relationships in response to multiple factors, both within the family and beyond.

As discussed previously, Heather Jacobson’s research examines how white middle-class mothers in Boston both attributed an essentialized sense of Chineseness to their children adopted from China and also exercised flexibility in how they symbolically implemented Chinese culture in the home. Building upon the work of other scholars on symbolic
ethnicity, Amy Traver similarly focuses on the relationship between the symbolic approach of white ethnics toward their identities and the application of those ideas to their nonwhite children in the context of Chinese adoption. Citing an earlier source by Waters (2004), she notes that “whites tend to interpret all ethno-cultural/ethno-racial identifications through a symbolic ethnic lens” (Traver 2007, 211). Traver links the consumption practices of white adoptive parents to both their tendency to celebrate diversity through the consumption and display of “ethnic” objects and the positionality of adoptive mothers seeking to gain legitimacy as mothers in the absence of a biological child. She also demonstrates how race continues to structure these practices that parents often think of in ethnic terms. My research also shows that white parents to some extent try to follow the same flexible approaches to crafting identities with their transracially adopted children, even as they are earnestly trying to address their “difference.” Unlike previous eras in which racial and cultural difference was not as readily acknowledged, these parents are raising their children during a time when this exposure to and acknowledgment of racial and cultural difference are seen as necessary and positive by many people. White adoptive parents apply a parenting strategy that is shaped both by the privilege of exercising ethnic options that they are used to employing and by their conceptions of what Chinese culture is and how both cultural and racialized identities are acquired and enacted. However, given the differences in the ways that ethnic options apply to nonwhites, and their understandably incomplete information about the ways that ideas about Chinese and Chinese American culture and race operate in U.S. society, they may run up against limitations in their ability to fully exercise their ideas about cultural and racial difference. Dorow writes: “I have said that race ‘condensed’ the range of cultural identity possibilities parents imagined, and by that I mean that race constrains the imagined free play of ethnic options” (2006b, 235–36). She also notes that transnational adoption may expose parents to experiences that may lead them to think about race and inequality in new ways.

But what ethnic options are available for Asian American adoptive parents of children from China who racially “match” their children? In providing background for the culture-keeping activities of white adoptive parents, Jacobson cites research on how women of color in the
United States engage in their children's ethnic socialization while also attempting to create “racially safe” (2008, 62) environments for their children. Biological mothers of white children, however, are used to exercising much more flexibility in the environments they construct for their children. They do not have to worry about their “racial safety” and are able to pick and choose from a variety of elements of ethnic identity (63). So what about Asian American adoptive parents of children from China? Do they engage in similar strategies of ethnic socialization and racial safety? Jacobson observes that white parents who adopted from Russia enjoy what she calls “biological privilege” (158), referring to the privilege not only of being able to give birth to biological children but also of appearing to be the biological parent of a child. As I discuss further in chapter 4, the biological privilege of Asian American adoptive parents of children from Asia allows them to also exercise their “privilege of authenticity” in terms of their flexibility in constructing racial and cultural identities for their children. Does this mean that they are employing ethnic options in the same way that white parents of white adopted children or white ethnics as a whole do?

Sociologist Miri Song has explored the question of whether racial minorities are indeed able to exercise some degree of ethnic options. Based on a comparative analysis of racial and ethnic politics in the United States and Britain, Song concludes:

Ethnic minority individuals and groups can exercise some degree of agency and control in their assertion of ethnic identities, including claims to belonging within the nation, on their own terms. Although significant constraints structure these processes, the conscious and deliberate choices made by minority groups and individuals regarding their ethnic identities have tended to be overlooked, particularly in the USA, where there is much emphasis on the dynamics of racial assignment by the broader society. . . . Minorities do have some ethnic options, but these can differ across and within groups—for example, according to class, length of settlement, and gender. (2003, 142)

In my ethnographic discussion of Asian American adoptive parents, I show the varied ways that constructions of Chinese and Asian culture are (often strategically) cultivated or flexibly employed in parenting
their children and shaping their identities. Echoing Song’s findings, these efforts reflect broader processes of how Asian Americans rework their identities throughout their life course, including changing relationships to their families of origin and conceptions of what it means to be Chinese American, and changing relationships to China and America. However, because of my focus on adoption, I look at what unfolds in the intimate realm of family identity and at individual expressions of identity.

Finally, there is the important question of how adopted children exercise options in expressing both their racial and cultural identities as Chinese. In demonstrating that ethnic options exist for racial minorities (and therefore that both race and ethnicity factor into how they identify), Song calls for a broader conceptualization of ethnicity, moving beyond the equation of ethnicity with “ethnic origins and heritage” (2003, 32) to something that takes into account “ethnic labels and images” as being “rather ambiguous, or inflected in changeable ways” (36).

The potentially contested nature of ethnic identities is key to the question of how Chinese adoptees, along with Asian Americans more generally, can exercise agency in creating and claiming new forms of identity that may serve to define new group boundaries and challenge existing notions of both racial and ethnic identity. This idea of ethnicity (and race) as multifaceted and a basis for politicized identities is also consistent with Lisa Lowe’s (1996) model of Asian American cultural production, which I use to frame my discussion of Asian American cultural production later in this book. Within this context, Chineseness, as crafted and recrafted in specific ways by Chinese adoptees, can become something over which they have some control in defining, rather than remaining an identity that is merely ascribed to them, often with negative connotations. Writing more generally of racial minorities, Song observes that we should examine how “the possession (or lack) of cultural capital . . . has mediated groups’ range of ethnic options, as well as their selective inclusion and exclusion across many social contexts” (2003, 40). I explore the processes through which ethnic options are constrained and exercised within a broader politics of race and multiculturalism, both locally and globally, in the following section.
Preemptive Parenting and Asian Difference

Today’s negotiations of identity by adoptive parents are marked by a preemptive and proactive quality. Like all parents, they make conscious choices regarding their children’s friends, schools, and extracurricular activities. My ethnographic findings show that many families who adopt from China are actively creating new forms of Chinese American culture—and new forms of Chinese adoptee culture—that play out within a broader nexus of race, culture, and adoption. Many white adoptive parents are finding that they need to address issues of both race and culture in ways they have not had to do previously. Having accepted the color-blind discourses that have come to define approaches to both race and culture in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2009), some adoptive parents, like National Public Radio’s Morning Edition host Scott Simon (2010), claim that the color of Chinese adoptee children’s skin and their “ethnicity” do not matter. In this case, as with color blindness more generally, racial and ethnic difference are seen as one in the same, and as not playing a role in how an individual is treated. But for many parents, experiences with their nonwhite children and the advice of adoption advocates have pushed them to go beyond these color-blind approaches that they fear overlook culture, power, and race (Steinberg and Hall 2000; Register 2005).

Parents who adopt from China, whether of white or Asian background, must grapple with the tension between embracing and managing the “difference” of their children. While what this “difference” means may differ from family to family, all adoptive parents engage in reimagining themselves as a family upon adopting their children while simultaneously reworking their own identities in relation to the presence of “difference” in their lives (Dorow 2006b; Jacobson 2008; Volkman 2005). They are reminded in a variety of ways of the “difference” of their children and of their families as a whole. The adoption process scrutinizes parents’ backgrounds, while the trip to China, during which parents complete adoption paperwork for the Chinese and the U.S. governments, encourages parents to experience “Chinese culture” through touring local sites and purchasing souvenirs. For transracial families, their visibility as adoptive families, beginning in China and continuing into their everyday lives in the United States, often means that they face
intrusive questions about the origins of their children (“Where did you get her?” “Isn’t she lucky that you saved her?” “Are they real sisters?” “How much did she cost?”). Furthermore, the Orientalist lens through which the West has historically conceived of the East also shapes the ways adoptive parents and others, whether white or Asian American, view their children’s origins. As discussed in Edward Said’s classic work *Orientalism* (1979), rather than merely constituting an objectively defined geographic location, an examination of the history of ideas about the East, produced in and by the West, illustrates how the East has been constructed as simultaneously exotic, mysterious, dangerous, and “Other” to the West. These ideas about the difference of the East have been used to justify attempts to tame or control that region (Said 1979; Rana 2011; Maira 2009) and have also framed the portrayal of people in the region in ways that are often highly gendered.

In the U.S. context, the emphasis of these discourses has shifted over time. During the Chinese exclusion era, they stressed the idea of a “Yellow Peril” (Tchen and Yeats 2014) to justify immigration restrictions in the form of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943) based on Chinese people’s unassimilable and barbarian nature (R. Lee 1999). During the Cold War, China was seen as a communist threat to U.S. democracy, forcing Chinese Americans to disassociate themselves from China (R. Lee 1999). Contemporary discourses about “the East” have become even more complex as these widely circulating ideas about Asian difference coexist with the celebration of and fascination with Asian popular culture. The spread of “Asian” culture, from food to popular culture (kung fu films, Japanese anime, Hello Kitty), to opportunities to learn “Asian” languages, is facilitated by transnational media flows and a general increased openness to exploring Asian things. However, this exploration can also overlap with new forms of Orientalism, as part of the appeal derives from how these things represent forms of often exotic or mysterious Asian difference. And this positive interest coexists with continued portrayals of the East as a threat to the West, whether in the form of terrorist threats from Asian Muslims (Maira 2009; Rana 2011), the outsourcing of jobs from the United States to Asia, Asian economic competition, or even the threat of new immigrants and international students from Asia arriving on U.S. soil. These ideas are often reinforced
by stereotypes that portray Asians as perpetual foreigners, a new form of Yellow Peril, or an “Asian invasion.”

Given the numerous and contradictory messages about Asia that circulate daily and on a number of levels through the lives of U.S. adoptive parents and their children, it is not surprising that parents might try to control what children see and how they experience “Chineseness” as a form of protection. In this context, Asian “difference” is seemingly knowable but also frighteningly unknowable. In Dorow’s words, Asian adoptees are “at once strange and familiar, different yet knowable” (2006b, 56).

Ironically, while parents may wish to control what their children see and experience in terms of information about Asia and Asian people, while these very images continue to shape their productions of Chinese identity for their children, and their ideas about what it means to be a “different” kind of family more broadly. Despite the fact that they may “match” racially, even Asian American parents may view their children as being different by virtue of their history, having been born in Asia under circumstances much different than their own family backgrounds and thus having particular ties and unanswered questions relating to these origins (Dorow 2006b). While they may exercise a certain degree of flexibility in how they practice Chinese culture, most adoptive parents remain aware that their children have direct connections to China that may need to be addressed. On the one hand, these direct connections may provide exciting opportunities to connect with Chinese and Chinese American culture and people in new ways; on the other hand, they may represent something that differentiates parents from their children and in that sense threatens the coherence of family identity.

Images and stereotypes about Chinese adoption provide an additional layer of complexity, as these also circulate widely in the U.S. media and are therefore easily accessible to parents and to their children as they grow older. These stereotypes may also heighten perceived differences between adoptive parents and their children. They include misunderstandings of the one-child policy itself, why the Chinese government implemented it, and what the high rate of infant abandonment of females reflects regarding the status of girls and women in Chinese society. Wanting to portray adoption in a positive light, some adoptive
parents may perpetuate ideas about an oppressive Chinese government and a society that does not value girls or orphans in providing explanations for why birth parents may not have been able to raise them. In many cases, parents may believe these ideas to be true. What becomes challenging for parents is how to manage these ideas of Asian difference in order to protect their children, yet also ensure that children remain aware of their origins. On the one hand, in public discourses, Chinese children are seen as exotic, desirable, and sometimes in need of rescue (Dorow 2006a); on the other, they are seen as children whose difference must be managed so that they can be incorporated into their adoptive family households. In light of increasing contact within China and Asia more broadly in the context of globalization, and their own experiences traveling to China as part of the adoption process, parents begin to engage in the process of reimagining the West in relation to the East. Parents may even see the new connections to the East that adoption creates as providing them with opportunities to participate in a cosmopolitan world (Werbner 2009) rather than, as some parents I interviewed mentioned, remaining generically white. Adoptive parents may be more attentive to parenting because of the public scrutiny their children receive as visibly adopted children who are part of adoptive transracial families (Jacobson 2008). These tensions between embracing and controlling the difference that their children represent come to the fore in both daily family activities and broader process of identity negotiation faced by both parents and children. For example, as I discuss in chapter 6, parents place importance on fostering a sense of familial ethnic identity in their children, along with a sense of Chinese origins. This can play out in multiple ways and reflects the challenges of how to instill a healthy and prideful identity in a child, particularly one, in the case of transnational and transracial adoption, that parents themselves do not entirely share. This issue was highlighted in a New York Times video feature on the Cough family in Maine, which touched upon both parents’ and children’s attitudes toward Chinese culture activities. The video showed the children’s attitudes toward Chinese school and dance to be varied, with one daughter embracing these activities but admitting that she still only feels “Chinese on the inside,” and the other expressing her dislike for Chinese school and dance (Mak 2014). And as illustrated by my ethnographic interviews with both white and Asian American adoptive
parents, while identity-making practices initially reflect parents’ own conceptions of how they identify with China and Chinese culture, and their conceptions of race and culture, they continue to evolve over time.

As adoptive parents engage in the process of exploring “difference” and in reevaluating their own, they are reimagining themselves in relation to both their nonwhite children and a cosmopolitan, multicultural world to which many feel their children are giving them access. Cosmopolitanism is an ideal that encapsulates cross-cultural exchange and worldliness that goes beyond previous models of multiculturalism and diversity in its global scope, yet localized execution (Werbner 2009). Cosmopolitanism enables adoptive parents not only to imagine themselves as attached to other parts of the globe through their adopted children but also to take steps to craft these connections. Adoptive parents have formed charities that work to improve conditions in Chinese orphanages by bringing in Western educational techniques, volunteers, goods, and capital.

Parents enroll their children in Chinese language classes and sometimes learn Chinese themselves with the idea that it will expand their ability to communicate with Chinese people, with many parents citing the utility of knowing Chinese in the twenty-first-century global world. Both Asian American and white parents draw flexibly and creatively on a variety of resources and connections, both local and nonlocal, in shaping and justifying their approaches to crafting Chinese identities for their children and to some extent for themselves as well. Within these cosmopolitan imaginaries, adoptive parents can flexibly interpret how activities such as dining out at a Chinese restaurant, purchasing Chinese decorations, befriending Chinese and Chinese American people, traveling to China, or even visiting Chinatown contribute to their child’s Chineseness. But while this flexibility is potentially liberating, on some level it is also disconcerting from an outsider’s perspective because it signifies the degree of control that parents have in not only shaping but to some extent interpreting their children’s worlds. Again, while this is not unique to white adoptive parents or to adoptive parents in general, for white adoptive parents who adopt from China, this may at times involve co-opting or at least selectively drawing from cultures that are not entirely their own. Asian American parents can selectively draw upon elements of their family “traditions” and bring in new ones as described
earlier; they are backed by their “privilege of authenticity” that enables them to appear to seamlessly incorporate new traditions into their lives. As discussed earlier, this flexibility stems in part from their ability to interpret whatever they do as “Chinese,” but also from the fact that they may not feel as much pressure to demonstrate their “Chineseness.”

Both white and Asian American adoptive parents are working with and responding to external discourses about family, culture, Chineseness, adoption, and difference. Much of this work takes place within the context of the home, and in this sense often in private and isolated ways. In his analysis of the “racial forgetting” in transnational and transracial adoption, David Eng (2010) notes that adopted children can be seen as fulfilling a labor of intimacy for their parents, for whom the adoption of children enables them to complete their nuclear family. Simultaneously, their children’s difference is sacrificed, as they are made to forget their origins and, more specifically, their racial difference. While this is a compelling model to explain the dynamics of what Eng calls “queer liberalism” and the broader context of neoliberalism within which it is crafted, I believe there are other ways of taking into account the complicated tension between achieving intimacy within the family and handling the “difference” of transnationally or transracially adopted children.

To more fully understand the factors that shape the production and negotiation of identities in today’s adoptive families, it is necessary to consider Chineseness not as a naturalized or inherited form of identity but as a form of cultural capital that parents try to cultivate for their children in light of multiple factors. Many parents viewed Chineseness not only as a cultural and possibly a racial identity but also as a form of potential cultural capital in a cosmopolitan world. Chineseness has become a highly charged and multivalent symbol and form of identity, something that both adoptees and their parents try to carefully craft and manage. I suggest that on a certain level, some parents may see developing this form of Chineseness as a means of shaping or controlling the Chineseness of their children. Both white and Asian American adoptive parents engaged in these processes to different degrees, and in different ways, because of their different relationships to Chineseness. Chineseness carries its own weight as a generic term standing for all Asians, and thus encompasses a powerful set of stereotypes.
For white adoptive parents, ideas about what it means to be white or Chinese have been shaped by models of racial and cultural diversity that circulate within broader U.S. culture but that also encompass global flows of information. However, these models are limited in terms of their ability to encompass the coexistence of multiple racial and ethnic identities within both individuals and families, that is, if these differences are recognized at all. The pervasive discourses of color blindness and the “melting pot” tell us that race and ethnicity no longer matter because we are all becoming part of a blended culture. But it has become clear that race and ethnicity do not disappear. As discussed earlier, in connection with the idea of ethnic options, models of multiculturalism emphasize ethnicity as a choice, something that can be explored and cultivated. These approaches easily slot into neoliberal identity projects that broaden the scope of identity production to a global scale, making the incorporation of Chinese adoptees into U.S. families apparently even more seamless and emphasizing the ability of the individual to engage in such projects. These celebratory approaches often push race or other structural factors aside, as the responsibility for the “self-fashioning” of identity is placed on the individual, further rendering the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape them invisible (Zhang and Ong 2008). But what differentiates the negotiation of adoptive family identities from other projects of identity formation is that parents are attempting to understand and negotiate notions of “difference” while also incorporating this difference into their family identities. They must negotiate contradictions between the idea that identity projects are driven by internally constructed choices that one can craft for oneself and one’s children (Bondi 1993), and the powerful societal discourses about race, gender, family, and adoption that actively shape these identities. The same global flows that allow parents access to the information about China, Chinese culture, and international adoption that they selectively use in these processes of reshaping their own and their families’ identities also have much broader ramifications for how these identities will play out in everyday life and over time.

The adoption of children from China into U.S. families has implications for the future of U.S. racial and cultural diversity, as it plays out on an everyday cultural level in the ways that parents and children experience, interpret, and reshape meanings of race, culture, and family. Par-
ents draw on both local and global sources, crafting identities that are, on the one hand flexible and inventive and, on the other, weighed down by historically rooted discourses defining family, race, and cultural difference. While parents’ understandings of Chineseness may both be shaped by and reproduce existing power hierarchies and racial meanings, in the process of the everyday parenting of their children, adoptive parents are negotiating broader issues of difference, both racial and cultural. We need to consider how white and Asian families deal with the attention brought to Chineseness as a form of both racial and cultural difference, and how they imagine the Chineseness of their children both in a midwestern context and in a Pacific Rim city, in relation to blacks, whites, Asians, and other groups.