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Lucky Girl: A Story About a Chinese Adoptee Navigating an American Identity

I'm travelling on a dirt road in a white van. I pass by poor Chinese workers in rice fields and tiny little houses on the side of the road. Everything is unfamiliar. When I pull into my orphanage I notice a gate and a red sign with Chinese characters on it. There are four people standing by the entrance of the orphanage. A huge banner says "Welcome to your natal home Guo Fu Xiu." I'm just ten years old and the translator tells me that one of the people standing by the orphanage is my foster mom. I never knew that I even had a foster mom or a foster family. So many thoughts and questions began to cross my mind.

In July 2007 I took a trip back to where I was born in China. I've always felt like I don't fully belong in any one place. When I went back to China, I was considered American; even though I look Chinese, no one in China would identify me as Chinese. In America, I'm always asked, "Where are you from?"; if I say Maryland, I'll be asked again, "But where are you from?" Only a few family and friends truly know the hardships and battles I've had with my identity and adoption; and I'm not alone. According to the U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs there have been 78,257 total adoptees since 1999-2016 and 86% of them were female (U.S. Department of State). I was adopted in the fall of 1998 from a small town in southern China called Guixi. Like most adoptees, I've always asked questions like, why am I different? Where are my birth parents? Why was I abandoned? Who am I? And throughout the years, I've discovered some answers to these questions, but not all of them. I continue to ask how a Chinese adoptee navigates a dual identity of American culture and Chinese culture. Where do Chinese adoptees belong if they are stuck between two countries?

My mom always knew that she wanted to have kids, but struggled to have them on her own so she and my dad decided on adoption. My mom was inspired to adopt from China because of a trip she and my dad took to Guangzhou in 1997. On their tour they went to the Guangzhou zoo and a little Chinese girl on a bus smiled and waved to my mom through a bus window. After that she immediately knew she wanted a daughter from China. After the trip, my mom explored other options such as South Korea and domestic adoption, here in America, but her heart was set on China. She then worked on intense paperwork for a couple of months (now paperwork could take years). One day in the mail the Chinese government sent her a picture of me and she called my dad crying tears of joy.



The first picture my parents received
1998

I was born on June 9th, 1997. At least that's what the orphanage told me. Most adoptees do not have any information about their birth unless their birth parents leave a note, which is uncommon. I don't know my time of birth—for some reason that has always bothered me.

My official journey to America started in the fall of 1998. On November 9th, 1998, my adoption day, my parents travelled to China and orphanage workers placed me in their lap at a Chinese hotel in Nanchang. I was the oldest out of the six other girls who were adopted with me. At seventeen months old I had never seen anyone that didn't look Chinese before and I was

shocked to be left in the care of two strangers. For weeks I cried non-stop; eventually I adjusted to my new family. I couldn't speak any English and it took me a little longer than most children to talk because all I knew was Chinese. As a baby I missed China and it took me a while to adjust to America, but eventually, America became the only home I knew.



Naturalization Ceremony, 1999
Syracuse, NY

I remember as a child around maybe two or three years old my mom read me books about being adopted –my favorite was *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* by Rose A. Lewis. The story is about a woman who travels to China to adopt a little girl. The book is cheerful and explains Chinese adoption to kids and my mom read it to me before bed. My parents were very honest about my adoption process; however, this is not the case for every adoptee. As a baby I'd touch my eyes and touch my mom or dad's eyes and just automatically knew I was different from them. Being different is a theme in my life as well as with many other adoptees. Difference doesn't mean unwanted, but for a while I equated the two.

“Since I was five, I’ve known that I was adopted, which is which is a politically correct term for being clueless about one’s own origins.”

Jodi Picoult – Handle with Care

I’ve always been a curious child and would ask why I was given up or why my birth mom left me? All I kept hearing around me was that I was “abandoned” which has a negative connotation meaning not wanted. In the documentary *Somewhere Between* Leigh Barton, a Chinese adoptee, speaking at an adoption conference explains that when people say, “Oh your mother or your parents abandoned you, it doesn’t sound very happy.” And that she corrects people into saying adoptees are “placed into a better life.” However, another adoptee says, “even though 99% of me believes I was placed, somehow I can’t get rid of that 1%. There’s definitely a part of me that wishes I had never heard the word abandonment” (Knowlton). This is just one of many examples of how adoptees struggle with accepting their origins and a past that is unknown to them.

Unfortunately, the one-child policy contributed to the abandonment of baby girls in China. China has a long history of preferring boys over girls in their society for cultural reasons. Traditionally, boys will take care of the family and carry on the family name, while girls eventually marry off and may not come back to their family. The one-child policy was meant to address the growing concern of rapid population development. Mao Zedong, the Supreme Chinese leader from 1949 to 1976, could have influenced the one-child policy because he believed that more people could lead to more power to rise up against the government (Zhang 2). The controversial policy was introduced in 1979 by Deng Xiaoping who rose to leadership after Mao died in 1976. In 2007 the one-child policy was amended to allow families to try for a second child if the first child was a girl. In 2015 the policy began to be phased out becoming the “two-child policy” (“China To End One-Child Policy”). In 2016 the one-child policy was banned

completely. In 1982, China's population was 1.009 billion; currently the population is 1.415 billion (Whyte 144). The Chinese government estimated that the one-child policy prevented 400 million births from 1982 to 2016. The policy was controversial outside of China because enforcement was unequal and was regarded as a violation of human rights. Rich Chinese were able to pay the fine for having more than one child, while 1,968 government officials were found in violation of the one-child policy. In poorer provinces, if women were found to be violating the one-child policy they could be fined, sterilized, or forced into abortion.

Steven W. Mosher, an advocate for human rights in China, wrote the book, *A Mother's Ordeal: One Woman's Fight Against China's One Child Policy*, challenging the forced abortions. In the book, Mosher reports horrific enforcements of the one child policy such as killing infants and forced sterilization (Mosher). To enforce the one-child policy some women were forced into getting IUD's (Croll). The cruel and strict enforcement of the one-child policy led to many mothers leaving their baby girls in front of police stations, orphanages, or in the middle of nowhere. Since it was illegal to abandon a child in China, most children were left on busy streets. I learned when I was young that many women did not have a choice in China, so the word "abandonment" doesn't truly reflect all of the babies left in China. Abandonment is a choice and Chinese mothers did not have one.

My finding certificate states that I was found outside the gate to my orphanage. Unfortunately, Guixi is known for child trafficking. Child trafficking in China is not widely studied according to *The Atlantic* article, "Kidnapped and Sold: Inside the Dark World of Child Trafficking in China", while searching for their birthparents some children discover that they were stolen from their families and sold. In the article, four-year-old Erica, asked her mom, "Can you find my [birth mother]?"(Custer 1). Sadly, Erica was one of the many cases where she was

stolen from her birth family and sold to an orphanage. Erica’s mother, Rose Candis, was sitting across from her daughter’s birth parents at a Chinese restaurant in Shaoguan, China while her translator told her that her daughter was purchased and resold for profit (Custer 2). The documentation, the paperwork, her finding place were all fraudulent. Rose Candis just wanted to find answers to her daughter’s questions, but she returned with a horror story.

There are hundreds of stories from parents reporting that their adopted child was stolen. However, kidnapping scandals are not often discussed in the adoption community. The scandals can be categorized as “isolated incidents” (Custer 3). But Brian Stuy, a father of three adopted daughters who helps adopted parents search for birth parents, believes that the issue of child trafficking in China is a much larger issue than being portrayed. He stated that “what we need is for somebody to show that the whole country is burning” (Custer 5). Child trafficking in China is not discussed because the Chinese government is very secretive and private; they hide information from the world to protect their image.

So when the world tells Chinese adoptees that they are “lucky”, are they really “lucky” or have they just wound up in America because of certain circumstances? Would you tell a child that they are lucky if they were stolen from their family and placed into a more privileged family? There’s a difference between being “lucky” and being grateful. I feel grateful to have an amazing family, but not lucky to have missing pieces of my past.



My “finding” place, 2007



Guixi Social Welfare Institute, 1998

Sometimes I think to myself that I could have been stolen or my finding certificate could be fake, but I will never know for sure unless I can find my birth parents. Finding one's birth parents is very rare and I have a minuscule chance of finding them. I have been searching for my birth parents and plan on going back to China after graduating to search in Guixi, but I do not have high expectations in finding them. My plan is to go back to Guixi with my adopted parents and tape up signs in my town with my baby picture and see if any potential birth families contact me. This strategy has worked for other adoptees in the past.

Some people ask why I am taking the time to search for my birth parents and that I am "lucky" to be in America. The documentary, *Somewhere Between*, has great insight into four Chinese adoptee teenagers lives. The documentary interviews the four girls and asks them about their identity and how they feel about being adopted. The film also gives perspectives into the girls' lives and follows them around their hometown and explores their life with their adopted family. There is a scene at a hair salon in which an older woman tells an adoptee's little sister who is three years old "Welcome to the United States! You are so lucky to be here." The older girls in the documentary say that they feel lucky, but understand that there were larger reasons for why they are in America. I feel that I am lucky, but also unlucky. I am always a "foreigner" because I don't belong in one place. I am considered an immigrant, but typical immigrants choose to come to the United States and bring along their culture. Adoptees do not choose to come to the United States, and along the way they lose their origins and culture. Jenni "Fang" Lee, who was adopted from China at the age of five, says that she is a "child stuck between two countries. I guess I'm kind of confused about my identity" (Knowlton).

I identify as American, but am not always seen as fully American because I look Chinese. I've been asked if I speak English and some people have greeted me by saying "Ni Hao." Other

adopted girls have had similar experiences. I know I am lucky to have the opportunity to be in America and to have the privilege of great parents, but how am I lucky to have a million questions about my heritage and origins that may never be answered? I would like to know what my biological family looks like and if I have siblings. Optimistically, I'd like to think that my birth family wanted to keep me, but just couldn't due to the one-child policy. Frankly, I am searching for my birth parents to find an answer to a lost identity, heritage, and culture.

From a young age, I've asked thousands of questions that my parents happily answered. They were always honest and currently my mom takes a lot of time to help me in my search to find my biological parents. My journey became complex when I entered middle school. The documentary, *Somewhere Between*, asks the critical question: "How will an adoptee build a strong sense of identity when there are so many missing pieces from their early life?" (Knowlton). In the documentary four teenagers are examined to try to answer this difficult question. One girl, Haley Butler, who is thirteen says, "I'm like a banana, yellow on the outside and white on the inside." This quote defines my experience in middle and high school; where, I was called a "Twinkie" which meant the same thing.

I distinctly remember wanting my identity to be white in middle and high school because then I would just fit in. Ann Boucti, another teenager in the documentary, felt the same way and described herself as white on the inside and Chinese on the outside. At age four she would tell her mom that she wanted to have blonde hair and blue eyes like her sister. Gregory Adams studies how Chinese adoptees associate racially in a school setting. He hypothesized that Chinese adoptees would associate desirable traits with being Chinese; however, the results came back and Chinese adoptees were more likely to show a white preference in their racial identity than a

Chinese preference (Adams 91). The idealization of a white appearance is typical in trans-racial adoptees.

I started to notice my race more in middle school; in elementary school, skin color and appearance didn't seem to matter as much. Middle school was the time when I started to struggle with finding my identity and self-esteem. Kenneth Watson explains the formation of self-esteem in adopted children: "Seeking an explanation for parental abandonment, adopted children wonder what is wrong with them, since birth families did not want them" (Watson 1). Since the formation of self esteem is a "developmental process that begins in infancy and is inextricably tied into children's early caretaking experiences," adopted children have an early sense of value and sometimes suffer from a fragmented self-esteem (Watson 1). The girls in the documentary, my Chinese adoptee friends, as well as I, have all struggled with the question "Why". Why wasn't I good enough? Why was I abandoned? The question seems to be universal in the Chinese adoptee community.

Psychologist and author, Dr. David Brodzinsky, explains that "many adopted children strive to be perfect . . . it comes from a sense of insecurity" (Brodzinsky 1). One adoptee, Jenna Cook, says that she needs to be perfect because growing up in a white town means everyone is watching you (Lee). Brodzinsky's explanation of the need to be perfect could explain why I was on two competitive gymnastics teams, the varsity cheerleading team, in five AP classes, and travelled around the world in a chambers choir in high school; while maintaining a 3.8 GPA. I needed to be perfect, and still have the tendency to strive for perfection. I shaped my core identity through grades, gymnastics medals, and test scores –which were all close to perfect. This is a pattern I see in Chinese adoptees in the documentaries and in the essays I've read. One adoptee cries as she says, "abandonment has affected my life by leading to my perfectionist

tendencies and my fear of failure” (Knowlton). She explains that she always wants to compensate for the fact that she was born a girl, poor, and maybe wasn’t good enough. A lot of adoptees say that they can’t get rid of the thought that they were abandoned. I’ve never connected my adoption to my perfectionist tendencies, but I always wanted to make sure that no one could think I wasn’t “good enough”, which could have led to the drive to achieve perfect grades, and perfect scores.

The first time I failed was on a math test. I’ll never forget what a classmate said to me: “You’re Asian, why aren’t you good at math?” I couldn’t answer that question because being good at math was just an Asian stereotype and I’ve never felt Asian enough to embody those stereotypes. Yung-Yi Pan writes in her article, “Finding Their Place,” that “Chinese adoptees are racialized as Asian, but their experiences do not reflect Asian Americans with biological parents” (Pan 98). I was able to interview my friend, Nellie, who was adopted with me and she said that “Adoption has shaped my whole entire course in life and that race is such an integral part of my adoption story” (Cannucciari). Growing up I believed race could be overlooked and didn’t matter – I was taught to believe we are all human and are all the same. As I got older I realized race cannot be overlooked in my life because as Nellie said, “Race is more relevant than adoption to me, because it’s something I can’t hide. I don’t need to talk about my adoption with everyone” (Cannucciari). Some adopted parents, like Nellie’s, tell their children they don’t see race and they just see their Chinese daughter as just their daughter. The lack of acknowledgement of a Chinese adoptee’s race is like erasing a part of their identity. Even if parents say they don’t see race, other people see race—Nellie and I see race.

We see race because it affects our daily lives. Growing up as a minority can be difficult. Chinese adoptees sadly have all had more than one experience with racism. Nellie said that when

she was little, kids would slant their eyes and say “ching, chang, chong.” Then in high school she was walking to gym class and a girl said “move chink” and then laughed and said to her friend “oh, I think she heard you.” Some people may defend racism as funny or kids just being kids, but racism is never justified. Not everyone can tell that someone is adopted, but everyone can see the color of your skin, which is why race is such an immense factor in a Chinese adoptees identity.

“Adoption is a lifelong journey. It means different things to me at different times.

Sometimes it is just a part of who I am. Other times it is something I am actively going through”

Kelly DiBenedetto, Adoption is a Lifelong Journey

Honestly, the journey of adoption never ends. All adoptees will continue to carve out their path in life. I’ve just scratched the surface to discovering who I am and where I belong. In the book, *How Chinese Are You?*, Andrea Louie, tries to address the crucial question of how Chinese adoptees navigate a dual identity of being Chinese and American. The media, school, and parents are the tools that are used the most to understand identity (Louie 185). What I’ve learned about navigating a dual identity is that it never ends. Every month, and every year all Chinese adoptees grow and learn more about our origins, race, and culture. There are a lot of growing pains that come along with being adopted because we all have to figure out what identity really is.



10 Year Adoption reunion, NYC
2008
Nellie is third to the right.



My adoption group, 1998, Nanchang, China.

In psychology identity is “the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks, and/or expressions that make a person or a group” (Heshmat). In the book *How Chinese Are You*, Louie interviews a fifteen-year-old adoptee, Xiao Hua, and asks “how do you identify yourself?” Xiao Hau responds, “My voice is English, my culture is American, and my background is Chinese” (Louie 225). When Louie asks if she could explain further her answer was, “I like having the connection to being Chinese, but I don’t really act upon it, I guess? . . . It exists, but it’s not really seen.” (Louie 226). Identity can be fluid and people can decide which parts of their identity to show. Xiao prides herself on being tough and relates it back to her experience in the orphanage and having to survive. Chinese adoptees can take parts of their heritage, culture, and past to shape their identities. There is a lot of freedom in shaping one’s identity because identity is “the choices we make and these choices reflect who we are and what we value” (Heshmat).

Flashback to 2007, I’m hugging my foster mom realizing it is to say goodbye. I spent the day learning about a new world. I learned about where I spent the first seventeen months of my life. I toured my foster mom’s house. She lives in a small house with dirt floors. There is one bed

and one tiny television. She told me that I would sleep in her bed with her and my foster father. When we left her house I saw the garden I used to play in as a child. I then went to lunch with the orphanage staff and my foster mom. At lunch my foster mom knew that I didn't like mushrooms, but really loved spicy food. I thought how could she remember these intricate details about me? The entire day I was in shock and it felt like nothing was real. It all just felt like a dream. Before it was time to get back in the white van, my foster mom handed me her jade necklace. I'll never forget the view of my foster mom waving goodbye as the sun set behind the orphanage. Adoption is a life long journey, and I am lucky enough to have been loved on both sides of the world.



Saying good bye to my foster mom, 2007



Two babies waiting to be adopted, 2007



U.S. Consulate, Guangzhou, China, 1998

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