

FEATURE

Chinese America and the Multiracial Family

by Amy Klazkin

This week my husband and I sold our second car. We live in the city, and we don't need two, so we listed the car on an internet forum and got lots of responses. The first and most enthusiastic was from a young woman named Meilin Gee. She said she would come over at 2:00 on Sunday to see the car and give it a test drive. Without even thinking about it, we had constructed a mental picture of what someone named Meilin Gee would look like, when, at two sharp, the doorbell rang. We opened the door and saw a young, attractive, intelligent, and friendly African American woman: Meilin Gee. She doesn't look it, but her dad's Chinese.

This is the changing face of America. Where I live, we use the Hawaiian term hapa for mixed-race people. When I walk down the street with my Chinese daughter, who does not look even a tiny bit like me, people in San Francisco usually assume that my husband is Asian and she is hapa. She attends the Chinese American International School, where a third of the kids are hapa. Contrary to the stereotype that only Chinese American women marry whites, about half of the biracial kids at her school have white moms and Chinese dads. Some mixed-race kids look Caucasian, others look Asian, others look mixed. But what all the children learned way back in preschool is that kids and parents don't have to match visually. And that's been a wonderful thing for my daughter, because it normalizes multiracial families and creates an environment of acceptance for difference within a family as well as within a community.

Obviously, I'm not Chinese. I'm an outsider, a waiguoren. I speak only as an observer. And as I told the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco when I was invited to join the board, I'm a place-holder for my

daughter and her cohort, the children adopted from Chinese orphanages since 1991 who will, I hope, one day take their seats in community organizations and speak for themselves at conferences like this one. Adopting a daughter from China, even living in China for two years, doesn't make me Chinese or even part Chinese. And my husband is white too, so while our parents considered ours a mixed marriage (I am Jewish and he is WASP), the world at large doesn't see it that way. But we have a Chinese daughter, who is now a Chinese American too, and she needs you. It really does take a village to raise a child, especially in a transracial adoption.

While there are many overlapping issues for biracial people and transracial adoptees, there are some important differences too. When my daughter grows up and goes out into the world, she carries her ethnicity on her face. She can't go off to college wearing a sign that says, "I may look Chinese, but my parents are white, and I don't have a clue what it means to be an Asian American." We white parents of Chinese kids will make things a whole lot easier for our children if we give them the opportunity while they're growing up to explore and validate their heritage in China AND their place as Asian Americans. But you can't pass on a culture that you didn't grow up in, any more than you can teach a language you don't speak fluently. So most transracial adoptees go off to college unable to relate to Asian Americans and unprepared to be classified as one by the white kids they gravitate toward.

The biracial child grows up with a whole extended family on the Asian side, and the spouse in a mixed-race marriage has to negotiate cultural differences too. There are people in the family who can pass on both heritages, and that's a

tremendous advantage. But when biracial children grow up and go out into the world, they face a different problem. As one of my friends put it, "I can't remember a single day that someone hasn't asked me, 'What ARE you?'" Until social attitudes catch up with changing demographics, not fitting into a conventional racial/ethnic/cultural box can be really hard on kids. For hapas the challenge often becomes more acute when they leave home, because their parents are not there to "explain" them. A journalist who is both hapa and transracially adopted from Korea told me that when he was a kid, being adopted was harder, but as an adult, being hapa was more challenging because of that infernal question, "What ARE you?"

Sometimes kids face that question early in life. Mike Gadd, who was 19 when he wrote an article in *AsianWeek* in 2001, described his changing experience of growing up hapa. "When I was in elementary school," he wrote, "other kids made fun of me because my eyes looked a little different, my hair was straight and black, and my cheekbones were a bit higher than those of my white friends. On the playground, white kids would come up to me and ask, 'What are you?' I would tell them, 'I'm me,' but they emphatically responded, 'No, no. What are you?'"

Beverly Yuen Thompson, in an article on *ModelMinority.com* wrote, "When I was growing up in white dominated Spokane, Washington, I spent most of my childhood trying to fit in. I [spent] a great deal of energy rejecting my Chinese heritage... I would not allow my mother to teach me Chinese... I thought that if I didn't speak Chinese then I could use that as proof that I really was white like everyone else. However, when we did end up in Seattle's Chinatown on vacation, I was secretly proud and impressed that my mother could speak in Chinese to the waitresses and would beg her to do so."

Transracial adoptees also face an identity tug-of-war. "I used to think it was either/or," Liza Triggs told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1998. "I could either be loyal to my family or to [my

racial heritage]. Then you grow up and you see things differently. There is a middle ground. You don't have to choose." You don't have to choose. What a concept! Even mixed-race and transracially adopted people can be whole.

As the numbers of hapas and transracial adoptees grew during the 1990s, a striking new movement began on college campuses: the biracial/transracial student association. Transracial, of course, is shorthand for adopted transracially. When I first heard about these groups, I thought some adoptive parent had dreamed them up. But no. The kids found each other and found a lot in common when they left home and went off to college, where so many kids split off into racial groups, leaving hapas and transracial adoptees on the sidelines. The hapa web page at hcs.harvard.edu lists nearly 40 such organizations, with names like Harvard Hapa, Multiracial Interracial College Students at USC, MOSAIC at Dartmouth, Variations at UC Santa Barbara, Blends of Traditional Heritages at Penn State, Students of Mixed Heritage and Culture at Amherst, Mixed Plate at Crinnell, and Masala at the University of Colorado.

Some of the hapa founders of these groups had felt rejected by the Asian American student groups because they didn't look Asian enough, no matter how much they identified as Asian; some of the adoptee founders got tired of having to explain why they couldn't use chopsticks, didn't speak Chinese, had never had turkey jook the week after Thanksgiving, didn't take their shoes off at home, accepted gifts with one hand and then opened them in front of the gift-giver and on and on. Some got the feeling that they themselves were unwelcome because of their white parents' decision to adopt them when they were babies, just as some hapas report disparaging remarks about their parents' choice to marry interracially. Some adoptees and hapas just wanted a group where they could be themselves and not have to choose between their heritages. As one mixed-race teen told me, "I'm not half and half. I'm double."

As I mentioned, I live in San Francisco, which, according to the 2000 census, is 33% Asian. No racial group is in the majority; we haven't had a majority population since the 1990 census. Now the entire state of California has no majority population. We are the face of things to come. And that face is increasingly mixed race. The numbers tell the story. The Mavin Foundation website (mavinfoundafion.org) notes that Census 2000 marked the first time that Americans could choose more than one race to describe themselves. "Nearly seven million people did so. It is estimated that nearly 75 million Americans will identify with more than one race by 2050. Today in the states like California and Washington, more multiracial infants are born than any other race but Caucasian. *Parade* magazine's July 6, 2003, cover story called multiracial youth the 'Changing Face of America.' Overall, the US multiracial population has grown from 3% in 1980 to 6% in 1990 to 9% in 2000."

The figures for Asian America are even more striking. Census 2000 tallied nearly 12 million Asian Americans, 14% of whom also checked another racial category. So today, around one in seven, or close to 2 million Americans, are double Asian and something else. Asian Americans and Latinos have interracial marriage rates of 40 to 50 percent (AP 3/2/01). 54% of Asian American women marry a man of another race (SF *Chronicle* 3/11/00). In the late 1990s the *Chronicle* ran an article claiming that in San Francisco, 60% of Chinese American women and nearly half of all Chinese American men married someone of a different race or ethnicity. It's clear that in San Francisco, at least, for the Chinese American community's hard-won political power to continue into the next generation, hapas will need to embrace the Chinese part of their heritage and that won't happen unless the Chinese American community embraces them.

Then there are the 34,000 children adopted from Chinese orphanages from 1992-2002, the oldest of whom are now entering their teens. Unlike hapas, Chinese children adopted by

white parents, and that's most of them, look fully Chinese but often have little contact with the Chinese American community. Living in predominantly white suburbs, many white adoptive parents are happy to celebrate Chinese holidays with other adoptive families and dress their kids in Chinese costumes and go out to Chinese restaurants, but there's often a reluctance to accept that their young children are not just Chinese now and not just American but also Chinese American. Many parents say they won't "shove Chinese culture down their children's throats." But by adopting children from China, we white parents all shove the English language and American culture down their throats every day. Whatever we parents think, our children will have to negotiate the tension between at least three cultural heritages: the one they were born into, the ones we parents were born into and "shove down their throats," and the one they belong to by virtue of being Americans of Chinese ethnicity. They need, in my opinion, nurturing in all their heritages, not just cultures of home and homeland.

My topic is the multicultural family, but I just wanted to say briefly that many Asian Americans adopt from China too. In San Francisco, about 1/3 of the Chinese adoptees have one or more Asian American parents, which is in proportion to the population. And contrary to conventional wisdom and Confucian proprieties, China itself has a long tradition, longer than Europe's, of adoption inside and outside the bloodline. But that's another topic for another conference.

Since I speak and write as a mere observer, I asked Sara Dorow, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta and the author of "When You Were Born in China," for an overview of her current research on American families who adopted children from Chinese orphanages. Over the past four years, Dorow has interviewed about 45 adoptive families: 20 in California, 18 in Minnesota, and 7 in China (5 Western families, and 2 Mainland Chinese families). Among the 38 families in the

U.S., both parents were Chinese American in 3 cases, and there were 6 mixed-race couples (Chinese and white). The other 27 families had white, parents, and some were single parents.

For the most part, Dorow explained, the mixed-race couples often did not want to "go too far" with Chinese culture/language or Chinese American identity for their children, "preferring to see Chinese Americanness as an identity with historical meaning and some aesthetic pleasure (e.g. Chinese food, stories from grandparents, etc.), but also wishing not to trump other possible identity choices for their children."

At the same time, however, "Chinese American parents sometimes claimed Chinese cultural identity in contrast to what they saw as the puzzling desires and efforts of some white parents to 'be Chinese.' This was further complicated by the perception that white parents might not be able to deal with or understand racism as well as they as Chinese Americans could. "It is also worth noting that for third or fourth generation Chinese American parents, there seemed to be some nervousness about their children having come 'directly' from China while they were several generations removed. What did this mean for conveying to their children any sort of 'authentic' Chinese identity? For some it meant a kind of splitting of the 'Chinese' and 'American' parts of children's identities."

White parents take a range of approaches to their children's identities, ranging from "she's American now" to "we will do all we can to support and encourage her Chinese identity." Many saw their children as "Chinese and American," which could mean "a range of things that separated Chinese race/culture from American race/culture, but which strove for a 'balance' and emphasized 'exposure' to Chinese culture (meaning dance, arts, food, etc.)." Those who thought of their children as "Chinese American within the historical and social context of the U.S. tended to be people who already had some connections to their local Chinese American or Asian American communities."

Dorow also found that many of the gay and lesbian families seemed "especially ready to embrace a Chinese American identity, citing their experience with social difference."

"All of these responses," according to Dorow, "were cross-cut by racialization in complicated ways. Racial difference was both a motivator for interest in Chinese cultural identity, as well as something to be denied for those who emphasized the 'melting pot.' Several white families emphasized that their child was Chinese American, but with the important qualifier of being adopted... these families said that FCC" - Families with Children from China, an adoptive family support network-"was their lifeline to the most important subculture for their children: adopted from China."

A generation ago, white parents adopting children from Korea were told that their children were "just American now." Social workers no longer do that, and most actively encourage adopting parents to incorporate their child's heritage in the family as much as possible. So I asked Dorow if she had encountered any families who defied the new conventional wisdom and chose to raise their kids as "just American," that is, neither Chinese nor Chinese American but just "our kids."

Dorow put 4 of the 38 US families squarely in this category, although maybe another 5-7 families said they wanted to expose their children to Chinese culture, in the meantime emphasizing that their children were "just our kids." For the rest, she said, "emphasizing a connection to China comes in many forms, from language immersion to stories about birth mothers to ongoing attention to Chinese culture or events"; 5-6 of the 38 families do all of these things, 15-17 do just one or two. Probably 70 percent of the interviewees had some kind of involvement in FCC: "Some of these families were quite active, although most used FCC sporadically for culture events or an annual camp. FCC involvement seemed to wane for families as their children started school, although FCC

chapters seem to be working on adjusting their activities to attract older kids."

Many parents say they want to seek out Chinese and/or Chinese American role models, and think this is important for their children (especially as their children get older). Of those who thought this was fairly important (25 or so out of the 38 families), maybe half had taken steps to make those connections, which included "Chinese grandmother" programs, Chinese nannies, finding a Chinese pediatrician, joining a local Chinese cultural association, and/or frequenting a local Chinese restaurant. Others cited some anxiety about seeking out Chinese American adults, "unsure about how to do so or what the response would be."

And yes, there were a few cases where white parents deemed themselves Chinese by virtue of adopting a child from China. One white parent even marked himself as "Chinese" on an official form. Another changed her name to a Chinese name. ("Chinese American adoptive parents thought this was nuts, and many white parents agreed.) But it is far more common, Dorow explained, "for parents to say that they now have a multicultural family, and that while not Chinese themselves, they had some kind of obligation to learn about things Chinese."

Dorow's research emphasis has been on "the way in which racial difference and racism shape understandings of the cultural and national identity of Chinese adoptees." Many white parents, especially as their children get older, begin to recognize that their children are a "different kind of American" from themselves, and that recognition, Dorow notes, "isn't just about the colorblind aesthetic of 'interesting cultural difference' but also about the real effects of racial difference. But parents vary in their willingness / ability to fully acknowledge and respond to this dawning recognition. It depends on their readiness to confront the power of whiteness itself, level of knowledge about historical inequalities regarding the Asian American experience, level of political/social

(and sometimes nationalist) commitment to the ideology of colorblind multiculturalism. And it also depends on the degree to which families are willing/ready to incorporate the difference of abandonment and adoption itself into their understandings of their children's identities."

Dorow grew up in Korea and worked for a while in US adoption from Korea. I asked her if she thought there was anything to learn from the experience of adult Korean adoptees. Dorow replied, "Given the great variety of ways in which Korean adoptees understand and express their identities, perhaps the greatest lesson is that transracial adoptee identity is an open-ended process that requires ongoing struggle with how identities are made, starting with parents finding the courage to not be afraid of the so-called impossible contradictions of transracial, transnational adoption."

So, to adjust the conventional wisdom, it takes a village to raise a transracially adopted child. Like mixed race children, our kids have complex identities, incorporating not only multiple cultures and but multiple countries. And unlike hapa kids, whose parents provide direct links to those multiple identities, transracially adopted kids have to make half those links outside their families. They can forge an adopted-Chinese identity among their peers adopted from China, and that may prove to be a very important and powerful identity for many of them. But to be whole, they also need some sense of themselves as Chinese and as Chinese Americans. And that's where you come in, because I'm about to ask for two huge favors from Chinese America.

First, while our kids are young, help support white parents' efforts to not only understand "Chinese culture" but especially to dig into the lived Chinese American experience, in its overlapping cultural and racialized forms. And second, for the future, please accept our Chinese-born children as part of this next multicultural Chinese American generation. White parents like me can't deliver that acceptance. Anyway, it's not about us. Whatever

you think of our decision to adopt across racial and national boundaries, or mixed-race couples' decisions to marry across racial lines, the kids



didn't make those choices. It's about them. And they are Chinese Americans. Please embrace them.

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