Article

The Color Purple? Perspectives of Canadian Parents of Adopted Children from China

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Abstract

During the past two decades, Canadian parents have been regularly adopting infants from China, and have been facing a confusing dilemma on how to introduce their children's Chinese heritage and language. The aim of this qualitative study is to uncover the beliefs and attitudes of the adopting parents about how to best promote a healthy identify development that includes their Chinese background. Using in-depth interviews, 19 parents of 14 adopted children explored their beliefs about incorporating the Chinese heritage in the development of their girls. The findings reveal that some parents feel that it is best to emphasize Canadian culture - "she is just Canadian." Some parents feel that it is best to leave it alone and allow the children to choose their "identity" – "she has both feet in both worlds", whereas, other parents are proactive by introducing Chinese heritage and culture to their children at an early age. Some parents feel that their children created a new identity with the "color purple" – a hybrid and new culture that combines both their Chinese background with a mainstream Canadian lifestyle.

Keywords: inter-country, international adoption, Chinese heritage, parental perspectives

Introduction

Among thousands of immigrants, there is a special group of very young people who are becoming the new blood merging into Canadian families. Between the years of 1999-2009, approximately 8,000 infants crossed the Pacific Ocean, leaving China behind as their birth country, and embarking on a journey of being new Canadians as the awaited daughters and sons of their Canadian parents (Canada, 2010). This article examines the perspectives of Canadian parents who have adopted one child or more from China, and specifically explores their attitudes and beliefs about raising their new child with the Chinese language and heritage. It asks the question of how they believe their child's Chinese heritage should be incorporated into their development? For example, do they believe

developing a basic knowledge of the Chinese language is essential to their child's identity development? This qualitative study was informed by a phenomenology approach utilizing the methods of semi-structured in-depth interviews, and both adopting mothers and fathers were interviewed regarding their 14 girls in 12 separate families.

The principal author was born and raised in China, and came to Canada as an international student for graduate study. She taught a class called "Mandarin, Music and Motion" for six children aged 3-7 years in a prairie city in western Canada. She observed that the parents wanted "more than the language" for the children, and were encouraging and cultivating something *Chinese* in their children.

It is important for social workers and other service professionals to understand and appreciate the adopting parents' perspectives on the best approaches to introduce Chinese heritage and language to their children. There is a lack of information from the parents' understandings and this study assists professionals in counselling and advising the parents, as their children develop identities that combine Chinese culture with a Western society.

Background Literature

Adoption is the permanent, legal transfer of the parents' rights and responsibilities from the public state or private birth parents to the adopting parents. It is generally assumed that the *best interests of the child* remain with his/her biological family and in his/her cultural community or country of birth (Saskatchewan, 2014). If the child's situation does not permit this, adoption can be used to permanently place the child in a new family. International adoption, inter-country- or transnational adoption is when the adopting parents are of a different nationality than the child. The adopting parents must meet the legal requirements of their home country and the requirements of the child's birth nation. In intercultural or inter-racial adoptions, the parents and children have

different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. In this study, the adoptions are both inter-cultural and transnational. Since January 2006, China has agreed to the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoptions, 1993 (Canada, 2010). The China Center for Children's Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA) is the only agency approved by the Chinese government to administer and process all inter-country adoptions (Jacobson 2008), and all Chinese adoptions are coordinated through this central agency.

For the past decade, close to 2,000 children from abroad have been adopted into Canadian families every year (Canada, 2010), and China has consistently been the largest source of the birth countries for international adoptions in Canada. In 2005, this represented 53% of all international adoptions but due to increased requirements, including the application of the Hague Convention, it has currently fallen to 22% (Canada, 2010) – a decline of 63% (Selman, 2012). Internationally, Canada has been one of the top five receiving countries for Chinese children, in addition to the US, Spain, France and Italy (Selman, 2009, 2012). Hence, it can certainly be said that Canadian families with children from China have formed a "wave" of international adoptions touching all regions of Canada.

The phenomenon of Canadian parents with Chinese children is relatively new, generally starting in the early 1990s, with a number of reasons contributing to that phenomenon. On the one side, there were many infants in Chinese orphanages who needed homes. As is widely known, China implemented a "one-child policy" in 1979, which stated that each family was allowed to only have one child. In a society that has traditionally favored male children over female children, that policy resulted in a gender discrimination of abandoned girls (Johnson, 2012). Approximately 90% of inter-country adoptees are girls, and the boys who are adopted often have disabilities. With an abundance of children, government officials saw the opportunity to collect revenue and charge a fee per child (Selman, 2012). With Chinese authorities insisting that the prospective parents travel to China to escort their child home, the real costs are over $20,000 CAN

(PBS, 2010). In recent years, the number of children in orphanages has declined and in light of the Hunan scandal, where children were abducted for adoption (Meier & Zhang, 2009 in Selman, 2012), the overall number of international adoptees from China has drastically dropped (Marre & Briggs, 2009; Selman, 2012).

Studies have reported a variety of reasons for inter-country adoption, including parental infertility, humanitarian reasons that consider the poverty of orphaned children, difficulties with provincial regulations on adoption, a desire for a girl and a general respect for Chinese culture (Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001; Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999).

Parents of international adoption are faced with at least two challenges in the raising of their children: the acknowledgement of the adoption (the child "looks" Asian) and the recognition of the birth culture (Juffer & Tieman, 2012; Yngvesson, 2010). Even children who are of the same ethnicity as their parents face identity issues as they reach puberty. Identity development for inter-ethnic adoptions is even more complex, because the children are visibly different from other family members (Bennet, 2002; Bishoff & Rankin, 1997; Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Sinclair, 2008, 2009; Yngvesson, 2010). It has also been suggested that the young adopted infants begin to identify themselves as members of an ethnic group between the ages of 3-7 years of age (PBS, 2010a).

The identity challenge is most notably exemplified and documented in the experience of Korean adoptees and Canadian Aboriginal adopted children. It is estimated that more than 98,000 Koreans were adopted by US families between the years of 1955–1998 (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000). Many of these adopted children grew up in the 1950s and 60s when the American social focus was on assimilation, thus resulting in them experiencing an "identity crisis" (Bishoff & Rankin, 1997). They went through different stages of identity search such as confusion, fear and anger, as well as feeling a sense of a "split" self. Dawson, a

Korean American Olympic skier, described "being caught in limbo between two different countries… My life until now has been confusing…" (MSNBC, 2007). Research on the Aboriginal adopted children also documented many dreadful results related to identity problems (Bennet, 2002; Sinclair, 2008, 2009). For example, during the 1960s and 70s, large numbers of Aboriginal children were apprehended and placed for adoption, primarily into Caucasian families (Sinclair 2008, 2009). Many of the adopted Aboriginal children felt confused and suffered identity issues that contributed to an onslaught of personal problems, such as severe psychological problems and even suicide. Since those early years, there has been a growth in providing a cultural engagement with the child's culture and homeland (Jacobson, 2008; Volkman, 2005). However, Sinclair (2008) and others argue that the adoption policies and practices toward Aboriginal children were oppressive and racist.

Although some research (Bagley, 1993; Kim, 1995; Rushton & Minnis, 1997) reported overall positive outcomes on the adjustment of the adoptees from a different ethnic group, they also pointed out some troubling issues in terms of cultural identity for the adopted children. For example, adopted children "would prefer to be white," "would not like to spend time with [persons of their own ethnic background]," are uncomfortable with their appearance or are ashamed of their origins (Tizard & Phoenex, 1995). These comments reflect that inter-cultural adoptees struggled to integrate an identity that includes an acceptance of their own physical appearance and their birth heritage (Juffer & Tieman, 2012; Upshur & Demick, 2006; Vonk, 2001), and some would argue that to remove these children from their ethnic heritage is racism at its worst. In an early study, Westhues and Cohen (1994) researched 155 Canadian adolescents and young adult inter-country adoptees and their families. Their study concluded that the only concern was with respect to ethnic and cultural identity, and the adopted children seem to be no less well-adjusted than would be expected in a representative sample of Canadian adolescents.

Regarding the children from China, there have been numerous benefits for all of the stakeholders involved. Children facing a bleak life in an institution have received love and acceptance within their new families and a society open to cultural diversity. Adopted girls will grow up in an environment that discourages gender discrimination and tries to promote equality, while children with disabilities will receive programs and services unavailable in their homeland. Moreover, all of these children will receive social, financial and educational benefits beyond their opportunities in China. On the other side, the Chinese agencies receive a significant cash inflow that is used to improve the social welfare system and the well-being of the children who remain (Bartholet, 2011). Nonetheless, international/ inter-country adoptions remain controversial with "experts" on both sides of the debate (see Bartholet & Smolin, 2012; Marre & Briggs, 2009; Fisanick, 2009; Haerens, 2011; Merino, 2009).

Identity Framework

This study seeks to explore Canadian parents' understanding of the identity construct of their children adopted from China, as well as parents' awareness of- and attitudes toward the role of ethnic Chinese culture and language in the identity development of their children. The focus of this article is on the parents' subjective understanding of identity development. It is important to understand the parents' perspective because they play a central role in "choosing" the process of the child's identity development (Quiroz, 2014). "Such decisions are embedded in the parents'constructions of their ideal child in relation to their own identities, as well as their perceptions about the child's racial/ethnic identity" (Quiroz, 2014, p. 143). Identity is the central challenge that inter-culturally adopted children face in their development (Schwarzwald, Collins, Gillespie, & Spinks-Franklin, 2015), and is one of the most complex concepts in human growth and development. As De Fina (2003) stated: "Identity is an extremely complex construct, and simple definitions of what the term refers to are difficult to find as there is no neutral way to characterize it" (p. 15). A number of theories have developed around this intriguing yet elusive topic, as most scholars tend to

acknowledge identity as a perception of self. For example, Pagliai (2003, p. 49) calls it "the person's perception of him or herself," whereas Stets and Burke (2000) use "self-views" and "self-categorization" to define it. Although "identity" is no doubt a sense of self, research reveals that it can never be understood in isolation and as a static entity. Instead, it is highly context-dependent and constantly changing. The notion of identity is normally thought of as something psychologically natural and socially constructed (Mozère, 2004 as cited in Borgnon, 2007, p. 266). In this study, one's identity is viewed as ever-changing and not static; there can be multiple "identities," and it can be the site of conflict or tension. These adopted children "look" Chinese yet are raised in a "white" Canadian/Western family.

The concept of group membership or "social identity" is of particular relevance to this study. Children adopted from a foreign country live in an inter-group context that creates a challenge for their identity development. They live in two major groups: the Canadian social setting which is the adoptive cultural environment and the country of origin that these children were born into and in many cases, carry in their physical appearance. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a person's development can be profoundly affected by the settings which the person has a connection to but may not be present in. Therefore, the social settings of both the Canadian and country of origin have a significant influence in these children's identity development. For this study, we developed a framework for understanding the child's identity development. This framework is similar to the model developed by Baden and Steward (2000). In Figure 1, the person's self is shown with a broken line, as it is under development and changing in a broader social context. These adopted children live in two contexts, which are demonstrated in Figure 2, where the context of the country of origin is a broken line. It is weak in their daily life except by their physical appearance, which reminds them of their biological origin. From this schematic, there are three scenarios. Figure 3 illustrates one possibility that these children live in under an extreme case of assimilation, where their relationship to their ethnic group is

totally denied. Their main identity is in a Canadian context, but their country of origin context is elusive and confusing, and because of their appearance it never goes away. Figure 4 illustrates that both the Canadian setting and their family origin exist, but as two split settings without any connection. Also, the cultural contexts have a primary context that is "white" western Canadian and a secondary context that is their country of origin; hence, there is an inherent hierarchy of cultures. Western is superior over the Chinese, and therefore justifiably dominant. The child can move between contexts, but feel a split or divided identity that contradicts or conflicts with whom she sees herself. Figure 5 illustrates the connection between the Canadian and ethnic social settings, which is represented in the overlap between the two settings. In such a case, the child can have the capacity to move in and out of the two settings freely and confidently and with ease in the face of an identity challenge. Because of their confidence, they can be part of both contexts at the same time. In our study, they might say to themselves: "People think I'm Chinese. I know I was born in China and raised in Canada. I know all about being Canadian. I also know something about China and about being Chinese. So I have both worlds. So what do I want to identify with in this particular context?" In school among their school "chums," they feel very "Canadian" and yet in a large family gathering celebrating the Chinese New Year, they feel very Chinese. In some settings, they can be something of both at the same time; in a sense, they are creating their own hybrid culture from both contexts:
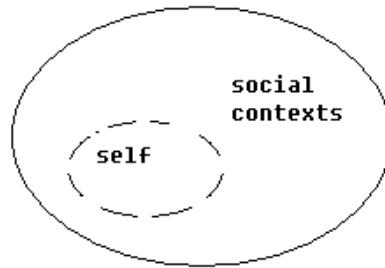
Figures for the research framework
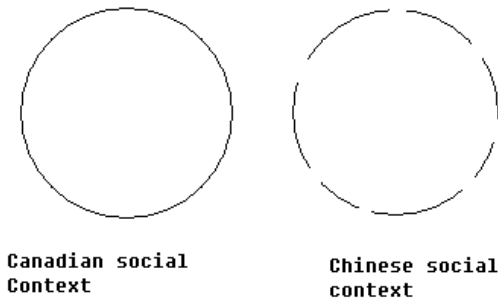

Figure 1–Identity as relationships

Figure 2–Two social settings

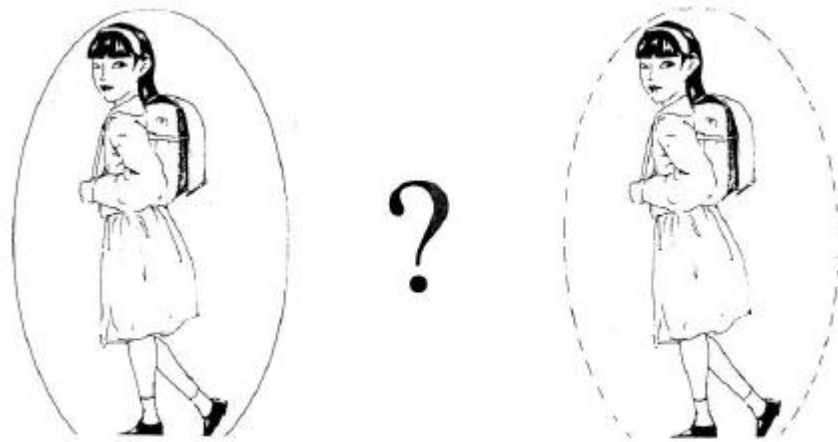**Figure 3– Self-in-positioning with one primary cultural identity**

Figure 4– Self-in-positioning with two cultural identities, primary and secondary
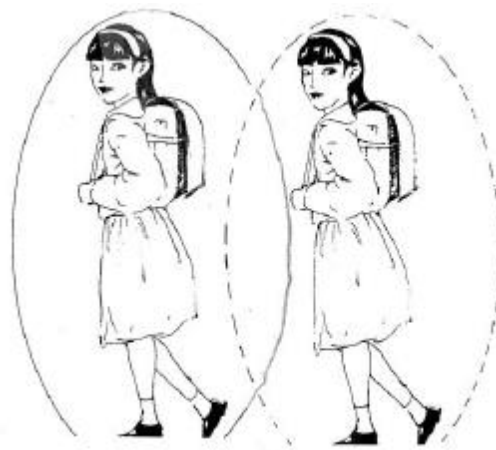

Figure 5– Self-in-positioning with equal and ever-changing identities.

Sketch by Hongchen Zhang

Purpose of the Study and Research Methods

Although there has been some research on families with children adopted from China (Massatti, Vonk, & Gregoire, 2004; Rojewski, 2005; Tessler et al., 1999; Trolley et al., 1995; Vonk, 2001), much of it has been conducted in the context of

the United States. Therefore, more research of the phenomenon in a Canadian context is needed. Additionally, most available research on children adopted from China has been focused on the initial adjustment, which seemed to generate positive outcomes in using quantitative inquiries (Massatti et al., 2004; Rojewski, 2005; Tessler et al., 1999; Trolley, Wallin, & Hansen, 1995; Vonk, 2001). Jacobson (2008) wrote about the importance of "culture keeping" in families with children from China and Russia, and her findings parallel our study. Consequently, in-depth research using a qualitative orientation to provide a more descriptive and interpretive analysis on the children's identity development is needed, as suggested by Lee (2002). In particular, scholars have called for studies to examine parents' awareness and attitudes of the role of ethnic heritage in inter-ethnic adopted children's identity development (Jacobson, 2008; Rojewski, 2005). Parents have the key role in the early socialization and identity development of their children. In intercultural adoptions, the attitude of the parents towards the role of culture is important to understand in helping to guide and develop appropriate resources for these parents. In Canada, all adoptions are under the domain of professional social workers. Thus, social workers need to be sensitive to the parents' attitudes and support them in finding cultural resources and experiences for these children.

Generally speaking, this study applies a phenomenological approach, and uses methods of face-to-face interviewing. In essence, a phenomenological study is a qualitative approach, in which the researcher attempts to describe the deep meaning or essence of the individual's lived experience with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research is the study of a lived experience, and the subsequent question: "What is this or that kind of experience like?"(van Manen, 1990, p. 9). It acknowledges and values the way a phenomenon is understood through the eyes of those who experience it. Phenomenological researchers seek "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 59). In this study, the

phenomenon that is shared by all of the participants is the adoption and raising of a child from China in a western Canadian city.

The underlying assumption of a phenomenological study is that the meaning of the lived experience will be revealed through dialogue and reflection (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Therefore, a phenomenological study often engages researchers and participants through intensive interviews that focus on the in-depth meaning of a particular aspect of their experience. This qualitative study explores the parents' perspectives on the identity construct for their children and to gain an in-depth understanding of parents' awareness of- and attitudes to the role of ethnic heritage culture and language in the children's identity development.

This study used a criterion sampling technique to identify participants - a common approach in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013). The researcher first brought letters of information to the parents in the "Mandarin, Music and Motion" class, and introduced the purpose of the study and how to participate if they would volunteer. Nine parents from the class showed an interest in the study and became participants. The children of these parents ranged in age from three to seven years. The researcher also used a word-of-mouth referral or "snowballing" to ask these parents to invite other parents they know who meet the criterion for participating, and who might be interested in joining the study. In the end, 19 parents participated in the study (12 mothers and seven fathers) in 12 separate families. Two families had adopted two children, making a total of 14 adopted children and, interestingly, all of them were girls. Two of the parents were of an ethnic minority (Indigenous and Chinese). The following table presents information on the adopting parents, and in order to protect the privacy of the participants pseudo-names have been provided.

Table 1

Information on participants

Pseudonym	Parent's Sex	Adopted child(ren) aged 3-7	Adopted child(ren) aged 8-11	Has biological child(ren)	Ethnic minority
Alex	F	Yes		Yes	
Amy	F	Yes			
Anna	F		Yes	Yes	
Cecilia	F	Yes			
Daisy	F		Yes		
Dan	M		Yes	Yes	
Eric	M		Yes	Yes	
Erren	F		Yes	Yes	
Ethan	M	Yes			
Eton	M	Yes			
Eva	F	Yes			
Helen	F		Yes		
Ken	M		Yes	Yes	
Linda	F	Yes			
Lydia	F	Yes			Yes
Nancy	F	Yes			
Natalie	F	Yes			
Nathon	M	Yes			
Nick	M		Yes		Yes

In-depth, semi-structured and two-round interviews were the methods used to collect data for the study. In the first interviews, an interview guide provided a framework to keep the discussion on the topic, such as the types of activities the parents arrange to encourage Chinese heritage, including dress, dance and food.

The second interviews dug deeper into the parents' beliefs about how Chinese language and heritage affected their child's identity development. The interviews normally lasted for approximately an hour and were audio-recorded. The interviews were arranged at the parents' convenience; some were in their homes, while others at a coffee shop or business office. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, with data analysis following the protocol of qualitative methods through coding and meaning categorization (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Research Findings and Analysis

In exploring parents' understanding of the identity construct for their child, a variety of views emerged among parents. Some parents see their children as just Canadian, whereas some see the children having both a Chinese and Canadian influence, thereby resulting in being Chinese-Canadian (with a predominance of being Canadian) or Canadian-Chinese (with a predominance of being Chinese) or "*a third space between Canada and China.*" Yet more interestingly, some parents recognize their children's identity "*as the color purple,*" in that they are one of a kind in their own identity, which integrates the children's experience of being born of a Chinese ethnicity, being adopted, and being raised by Canadian parents. The following three sub-themes describe five types of parents' views on identity, along with parents' perceptions of whether or not these children's identity is a challenge for the children.

She is just "Canadian"

In responding to the interview question, "How do you see your child, as a Canadian, a Chinese, a combination or else?" A small number of parents clearly see their child as just being "Canadian."

There are several ways that parents minimize the Chinese influence in their children. The predominant way is to emphasize that they are brought up in the family and settled in the community, whereas another view is that being born in China is part of the child's personality. Moreover, parents tended to emphasize

the commonness among the adopted child and their biological children, rather than identify the differences. Some parents seemed to "forget" or overlook the ethnic differences in their families, because they were so used to the children being part of the families, even when that was pointed out by other people.

In further explaining how the child's Chinese heritage is resolved in her identity, the parent ascribed the Chinese ethnic heritage to the personality of the child. It is something unique to the adopted children, but not applicable to their biological children who have other unique qualities:

> *Each of us has a unique background or personality, and the fact that she was born in China is part of her uniqueness….I think the fact of her being born in China is part of her personality. But I don't know how much difference that makes in her. It's just something unique to her.* (Eric, father)

Another reason that some parents saw their child as "just Canadians," just like their non-adopted siblings, was to emphasize the sameness. For example, when talking about the Chinese New Year, one parent said: "*Grandparents or the neighbor might give something to Yan, because it's Chinese New Year, so they single her out.*" Although not clearly stated, the parent's impassioned tone and facial expression conveyed the sentiment that he would not want Yan (the adopted child) to be different than his biological children.

The parents who see their children as just Canadians also indicated that they were not sure whether that identity would pose a challenge for the children in their development. When asked about that, a parent said: "*I don't know. I think that's partly because we kinda are unaware of that. We don't have the background of that, so we just go with the flow. Because I didn't go through that myself, so I'm not sure. I was from the dominant group.*" It seems as if these parents view their child as in Figure 3: "Self in Positioning," but with only one primary cultural identity. In a real sense, the parents are assimilating the child into their Western culture with only a "nod" to her ethnic background, and are thus avoiding identity development challenges (Quiroz, 2014). This approach

does not require the active participation and creation of cultural opportunities for the child to explore her ethnic origins. It is almost that the Chinese heritage is ignored and not part of their consciousness. In effect, they are "de-racing" (erasing) their child's ethnicity (Quiroz, 2014).

She's got two feet in both worlds

Most parents acknowledge being both Canadian and Chinese in the interplay within the identity construct, and they are very clear in not overlooking either. But there are still various opinions about the relationship between the two influences. The difference is in the parents' view of which one, Canadian or Chinese, takes a more predominant role; even so, some parents see that the child's identity is in *"a third space"* between the two.   Three types of perceptions emerged in the parents' understanding of identity development that acknowledges being both Canadian and Chinese:

1. Chinese-Canadian, meaning Canadian first and foremost, but with a Chinese heritage;
2. Canadian-Chinese, meaning Chinese, but ultimately with a strong Canadian influence; and
3. equally Canadian and Chinese, *"a third space,"* which depends on the social setting.

Despite the various views, the common emphasis parents made was that being Canadian was related to citizenship, and that being Chinese was related to heritage. Many parents saw the Chinese-ness as an inseparable fact in the child's identity, and also saw it as an advantage to have access to both the Chinese and Canadian worlds. As one parent stated, "She's got two feet in both worlds" (Erren, mother)*.*

Some parents also tried to stand in their children's shoes, and believed that the children would see themselves as being both Canadian and Chinese, but as Canadian first. As one parent said: *"I think she'd say she is Canadian, and also she's Chinese. She'd answer both. I think she'd say Canadian first, and Chinese*

right away" (Ken, father). This indicates, even though not directly, that the parents themselves are ready to embrace the two cultures of the child.

One parent who is of a Chinese background herself referred her child's identity to her own experience, and said:

> *I see myself as Canadian as my citizenship, Chinese as my heritage. It is similar for me and Rong [the name of the adopted child].* (Lydia, mother)

Yet, some parents saw their child as being in "*a third space between Canada and China."* For example, one parent realized the social reality was that a person who is "*not white, and not like an average European Canadian of European ancestry, will be identified first by your country of origin, no matter how long you've lived here. So they (the adopted children) are not going to be seen by many people as really just Canadian"* (Natalie, mother)*.* On the other hand, "*They are not going to be seen as real Chinese, and only be so accepted in Chinese society. Because they are not living with Chinese parents, and not exposed to Chinese culture. They are always some kind of hyphen."* The children are walking a fine line between cultures, which is portrayed in Figure 4 as, "Self in positioning with two cultural identities: one primary and the other secondary." In this case, the parents see the Western culture that they offer as the primary cultural context and the Chinese identity being secondary. There is a subtle implication that the Western culture is superior to the Chinese, with an emphasis placed on being successful in the dominant culture. At times, this situation can be confusing to the child, and they may feel "Canadian" but look "Chinese," and are not sure exactly how to relate to their culture of origin.

Identity as the color purple

Some parents' perception of their children's identity construct went beyond the recognition of the coexistence of being Canadian and Chinese. They pointed out that their children were one of a kind in their unique experience and created a

distinctive identity of their own, hence creating a new "culture". Dubinsky (2010) calls this child, "the hybrid child."

For example, one parent used the symbolic color of purple. She said: *"Maybe she sees herself as the color of purple"* (Amy, mother). Thus, the concept of a "purple identity" is adopted to be the title of this sub-theme in order to illustrate the one-of-a-kind feature in parents' understanding of their child's identity construct.

New identities are created by mixing and the fusion of disparate elements. Some parents pointed out the three major elements of the child's life and the integration of these elements made their identity distinct. The three elements are: their being born of Chinese ethnicity, being adopted and being raised by Canadian parents. As one parent explained:

> *My hope is she can be quite clear in the fact that she is a Chinese-Canadian adoptee. I think she'd have a struggle with the different aspects of herself: the three facts that she is adopted, she is Chinese and she is a Canadian citizen.* (Nancy, mother)

Such an understanding also coincides with Hall's (1992) concept of a poised identity, in which he suggested that identities are not fixed but in transition among different positions. In other words, the identity *as the color purple* is a product of the crossovers emerging in the complicated and interconnected realities that include adoption and their homelands of both Canada and China.

Not only did some parents see the child's identity as the *color purple,* which integrated the three significant aspects of their life, and none of which can be overlooked, but the parents were also aware that their children were creating a new culture – a hybrid culture. These thoughts are present in Figure 5, in which the identity is shared between Canadian and Chinese cultures with movement between them: multiple identities for specific circumstances. It also suggests the creation of a personal and unique hybrid culture specific to the individual, as the

children can blend the cultural mix and create a context that is their own. They can be "Chinese" on the playground with their school friends or be an ice hockey player in a Chinese cultural camp. They feel comfortable being unique in different situations.

Little or no awareness

Parents with little or no awareness of the relationship between the ethnic Chinese heritage language and culture and identity development only recognize the utilitarian benefits of children learning their ethnic Chinese language and culture.

All parents in the study pointed out the utility of knowing the Chinese language and culture, such as "*job opportunities in the future*" or "*to open a door career-wise down the road.*" Some parents saw, from an entrepreneur's (businessman's) perspective, that China is booming economically and, therefore, "*Mandarin Chinese is the language to learn.*" As one parent put it: "*From my point of view being an entrepreneur, I think it [learning Chinese] is an advantage in the global workplace*" (Dan, father). Similarly, another parent said: "*In Saskatchewan, if you want to do something connected with wheat or potash, if you can speak Mandarin, it'll be a big advantage*" (Eric, father). Such recognition was also reflected in advising their other biological children what foreign language to learn. "*So when our daughter was looking at taking some language, I said I took French, you could take something like Chinese, it's the market of the world now. I see that as a big advantage*" (Dan, father).

Parents also recognized the "*brain development*" and to make good use of childhood as the best time to learn languages, which are also not particularly related to children's identity development:

> *I heard things about music helping develop different parts of the brain. They say kids who learn music early get better marks in school. It's the same with language, I mean to utilize a different part of the brain.* (Alex, father)

Although all parents recognize the utilitarian benefits of learning Chinese language and culture, some parents saw those benefits as the primary motivation for their children to learn. They did not acknowledge the influence that the learning would have in the children's identity. It was subtly implied in their words, so that it could only be drawn from the comparisons that the parents made.

The little awareness is also reflected in the lack of difference in parents' attitudes toward the Chinese language and culture both before and after their adoption. One family was generally interested in different cultures, but they saw no difference in their connection with China before and after their child joined their family. As one said: "*I don't think to do Chinese culture or language is a forced thing or things that we think we need to do. I think it's more that we are sincerely interested in what we were before we adopted*" (Eric, father). This attitude is in line with Figure 2, in which the child develops a single cultural Canadian identity with little regard for her ethnic Chinese background or physical appearance. As mentioned before, the child is assimilated into the mainstream culture of the adopting parents and leaves her ethnic heritage behind. It is a process of neglect and not pro-action to assist the child in her identity development.

It's Her Choice and Give Her a Choice

The context in which an inter-ethnically adopted child is raised affects how she ultimately forms her identity (Baden, 2003). Parents have a significant influence in the child's identity development because they form their children's most immediate contexts. Helms (1990) also suggested that parents are most influential during infancy and early childhood in identity development. It is understandable that parents are children's first teachers in life, and on whom they are totally dependent when they are very young.

"Child Choice" is a relatively newly emerged socialization approach by parents with respect to nurturing the Chinese-ness of their children's identity (Tessler et al., 1999). It describes that parents acknowledge the importance of the ethnic

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Chinese heritage to their children and initially provide cultural opportunities, but parents adjust their heritage socialization effort according to the children's interest and wishes (Gidluck & Dwyer, 2006; Lee, 2003). Parents are aware of the connection between ethnic heritage and identity development, but are ambivalently supportive in their attitudes to providing access. The attitudes and practice of "*It's her choice*" as identified in Tessler et al. (1999) is confirmed in this study. It appears to be the most prevalent attitude among the parents in this study.

The majority of parents in the study "*take cues*" from their children and respond by providing some Chinese culture and language to their children. "*If she's interested, we'll open the door and tell more about the culture, and try some language*" (Ethan, father). Some parents were supportive as long as their children were interested. "*We are the parents that whatever our kids want to do, we'd support them as much as we possibly could*" (Erren, mother).

Tessler et al. (1999) found that some parents are consciously allowing their children to choose what matters to them, rather than what the parents believe to be important. This view is supported in this study as well, and parents see their roles as providing help to their children as they search for their own way:

> *I don't want them to do what they think I want them to do. I want them to figure their own path. I'd help to find the path. But I don't tell them this is what they should take. I want them to explore and find where they feel comfortable.* (Amy, mother)

"Freedom of choice" is a distinctive American cultural value (Baden 2003), and is clearly reflected in parents' attitudes toward their degree of providing children exposure to their heritage. Some parents have a deeper understanding of what it means to make it a real choice. One parent, from personal experience, pointed out that to have exposure to the "difference" was what a choice started with:

> *If you only see, and are exposed to one culture, you have no reason to question. You don't know there should be anything different. But when you come here, you*

know there are two ways to do things. So naturally you have questions. (Lydia, mother)

As a parent with a distinctive visible ethnic heritage, she understood that the "*questions*" as a result of being exposed to that difference leads to personal choice. She explained the different choices that she and her ethnic minority relatives made in their attitudes and practice. "*Some will accept and appreciate it. Some say, 'I don't need to do that one, I know this one'*" (Lydia, mother).

All the parents in this study were supportive of providing access to their children's ethnic Chinese heritage. This is not surprising given that many of the parents had their children enrolled in a cultural/language class prior to the study. However, underlying their similarly supportive parental practice, there was a fundamental difference in their awareness of the connection between their ethnic heritage and identity development. Some parents do so because they believe it will help with their children's identity challenge and cope with an unequal social treatment due to their being Chinese. Some parents, though they actively provide opportunities for a Chinese cultural experience, were not motivated by their awareness of the role of ethnic heritage in their children's identity development. What might contribute to the combination of an active support with little awareness are the personal experiences of the parents. For example, some parents are interested in cultural diversity themselves, so hence they bring that to their family. As one parent described her spouse, "*Eric travelled a lot as a young boy, he got to see a lot of the world. He brought that to me and our kids*" (Anna, mother).

Final Comment

This article aims to explore parents' perspectives on the identity development of children adopted from China, and to understand parents' awareness of the relationship between identity development and ethnic heritage language and culture, as well as their attitudes toward supporting their children's exposure to their Chinese heritage. The study has the following conclusions.

Parents have various perceptions of their children's identity. Some parents think their children are just Canadians, while some parents think they have influences from being both Chinese and Canadian so that they are Chinese-Canadian with a predominance of being Canadian, or Canadian-Chinese with a predominance of being Chinese. Some parents see that their children are in "*a third space*" between Canada and China. Yet, some parents think that because of their children's identity of being *"the color purple,"* they are one of a kind in their own right. It integrates the children's experience of being born of a Chinese ethnicity, being adopted and being raised by Canadian parents. Thus, these parents think that their children have created a new culture of their own. With regard to the challenge of identity, the parents also have different perspectives. Some parents do not know whether or not their children will be challenged due to the parents' lack of personal experience with ethnic minorities. Some parents believe that the multicultural society of Canada would help reduce the stress. Even so, some parents acknowledge the identity challenge for their children, and see them walking a fine line between their ethnic heritage and adoptive cultures.

Parents also have different degrees of awareness of the role that an ethnic Chinese heritage culture and language plays in the children's identity development, as well as their attitudes to supporting it. Some parents have little or no awareness of the connection between the two; others have an awareness in various perspectives and degrees. Some parents have a deeper understanding of the positive influence in fostering their children's Chinese heritage "roots," insofar that they see an investment in the *wholeness* of their children's identity with pride and confidence. With regard to parents' attitudes to providing their children with exposure to their Chinese heritage culture and language, most parents adopt the approach of "child choice," that they adjust their effort to offer the children access to their heritage according to the children's wishes and interests. Still, some parents emphasize giving their children a choice by giving them a "*ticket home*" to their ethnic heritage home, as a result of

vigorously providing opportunities and role-modeling for the children to explore their heritage.

It is evident that all of the parents genuinely love their adopted children and want to help them to be healthy and happy individuals. However, their perceptions, awareness and attitudes vary. Some parents do not think identity is an issue, whereas some acknowledge its importance to their children's well-being, and that there is no way to avoid it. Some parents are not really as aware, as they think they are, of the connection between identity development and ethnic heritage. Some parents are not clear about how to help their children in their identity development, while some parents realize they can validate, acknowledge and embrace their children's perception of "who I am." They have a positive impact on their children's identity development by exposing them to their ethnic heritage and fostering their heritage "roots." Some parents even acknowledge their own identity change through the adoption and parenting experience. Traver (2014) refers to this process as becoming "Chinese-American" or, in this case, Chinese-Canadian parents.

It is also important to acknowledge that ethnic heritage can play a significant role in fostering these children's identity, yet it is part of the overall identity challenge they face caused by other factors, including ethnicity and gender. It is true that no amount of development in ethnic heritage can change the social reality of being an ethnic minority in a Western world. Each factor has its place in forming an individual's identity. Studies have shown the importance of incorporating the adopted child's cultural background into family traditions and activities (Baden & Steward, 2000). Professionals argue for the need for parents to be proactive and provide opportunities to interact with others of a similar ethnicity. It is common for these children to ask questions and seek their personal histories and ethnic heritage as they mature and their identity strengthens (Schwarzwald et al., 2015). It is critical that transculturally adopted children feel comfortable asking questions and discussing their feelings with their adoptive parents.

It is hoped that children adopted inter-ethnically grow into happy, healthy, confident individuals, despite all of their challenges. After all, they have a choice to interpret their unique adoption stories into a struggle or a blessing, and to *"have feet in both worlds"* if they are given opportunities to explore all of their choices. Some of these children will choose the "color purple."
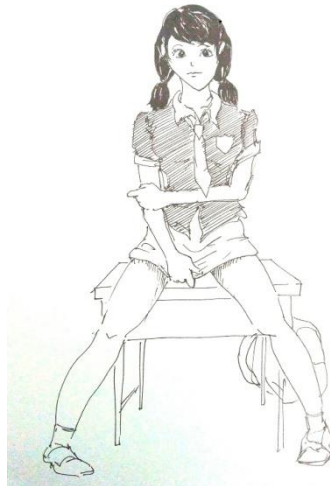
Sketch by Hongchen Zhang

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