

# Opinions on Adoption

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of transnational adoptions, the phenomenon of white parents adopting Asian children can be viewed as performative and entrenched in racial biases. These adoptions can sometimes be driven by a desire to fulfill a certain image or to display a sense of nobility without addressing deeper issues of racial bias and privilege.

## AREAS OF CONCERN

Transnational adoptions perpetuate harmful Asian stereotypes while simultaneously deepening the divide between Asian and Black communities. Moreover, these adoptions that are often presented as acts of altruism really play a role in the gradual erosion of authentic Asian cultural traditions and heritage.



"The celebration of difference is limited to tokenized moments of inclusivity with little to no acknowledgment of the historicity of racial injustice."<sup>1</sup>

## *Transnational Adoptions Diminish Asian Cultural Heritage and Deepen Racial Divides*

## HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

The evolution of adoption as a relatively recent concept has given rise to an array of perspectives from adoptive parents, yet the voices of adoptees, who were infants at the time of adoption, have frequently been left out of the conversation. These single sided perspectives lead to unrealistic portrayals of the adoption process and often hide the complex realities and of those who have been adopted.

Concurrently, the surge in transnational adoptions during the 1980s and 90s precipitated a shift in the discourse surrounding adoption, culminating in the emergence of an orientalist viewpoint that hailed Western nations as "redeemers" for their adoption of Asian children. This narrative can be traced back to the transnational militarized agreements between Asian countries and America during wartime.

# Racial Baises

## INTERMINORITY HIGHERARCHY

The stark contrast in the cost of adopting Black children compared to Asian children carries heavy implications within the adoption landscape. The devaluation of Black adoptees by pricing them lower perpetuates a troubling narrative of their perceived worth and desirability. "Blackness emerges as a kind of 'white noise' against which Asianness becomes flexible in the White American imaginary. The desirability of Asian adoptees is understood in relation to the undesirability of Black children. While adoptable Chinese children are defined as "baggage free, desirably different, and savable," the narrative attached to Black adoptable children is laced with images of damage, irredeemability, and marginalization." (8)

These practices reinforce the "model minority" stereotype, perpetuate racial biases, and inadvertently foster intergroup conflict among different racial communities. "The higher social status of Asian Americans over African Americans biases the use of the former's relative social acceptance as a gauge for the latter's experiences, and vice versa." (2)



## RE-FENCING

Re-fencing is a concept where white parents who had adopted Asian children perceive themselves as tolerant and accepting but devised creative excuses for their intolerance when the situation called for it. (9) In reality, these parents have recast their children as white, and if asked, most of them would not be willing to adopt a Black child.

The unequal treatment and opportunities afforded to Asian children over Black children in the adoption process not only reinforce racial hierarchies, but also contribute to the perpetuation of racial tensions and divisions within society. The implicit message sent by this preference is that Asian children are more desirable or worthy of adoption than Black children.

# Adoptee Fetishism

## ADOPTEE COMODIFICATION

Imperialism, media, and sexism have resulted in Asian women functioning as "objects for western consumption and the satisfaction of western desires." Subsequent to their objectification is the overarching conception of Asian women as submissive, subservient, and inherently hypersexual. Similarly, infant bodies act as "commodities to fulfill the fictional prospective adoptive parents' goals and aspirations" (16)

The adoption of Asian children by white families, often under the guise of progressive ideals, is frequently tainted by Orientalist fantasies. These fantasies portray the adopted children as "innocent and in need of rescue and care, positioning them as outsiders untouched by the socioeconomic conditions that facilitated their adoption throughout the twentieth century." (21)

## THE CHINA DOLL

A prevalent perspective among white adoptive parents often portrays the adoptee as a delicate China doll, expected to seamlessly assimilate. This perception equates cuteness with vulnerability, smallness, submissiveness, docility and controllability. The symbolism of the China doll linked to the child perpetuates a form of racially biased affection disguised within white racial liberalism. (14) The issue goes beyond just the act of adoption itself, extending to the adoption of Asian dolls, where adopted Asian girls are seen as fulfilling a predetermined role.



This mindset is rooted in a harmful dynamic that requires the adoptee to conform to the adopting parent's idealized notions of child behavior – obedient, grateful, and easily shaped to fit the desires of the adoptive parents. In this context, adoption ceases to be about the well-being and identity of the adoptee; instead, it becomes a vehicle for fulfilling the fantasies and expectations of white adoptive parents.

# The Rescue Narrative

## MILITARIZED HUMANITARIANISM

The enduring impact of war on transnational adoption continues to resonate in contemporary discourse. Adoptees are confronted with endless imposed "white savior" narratives. Within the framework of Orientalism, the adoption of Asian infants by White parents is often cloaked in the guise of humanitarian benevolence, yet beneath this veneer lies a more sinister reality characterized by a form of militarized humanitarianism. (13)

This narrative presupposes that white parents are rescuing these children, affording them improved economic prospects and relocating them from developing nations to the Western world. This is analogous to the exploitation of comfort women in wartime contexts, where now, infants are objects of a militaristic gaze within a historical milieu reminiscent of the subjugation of gijichon women for American desires. (13)

## WESTERN DOMINANCE

The narrative of rescue and betterment perpetuated by media, carries with it an implicit assumption of western superiority. This framework also positions the adoptive family as saviors while implying that the biological mother's decision to relinquish her child was inherently flawed. This idea oversimplifies the complex circumstances that can lead to child relinquishment like sex trafficking and coercion, while also perpetuating harmful stereotypes that delegitimize the capacity of biological mothers -especially minorities- to provide adequate care and nurture for their children.

Ultimately, the white savior complex that positions the adopters as rescuers or saviors of marginalized communities perpetuate a distorted power dynamic and reinforcing racial hierarchies.



# Cultural Erasure



## THE COLORBLIND APPROACH

Many adoptive parents avoid acknowledging racial distinctions between them and the adoptee for several 'well intentioned' reasons. Therefore, many resort to the "color-blind" approach. This approach socializes children to adopt a white perspective, and it can have profound implications on the adoptee's sense of identity and self-worth which often leads to internalized racism.

"Parents saw themselves as raising their children to be "normal," with little awareness that their definition of normal was white centered." (9)

Being raised in an environment that normalizes whiteness and prioritizes a White-centered worldview, can lead to adoptees internalizing attitudes that devalue their own racial and cultural heritage.

## Banal Multiculturalism

Kate Driscoll Derickson contends that banal multiculturalism suppresses past and current racial injustices while masking inequality as achieved equality in neoliberal society. This approach fuels the fetishization of Asian adoptees and is evident in families who embrace racial diversity without fully understanding how race shapes their children's experiences. (9)

# Cultural Erasure II

## TOKINIZED CELEBRATIONS

While many parents exhibited discomfort when confronted with issues of racism and racial diversity, they were notably more inclined to support their children's exploration and appreciation of their own cultural heritage. Transnational adoptees' parents often express their reverence for their heritage and cultural background through tokenized gestures like "by bringing home a book about or from Korea, purchasing dolls or other artifacts, preparing or purchasing Korean foods like kimchi, attending a Korean or Asian-centered event (including Asian restaurants), or attending an adoptee-centered event." [11]

Some adoptive parents choose to immerse their children in adoptee camps, where they interacted with other families comprising white parents and adopted children. The presence of predominantly white parents in these social settings underscores the extent to which parents were willing to go. "In effect, white adoptive parents went to the edge of their racial and social geographies without actually crossing them." [11]

Other parents reportedly encouraged their children to engage in cultural interactions with Asian individuals, this tokenistic approach inadvertently perpetuates racial stereotypes by homogenizing diverse Asian cultures and populations, rather than recognizing their rich complexity and variety.

Unfortunately, for many white adoptive parents, cultural exploration often remained sporadic and superficial, lacking in meaningful depth. Many parents deferred to their children to take the lead in exploring their cultural roots. However, in my experience, relinquishing this responsibility to the child often results in little to no cultural exploration as many adolescents struggle between the conflicting desires to assimilate and belong, thereby distancing themselves from activities that emphasized their "differences."

Ultimately, while parents generally exhibit more positive attitudes towards cultural exploration compared to racial exploration, both endeavors frequently fall short of genuine engagement. By predominantly focusing on cultural differences while neglecting racial disparities, parents leave adopted children ill-prepared to navigate the harsh realities of racism and its subtle microaggressions.