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Children of "A Dream Come True": A Critical Content Analysis of the Representations of Transracial Chinese Adoption in Picturebooks

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Abstract

This study offers a critical content analysis of thirty-six contemporary realistic picturebooks featuring transracial Chinese adoption. The theoretical framework of critical literacy highlights significant sociocultural implications of these portrayals: in particular, negative stereotypes and ideologies, in an attempt to call for inclusivity and respect. Though these adoption tales provide an opportunity for Chinese adoptees to explore sociocultural identities and for other young readers to perceive the world of adoption-created families from a different perspective, negative depictions of certain aspects suggest that transracial Chinese adoption narratives are highly contested in terms of how Chinese adoptees are viewed and what family configurations are valued. The stories sometimes omit or simplify the complexities and nuances involved in the practice, the voices of birth parents and adoptees are noticeably absent, and certain ideologies prevail in some adoptive narratives. The complex picture of what transnational adoption looks like and means for those involved needs to be more critically explored and extended by children's literature researchers as unveiling discourses on belonging and exclusion are informed by values that will be passed on to the new generation.

Keywords Transracial · Chinese adoption · Picturebooks · Critical literacy · Critical content analysis

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Introduction

Nowadays, family types in the United States are constantly changing, with a growing number of non-traditional families. While racial homogeneity remains the norm for most American families, interracial and multi-ethnic families formed through intermarriage and transracial adoption are on the rise in the context of globalization, transforming assumptions about what a family should be. At present, fewer than fifty percent of children in schools across North America belong to a traditional nuclear family headed by two biological, heterosexual parents, with the mother fulfilling the role of primary caregiver and nurturer (Pyke, 2014). The trend of diversity in family composition is increasing and will continue to evolve.

However, these changes in family formation remain unacknowledged to some extent, and these new families are underrepresented in literature and cultural media products (Satz, 2007). Particularly, adoption, despite its prevalence, is often unrecognized as an aspect of identity, yet it is significant in the lives of children and their families. Transnational adoption is an intriguingly complex component of diversity, encompassing varied themes including, but not limited to, gender, race, class, sociopolitical context, religion, as well as power and privilege. Unfortunately, the existing power dynamics are very often ignored, underestimated, and/or essentialized by non-adoption scholars.

Children's literature featuring transnational adoption represents pioneering efforts to expand the definition of family beyond its biological norm. The texts that children engage with influence their understanding of their own lives and the world around them. Children's literature, specifically, has been shown to influence readers' identity, empathy, and perspective-taking skills (Stephens, 2011). On the one hand, for those with a personal connection to adoption, a text can serve as a mirror (Sims Bishop, 2012) through which one sees one's self reflected and explores his/her identity; on the other hand, strategic use of children's books reflecting adoption also provides children outside the adoption triad with meaningful opportunities to perceive the world of adoption-created families from a different perspective, to recognize the legitimacy of alternative families, and to express feelings about families. Further, given the adoptees' limited life experience, young children might not be able to articulate their own confusion, feelings, and ambivalence about adoption. Children's literature can be an effective way for families to address sensitive issues and contextualize their experiences, as a means to initiate dialogues between adoptive parents and adoptees who might be reluctant to open discussions or ask questions.

Nevertheless, very few studies have been conducted with a primary focus on how adoption is represented in literature for young readers. The findings of this study reveal that portrayals of transnational adoption in current children's books are still slanted toward troubling oversimplifications, unexamined assumptions, inadequacy or absence of birth parents, perpetuated widespread stereotypes, and inaccurate/biased depictions (Bergquist, 2007; Kokkola, 2011; Jerome and Sweetney, 2014). The problematic treatment of adoption in print proves to be a potent

source of misunderstanding given that teachers and families seek out literature to help children understand adoption. Without careful interrogation, these forms of representation can affect how children view themselves and others, particularly when the distortions are repeated across multiple texts.

Critical analysis of texts depicting diverse life situations in children's literature is concerned with issues of equity, power, and social justice. Conceptualized within the theoretical framework of critical literacy, this study conducts a critical content analysis of depictions of transracial Chinese adoption by US parents and adoptive families in contemporary Anglophone realistic picturebooks. It intends to consider how children might see adoption depicted in relation to their own lives and the lives of others through exploring recurrent themes across texts and highlighting embedded perspectives. It is concluded that though the multidimensional aspects of transracial Chinese adoption are reflected within the moving tales, they sometimes omit or simplify the complexities and nuances involved in the practice, including the absence or under-representation of birth parents, vague explanations for relinquishment, and problematic narratives of rescue and salvation.

Rationale of the Study

Transnational adoption is a complicated sociocultural practice shaped by an intersection of contextual factors. It is also an ideologically contested site characterized by imbalanced power relations between the receiving and sending countries. Different countries have different histories and practices of transnational adoption. This research project focuses on the representations of transnational adoption from China into the US in children's picturebooks for the following reasons.

First, transracial adoption from China is uniquely situated in the contemporary phenomenon of transnational and transracial adoption. Chinese adoptees constitute the largest percentage of children adopted from other countries in the US. Adoptees of different national origins, and even those of the same national origin sent to different adoption destinations, have different experiences. Thus, each racial/ethnic/national adoptive group is worth its own separate study. I focus on adoption from China in part because "Chinese adoption and the communities that have developed around it have become remarkably visible and vocal" (Volkman, 2003, p. 30).

Second, while there have been some studies examining literary representations and experiences of transnational adoptees from other countries, such as those focusing on Korean adoptees (e.g., Bergquist, 2007; Kim, 2010), studies on adoption from China and Chinese adoptees represented in literature and media are rare.

Last but not least, the unique history and practice of adoption from China exerts a profound influence on the adoptees' experiences. For example, China's one-child policy, patriarchal societal structure, and sociocultural preference for male children result in a large number of adoptable and healthy female infants. This situation provides a rationale for analyzing literary representations of transracial Chinese adoption and adoptees' experiences. Moreover, experiences of adoptees are largely shaped by societal ideas about what it means to be of a particular racial and cultural background. For instance, Chinese adoptees are often associated with certain traits of being a "model

minority"—intellectually high-achieving, obedient, and adept at playing musical instruments (Rojewski and Rojewski, 2001). From this perspective, research findings from studies on adoptees of different racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Blacks or Koreans) cannot be generalized to Chinese adoptees. An analysis of representations of Chinese adoption and adoptees in children's books as "an integral part of the multilayered tapestry of the American experience" merits its own separate study (de Manual et al. 2006, p. vii).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy studies grew out of critical perspectives on education, emphasizing the connections between language, knowledge, power, and subjectivities (Freire, 1970; Gee, 2008; Luke et al. 2011). In this view, literacy is conceptualized as praxis with significant sociopolitical implications and texts are never neutral, but embedded in particular historical contexts. Reflective of those contexts, texts of all types position and shape readers through legitimizing particular ways of being and knowing. Critical literacy theorists, such as Michael Apple (1995) and Hilary Janks (2009), contend that unequal power relations are prevalent and people in power generally choose what truth is to be privileged. Ruth McKoy Lowery (2003, p. 19) notes that "The main goal of critical literacy is to disrupt and challenge unequal power relations that exist in the society. Experience and knowledge are historically constructed within specific institutional power relations."

Critical literacy also encourages readers to actively and analytically read text in a manner that promotes a deeper understanding of unequal power relations and social injustice in human relationships, through uncovering and deconstructing socially constructed concepts. Moreover, it encourages teachers to critically scrutinize curricular materials and textbooks from the perspective of social equity and justice for positive transformation of unequal practices (Hefferman, 2004). Culturally relevant and authentic literature provides a generative space for disagreement and dialogue that encompasses multiple voices, identities, questions, as well as different ways of thinking and being in the world (Harris and Violet, 2003). Through practices of critical literacy around culturally relevant literature, readers can discover different forms of oppression and social dominance by interrogating relationships between language and power, such as whose perspectives are privileged and whose voices are missing. More importantly, they will learn about alternative worldviews and values, and possibly critique their own biases.

Method

Critical Content Analysis

Critical content analysis is a "close reading of small amounts of text that are interpreted by the analyst and then contextualized in new narratives. What makes the study *critical* is not the methodology but the framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text" (Beach et al. 2009, p. 2). My research is critical because it is informed by the framework of critical literacy to make power apparent. Critical content analysis interrogates unequal power relations and inequalities among different groups through the interpretation of texts in the contexts. It is both heterological and hermeneutic (Nikolajeva, 2005). Qualitative approaches to content analysis are informed by critical theories and social sciences. The requirements of doing critical literacy such as disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, and focusing on sociopolitical issues match with my aims of doing qualitative critical content analysis.

Procedures

Data Sources

My critical content analysis is based on thirty-six children's picturebooks for age groups ranging from pre-K to grade three (five-ten years old). These books are publicly accessible. Utilizing the categories of picturebooks, pre-K through grade three, and age group five to ten, I found the Chinese-adoption-themed books through an extensive online and academic search using Amazon.com, Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, and the Database of Award-winning Children's books. I also consulted online magazines and periodicals such as *Adoptive Families* for lists of recommended books. Moreover, adoption websites were also consulted, such as loveisntenough.com and chinamonkey.com. The results were fifty-one entries. Finally, I went through library sources that would have any information on any of the authors.

Since large-scale adoption from China did not begin until the early 1990s, I expected there to be only a moderate number of books on this topic. I found books spanning twenty years and initially tried to include all of the books as a whole corpus. The criteria I used for selecting books for close analysis are: (1) availability of narratives within the US, focusing on transracial Chinese adoption by US parents; (2) the books have to be written in English for a pre-K to grade three audience who are primary readers of picturebooks, and the books have to be published and circulated in the US within the last two decades; (3) the books are written both by adoption insiders and by adoption outsiders, for comparative purposes; (4) the protagonists of the books are human beings and human families rather than animal characters; (5) books with photographic illustrations are

excluded because the nature of photographic images requires a different analysis. After this narrowing-down process, I ended up with a total of thirty-six recently published (from 1992 to 2013), contemporary realistic picturebooks that were likely to be readily available to young readers.

Data Analysis

The application of critical content analysis depends on subjective interpretation of textual and visual content through systematic coding of patterns or themes. The analysis process is reflexive and cumulative through noting and coding aspects relative to transnational adoption. While visuals are an important means to get across messages and transfer core values and ethos, due to the limitations of space, I left aside critical visual analysis of the representations for a separate paper. Thus this study focuses only on the verbal narrative patterns. With the whole set of chosen children's picturebooks at hand, first of all, I counted how many books featuring transracial Chinese adoption and Chinese adoptees were published each year during the past two decades, so that a publishing trend could be revealed. This calculation also enabled me to know how accessible these books were for readers.

Secondly, I studied the profiles of authors in order to find out if they are adoptive parents, adoptees, adoptive siblings, or uninvolved with transracial Chinese adoption personally. I synthesized my findings into the following categories: narratives written from the perspective of (1) adoptee, (2) white adoptive parents, (3) a third-person narrator, (4) sibling, and (5) birthmother.

Thirdly, I read and re-read the books, looking for their characteristics and the most prominent patterns within the texts. I developed codes and thematic subcategories from the verbal narrative patterns in light of the adoption experiences in picturebooks. For the convenience of coding, I categorized the process of transracial Chinese adoption into three stages: pre-adoption; adjustment and accommodation; and post-adoption. Prominent thematic subcategories were found from recurrent readings and inductive coding. Extended memos were kept of developing insights, adjusting and refining as each new book added perspectives or solidified developing understandings.

Last but not least, I engaged in close reading of the literary texts by analyzing their narrative structures, aiming to discover if the story reflects realities with reference to additional insights from reading adoption-related scholarship, media and websites. In addition, I looked for the most prominent patterns within the texts, endeavoring to identify inferences across multiple contexts, and uncover implied meanings as well as power politics. Conclusions stem from coding and analysis of data across texts, collected, categorized, and interpreted through this process.

Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal recurrent themes and patterns across multiple texts that construct a discourse about transracial Chinese adoption that open the door to important dialogues about sociocultural identities, power and choice, as well as how children are positioned

and viewed. At the same time, some troubling assumptions, oversimplifications, and distortions are also noted.

Publishing Trend

A total of thirty-six picture books was published in the US between 1992 and 2013 featuring transracial Chinese adoption and the experiences of Chinese adoptees (see Appendix). I counted the number of books published each year, attempting to map publishing trends. The numbers can be found in Table 1.

Large-scale adoption from China began in 1992 and peaked in 2005. It is noted (Powers, 2011) that more than 60,000 Chinese children were adopted by North American parents from 1998 to 2008. The total number of thirty-six picture books might be small. Over 14, 493 Chinese children were adopted into North American families in the year of 2005, but the number declined to 10, 743 in 2006 (Selman, 2009). As shown in Table 1, a total of eleven (about 31%) books were published within the years of 2006 and 2007. The number has been decreasing from 2008 to 2013. Not a single book representing transracial Chinese adoption was produced in the year of 2012. The publishing trend coincides with changes in the policy of transnational adoption from China: China imposed more restrictions on this practice from 2008 (Smolin, 2011).

Whose Voices Get Heard and Whose are Marginalized?

As shown in Table 2, among the forty authors and co-authors of the thirty-six picture-books, thirty-three of them are white Euro-Americans. Only two authors are adoptees. Authentic voices of the adoptees and siblings are under-represented or missing. As few as five books are written by authors of other ethnicities. Given the fact that more non-white families have been adopting children from China in recent years (Smolin, 2011), this number is small.

Whose Perspectives and Experiences are Represented and Whose are Under-Represented?

As shown in Table 3, only one book is written from the perspective of the birth mother. The feelings and experiences of birth parents are in a void. At best, birth parents are depicted as shadowy figures in the child's imagination and wonderings. Table 2 shows that only four authors are adoptive fathers out of a total of forty authors. Only one book is written from the perspective of an adoptive father. In contrast, twenty-two authors are adoptive mothers and six books are written from the perspective of adoptive mothers. The perspectives and experiences of adoptive fathers (single or married) are thus

Table 1 Years of publication and the number of books published

1992	2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013
1	3	1	5	2	3	5	6	3	3	2	1	1

Table 2 Authors (Total: 40; N = no personal connections with adoption)

White Euro-American				Chinese-American				Native Chinese	Korean-American
Adoptive mother	Adoptive father	Daughter of adoptee	N	Adoptive mother	Adoptive father	Daughter of adoptee	N	N	N
22	3	1	7	1	1	2	1	1	1
33				5				1	1

Table 3 Perspectives (Total: 38)

White Euro-Americam			Chinese		Third person	Adoptee
Adoptive mother	Adoptive father	Sibling	Birth mother	Sibling		
6	1	2	1	1		
9			2		16	11

Mama's wish/ Daughter's wish is written from the perspectives of the adoptee and a third person; *Just Add One Chinese Sister* is written from the perspectives of the sibling and adoptive parents

noticeably under-represented in adoption stories. At the same time, it is interesting to note that although only two books are (co)authored by adoptees, eleven books are written from the perspective of adoptees. Among the eleven books, as many as nine books are written by White Euro-American authors and two books are collaboratively written by adoptive mothers and adoptees. These numbers show that books reflecting the perspective of adoptees are authored largely by White adoptive parents or White Euro-Americans with no personal involvement with adoption. In addition, only three books are written from the perspective of siblings. These patterns reinforce the previous findings that the voices of adoptees and siblings are under-represented.

What Themes are Presented and What Themes are Missing or Omitted?

Thematic coding of adoptive family dynamics reveals some interesting trends and suggestions about the way in which transnational adoption is represented. These stories offer potentially meaningful contexts for dialogues about sociocultural expectations of family; but analyzed cross-textually, they also reveal perspectives that may privilege and legitimize stereotypical views of transnational adoption.

The Pre-adoption Stage

Adoption stories concentrate heavily on the narratives surrounding the process of adoption: in particular, how a child is brought into the adoptive family. They include the motivations for adoption, pre-adoptive activities and preparations, pre-adoptive siblings' expectations, and emotional or practical support from extended family and friends. Typical examples include *The Red Blanket* (Thomas, 2004), *The White Swan Express* (Okimoto and Aoki, 2002), *A Sister for Matthew* (Kennedy, 2006), and *Emma's Story* (Hodge, 2003).

Stories like *Finding Joy* (Coste, 2006)*, Letters of Love from China* (Cuzzolino, 2006), and *At Home in This World: A China Adoption Story* (MacLeod, 2003) also mention the sociopolitical context for transracial adoption from China. They explain why the majority of children placed from China are girls based on information drawn from research. Many complex factors contribute to adoption, but their explanations are limited. Adoption researchers discuss the impact of poverty, family planning policy, sociocultural preference for boys, and out-of-wedlock births. However, these picturebooks fail to offer a clear explanation as to why the adoptees' birth

countries facilitate more overseas than domestic adoptions, and why adoptive parents chose transnational versus domestic adoption.

The choice of transnational adoption is explained simply in terms of supply and demand, or by evoking the altruistic desire to help children in need. Inherent in such motivations are "rescue fantasies and paternalistic First World assumptions about the moral responsibility of developed countries to deliver nations from their own social, economic, or political failings" (Bergquist, 2007, p. 307). Reported parental reasons for wanting to adopt transnationally and transracially are varied, including the ease of securing infants, the cost of adoption, the age of children available for adoption, the waiting period, bureaucracy, the prospect of how well the children would get along with their siblings, the possibility of the children being reclaimed by their birth parents, the children's other characteristics, and the adoptive parents' understandings of race (Meese, 2009; Powers, 2011; Tan, 2011; Traver, 2010). However, the representations of adoptive parents' motivations for transnational adoption in these picturebooks do not reflect the complexity of this sociocultural practice.

The Stage of Adjustment and Accommodation

The motif of the "cherished" child is prevalent throughout most of the picturebooks, including *The White Swan Express* (Aoki and Okimoto, 2002)*, At Home in This World: A China Adoption Story* (MacLeod, 2003)*, The Red Blanket* (Thomas, 2004), *Just Add One Chinese Sister* (McMahon, 2005). The narratives hold the child as having a special status within the multiracial and multicultural family. The child is welcomed, given a new name, and cherished as a valuable new family member, bringing joy and happiness to the adoptive family. The adoptive mother in *The White Swan Express* (Aoki and Okimoto, 2002) even strives to learn Chinese in preparation for her trip to China to adopt her precious daughter. During the stage of adjustment, some adoptees are portrayed as displaying difficulties and emotional disturbance due to the abrupt change of familiar caretakers, smells, sounds, food, interactive patterns, and language; for example, *The Red Blanket* (Thomas, 2004)*, I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000), *A Sister for Matthew* (Kennedy and Amy, 2006). Though sometimes it takes time for the adoptees, parents, and siblings to get used to each other because of cultural differences, the adoptees are loved and cared for unconditionally.

Nevertheless, the stage of accommodation and adjustment is portrayed ambiguously in some stories. For example, in *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000), the narrator is deeply touched when she holds her daughter for the first time. She says, "I was so happy that I cried the moment I took you in my arms…you cried, too" (p. 6). Though the adoption day is one of great excitement for adoptive parents, it is a traumatic day for the adoptee, signifying the end of her life in the birth country. The picturebook does not make a distinction between the reasons for these tears. Once the narrator brings her daughter to the US, she describes the girl discovering her new room by saying "she smiled as if to say, I'm home" (p. 8). The girl is in a new place, surrounded by new people and smells; and thus it is hard for her to feel at home in real-life situations. By assuming a child would feel immediately at home,

the adoptive parent could ignore some transitional behaviors or other emotions due to the number of changes in such a short time span.

Name defines an individual's identity in relation to nation, community and family. For children adopted transnationally and transracially, naming proves problematic as it "raises the question of how the child is to be positioned in the realm of the symbolic" (Anagnost, 2000, p. 407). In some stories, the adoptees are nameless. Most adoptive parents impose a new identity on their child by choosing to retain the child's Chinese name as a middle name, or to translate the Chinese name into an English name of similar meaning that is more easily pronounced by an English speaker. Sometimes the child's name is closely connected with their place of origin (Lin, 2013). However, the practice of naming is minimized in some of the stories. The Chinese girl in *Finding Joy* (Coste, 2006) is simply named Joy because she brings joy to her new adoptive family. Another Chinese girl in *Waiting for May* (Stoeke, 2007) is named after the month of May because she is adopted during that month. In contrast, naming practice is an important tradition in the Chinese cultural heritage since name, as a significant personal icon, may anticipate a person's fortune and future. For the Chinese children adopted across national and racial boundaries, the practice of naming or re-naming is more complicated as a "site of anxiety" (Anagnost, 2000, p. 408).

The Post-adoption Stage

Different aspects of the adoptee's post-adoptive life are represented in the stories. Nevertheless, they are also treated in different ways. The overarching theme in the stories featuring post-adoptive life is the exploration of identities. Two subthemes are identified when examining the stories for their treatment of issues of identity: negotiation of differences, and origin and belonging.

Negotiation of Differences Transracially adopted children begin to discern the individual differences between their adoptive family, others, and themselves from as early as the preschool years. As Eleana Kim (2007, p. 127) observes, "mirrors and family photos present visible evidence of the adoptees' irreducible difference from her family and peers, and also provoke questions about inherited traits and genetic resemblances." The adoptees' racialized physical otherness often counters their belief of being authentic Americans. They may ask questions about physical appearance and feel a sense of ambivalence, confusion, and anxiety about their identity. Books like *Mommy Far, Mommy Near: An Adoption Story* (Antoinette Peacock, 2000), *A China Adoption Story: Mommy, Why Do We Look Different?* (Koh, 2000) and *Emma's Story* (Hodge, 2003) deal with issues of racial differences, birth culture, and having two sets of parents.

These stories serve as viable tools preparing adopted children for their minority status and for the reactions of others. They portray how the adoptees come to more fully understand adoption, and how it involves processing the idea of having a birth mother—what it means, whether their birth mother loves them, and grief at her absence. Although these are children's books, parents can benefit as well. The adults in the stories such as adoptive mothers and grandmothers are good examples

of how to tell a child's adoption story lovingly and from an early start, how to take advantage of teaching moments, and how to answer difficult questions about being different with understanding and love. As Carol Peacock, the author of *Mommy Far, Mommy Near: An Adoption Story* (2000), says, "I believe that parents are the very best people to explore the issue of adoption with their children. Discussions begun when children are young set the stage for ongoing openness, as the child grows." (p. ii)

Origin and Belonging The search for roots and a sense of belonging is embedded within the context of exploring identities. From the age of eight, adopted children may begin to question their position within the adoptive family as an integral and genuine member (Meese, 2009). They may feel angry and distressed about not being born into the family and feel inferior to biological siblings. They may begin to wonder why their birth parents did not want them and feel guilty for being bad or unwanted. A search for roots and belonging is prevalent in adoption stories including *Mother Bridge of Love* (Xinran, 2007), *Letter of Love from China* (Cuzzolino, 2006)*, We See the Moon* (Kitze, 2003), *The Adventures of Lily* (Campbell, 2008), *Every Year on Your Birthday* (Lewis, 2007), and *At Home in This World* (MacLeod, 2003).

As the youngest involuntary immigrants in the Asian diaspora, Chinese adoptees belong to their birth country, biological families, adoptive families, and North America. Some stories such as *We See the Moon* (Kitze, 2003)*, Letter of Love from China* (Cuzzolino, 2006) and *The Adventures of Lily* (Campbell, 2008), contain compelling images of China such as fertile land, towering mountains, and other beautiful sceneries intended to boost a sense of ethnic pride in the adoptees. Through such stories, adoptees begin to understand that families come into being in different ways. Love and care bind family members together in spite of superficial differences. Adoptees also feel encouraged to treasure their connections to birth parents, caregivers, and birth country.

What Ideologies are Embedded in the Narrative Structures?

Fatalism—The Myth of the Red Thread The red thread is an old belief in China. The original tale describes how a red thread connects all Chinese people with their future spouse by fate. Despite twists and turns during their life course, the couple are destined to get married because their marriage has been arranged in their previous life by the old man under the moon, who tied the couple together by their feet with a red thread (Lin, 2013). Some children's books such as Grace Lin's imaginative adoption story, *The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale* (2007), modified the original folktale by stating that when a child was born, an invisible red thread binds the adoptees to each other and to their family members by tying a knot around each person's wrist. The story describes how a childless Western couple follows a magical red thread that tugs at their heartstrings and finds their Chinese daughter in a foreign land. The image of the red thread also appears in *The Adventures of Lily* (Cambell, 2008) and *A Single Red Thread* (Simcox, 2008), conveying the same messages. Both stories embrace the ancient Chinese belief that an invisible red thread connects those who are destined

to meet regardless of time, place or circumstances. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.

The tale of the red thread is commonly used by many Chinese heritage camps connecting adoptees with their family members. The metaphor of the red thread helps the adoptees reconcile with their birth histories and realize the special ways in which families are brought together (González and Wesseling, 2013). The adoptees are bound in a predestined sense with their adoptive parents by an invisible link. However, this metaphor also simplifies the complex reasons for adoption. Further, the red thread is originally associated with the practice of arranged marriage and symbolizes women's oppression (Lin, 2013). It has been Americanized and morphed into a loving adoption story in the adaptation. The new version mystifies and exoticizes Chinese culture. The ideology of fatalism is embedded in the symbol of the red thread. By either attributing adoption to fate (the allegorical red thread connecting Chinese children to their prospective adoptive parents) or to the stringent one-child policy of the Chinese state, the more complex dimensions of transnational adoption including loss, privilege and stratified reproduction are covered up (Colen, 2005).

Rescue and Salvation As most transnational adoptions involve the unidirectional transfer of children from disadvantaged circumstances (e.g., abandonment, initial years spent in orphanage, or disabilities) in the Third World to Western White families with considerable advantages of class, economic status, and education, these families are usually involved in global relationships marked by inequality (Jerng, 2010; Jacobson, 2008; Suter, 2008). It is rare to hear about cases where children from affluent Western countries are adopted into families of Third World countries. The practice of adoption in these stories is portrayed as a benevolent and magnanimous act of crossing different boundaries for the sake of love, an act of admirable altruism. Every adoption means a child saved, regardless of the significant losses and grief on the part of the adoptees. A quintessential example is *Sweet Moon Baby* (Clark, 2010) where an abandoned Chinese infant girl drifts in a basket on the heavy sea against the foul weather. She is ultimately saved by a loving couple on the other side of the world. In spite of initial challenges in adjustment, the adoptees are generally depicted as healthy, carefree, enjoying a well-off Western life style, and living happily ever after with the adoptive family. The adoption from China is dramatized as the rescue of abandoned and needy girl orphans.

The assumption that a poor child from the developing country will have the promise of a better life with a well-off family in the developed country is simplistic (Tessler, Tuan & Shiao, 2011; Trenka, 2005). Relocation to another country can mean irrecoverable loss, unhealed wounds, and sacrifice on the part of the child (Pan, 2013). According to Hubinette (2004), this perspective idealizes transracial adoption as a multicultural utopia where love is triumphant. These narratives of salvation and rescue require adoptees to be grateful for having been rescued from a life of abjection. They feel guilty if they do not feel indebted, or they feel ambivalence and resentment in the post-adoptive life (Trenka, 2005; Wilson, 2009). Some significant issues including loss and abandonment, racism, isolation, and the perpetual cultural limbo experienced by most adoptees are unexplored

in such narratives. The narratives might try to give hope to the adoptees, leaving these thorny issues unexplored. Such books have good intentions, but they fail to present a full picture of the adoptees' life situations. Moreover, the humanitarian altruistic discourses "obscure the very structure of power and global inequalities that produce the problem of the orphan in the first place" (Kim, 2010, p. 255).

Happy Endings—The Triumph of Colorblind Love Almost all the adoption stories within this study have traditional happy endings with the conflict resolved in a satisfactory way. The adoptees are welcomed by the adoptive families and extended social network members, and settle cozily in their new homes. The characters live happily together thereafter, even though some of their questions still remain unanswered. The theme of colorblind love or "love conquers all" philosophy pervades the narratives. This kind of narrative ignores the challenges and conflicts the adoptees might encounter in the adjustment process, though it gives hope to the adopted children by assuring them that multiracial adoptive families can work out well and that they are loved in spite of racial differences. Readers might feel that the adoptees' resentment, anxiety, confusion, bitterness, and ambivalence are unwarranted. Seeing the characters smiling and content, the adoptees are compelled to model this behavior. These romanticized narratives celebrate hybridity and racial/ethnic mixing, boosting confidence in the act of transnational adoption. This practice can be successful as long as the adoptees are immersed in love and care.

However, the narratives hide the problems and challenges embedded in transnational adoption, to some extent. Adoption stories have to affirm differences while realistically reflecting the potential issues related to adoption. It is noted that "children's literature that attempts to address the complex emotions that arise from adoption by imposing a singular narrative outcome is highly problematic" (Kokkola, 2011, p. 47). By insisting that the adopted child integrate into a multicultural society, these narratives "close off avenues that might allow for a place for the ongoing, day-to-day mixed feelings that the child may experience" (Kokkola, 2011, p. 48). The happy endings trivialize or minimize the isolation, stress, losses, and cultural dissonance that older adoptees experience.

Validating White Motherhood There is a popular proverb, "A woman who mothers another's child is like a cloud that gathers moisture and then travels great distances to nourish a lone tree in the desert." All the books in this study portray adoptive White motherhood in laudatory terms, depicting White mothers as competent in maternity roles and their act of adoption as selfless and admirable. In contrast to the ideal of White motherhood, the birth parents in these stories are either left out of narratives or portrayed as poor, weak, irresponsible, and victimized by oppressive national policy and coercion. The story of *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000) shows empathy and respect for the birthmother. The story ends with the adoptive mother holding the daughter and crying. She explains that "the tears were for your Chinese mother, who could not keep you. I wanted you to know that we would always remember her" (p. 29). Ending the book in this way humanizes

the birth mother and intimates that even though she cannot physically be with them, her presence in their family will remain.

Nevertheless, in *Letter of Love from China* (Cuzzolino, 2006), the Chinese peasant mother has to give up her child because of extreme poverty. The whole family makes the decision together. Though the birth mother seems reluctant, she is submissive and acquiesces in sending her baby away. The birth mother in *Sweet Moon Baby* (Clark, 2010) could not keep her newborn baby girl because the family is too poor to support her. The rural birth parents then make the rash decision of putting the infant into a basket at the mercy of the boiling sea. They hope someone will find her and save her, regardless of the severe dangers the baby might encounter on the way. The birth mothers in *Yushi and the Tall Man* (Staut, 2009)*, Three Names of Me* (Cummings, 2006), and *Finding Joy* (Coste, 2006) are victimized by the stringent one-child policy and have to abandon their baby girls in front of the orphanage steps or under a bridge. In *Mother Bridge of Love* (Xinran, 2007), the author describes the biological and adoptive mother with the line of "the first gave you a need for love, the second was there to give it" (p. 8). This connotes the idea that the first mother did not love the daughter. The negative view of birth mothers is perpetuated as flawed and lacking agency.

The Chinese mothers surrender their children under different circumstances and they choose the only option in the best interest of their children, often bearing the consequence of gnawing pains and lifetime guilt (Luo and Smolin, 2005). Whatever the reason, the Chinese mothers love their daughters wholeheartedly and unconditionally, but have to relinquish them due to personal impasse and societal pressures (Xinran, 2011). Some are still searching for their lost daughters. Portraying all Chinese mothers as victims of a patriarchal system "threatens to homogenize the discrepant histories of all birth mothers into a single narrative" (Kim, 2010, p. 261).

Commodification of the Adopted Child Commodification refers to a person being treated as an object for trade, usually with a price tag. Commodification of the adopted child is present in two adoption stories within my study—*Made in China* (Oelschlager, 2006) and *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Lewis, 2000). A Chinese girl is teased by her older and blond sister as being "Made in China": "it's stamped right on your head" and "you're like my shirt and my favorite plaid skirt!" (p. 10) Wounded and worried about being different, the little girl goes to her father who tells her the story of how she came to be their child. He assures her that "you are not made like a toy, you were made in China to give us joy" (p. 12). The father's words imply that the daughter was brought into this world simply for their pleasure, suggesting that the parent's need for joy was greater than the child's needs. This also places the burden on the child to feel that she is responsible for her adoptive parents' happiness.

The girl feels sad and frustrated at being different from her family members. The father says, "Please, my dear one, don't ever be sad. You were 'Made in China,' so I'd be your dad" (p.16). Sadness and grief are natural feelings for children who have lost their parents and culture. Asking a child to not "ever be sad" places yet another burden on the child when they do have inevitable feelings of pain or abandonment. The father's words imply a closure of communication. This could potentially make adopted children feel uncomfortable

and unwilling to discuss their true, intimate feelings with their adoptive parents because the book indicates that the father does not want to hear his child's sad thoughts.

The notion of "Made in China" is shown on the cover and several of the pages within the book. It is repeated again and again by the father when he continuously tells his adoptive daughter that she was "Made in China" for several different reasons. His confirmation that his daughter was "Made in China" emphasizes child commodification by comparing the child to toys processed and manufactured in China. Being born in China is different from being made in China. The corresponding image of the main character wrapped in a plastic box like a doll on a conveyor belt reinforces the message despite the father's saying that she was "not made like a toy" (p. 12). The father should have made a distinction between being "made" versus "born" in China. The daughter's origins lie in China, but she was not processed and manufactured.

China as the Oppressive Birth Country China, as the adoptees' birth country, often appears in these adoption stories. But it is usually portrayed only as the setting where adoption happened. In the rare cases where China's role in the adoption is explained, such as *Letter of Love from China* (Cuzzolino, 2006), China is always portrayed as oppressive, inhumane, misogynistic, and a place that violates human rights in the strict enforcement of one-child policy and abandonment of girl infants. It has historical resonance with the way China was depicted in the nineteenth century as a "backward" nation full of poor foot-bound Chinese girls who were killed, abandoned, or mistreated (Riegel, 2015). The stereotypes of China and the Chinese have persisted over time.

In *Letter of Love from China* (Cuzzolino, 2006), the birth family abandons the infant girl because the family prefers a male heir and is too poor to support an "extra" girl. The birth mother in *Three Names of Me* (Cummings, 2006) gives up her newborn daughter to an orphanage since "China is too crowded and not rich. It has rules about how many children a family can have" (p. 7). In the adoption tale of *At Home in This World* (MacLeod, 2003), the Chinese girl is surrendered by her birth parents because of the restriction on the number of children a family can have. In *Finding Joy* (Coste, 2006), a Chinese baby's parents feel that they have no room for girls and sadly place her underneath a bridge to be found. In the author's notes, Marion Coste explains China's one-child policy and the tradition of preferring boy babies. In this discourse, the Chinese government is portrayed as using inappropriate means for population control. This perspective is uni-dimensional, concealing more complex reasons and broader sociopolitical contexts. The fact that there are large numbers of Chinese infant girls available for transnational adoption must be "interpreted in the context of the stringency of China's birth policy and the state's economic reforms, which have set up compelling reasons for ensuring the birth of at least one son in order for the rural household to reproduce itself" (Anagnost, 2000, p. 394).

Summary and Conclusion

Transnational adoption narratives expose the basic human condition – expectations, family dynamics, vulnerabilities, and strengths – and opens the door to significant conversations about which family contexts are valued, who has choice and power in relationships, and how children are positioned and viewed. Multidimensional aspects of transracial Chinese adoption are reflected within the stories including the pursuit of adoption, adoption journey, the dynamics of relationships with the adoptive parents and siblings, complexities of identities, schooling experiences and homeland visits in China. These representations provide a window on the changing dimensions of family formation, race relations, and gendered citizenship in the US. They also broach some difficult and unexplored issues, such as racialized teasing, racial stereotyping, losses, and belonging.

   However, most of these books shine a rosy light on the practice of transnational adoption. The stories are moving, but sometimes they omit or simplify the complexities and nuances involved in the practice, such as the losses and abandonment. The voices of birth parents, adoptees, and siblings are under-represented, reinforcing the inherent inequalities embedded in transracial adoption. Moreover, the ideology of fatalism, colorblindness, the fantasy of rescue and salvation, and validation of White motherhood still exist in some adoption narratives. And narratives about belonging appear to fail to acknowledge racism that is naturalized in these stories. High-quality children's tales on transnational and transracial adoption have to "challenge the dominant White narrative of transnational adoption as an emotionally seamless act of child salvation and wrestle with the grittier realities of identity crisis, displacement, birth family loss, and American racism" (Nelson, 2003, p. 15). What transnational adoption looks like and means to those involved needs to be more critically explored and extended.

Implications

Transnational adoption is a multifaceted and norm-challenging aspect of social diversity. In this study, I inquire into discourses on this unique form of immigration in children's literature published in the US. These books aim to educate children on cultural diversity and assist in understanding the socialization of this form of family reproduction. As a critical look into depictions of cultural diversity in children's literature, this inquiry sheds light over how current and predominant ideologies regarding race, ethnicity, gender, belonging, and cultural origin are reproduced and resisted through narrative texts labeled for children. With the coming of age of the first generation of Chinese adoptees-most often girls adopted by Western families in the mid-1990s, a large number of them report suffering from racial discrimination and xenophobia at schools or in society (Tobella Mayans, 2014). Anthropological research on Spanish adoptive families has also revealed that adoptive parents appear to be unaware of the racism

their children experience, yet they do engage in some practices of racial/ethnic socialization, such as celebrating the traditional festivals of their country of origin, enrolling them in heritage language programs, and giving their children ethnic names (San Román, 2013). Nevertheless, the media, including children's books, often represent a society that extols transnational adoption, ignores or minimizes race/racism, and celebrates the multiculturalism resulting from the new landscape of family formations. It is, therefore, valuable to have children's books negotiating stereotypical portrayals, providing strategies for resisting processes of racialization, as well as challenging immutable hegemonic views on culture and identity.

Moreover, while narratives mirror reality in multiple ways, it is also important to note that they may also shape reality – that is, people make sense of the world and make decisions based on storytelling and credible tales (Fisher, 1989). Likewise, children's books, as value-laden and ideologically informed cultural products, are instrumental in conveying values, creating meaning, and moulding identities, contingent on social discursive transformations (Hurley, 2005; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994; Morgan, 2009). For example, China's current geopolitical power enables new ways of negotiating transnational adoption. The reasons Chinese birth mothers place their children for adoption are varied, including poverty, early widowhood, social pressure, teenage pregnancy, coerced sexual relationship, and criminal violence. Birth-control policy is just one reason among many others. Relating child abandonment exclusively to the one-child policy and the persistence of Confucian patriarchy is a limited and stereotypical view of Chinese kinship. Since books reflect and construct reality, the celebratory representation of multiculturalism or assimilation is also problematic as it is often "detached from immigrant histories in the United States" and it may "not only pose problems for adopted children in developing understanding of their racialization, but this dehistoricization also maintains the separations that constitute racialized boundaries in the U.S. society historically" (Anagnost, 2000, p. 391).

I believe books specifically written and recommended for children serve as a window through which we peek at how unveiling discourses on belonging and exclusion emerge and shift as they are informed by values that will be passed on to the new generation. As these books are read out loud by teachers and parents to socialize children and inform their own perspectives on cultural socialization, a critical pondering seems imminent as to how these young readers are expected to engage/respond in certain ways and how teachers and parents could possibly be involved in positive identity formation (Samuels and LaRossa, 2009). Thus, future research may focus on how teachers and adoptive parents select and utilize children's books on transnational adoption as a means of understanding power, facilitating psychological development, and coping with racism in childhood and into adulthood.

Appendix: A List of Picturebooks Featuring Transracial Chinese Adoption (1992-2013)

1. Blackington, Debbie and Blackington, Brynne. (2004). *Mama's Wish/Daughter's Wish.* Duxbury, MA: Pebbleton Press. (illustrated by Blackington, Brynne)
2. Bratt, Kay. (2011). *Mei Li and the Wise Laoshi*. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. (illustrated by Vass, Monika)
3. Busby, Richard. (2005). *Carson's Book: A Story about Adoption from China*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse. (illustrated by Marcelo, Phil)
4. Campbell, Keri. (2008). *The Adventures of Lily*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse. (illustrated by Lemaire, Bonnie)
5. Cheng, Andrea. (2013). *The Year of the Baby*. New York, NY: HMH Books for Young Readers. (illustrated by Barton, Patrice)
6. Clark, Karen H. (2010). *Sweet Moon Baby*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf. (illustrated by Barton, Patrice)
7. Coste, Marion. (2006). *Finding Joy*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press. (illustrated by Chen, Yong)
8. Cummings, Mary. (2006). *Three Names of Me*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company. (illustrated by Wang, Lin)
9. Cuzzolino, Bonnie. (2006). *Letter of Love from China*. New Brunswick, NJ: Plum Blossom Books. (illustrated by Benette, Jax)
10. Friedman, Darlene. (2009). *Star of the Week: A Story of Love, Adoption, and Brownies with Sprinkles.* New York, NY: HarperCollins. (illustrated by Roth, Roger)
11. Hodge, Deborah. (2003). *Emma's Story.* New York, NY: Tundra Books. (illustrated by Zhang, Song Nan)
12. Kennedy, Pamela. (2006). *A Sister for Matthew*. Harlan, IA: Guideposts. (illustrated by Wummer, Amy)
13. Kitze, Carrie A. (2003). *We See the Moon.* Warren, NJ: EMK Press. (illustrated by Jinshan Painting Academy)
14. Koh, Frances M. (2000). *A China Adoption Story: Mommy, Why Do We Look Different?* Singapore: East West Pr. (illustrated by O'Brien, Anne Sibley)
15. Landry, Doris A. (2003). *Before I Met You—A Therapeutic Pre-adoption Narrative Designed for Children Adopted from China.* Bloomington, IN: Xlibris. (illustrated by Haskew, Suzanne)
16. Lewis, Rose A. (2000). *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes: A China Adoption Story.* New York, NY: Little Brown Books for Young Readers. (illustrated by Dyer, Jane)
17. Lewis, Rose A. (2007). *Every Year on Your Birthday*. New York, NY: Little Brown Books for Young Readers. (illustrated by Dyer, Jane)
18. Lewis, Rose A. (2010). *Orange Peel's Pocket*. New York, NY: Abrams Books for Young Readers. (illustrated by Zong, Grace)
19. Lin, Grace. (2007). *The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company. (illustrated by Lin, Grace)

20. MacLeod, Jean. (2003). *At Home in This World*. Warren, NJ: EMK Press. (illustrated by Su, Qin)

21. McMahon, Patricia and McCarthy, Conor C. (2005). *Just Add One Chinese Sister: An Adoption Story.* Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press. (illustrated by Jerome, Karen)

22. Molnar-Fenton, Stephen. (1992). *An Mei's Strange and Wondrous Journey.* London, UK: DK Children. (illustrated by Flesher, Vivienne)

23. Oelschlager, Vanita. (2006). *Made in China: A Story of Adoption*. Akron, OH: Vanita Books. (illustrated by Blackwood, Kristin)

24. Okimoto, Jean D and Aoki, Elaine M. (2002). *The White Swan Express*. New York, NY: Clarion Books. (illustrated by Meilo So)

25. Peacock, Carol Antoinette. (2000). *Mommy Far, Mommy Near: An Adoption Story.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co. (illustrated by Brownell, Shawn C)

26. Regier, Don. (2004). *The Long Ride: A Story of Adoption & the Family of God.* New York, NY: Kregel Kidzone. (illustrated by Pritchett, Karen)

27. Schaumberg, Rose. (2007). *Three Blessings from China Adopted*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse. (illustrated by Schaumberg, Rose)

28. Shemin, Craig and Capone, Deb. (2003). *Families Are Forever.* Montauk, NY: As Simple As That. (illustrated by McCoy, John)

29. Simcox, Lorraine B. (2008). *A Single Red Thread*. New York, NY: Bigtent Books. (illustrated by Wang, Lin)

30. Spangler, Jon. (2007). *The Sky Princess.* Parker, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc. (illustrated by Spangler, Jon)

31. Spangler, Jon. (2009). *The Sky Princess Moves to the Land of Peaches*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse. (illustrated by Lester, Roseanna)

32. Staut, Tami. (2009). *Yushi and the Tall Man*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. (illustrated by Comer, Colleen)

33. Stoeke, Janet M. (2007). *Waiting for May*. New York, NY: Dutton Juvenile. (illustrated by Stoeke, Janet M).

34. Thomas, Eliza. (2004). *The Red Blanket*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press. (illustrated by Cepeda, Joe)

35. Xinran. (2007). *Mother Bridge of Love*. Cambridge, MA: Barefoot Books. (illustrated by Masse, Josee)

36. Young, Ed. (2006). *My Mei Mei*. New York, NY: Philomel. (illustrated by Young, Ed)

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