



# The racial attitudes of Chinese adoptees in America: Comparisons with children being raised in China

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## Abstract

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Many American parents who have adopted Chinese children are concerned that their children will incorporate derogatory beliefs from the dominant culture into their developing ethnic minority identities, and consequently come to view themselves as inferior to the white majority. One way to test whether American culture is causing adoptees to incorporate derogatory beliefs into their identities is to compare them with Chinese children for whom being Chinese puts them in the ethnic majority. The current study used a photo preference task to compare the racial and ethnic attitudes of 84 adopted Chinese girls in America, ages 8-11, with the attitudes of 73 of their age and gender peers in China. The results indicate that Chinese adoptees in America are just as comfortable in their ethnic minority identities as children in China are in their ethnic majority identities. In addition, the adoptees are more comfortable with members of other ethnic minority groups. The only point of concern came from within-group analyses indicating that the frequency of Chinese preferences declined as a function of child age. A more critical test of the idea that Chinese adoptees in America will incorporate derogatory beliefs into their ethnic minority identities will come in adolescence, when peer influence and self-identity are paramount.

**Key words:** international adoption, race, identity, diversity

## Introduction

For parents, educators, researchers, and virtually any other stakeholder, outcomes are the bottom line for evaluating international adoptions (Weil, 1994). Stakeholders want to know whether the children are healthy, have made good attachments with their adoptive parents, are doing well in school, are making friends, etc. In short, they want to know how the children are doing in the *receiving country*. The comparison groups used to evaluate such outcomes may consist of national norms from the general population (Tessler & Gamache, 2003), domestic adoptions (Groza & Ryan, 2002), or children adopted from another country (Tessler, Adams, Houlihan & Groza, 2004).

It is rarer to evaluate child outcomes in comparison with children from the *sending country* who are growing up in their birth culture. But, it is nonetheless compelling to compare adoptive children with them, since in many ways they represent what would or might have developed were it not for the circumstances that led to the adoptions. The current paper draws on

a comparison with non-adopted children in China to illumine how international adoptions are associated with children's attitudes towards their own and others' race and ethnicity.

In social psychology, attitudes are believed to vary in direction as well as intensity. They can be positive or negative, strong or weak. Most attitudes are towards persons, situations, or events that are situationally outside of the self, but attitudes can also carry over into how one thinks and feels about oneself. The development of ethnic identity involves both types of attitudes since the object of the attitude is the ethnic group in which the child also has a personal membership. Measuring attitudes is very challenging because attitudes cannot be assessed directly. Instead they can only be inferred based on what people say or do. Assessing a child's attitudes is especially challenging because the attitudes may not be fully developed, and the child may be unable to articulate them (Pegg & Plybon, 2005).

Attitudes are widely viewed as socially and culturally constructed. That is, children are not born to think positively or negatively about a social group, or to have particular beliefs about group members. Although the exact mechanisms are sometimes unclear, the development of attitudes necessarily has much to do with culture and the socializing of the children to be part of the society. We know that the initial influences occur in the family, and expand to include peers and teachers as the child enters formal schooling. As with other dimensions of identity, racial and ethnic identities are products of reflective appraisal (Khanna, 2004). Depending on one's position in the social structure, the ethnic identity is a minority or a majority representation within the mind of the individual that marks his or her sense of personal identification with a particular ethnic group (Hutnik, 1991; Phinney, 1990; Roberts et al., 1999). What differentiates ethnic identity from racial identity is the fact that one's sense of ethnic belonging may be based upon not only shared physiology, but also the common values, beliefs, and practices that stem from shared cultural origins (Smith et al., 1999).

In America, educators, among many others, are very concerned that children develop secure ethnic identities. This is a reflection of the diversity of American society and a commitment to preventing prejudice and discrimination. For children adopted from China who find themselves as minority members in their adopted society, it is also a matter of feeling that they are on an equal footing with other American children.

In contrast to America, China is not a pluralistic society. Even the ethnic minorities that do exist constitute only about two percent of the total population. It is infrequent for Chinese children to encounter in their daily lives a foreigner except in large cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Nonetheless, throughout China, Chinese children are increasingly exposed to multi-racial and ethnic images through the mass media, especially television and the Internet.

For all these reasons we would expect that the adopted children growing up in America acquire more positive attitudes towards diversity than do children in China, who are not nearly as exposed to race and ethnic variations. There are, however, some important caveats. First, America is not only a diverse society, it is also a racist society, and international adoptees are not immune to learning to make judgments about human worth based in part on human differences. Because the prevailing hierarchy of human worth places white persons at the top, Chinese and other adoptees of color may acquire a preference for whiteness, with possible consequences of low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy (Clark & Clark, 1939; Phinney, Cantu & Kurtz, 1997; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

Thus, there is some basis for the concern of adoptive parents that their children will internalize negative attitudes toward their own race and wish that they, like their adoptive parents, were white (Huh and Reid, 2001). If, compared to Chinese children in China, the adoptees in America show less positive attitudes toward Chinese children like themselves, along with an idealization of whiteness, then there would be support for the idea that American culture makes it difficult for some adoptees to build healthy ethnic minority identities.

Accordingly, we sought to test two related hypotheses: first, adoptees would show a weaker Chinese preference and a stronger white preference; second, growing up in America will be associated with more positive attitudes towards persons of different races and ethnicities. We

test each of these hypotheses by comparing adopted children's attitudes with the attitudes of their gender and age peers in China.

## Method

The research design consists of two independently selected groups of girls. The first group, to be referred to here as the adopted American sample, comes from a longitudinal study of American children adopted from China. The other group, to be referred to as the non-adopted Chinese sample, consists of children of comparable ages attending elementary schools in Anhui Province, PRC. All of the children completed a projective test in which they were asked to associate socially desirable characteristics such as being smart, pretty, and happy with photos of Chinese, white, black, and Hispanic children.

### *The American sample*

A large group of over 500 adoptive parents in more than 35 states were first surveyed in 1995-96 when their children averaged two years of age. Parents volunteered to participate in the study. It was not possible to sample randomly from a defined population of families adopting from China because privacy laws precluded access to national lists of recent adoptions. The baseline sample was, nonetheless, large and probably representative of the socio-demographic characteristics of parents adopting from China, the vast majority of whom are married, well educated, persons in their 40s, and of western European ancestry (Tessler, Gamache & Liu, 1999).

The follow-up survey, on which the current paper is based, took place five years later in 2001-02. It is limited to girls, who in any case comprise the vast majority of children adopted from China. For this paper we focus only on 84 girls who could be matched by age to the children in the Chinese sample described below. We will refer to them as the American girls.

With permission from their parents, these girls were asked to associate socially desirable characteristics such as being smart, pretty, and happy with photos of Chinese, white, black, and Hispanic girls, and in this way to express their attitudes towards persons of different races and ethnicities. We will refer to this source of these data below as the mini-booklets. Mini-booklets were completed for about 90 percent of the American girls. Where refusals occurred, it was almost always a parental decision. All of the children were given gifts whether or not they participated.

### *The Chinese sample*

The children came from two elementary schools in Anhui Province. One of the elementary schools is in the capital city of Hefei (population approximately 1.5 million). The other elementary school is in the countryside in Fei Don County, located about 25 kilometers east of Hefei. Mini-booklets were completed by both boys and girls. However, data from Chinese boys are not shown here because there were no boys in the American adoption sample to whom they could be compared. (In general there were no differences in the attitudes of the boys and girls in China.) In presenting the results we will refer to these respondents as the Chinese girls.

The city school has a total of more than 1,000 students. All the children were selected from a single third-grade class. As is true generally of children in the cities, most of these children came from middle- and upper middle-class households. Most of the parents in this particular school work for the government. The researchers made contact directly with the classroom

teacher, who was responsible for distributing the mini-booklets and explaining the study to the children.

The school in the countryside was a smaller school with approximately 300 students. In each grade there was only one class. In order for there to be sufficient numbers it was necessary to include students from both second and third grades. Students in this school pay less tuition than do students in the city school because the government subsidizes a part of their primary education. The village where the children live is quite typical of life in the Chinese countryside. Almost all of the parents are farmers. In this school the Chinese researchers went to the classroom and supervised the data collection themselves.

## ***The mini-booklets***

Data describing the girls' emerging ethnic self-identification were gathered using mini-booklets especially prepared for this study. The instructions to the mini-booklet read:

Welcome to our study. We would like to tell you about this Mini-Booklet. It is made up of pictures of real people. On each page there are four different faces, and a question for you to answer. You can give your answer by drawing a circle around one of the faces. Please only choose one... Don't worry about making mistakes because there are no right or wrong answers. Only what you think is important matters.

The mini-booklets consisted of photos of white, Chinese, black, and Hispanic children which had been licensed for research use. The same photos were repeated in varying order on each of five pages. At the bottom of each page, above the photos, were the words *Circle the one who you think...* and at the bottom of each page were the following socially desirable descriptors: *the prettiest, the smartest, the happiest, the nicest, and has the most friends*. In this way the girls were instructed to associate socially desirable characteristics with photos of girls of different races and ethnicities. The order of photo presentation was varied to avoid order effects.

The photos were shown in black-and-white rather than color. Thus, phenotype rather than skin color was the main difference between them. The photos were pre-tested to ensure that each had appeal, and the questions about them were completed without difficulty by the vast majority of the children. The booklet included additional pages with photos of teenagers and adults, but the data reported in this paper focus only on the perceptions of girls of similar age. All of the children were given gifts in appreciation of their participation.

## ***Index construction and reliability***

The data were coded exactly the same for the American and Chinese samples. The between-country comparison provided the major focus of the analysis, although additional within-group analyses (urban-rural in the China sample, and differences associated with child age) were also carried out.

Preparatory to testing the main hypotheses, multi-item indices were constructed to measure the diversity of the children's choices as well as the frequency of their choices within each of the race-ethnic groupings (Chinese, white, Hispanic, and black) included in the mini-booklet. First we calculated frequencies by counting the number of times each photo was chosen across the five social desirability choices. For example, a score of 2 on "Chinese girl" would indicate that the child chose the photo of the Chinese girl twice. A score of 1 on "Black girl" would indicate that the child chose the photo of the Afro-American girl once. In addition, a diversity index was calculated to measure the range of racial and ethnic choices children made in response to five social desirability questions (e.g., "Circle the one who you think is the nicest"). Scores on the diversity index ranged from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated that only one race (Chi-

nese, white, black, or Hispanic) was chosen across the five social desirability questions, 2 and 3 indicated that the child chose two or three different races or ethnicities as exemplary, and 4 indicated that all four of the races were picked. In calculating the diversity index in this way, we assumed that higher scores reflecting a greater range of picks indicated more positive attitudes toward diversity.

Unfortunately, there are no test-retest statistics available with which to assess the reliability of the mini-booklets. However, we were able to use a post hoc procedure known as bootstrapping to test whether means and standard errors were sensitive to variations in sample selection. Bootstrapping is similar to split-half reliability estimation, except that the number of replications is much larger (Davison and Hinkley, 1997). In a bootstrap involving 500 replications, we obtained an average mean difference in diversity scores of .007, with an average standard error of .143. The fact that the mean difference between random samples was near zero, and that the standard error was also relatively small, provides evidence, albeit post hoc, of the reliability of the mini booklet as a data collection instrument.

## Results

The Chinese sample was composed of all the girls who completed a mini-booklet. Cases selected from the American sample fell within the age range of cases from the Chinese sample. Every effort was made to equalize the age structure of the two samples by restricting the cases to a common range of 8-11 years. But a small yet statistically significant age difference remained. The average age of the American children was 8.7 compared to 9.1 in the Chinese children ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 1 compares the responses of the American children adopted from China with those of their approximate age peers in China to questions posed on five pages showing children of different races and ethnicities. Although the order in which the photos were presented was randomized from page to page in the mini-booklet, they are shown in fixed order in Table 1 beginning with the photo of the Chinese girl to facilitate the presentation of results.

As already noted, each page had a separate question. In the first shown here, the children were asked to *circle the one who you think is the nicest*. On successive pages they were asked to circle the one who they thought was *the smartest, the prettiest, the happiest*, and the one who they thought had *the most friends*. The distribution of responses is shown in the top panel

**Table 1**

Comparison of 84 American and 73 Chinese children, ages 8-11, in their attitudes towards children and adults of different races and ethnicities

Circle the one who you think...	American Children Percent who circled...				Chinese Children Percent who circled...				F Ratio
	CH	WH	BL	HI	CH	WH	BL	HI	
is the nicest	31.7	23.2	31.7	13.4	20.8	54.2	15.3	9.7	17.12***
is the smartest	30.1	18.1	22.9	28.9	21.9	53.4	9.6	15.1	22.46***
is the prettiest	6.0	28.9	22.9	42.2	12.3	80.8	2.7	4.1	56.20***
is the happiest	14.3	73.8	1.2	10.7	24.7	60.3	11.0	4.1	11.99**
has the most friends	32.5	25.3	19.3	22.9	28.8	39.7	13.7	17.8	3.91

Notes: CH = Chinese, WH = white, BL = black, HI = Hispanic; percents may not total 100.0 due to rounding error. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

of Table 1 in columns 2-5 for the American children adopted from China and in columns 6-9 for their Chinese peers.

Most of the questions yielded significant differences in response. These differences are well illustrated by the first judgment, in which the children were asked to judge which girl is *the nicest*. The major difference here is in the proportion choosing the white girl, which was much more frequent among the Chinese children (54 percent) compared with the American children (22 percent). Proportionately more of the American adopted children picked the Chinese girl as the nicest, although the difference in percentages is not as large as for the white girl.

The Chinese respondents were consistent in favoring the white girl. In the most extreme case, almost 81 percent of them chose the white girl as the prettiest compared to less than 29 percent of the American children. One area of agreement was which girl was *the happiest*. Approximately 74 percent of the American children and 60 percent of the Chinese children chose the white girl. In contrast, only about 1 percent of the Chinese-American and 11 percent of the Chinese children chose the black girl as the happiest. It is interesting that proportionately more of the American children chose the black girl as *the nicest, smartest, and prettiest*, even while so few of them chose her as *the happiest*.

Table 2 shows the total number of picks within each race and ethnicity made by the American and Chinese girls in response to the photos of the children. The bottom row shows a diversity score calculated to represent the range of choices; higher scores represent more diversity in whom the girls chose as the smartest, prettiest, and so forth.

With only one exception (number of Chinese girl picks) all of the differences are statistically significant. As expected, the Chinese children were less likely to pick photos of blacks and Hispanics, but surprisingly they were more likely than their American counterparts to pick the white children. The diversity scores are higher for the American children, indicating that the American girls were more likely than the Chinese girls to associate positive traits with a variety of races and ethnicities.

We were also interested in testing for within-country differences in racial attitudes. There was no significant difference in the Chinese sample comparing those from the countryside with those from the city. Nor were the attitudes of the Chinese girls related to their age. However, child age was a significant variable in the American sample. These results are shown in Table 3. The numbers shown are correlation coefficients between child age and the frequency and diversity of particular choices.

Examination of Table 3, column 2 shows that, among the American children, age was negatively associated with picking the photo of the Chinese girl, and positively associated with picking the photo of the white girl. In other words, older respondents were less likely to associate socially desirable traits with the photo of a Chinese girl. There was also a tendency for the older girls to choose the white girl as most desirable.

**Table 2**

Comparison of 84 American and 73 Chinese children, ages 8-11, in the frequency and diversity of their picks

Photo in Mini-Booklet of...	American Children Number of times picked...	Chinese Children Number of times picked...	F Ratio
Chinese girl (0-5)	1.13	1.08	0.11
White girl (0-5)	1.68	2.88	54.93***
Black girl (0-5)	.96	.52	13.68**
Hispanic girl (0-5)	1.17	.51	26.38***
Diversity (1-4)	3.18	2.48	33.42***

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

**Table 3**

Correlations of child age (8-11) with frequency and diversity of race and ethnic picks by American and Chinese children

Photo in Mini-Booklet	American Children (N = 84)		Chinese Children (N = 73)	
	correlation	t ratio	correlation	t ratio
Chinese girl (0-5)	-.35	-3.42***	.07	0.55
White girl (0-5)	.21	1.93 <sup>+</sup>	.07	0.63
Black girl (0-5)	-.04	-0.33	-.07	-0.57
Hispanic girl (0-5)	.08	0.71	-.13	-1.12
Diversity (1-4)	.02	0.15	.01	0.12

<sup>+</sup>p < .10, \* p < .05; \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

In contrast, none of the associations between child age and racial preferences were statistically significant in the Chinese sample (see column 3). Diversity was not a significant correlate of child age in either the American or the Chinese samples.

## Discussion

Many parents who adopt internationally want to provide their children with a bi-cultural ethnic identity. This may be especially important when there is a dominant culture that is sometimes intolerant of differences and when adopted children are easily identified on the basis of racial characteristics. In encouraging a positive bi-cultural identity, parents hope that pride in the birth culture, along with a strong sense of belonging in the dominant culture, will help their children to cope with prejudice and discrimination if and when it occurs, and serve as a buffer against feelings of social marginality and poor self-image (Friedlander, Larney, Skau, Hotaling, Cutting & Schwam, 2000).

The current study sought to explore whether, and to what extent, children adopted from China are in fact feeling positively about being members of an ethnic minority group in America. As an exploratory study it is really a snapshot of identity-making that is in process and not yet complete. Nonetheless, it seeks to provide some clues. By including children being raised in China, it also seeks to put ethnic identity formation into comparative perspective.

Contrary to the idea that American culture undermines the development of healthy ethnic minority identification, the adoptees were no more (or less) likely than their peers in China to choose photos of a Chinese girl as best personifying socially desirable traits. Furthermore, it was the Chinese children in China rather than the adoptees in America who more often chose the white girl as exemplary. As a reflection of their more positive attitudes toward diversity in general, the American girls were more likely than their counterparts in China to perceive positive traits in blacks and Hispanics.

The white preference shown by the children being raised in China was unexpected. Informants in China suggest that it reflects a preference for light skin. Interestingly, concern over skin tone in China exists mainly among women who view light skin as more beautiful. This bias is summarized in the Chinese expression *yi bei shi*, which means *if white more beautiful*. The white preference shown by the children in China did not extend to their attitudes to-

wards adults, where they were much more likely to choose photos of Chinese adults (data not shown).

One limitation of using actual photographs is that individual characteristics such as hairstyle, age, facial expressions, and other more subtle physical cues could not be fully controlled. Comments from parents suggested that these extraneous sources of variance did play a role in influencing subjects' choices of whom they found most desirable. Whatever the limitations of the mini-booklet, it had the virtue of being of real people, and not artist representations, which can be highly stereotypic.

We also want to acknowledge that the cultural venues within which the two groups of children under study were being raised was not the only difference between them. Adoption was also confounded in the comparison. Although adoption cannot be ruled out as accounting for some of the differences, it seems far less compelling than culture as a basis for explaining the patterns that were observed. We also acknowledge that children adopted from China by Americans represent a very special population. Since we believe their responses were culturally determined, we also think the results are likely to generalize to non-adopted Asian-Americans who represent a much larger population (Tuan, 1998; Xie & Goyette, 1997). This is a matter for future research.

Taken as a whole, the research findings should allay adoptive parents' concerns that American culture will make it more difficult for their adopted Chinese children to build healthy ethnic identities. They seem to be just as comfortable in their ethnic minority identities as children in China are with their ethnic majority identities. In addition, the adoptees are more comfortable with members of other ethnic minority groups. The only point of concern came from within-group analyses indicating that the frequency of Chinese preferences declined as a function of child age.

A more critical test of the idea that Chinese adoptees in America will incorporate derogatory beliefs into their ethnic identities will come in adolescence, when children become more self-conscious in general and when questions about ethnic identity arise as part of a larger discourse about personal and social identity. At this time, the challenge for parents, teachers, and friends will be to help these internationally adopted children to continue to embrace themselves as they are already embracing others. Meanwhile, the current results obtained in middle childhood are noteworthy both for what was found and for what was not found.

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