

## FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Taught as part of the Genre and Audience cluster, the WR 150 seminar “Global Documentary” asks students to design independent research projects entirely motivated and shaped by their interests. For Gayle Tan, whose essay won one of this year’s prizes, the question she pursues—What challenges do internationally adopted children face in forming their identities?—emerged from her experiences as an international student from Singapore. As she reflected early in the research process, “[I]t was living away from home that helped me to see how big a part my nationality and race play in determining who I am.”

Gayle sought answers to her questions by locating two documentaries that represent in different ways the experiences of American children adopted from China. Drawing on historical and anthropological scholarship, Gayle demonstrates how concerns about identity imbue all international adoption discourse, even if such concerns aren’t directly acknowledged. In the process, she challenges the optimistic assurances of the documentary *Wo Ai Ni Mommy* and anthropologist Signe Howell. And she reveals, through the adoptees’ words and physical gestures, an underlying anxiety and confusion. Gayle’s analysis of evidence from the films is a particular strength of this stellar essay.

What can Gayle’s essay teach us about designing and executing a research project? She answers this question with the same insight that she brings to the finished project: “to conduct my research with an open mind, and to explore different material without a preconceived idea of what I wanted to find.”

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WR 150: Global Documentary

## FROM THE WRITER

My first year studying overseas in America not only opened my eyes to the diversity of culture and people from all around the world, but also gave me reason to reflect on who I am. Being surrounded by people from different nations and cultures for the first time made me realize that being Singaporean and being Chinese are core parts of my personal identity. Though I have many friends here in Boston, I cannot help feeling like a “stranger;” each time I go back to Singapore, I feel a strong sense of truly belonging. These struggles as an international student made me wonder how much more difficult it must be for internationally adopted children who, being born in one country but raised in another, must find themselves in a bind when defining who they are and where they belong. Having been given the opportunity to choose our research topics in my class “Global Documentary,” I thus wrote the following essay which is an exploration into what some of these identity struggles look like for internationally adopted children.

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GAYLE TAN

*Prize Essay Award*

**ADOPTED INTO AN IDENTITY STRUGGLE:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THEMES PRESENTED IN  
*WO AI NI MOMMY* AND *SOMEWHERE BETWEEN***

“Do you feel like you’re more Chinese, or more American?” director Stephanie Wang-Breal asks young Faith in the closing scene of *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, a documentary that chronicles Faith’s journey of adoption. Born in China but adopted by an American family when she was eight, Faith (Sui Yong) initially struggled with living in her new home and was reluctant to learn the English language. Just fourteen months later, though, she replies to Wang-Breal’s question with a confident “American,” and a little nod. Witnessing this scene, however, made me wonder whether Faith really understood and meant what she said—as a young nine-year old, she likely had not explored the meanings of identity and belonging yet. While watching this film helped me to better understand the experiences of international adoption in a family, it also raised many questions for me: Will Faith struggle with her sense of identity and belonging as she grows older? Will she ever feel truly American, or truly Chinese? Where is home to her?

International adoption is a burgeoning phenomenon today: Since 1991, over 70,000 Chinese children have been adopted in America; worldwide, more than 250,000 children live with adoptive parents outside the nation of their birth. In recent years, international adoption has been brought to the spotlight through the media, as well-known celebrities Angelina Jolie (together with her husband Brad Pitt) and Madonna publicized their adoptions of children from less developed nations, and various filmmakers have undertaken documenting the lives of adoptees. Yet much of the public remains unaware of the multiple challenges that international adoptees face. In fact, one may argue that this recent publicity surrounding international adoption has simplified it to a mere act of goodwill in the minds of the public—common is the notion that being adopted is a “happy ending” in itself. *Wo Ai Ni Mommy* is one example of a film that offers a glimpse into the struggles and the joys that internationally adopted children and their adoptive families face, but fails to adequately address the identity struggles that many adopted children experience. This paper is thus an attempt to explore in greater depth some of the complex issues, ranging from insecurities about their appearances to uncertainties about their pasts, that internationally adopted children grapple with as they search for their self-identities.

Adoption takes children away from their birth parents and places them in new families and communities that they are expected to accept as home. International adoption goes one step further by placing children in a whole new country, with parents who often look, speak and behave differently from the child’s biological family. Whether or not children are aware of their adoption when it happens, they sooner or later grow conscious of it; in fact, many of them regard being adopted as a core part of their identity. Yet while adoption is often a “site for . . . identity thinking,” it is at the same time a “‘crossroads of ambiguity’ at which identity seems to break apart” (Yngvesson 37). For international adoptees, discovering their sense of selves can be particularly challenging as they deal with uncertainties about their past and questions that arise from their

relationships with parents and peers. Reconciling physical differences with their families, dealing with feelings of abandonment and insecurity, and living with questions about their origins are just some of the complex issues that complicate international adoptees' personal identities. Yet understanding in a deeper way the issues that adoptees grapple with is the first step in empowering parents, teachers and society at large to better support these adopted children as they journey to discover, define, and develop themselves.

The origins of international adoption are often traced to the mid-1950s, when foreign nationals began adopting Korean "war orphans" after the Korean War (Yngvesson 21). Various conditions in both sending and receiving nations continued this trend of international adoption in the later half of the twentieth century. While civil wars in less developed countries and China's one-child policy resulted in a lack of adequate care for large numbers of children, increasing rates of childless couples in the West coupled with decreasing numbers of domestic children available for adoption there led many parents in Western countries to look abroad for adoption (Yngvesson 29). Today, Sweden has the highest rate of international adoptions (Yngvesson 48). The demand for international adoption in Sweden began in the 1960s because a declining birth rate and a decrease in domestic children available for adoption coincided with a time when involuntary childlessness between couples was at a high of 10–15%. Sweden's Adoption Centre, one of the most influential organizations for international adoption, was also instrumental in Sweden's growth in the number of international adoptions in the 1970s and 1980s. Adoption Centre's organizational structure and operational transparency have facilitated the continued rise of international adoptions in Sweden until today (Yngvesson 48).

Despite the rise in international adoptions throughout the past century, this phenomenon has not been without controversy. Back in 1986, "concern ... at the large number of children who [were] abandoned or [became] orphans," together with a "conscious[ness] of the need [for] universal principles" (United Nations) regarding foster care and adoption precipitated the UN General Assembly's Declaration on Social and Legal Principles Relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children. There, foster care and "appropriate institutional placement" in the child's birth country was determined preferable to international adoption (Yngvesson 20). Though this position changed seven years later at the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, a divisive issue remained: that of whether the Convention should encourage international adoption or restrict it. On one hand, a child's "need for a family" (Yngvesson 20) led some to believe that international adoption should be endorsed; on the other hand, the understanding that a child's identity is inextricably tied to his/her past convinced others that international adoption should not be excessively promoted. Ultimately, the Convention concluded that in light of the child's need for "a family environment," international adoption would be privileged over domestic foster care and institutional care, but only after domestic adoption had been considered (Yngvesson 20). I argue that this contention over what constitutes "the best interests of the child" (United Nations) reflects an acknowledgement of the challenges that the international adoption process poses to both adoptees and their families. Recent Swedish studies indicate that international adoptees are "three to four times as likely to commit or attempt suicide, ... five times as likely to be drug-addicted, and two to three times as likely to abuse alcohol or commit crimes" (Yngvesson 107). While this may be in part because parents were more likely to give up children deemed problematic for adoption, I believe that the extent of these grim statistics also point to the fact that international adoptees face many difficulties after adoption.

Such difficulties are portrayed in *Wo Ai Ni Mommy* and *Somewhere Between*, both films about Chinese girls who were adopted into American families. *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, a 2010 film by New York based filmmaker Stephanie Wang-Breal, follows the journey of just one child, Faith, as she grows up in an American home. Separately, *Somewhere Between* depicts the stories of four separate Chinese

teenagers who were also adopted by American families. This film was produced in 2011 by Linda Goldstein Knowlton, an American who herself adopted a baby girl from China; she in fact introduces the film as a gift to her daughter. *Wo Ai Ni Mommy* does contain scenes that hint at the difficulties of belonging in a new country, yet it seems to portray a linear process of Faith becoming more American without much attention paid to how her past affects her identity. In contrast, *Somewhere Between* conjures for the audience a complex fabric of what it means to be adopted from another country, as it explores the girls' struggles and confusions as they reflect about their experiences.

Pertinent to both films is the fact that the adopted girls, being Chinese, look very different from their American parents. Fifty years ago, this would have been a big cause for concern because at that time, many believed that the more similar the child was to his or her adoptive parents, the more likely the adoption would "succeed;" thus, transracial adoptions were rarely supported (Howard and Altstein 1). Subscribing to the idea that parents would be better able to "identify with a child who resembles them," adoption agencies in the past have tried to match children with adoptive parents who were as similar to them as possible—physically, emotionally and culturally (Howard and Altstein 2). When transracial adoption began increasing in the 1960s-1970s, it was vehemently opposed by some—the National Association of Black Social Workers at its 1972 conference went so far as to claim that "Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people" (Howard and Altstein 14). While this claim may sound extreme, it was not an uncommon belief that being adopted by parents of a different race would be harmful for the child. One of the strongest arguments against transracial adoption was that "white families, no matter how liberal or well intended, cannot teach a Black child how to survive in an essentially racist society" (Howard and Altstein 16). International adoptees, though defined by being of a different nationality, are also often of a different race from their parents. The fact that parents of international adoptees find it difficult to relate to the racial experiences of their children is made clear in *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, where in a discussion with Dr. Amanda Baden, a transracial adoption psychologist, Faith's father makes the remarkable suggestion that "maybe (Faith) sees herself as white when she looks in the mirror." Baden clearly disagrees, but offers the claim that "many white parents don't have a real history about talking about race" as an explanation for his lack of empathy. Yet this acknowledgement does not discount the reality that because many parents of transracial and international adoptees are unable to fully empathize with the experiences of their children, children feel alone as they navigate issues of racial identity.

Though in the post-Civil Rights era race is no longer explicitly regarded as an indicator of one's worth, it remains a universal experience that how we look affects how we view ourselves. For international adoptees, physical differences, often obvious to the eye, play out in adoptees' lives as well. In the film *Somewhere Between*, Haley Butler's mother admits that before Haley turned four, she had already begun to realize that she looked different from her family and expressed her wishes to have "blond hair and blue eyes" like her older sister. At fourteen, Haley is able to joke with Knowlton that she is "a banana, yellow on the outside but white on the inside." Yet her looks do continue to affect her. A later scene at her school depicts her friends teasing her and asking if she was a Chinese orphan, following which she comments (albeit lightheartedly) that "at times like this, I wish I was white." For Sara Nordin, a Swedish adoptee born in Ethiopia, the incongruence between her external appearance and her official citizenship complicates her sense of self. We perceive this tension clearly when she says, "I have tried to absorb the 'black' but then I have difficulty holding onto the Swedish. I have tried to absorb the 'Swedish' but then I haven't understood what I see in the mirror" (Yngvesson 35). Nordin also shares that growing up, she felt torn between identifying with her Swedish friends and with her immigrant friends, and that made her unable to "decide [herself] where [she] belonged" (Yngvesson 130). The experiences of Butler and Nordin are

powerful indicators that one's identity is inextricably tied to one's appearance. Though Faith herself does not comment on her racial identity in *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, her parents' concern in helping her understand her race (made clear in their discussion with Dr. Baden) is reflective that it is a prevailing issue for her. International adoptees, whose closest family and friends often look vastly different from them, often question this aspect of their identity.

Apart from the present experience of looking different from their parents and peers, international adoptees' uncertainties about their past also greatly impact their views of themselves. The idea that they were once given up by their birth parents is one that haunts many adoptees throughout their lives. Responding to a question on coping with the word "abandon" during a conference on adoption, Jenna Cook in the film *Somewhere Between* tears up as she admits that "even though 99% of me believes that I was really placed, I think somehow I can't get rid of that one percent... I can't get rid of that small thought that maybe I was abandoned." She shares that it is this persisting idea of abandonment that has influenced her perfectionist personality; that the idea of not being "good enough" drives her to "search for way[s] to compensate" by striving for excellence in what she does. At the same time, the knowledge that they could be leading drastically different lives makes some adoptees feel disconnected from their adoptive families. In the film *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, Faith's question to her parents "Why would you want a Chinese girl for a daughter?" similarly hints at an understanding that while she was chosen by her parents, she could just as well have not been chosen. In this question we catch a glimpse of Faith's uncertainty of whether she truly belongs in her new home. Because in adoption parents have a choice over the children they adopt, and this choice is seemingly arbitrary, children may at times question whether they really belong in their new home. Feeling rejected by their biological families and yet still an outsider in their adoptive families, adopted children find it difficult to identify a place and community where they truly belong.

Ambiguity about their origins is another thought, one step further into their pasts, that complicates many adoptees' sense of belonging and identity. It is a widely accepted belief that "descent creates solidarity;" we see this in the fact that words like "roots," "blood," and "home" are closely associated with one's identity (Legrand 247). In her research about genealogy, anthropologist Caroline Legrand found that adoptees in particular spoke of genealogical research as a "search for origins," and regarded the process as a "seeking [of] their identity" (Legrand 246). Haley Butler in the film *Somewhere Between* is one example of an adoptee determined to find her origins. Her claim to her friend Ann that "I'll be looking for my birth parents until I'm grey and wrinkly" translated to action in the film as Haley went back to her province, did DNA testing, and eventually reunited with her birth family. Recounting the experience, Haley shares that this new knowledge of her family is comforting, and that receiving a Chinese name from her birth parents "meant a lot" to her. Undoubtedly, not all searches for birth families and communities will end in success – for many adoptees who have little information about their birth places, the chances of ever finding their birth parents are very slim; among those who reunite with their birth families, some adoptees regret doing so for these new relationships burden them. Yet I believe that the act of searching in itself, and even the prior longing to know where they come from, stem from a sense of incompleteness about their sense of identity. This uncertainty about their past is a major influence that confounds many international adoptees' perceptions of themselves.

Not everyone agrees that international adoptees regularly grapple with questions about their identity. Anthropologist Signe Howell, in his work with Norwegian adoptees, found that most of them were indifferent to finding out about their origins, and were content with the "place in their adoptive parents' family trees" (Howell 262). At least in Norway, he asserts that adoptees who regard their genealogy as an important part of their identity are but "a vocal minority," and he quotes an adoptee who says that "Personally, I am not interested in biological roots" to reflect this point (Howell 258, 260). In a strong statement, Howell suggests that adoptees who concede to the

notions that “blood is thicker than water” and that kin must be “of the same flesh and blood” “render themselves deeply unhappy” (Howell 258, 267). He proposes instead that international adoptees are “de-kinned and re-kinned when they were abandoned and adopted”—by this he means that the abandoned child, “stripped of biological kinned relatedness,” is “socially naked” and is later “socially and emotionally kinned by their new parents and family in their new country” (Howell 264). In Howell’s view, international adoptees’ struggles to find their identity are perpetuated by the myth that blood relations determine one’s identity, and can be overcome by defining oneself by one’s sociality, instead of biology.

While Howell’s assertion that the link between blood ties and personal identity is a mere construct may contain some truth, it does not deny the tangible impact that holding on to this idea entails. Howell concedes that “Americans seem to be more preoccupied with their roots than Norwegians,” possibly because as a nation of immigrants, “Americans are generally more aware of their racial-ethnic identity” (Howell 259). Yet this distinction between the experiences of international adoptees in different receiving countries indicates that while his theory of “de-kinning” and “re-kinning” may sound plausible, in practice it does not easily extend to all international adoptees. The belief that “blood is thicker than water” is one that is deeply ingrained into society, and it undoubtedly affects many international adoptees’ opinions about where they belong and who they are. In particular, as Faith grows up in America, where race and background are seen as a big part of one’s identity, she will likely regard her past as an important part of who she is. Though I agree with Howell that biology alone does not define one’s identity, I believe that totally neglecting it—as he proposes adoptees should—is something that not many can do. Notwithstanding the fact that each adoptees’ experience differs, and that some may easily find belonging in their adoptive homes and families, I believe that there are nonetheless a large proportion of international adoptees who, at some level, struggle with defining themselves, Faith included. Though her words when she was nine may have indicated otherwise, I believe that as she grows to understand the complexities of identity and belonging, she will face challenges in defining her personal identity.

From the outset, lawmakers have recognized that “adoption does not make the adopted child of the blood of its adopter, nor of the blood of his ancestors” (Yngvesson 22). Although international adoption is sometimes presented and perceived as a simple process of the adopted child integrating into his or her new family, I believe that many international adoptees face complex struggles in figuring out their self-identity. The search for one’s identity is a personal journey but is also a universal experience; at some point of time all of us grapple with the question “Who am I?” For international adoptees, answering this question can take a lifetime to answer and can cause much grief and distress. Granted that each adoptees’ experience is unique and that one cannot make a blanket generalization of the challenges that they face, this essay presents a glimpse of certain struggles common to many adoptees. With a greater understanding of some of these challenges, it is time for researchers and policymakers to explore how they may better equip parents and teachers to support international adoptees as they journey to define and develop themselves.

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