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## Understanding the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees in college

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UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN  
TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES IN COLLEGE

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

Frances Elizabeth McDermott

University of Northern Iowa

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EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES

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Date

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Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

# EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES

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## EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES

### **Abstract**

Asian American transracial adoptees are an underserved and underrepresented population in America, specifically on college campuses. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences lived by individuals in this group, focusing on their time in college. Through qualitative interviews, this research captured the feelings, opinions, and experiences of select individuals within this group. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with six separate participants via video chat. All participants attend(ed) the University of Northern Iowa, were 18 years of age or older, and were adopted from an Asian country into a White, American family. Results showed that each participant is at their own unique stage of identity development based upon their personal experiences and background, and no two are the exact same. However, many of them faced a similar struggle of trying to balance and understand their Asian identity while connecting more to White culture due to their upbringing. Additionally, college resources and programming for minorities was a common positive influence on the college experience across several interviews. The stories of each participant serve as a strong base from which to measure the need and benefit of additional support and resources for this population while in college.

# EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES

## Terms

In order to ensure that all readers have the same understanding of topics covered in this thesis, I have laid out definitions for terms that are commonly used.

- **Transracial adoptee:** Refers to a child of one race being adopted by a parent(s) of another race (i.e., a Chinese child adopted by White parents) (Nelson, 2016).
- **Transnational adoptee:** Refers to a child with citizenship in one country being adopted by a parent(s) with citizenship in another. These types of adoptions do not necessarily have to be transracial (i.e., a child born in China adopted by an Asian American family) (Nelson, 2016).
- **Asian American transracial adoptee:** In this paper, I use Asian American transracial adoptee to refer to an individual whose origins are from an Asian country but who has been adopted into an American, non-Asian family (this study primarily focuses on those specifically adopted into a White family). I refer to the participants in this study as Asian American transracial adoptees solely to clarify who I am speaking about, although they may not identify themselves with this exact title.

## Introduction

In the year 2000, when I was 13 months old, I was adopted from Jiangxi, China by a single, White American woman who had no other kids of her own but always dreamed of being a mother. After months and months of paperwork, interviews, and prayers, she traveled 6,900 miles across the world to be united with her new daughter. She brought me back with her to the United States of America, where I was welcomed with open arms into my new family and began a new life, completely different than the one I was born into.

As is the case with many adoptees from Asian countries, I know very little about my life prior to my adoption. The only information I have comes from my mother, who fortunately has always been transparent and open with me about everything she knows. According to her, I was found outside of a fire department in Jiangxi, China, wrapped in a blanket with my birth name, Yi Wen Xin, and birthdate, February 5, 1999, pinned to the outside. They brought me to a nearby orphanage where I stayed for a short while until I was brought into a foster home and then eventually adopted. I know nothing about my birth parents.

Growing up, I never considered myself to be any different than my White family or the other children around me. I was raised in small-town Iowa, in a town of about 4,000 people where there are about five common last names and everyone knows everything about everyone. Because of this, it seemed as though my whole community already knew everything about my adoption story before I was even old enough to comprehend it myself.

Even though I always understood that I was adopted and that I looked different, I still felt like I was just like everyone else in my community. And I was treated that way, too. Although my mother did make a good effort during my early years to expose me to what little Asian culture there was around our region, I still gravitated towards all of the same interests and

activities that the rest of my White community did. How couldn't I? My family was White, my friends were White, and so was everyone else in my town...for all intents and purposes, I *felt* White. In fact, I distinctly remember a time in third grade, when we were taking the Iowa standardized tests, I actually filled in the "White" box for my race. Even though I knew I was *technically* Asian, that seemed like a more accurate answer to me at the time.

It was not until I left my small-town bubble for college that the implications of my race ever truly crossed my mind. No longer was I surrounded by family, friends and neighbors who all knew me and my adoption story and treated me just like all the other kids my age. I was thrown into an environment in which I became increasingly aware that people were probably making assumptions about me because of my appearance. I felt like I had to explain my story to people and prove to them that I was just like them - *them* being the 85% of students at my university who were White.

The process of understanding and grappling with this part of my identity is something I have spent the majority of my college years internalizing and, if I'm being honest, suppressing. I found myself consistently downplaying the topic of my race and adoption because, for most of my life, that is how I treated it at home. Even though throughout my life everyone acknowledged that I was adopted from China, people would say things like "You're not really Asian," or "Yeah, but you don't count," whenever something related to my race would come up. As a result, I subconsciously discarded my Asian identity completely and rarely addressed my adoption as a part of my life.

It wasn't until my senior year of college, when I began looking into thesis topics, that I really started to grow interest in the idea of exploring my adoptee identity. At first, I was surprised to find that there was a small area of academia that actually explored this topic at all.



As I read through some of the literature, I was shocked to discover that pretty much all of the theories and identity models strikingly aligned with the feelings and emotions that I have experienced my whole life as a transracial Asian American adoptee.

That research gave me the courage I needed to pursue this topic. While there was some research out there, what I realized is that there is still a significant lack of literature that gives voice to the actual Asian American adoptees themselves. Specifically, there is a severe lack of research on this population after adolescence and into their young adult years. As a member of this population, I realized that I have an amazing opportunity to tell my story and the stories of other Asian American transracial adoptees.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand and call to light the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees as they navigate the college environment. College is a time of crucial self-identity development, and the complex identities that Asian American transracial adoptees have to manage can be even more confusing during this time. By telling these stories, it is my hope that I can inform and educate others, especially college administrators and faculty, on the experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees while at college and potentially discover how their needs could be better addressed.

## **Literature Review**

### **A History of Transracial Adoption in the United States**

The history of adoption in the United States is extensive. Although adoption has been in existence for as long as humans have, “modern” adoption history refers to adoptions after 1851, when the first adoption law was passed in Massachusetts (American Adoptions, n.d.). Currently, national data indicates that there are 1.7 million adoptive households across the country and that 2% of all U.S. children live with at least one adoptive parent (Park, 2012).

While there are many ways in which families can experience adoption, transracial adoption is one of the fastest growing and most common forms. *Transracial adoption* can be defined as a child of one race being adopted by parent(s) of another race (i.e., a Chinese child adopted by White parents) (Park, 2016). These types of adoptions can take place internationally or domestically. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009), 40% of all adoptions in the U.S. are transracial, which equates to approximately 680,000 transracial adoptees. This is a significant number of children who are adopted into families of a different race.

Transracial adoption is distinctly different from transnational adoption. *Transnational adoption* can be defined as “the adoption of [a child] with citizenship in one country by parents with citizenship in another” (Park, 2016, p. xiii). These types of adoptions do not necessarily have to be transracial (i.e., a Chinese-born child adopted by an Asian American family). However, approximately 85% of transracial adoptions are also transnational (Lee, 2003). For the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing primarily on transracial Asian American adoptions, although I will note that the participants in the study are all also transnational adoptees as well.

Transracial adoption has not always been as widely accepted and encouraged as it is today. In fact, the earliest examples of domestic, transracial adoptions in the United States were met with great resistance. The Indian Adoption Project, which took place between 1958 and 1967, was designed as an attempt to remove Indian children from their families on reservations and assimilate them into mainstream society by placing them with White families (Fanshel, 1972). Around the same time, child advocacy groups began adoption programs to find families for orphaned African American children. Both of these programs received major backlash from those racial communities, who argued that transracial adoption was, “in essence, a form of race

and cultural genocide” and called for an end to transracial adoption altogether (Lee, 2003, p. 2). In response, social service agencies such as the Child Welfare League of America revised their standards for adoption and began to use a “matching” technique, where they placed adoptable children with families of the same race or ethnicity (Dickinson, 2019). This was seen as more acceptable, although it became increasingly difficult to sustain.

While there was great controversy surrounding domestic transracial adoptions during the 1950s and 60s, transnational-transracial adoptions, specifically from Asian countries, were becoming more popular. This unique acceptance for Asian adoptions can be attributed largely to the political and social climate of the time (Park, 2012). Media coverage of the Korean War in 1953 told the horrific stories of thousands of Korean children who were left starving and abandoned, prompting an immense influx in the number of adoptions from South Korea. Between 1958 and 2001, over 100,000 Korean children were adopted by U.S. families (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002). Additionally, increased access to birth control and decreased fertility rates in the U.S. led to a decline in the availability of White, domestic adoptees during a time when the baby boomer generation had reached parenting age. Coupled with the backlash from Native American and African American communities following the domestic adoption programs of the 1960s, “domestic transracial adoptions were seen as racist” (Dickinson, 2019, p. 5). All of this contributed to the view that adopting overseas was more socially acceptable.

The preference to adopt from Asian countries intensified when China instituted the One Child policy in 1979. This policy limited Chinese families to having only one single child, which significantly inflated the number of child orphans. As the United States’ foreign relations with China began to improve around this same time, a rapid development of the international market

occurred, which included the adoption industry. Thus, adoptions from China and other Asian countries soared (St. Clair, 2017). This was a drastic progression of the perceptions of transracial and transnational adoptions during the last half of the 20th century.

### **Asians in America**

Before delving further into the unique identities of Asian American transracial adoptees, it is important to understand the perceptions of Asians in the United States of America. Asians as a minority group are perceived quite distinctly from other minorities, particularly due to the model minority myth. According to St. Clair (2017), “the model minority myth, a term that gained ground in the 1970s and 80s, depicts Asian Americans as hard workers who have stayed out of trouble and achieved the American Dream” (p. 42). In essence, the model minority myth paints the picture that Asians are an ideal race for other minority groups to look up to because they typically are well-educated, have higher-status jobs and cause little trouble with law enforcement. While this stereotype may seem like a compliment on the surface, in reality, the implications are much more negative. The model minority myth actually serves as a mechanism to “reinforce and propel racism in America” by pitting different minorities against each other and ignoring the vast diversity and uniqueness of Asian American subgroups (Fry, n.d., para. 10; St. Clair, 2017). Additionally, it allows people to turn a blind eye to the discrimination, racism, and real violence that Asians in America still face.

### **Asian American Transracial Adoptees: The Identity Crisis**

Asian American transracial adoptees face a unique identity crisis. As mentioned earlier, the large majority of these individuals are adopted by White parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). According to Lee (2003), parents who have adopted transracially often tend to reject or downplay their child’s racial or ethnic differences and assimilate them to

their White culture, whether this be consciously or subconsciously. Whether or not this is a conscious action by the parents, Asian American transracial adoptees then receive an honorary White status within their families and communities, where, because the child's family is all White, and the child is assimilated into the White family, the child is also seen as White (Baden et al., 2016). This leads to a colorblind approach to parenting in which parents claim not to "see" skin color and regard any issues of race as irrelevant or insignificant (Park, 2012). They may even play into the model minority myth or some of the other typical Asian stereotypes, writing them off as a joke, or saying things like, "But not you, because you are *basically* White."

While it is not inherently bad to raise the adopted child without any connections to their race or ethnicity, the effect of this parenting style is that it can unconsciously force the child to hide their encounters with racism and refrain from any explorations of their Asian identity (Fry, n.d.). They may actively suppress or ignore anything that signifies their Asian birth culture, such as a cultural holiday or a crude racial comment, because they want to continue to see themselves as just the White part of their identity. For Asian American adoptees who are completely immersed in their family's White culture, this may be the easiest route to take, since they have no opportunities to build a sense of their Asian identity through the adoptive family anyway. It also might be their preferred option because they want to maintain their honorary White status and not call out anything that might set them apart. Or, it is possible that they simply have no interest in exploring their Asian identity at all (Baden et al., 2012).

According to Kim's Racial Identity Development Model (2012), these experiences of denial and/or rejection of the Asian American identity can contribute toward a negative self-concept and low self-esteem for transracial adoptees. A lack of awareness and understanding about their ethnic identity may breed self-hatred and lead to internalization of the negative

stereotypes or messages they hear about their group (Baden & Wiley, 2007). According to Fry (n.d.), this identity conflict becomes more apparent once the adoptee leaves home, which often occurs at the time when young adults move on to college.

### **Asian American Transracial Adoptees at College**

While it is no secret that all college students go through significant developmental changes during college, this process can be uniquely elevated for transracial adoptees (Fry, n.d.). For those who come from very White communities in which they may have been one of few minority individuals, college is usually the first time they are exposed to people of their own race. Additionally, while many Asian American transracial adoptees may have held onto their honorary White status throughout their youth and into high school, this honor potentially “ceases to exist” when they get to college as they become one in a crowd of racially and culturally diverse strangers (Fry, n.d., para. 17; Baden et al., 2016). When the adoptee is forced to take complete responsibility for managing their appearance, it could also be the first time that they “fully comprehend the lack of knowledge they have about their past” (Fry, n.d., para. 18; Kryder, 1999). They may be exposed to the harsh assumptions and stereotypes attributed to Asians that they never before have experienced, which they might internalize and believe as true of themselves. All of these factors can trigger insecurities about their identity and self-worth (Fry, n.d.). In a college environment where the student may already be struggling to stand on their own two feet, crises about their identity only increase feelings of isolation.

### **Transracial Adoption Paradox**

This brings us to the phenomenon of the transracial adoption paradox. This paradox is essentially the idea that adoptees are “caught between two worlds - the White one in which they were raised, and the one they have never known” (Fry, n.d., para. 20; Lee, Yun, Yoo, & Nelson,

2010). They are faced with the expectations from society to act like how Asian Americans “should” act; while, at the same time, they are rejected by those within Asian ethnic groups for not being Asian enough.

Specifically for Asian American transracial adoptees who were adopted into White families, “Whiteness is not only conferred on them through their relationships with their White adoptive families, but blindly accepted by them” (St. Clair, 2017, p. 44). For example, in one qualitative study in which Chinese American college students were interviewed, the researchers found that as children, these adoptees came to the conclusion that they looked White, like their parents and people in their local community, even though they understood that they were adopted from another country and had some exposure to Chinese culture (St. Clair, 2017). Because of this, they found it hard to reconcile with their Chinese attributes and respond to situations that confronted their Asian ethnicity. This goes to show how the transracial adoption paradox manifests itself as individuals become faced with questions about their ethnicity, and how insecurity and self-doubt can arise.

Although the transracial adoption paradox is indicated in the literature, there are transracial adoptees who do not feel that deeply about their adoption identity and may be in the very initial stages of their ethnic identity development. According to Kim’s Asian American Racial Identity Development Model, there are five distinct stages that are sequential and progressive in the development of ethnic identity development. Those five stages are: 1) Ethnic Awareness, 2) White Identification, 3) Awakening to Social Political Consciousness, 4) Redirection to Asian American Consciousness, and 5) Incorporation (Kim, 1981). As individuals get older, they become more aware of their identity and can move through these stages at their own pace, or remain in a certain stage as well.

Moreover, “transracial adoptees may identify with more than one racial or cultural identity, shaped by their exposure and self-worth within different groups...while others fail to identify at all with any racial or ethnic group” (Fry, n.d., para. 20; Baden & Wiley, 2007). For those transracial adoptees who have spent their whole lives suppressing any race-related emotions, experiencing the transracial adoption paradox or any form of racism at college can be especially isolating and uncomfortable. According to Kim (1981), “this may be manifested in a variety of forms such as self-hatred, rejection of self and/or racial group, leading to lowered self-esteem and further alienation” (p. 26; Sommers, 1960). Further research on racial identity with Asian Americans has found that race-related stress often drains cognitive resources that help manage mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression, which harms the individual’s overall mental well-being (Harrel, 2000; U. S. Public Health Services Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). With all of the other transitional challenges that an average college student faces, this identity crisis is a unique and important issue that cannot be overlooked.

### **Previous Research on the Matter**

The complex identities of Asian American transracial adoptees are rarely discussed in academic literature (Fry, n.d.). Most of the previous research surrounding this population focuses on adoptees in their childhood or on the perspectives of the adoptive parents. Only a select number of studies even mentions the first-hand experiences of these individuals in young adulthood, let alone at college (St. Clair, 2017; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010; Fry, n.d.). Based on those minimal findings about individuals in this stage of life, there is much more on the subject that can be researched.

According to Suda and Hartlep (2016), “transracially adopted Asian American college students are a minoritized and underserved population...in part because they are often an



invisible population to their non-adopted peers and university administrators” (para. 1). Being adopted is not a physically noticeable trait, therefore it is easier to forget about when considering the needs of students. With the increased vulnerability that transracial adoptees have to mental health-related issues as discussed earlier - and the fact that a large number Asian adoptees are just now reaching college-age - this lack of understanding about the unique experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees in higher education is especially concerning (St. Clair, 2017). Just because the unique struggles of this group may not be noticeable on the surface, does not make the need to address them any less significant.

The research that has been done has revealed that there are some common themes among the Asian American transracial adoptee population related to their college experience. Among those were ideas such as dealing with racism, dealing with how others perceive transracial adoptees, and balancing their White vs. Asian identities (St. Clair, 2017). In one study, researchers found that many of the participants believed that problems they faced at college were “related to the lack of institutional support for understanding this minoritized population” (Suda & Hartlep, 2016, para. 39). However, actionable steps for these ideas are limited by the gaps of unknown information from the individuals who are actually dealing with them.

This thesis aims to build off these findings and contribute to amplifying the voices of Asian American transracial adoptees by telling the stories of their personal experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding questions that frame this thesis are:

1. **RQ1:** What are the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees in college?
2. **RQ2:** In what ways can colleges and universities better serve transracially adopted Asian American students?

## **Methodology**

### **A Qualitative Approach using Portraiture**

This research study was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting non-numerical data, such as human experiences (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), qualitative research is appropriate for an inquiry into questions asking how things work or what people think. They explained, "if you want to understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed you need to get close to them, to hear them talk and to observe them in their day-to-day lives" (p.31). Therefore, this was the best methodology to follow for the purpose of this study.

This study also utilized a form of qualitative inquiry known as portraiture. The portraiture method was developed by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot (2005) as a way to "capture the texture and nuance of human experience" (p. 6). According to Sauer (2012), portraiture research allows each individual participant to share their complete and contextual individual experiences, without their findings being over-generalized or disrespected. "Rather than objectifying the subjects of the study, portraiture seeks understanding" (Sauer, 2012, para. 13). This method served as the ideal vehicle for presenting the findings of this study, as each Asian American transracial adoptee deserved the opportunity to fully express their perspectives and share their experiences in a way that gave them the freedom to help shape the meaning of their stories.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews (Myers & Newman, 2007) with participants who met the following criteria: (a) are currently enrolled in or have attended a college or university in the United States within the last four years, (b) are 18 years of age or

older, (c) self-identify as an Asian American transracial adoptee, and (d) were adopted into a predominantly White family. Framing the interviews as semi-structured allowed the chance for participants to elaborate on topics of choice and explore potential areas of significance outside of the guiding questions, while ensuring that each interview consisted of similar discussion points. This method also provided the most effective platform for participants to share their experiences and have their voices heard.

After receiving the proper approvals from the IRB to conduct this study, individuals were invited to participate via email. Those who were interested in and met the qualifications of the study read a consent form and provided written consent before participation. Following IRB guidelines, each individual participated in two virtual interviews via Zoom, a video conferencing platform. The first interview explored participants' general demographics and experiences prior to college. The second interview dove further into their identity as Asian American transracial adoptee and experiences they have gone through during their time in college. Specific examples of questions asked in each interview can be found in **Appendix A**.

### **Setting and Participants**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that was going on at the time of this research study, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Six individuals were invited to participate in the study following the criteria screening. Four of the six of the participants are current undergraduate students at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), while the other two participants graduated from UNI within the last four years. Participants consisted of two males and four females, all varying only slightly in age and grade level. Because of the nature of this study, the participants' names are kept confidential, and they are referred to in this paper by pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher interviewed each participant individually, two times, for 30-60 minutes each. During the interviews, the Zoom audio and video was recorded so that the interview could be transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed afterwards. After the recordings were analyzed, they were destroyed, and any identifying markers were removed from the data in order to protect the participants' privacy.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all of the interviews were complete, the data analysis began. Data were initially analyzed using a thematic approach in which each interview was coded for common themes and then grouped into categories based on subject matter. However, as the analysis went on, it became clear that each participant had truly unique experiences that would be difficult to generalize into just a few themes. It would have been unfair to the participants to combine parts of their stories with parts of the others' without providing a clear understanding about why each individual feels the way they do. For this reason, the researcher decided to use the portraiture method to share the results of the study, as discussed in the first subsection of the Methodology section. Each participants' interviews were written into individual stories that painted a more complete picture of who the person is. By doing this, the researcher was able to share the crucial context around each experience. The following section details the main takeaways from each of the participants' interviews.

## **Results (The Lived Experience)**

### **Jayden**

Jayden is currently a junior math education major at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). She was adopted from Cambodia by a single, White mother when she was about eight

months old. As a young girl, she was very active and involved, participating in gymnastics, soccer, and poetry slams.

Growing up, Jayden lived in a neighborhood in West Des Moines, Iowa that consisted of primarily White families. However, despite being immersed in White culture from her family and friends, she still had significant exposure to her birth culture growing up - all thanks to her mother.

My mom definitely tried to make me feel more welcomed and that I belonged in West Des Moines because she found a Cambodian heritage group. She got me into Cambodian dancing and learning a little bit about the culture. It was more my mom's initiative, because she actually questioned why I wasn't more questioning about my own culture. I just kind of got wrapped into White society, and I just kind of, almost in a sense, forgot that I was not White. And I really appreciated that...just her showing an interest in where I came from was really thoughtful of her.

In addition to the Cambodian heritage group, Jayden also had the opportunity and support from her mother to go to Cambodia and meet her birth family. All of these experiences allowed Jayden to understand more of her background and become more secure in her identity.

When I was younger, I always thought I was ugly, because I was not White. But then I learned that, you know, that's not how it goes. But I don't even think of myself in that way...I can still have the same abilities and have the same talents everyone else can. This mindset served Jayden well throughout high school. Stereotypical comments and jokes rolled off her back, and she actually found them to be "hilarious." "That sort of thing has never really [bothered] me, like the jokes about the eyes," Jayden said. "Really, my comeback is, 'Smile, and you're gonna look just like me.'"

Transitioning to college brought along a whole new set of experiences for Jayden. Although she had been involved with the Cambodian heritage group in her town and was pretty well-educated about her birth culture, she recalled her participation in a program called Jump Start to be quite a significant impact on her identity development in her first year of school. Jump Start is an extended orientation program at UNI designed to facilitate the successful transition of underrepresented students to college (Student Success and Retention, n.d.). Participants in the program have the opportunity to move onto campus a few days earlier than the rest of the students and become acclimated with the university in a more intimate setting. During those days, students participate in a variety of fun activities and resource sessions, and they get the chance to talk about their experiences being part of an underrepresented population.

Initially, when Jayden was invited to attend Jump Start as a requirement for a financial scholarship, she didn't want to attend.

I originally didn't want to do Jump Start because I don't relate with minority students who face adversity. My life has been pretty easy, and I haven't had to experience hardships like other minorities have. I also didn't want to go because I don't necessarily enjoy meeting new people in a setting where I was required to attend it.

From her point of view, this program did not really apply to her. But once she went through it, she quickly realized that there was a lot of learning and growth she was able to do regarding not only her own identity, but that of other minorities as well. She talked about how hearing the hardships other students faced, simply because of their race, was very eye-opening.

When I got to UNI for Jump Start, that was a big awareness builder for me, that people do go through things like that. I guess for me, I really just forget [that I'm a minority]...I

don't like saying that either, because that just sounds so bad. But at the same time, I feel like I blend in.

Her experience attending Jump Start actually wound up turning into one of the best things that she did her freshman year, in her opinion. She met several long-term friends through the program, and was able to learn a lot about all of the academic and student support resources at UNI in general, which made her feel much more comfortable once classes started.

Being able to keep an open mind was difficult in the beginning, but they easily broke down my walls and just made me feel very welcomed. And so I opened up, and it was a lot better experience from it. And it kind of introduced me to the other people that were going to be at the school, because the minute the rest of the campus came, it was mostly White. So it was kind of nice to walk around campus and if I saw those few people, it was easy to pick them out, and know that they were welcoming as well.

Aside from Jump Start, now that Jayden has been at UNI for a couple years, she does not think much about her identity as an Asian American in her day-to-day life. She attributed some of this to her being raised in a White family.

Overall, for me, things have gone very well. And [for] other students, that's not the case. But I think I'm just lucky that I did actually grow up in a White family, and so maybe some of the difficulties that other minorities face, I don't have to face, because in documents and such, my family looks like it has...the money that a normal family would, and a higher education. So I think that helps.

She continued,

When I live my daily life, I forget [that I'm Asian]. I know one of my best friends - she's half Black, half White - and every single semester, she'll walk into class and count how

many people are not White...I walk in the class, sit down, and the thought never crosses my mind.

Although she said that she hasn't had any major negative experiences dealing with her race or ethnicity while at school, she did talk about one situation in which she was racially profiled while at the on-campus library, but didn't even realize it at first.

I was walking through [the library]...with a girl that was White. We walked through the exit and it started beeping. The librarian was like, "Do you guys have textbooks in your bags?" and we're like, "Yeah." She's like, "Can you come here for a sec? Can you open your bag and take out the textbook?" I'm like, sure, why not? So I give it to her, she looks at it, and gives it back. We walk through the front door, and [the girl I was with] turns to me and she's like, "Bro, you were just racially profiled!" And I'm like, "What do you mean?" And she's like, "Did you see me do any of that?" Obviously, it was so over my head. I was just trying to be helpful, but I didn't realize that really, that was just not it.

Here, Jayden didn't even consider the idea that the reason she was asked to open her bag, but her friend wasn't, was because of her race. That possibility wasn't at the forefront of her mind until her friend pointed it out.

Aside from this stand-out event, Jayden did not recall any other race-related issues during her time at UNI thus far. "I think I just have the normal, like, getting stressed or having a traumatic event happen and needing to deal with that...but there's nothing that stands out," she explained.

Although Jayden doesn't feel like she needs extra support at college, she appreciates the resources that UNI has provided for minorities and underrepresented populations. "I think [UNI] is very welcoming," she stated. "I find that the school is pretty open-minded...I know they're



trying to recruit more minority students. They are showing interest in that. And within even the student body, they seem very welcoming.” She highlighted that UNI recently created an Asian Student Union group on campus, which was a positive step towards becoming a more inclusive campus.

Getting that new organization for Asians, that was a great step to see that the school is recognizing that. I haven't really decided if I want to be a part of that yet, but I'm glad that that's now an opportunity. Because when I first got to college, I was like, "Where's the Asian one?"

Overall, Jayden recognizes her identity as an Asian American and views the role it plays in her everyday life as relatively minimal. Her opinion regarding her experience as an Asian American adoptee at college can be best summed up by this quote:

We're all in college, we all got in [regardless of our race]. We're all here for a reason. And so I think that almost levels the playing field a bit. It's like, you were good enough to get into college, and you're still here pursuing your dreams. So I think that's something to be proud of. And I think other students recognize that.

Being Asian American doesn't completely define Jayden, but has been a notable part of her experience.

### **Jack**

Jack is a 2019 graduate from the University of Northern Iowa. He was adopted from Seoul, South Korea and raised in eastern Iowa with three other siblings who are all also adopted from South Korea. His hometown was predominantly White.

As a child, Jack's parents kept him and his other siblings as connected as possible to the adoption community in Iowa. He attended a Korean adoption camp for several years, which was

a week-long retreat for Korean adoptees and families in Iowa to learn about their culture and share their stories. Growing up, Jack really appreciated this camp, and actually became a counselor for it once he got old enough.

I just felt like I wanted to get back into that community, because they gave me so much and I just wanted to give back. I think it was just nice to be able to relate to...basically everybody there one way or another. And I guess, just obviously learning more about our culture, and being able to take what we learn from there and teach others about it.

Even though Jack enjoyed the camp and all that it offered him in the past, he really does not have an interest in learning about his adoption or about being Asian American now. When asked about his adoption story, he said, "Once [my parents] told me the story, I really haven't thought twice about it...it's something in my past. It's not like I'm going to let it affect me. I just live my life."

Additionally, although he's been back to Korea with his family three times, he didn't view those trips as a chance to learn more about his personal Korean identity. Rather, for him, it was really a vacation. "It was just a reason to get on an airplane and stay in a hotel and eat a bunch of food, really. I never thought about it from that standpoint," he explained.

Jack's lack of interest in his Asian American identity continued as he entered into college. His focus during the transition to college was more on how to manage his newfound freedom, a common concern for many students coming to college directly from high school.

My mom was a very strict parent, so coming into college, it was a large sense of freedom and [I] kind of embraced [that] freedom and just did whatever I felt like. It felt so good to have no one breathing down my neck the entire day.

Jack said that although he never felt singled out for being Asian American while at UNI, he did face racist jokes off campus. Whenever he encountered these jokes, rather than get angry or upset, he would simply pause and point out why they were wrong.

Whenever I see stuff like that, I just point out flaws and inform [them]. If I'm watching something with somebody, or I see someone on Facebook and somebody makes a comment, I just educate them. I just educate them and just point out the flaws itself.

While at college, Jack didn't pay much attention to, or have much interest in, resources for minorities. He was aware of programs like Jump Start and knew that there were various events targeted to minorities, but he didn't feel a need to attend them because he felt like he had already learned enough about his own background on his own. He explained,

It would have been nice to find some sort of community that would like to cook food, just because I was always looking for free food. But otherwise, like, I knew a lot about my own culture so I kind of didn't really need to expand farther out into it.

This sentiment was the same when it came to finding friends at college.

I pretty much affiliated myself with predominantly White people, just because...I don't know, I [came] from a predominantly White community. It just kind of happened like that. Basically, I just tried to find a group of friends who make me happy with who I am, and obviously not judge, whether it be my background or my personality.

In regard to diversity on campus, Jack felt that diversity at UNI was much more focused on the Black community compared to Asians or any other minority group.

[Diversity at UNI] was *really* emphasized on the Black community. I didn't really see much of the Asian community having clubs and items like [them]. I might have missed it

completely...but I think when it came to the word, or the term “diversity,” everyone affiliated it with the Black community in general.

He clarified that although this might have seemed like the case to him, he did think UNI did a

“pretty good job of trying to show that there’s more than just White people around the campus.”

If there was one suggestion that Jack had for ways that UNI could improve their support of Asian minority students, it would be to provide additional communication about activities or events.

The only time people tried to reach out to me was when I walked through the Union.

Most of the time, I was just trying to get to class, so I didn’t really care. Otherwise

outside of campus or in even on campus, I never really was reached out to. I think finding

an alternative way to reach out to people, whether it be email or, heck, even just having

classes, like putting something new in the curriculum or something [could help people

learn more about different cultures].

Although Jack did not utilize any minority resources while in college, he recognized the benefit

of them and provided some suggestions for improvement. Overall, he understands the usefulness

of these opportunities for this population, even though he might not personally have had an

interest while in school.

### **Lauren**

Lauren is currently in her second year at UNI. She was adopted from China when she

was approximately one year old, during the time of the One Child Policy. Lauren was raised by

two White parents in a primarily White, Iowan town where she recalls being the only Chinese

girl in her class and one of very few minorities in her school overall. A self-proclaimed social

butterfly, in high school Lauren was involved with student council, soccer, dance, choir, and

track - just to name a few.

Unlike some of the other participants in this study, Lauren had little to no exposure to her birth culture growing up. She also does not have any desires to learn more about her adoption or birth culture now. “My parents have told me about my adoption several times...I just don’t really care to listen that much. I don’t find it very interesting, which is odd,” Lauren said. She went on to explain,

I’m a Christian, so I’m like, ‘God has a plan for me.’ I’m so blessed here. If I wouldn’t have been adopted then I don’t know where I would be, and my life is so amazing how it is. I couldn’t see it any other way.

Although Lauren was one of very few Asian Americans in her hometown, and the only in her class, she never felt like she stood out because of it, or that it has played a large role in her everyday activities. “I don’t really think of myself as different or see myself different from everyone else, just because I was raised in a primarily White town,” Lauren explained. “As I got older, I realized, ‘Oh I am a different ethnicity than everyone.’ But that was never really a problem.”

Lauren’s extraversion and passion for getting involved when she was in high school translated into a smooth transition into college. When asked about what it was like to make that jump, she recalled, “Academically, I don’t think I faced any challenges; I was really excited. Socially, I was ready to get out there and meet new people. I just love doing that. I think I’m pretty good at it.”

One significant impact on Lauren’s transition to college was participating in the Jump Start program (as described in Jayden’s story above). While overall it was an amazing experience for her, she recalls initially feeling quite out of place when she was placed in the Asian affinity group.

It was really odd, I would say. There was one guy who was like me and who was adopted. He was Asian American. So that was nice, that was comforting, but then a few of the other ones were actually from Asia, and I was just kind of blown away. They kind of had this expectation of me that I was like them - kind of quiet and not very analytical and things like that - and I was not like that at all, I would say.

For someone who had hardly any exposure to other minorities growing up and who did not look much into her own Asian American identity, Jump Start was a very eye-opening experience. Additionally, because she grew in a town where most of the other minorities she knew were also adopted into White, middle-class families, Lauren had not been exposed to the harsh realities that some minorities experience as a result of their race. She recognized the unique perspective that she holds as an Asian American who was adopted into a White family.

When I did the Jump Start program and met so many people, I found out that a lot of these people felt like minorities were treated differently, and they were so unhappy with the ratio of ethnic people at a primarily White school. And it was just crazy they were like very upset about it and like, I've never been like offended or upset or scared or intimidated, really.

Lauren's feeling of distinction between herself and those whose racial identity is more salient to them was further expanded upon when talking about experiences dealing with race at college. Because she had never really been questioned about her background as an Asian American adoptee, some of the interactions that she has had with new friends or peers at college have become increasingly frustrating.

When I'm meeting new people at school and they assume my parents look like me...and when they see that they're not like me, they're like "Oh, you're adopted!" And then they

ask like all these questions, like, “Where are you from?” or “Can you speak Chinese?” and every time I get so...not necessarily annoyed, but I get like, UGH, I have to explain this again. How do people not know this!? And my dad and I were talking about this and I was like, “Why do I get annoyed when people just ask me all these questions and they are like walking a tightrope like they don’t want to offend me?” I’m like, you’re not going to offend me, just ask me! I’m not any different than you.

She also went on to say, “I think I feel like I expect too much out of [people]. Like, just how I present myself, they should just know that I was adopted and I’m not really involved in my culture. I’m like, very whitewashed.”

Lauren identifies so much more with the White culture and her White peers at college that she gets frustrated when people don’t realize that. She expressed similar sentiments when it came to the subject of resources at UNI for Asian Americans and adoptees. In her opinion, it feels even more ostracizing to attend events specifically for minorities.

I feel kind of singled out when they invite just a whole bunch of minorities together. I feel like...it's kind of exclusive of others. Even though they're trying to be inclusive. I don't know, I'm very torn. But yeah, for some reason I just don't go to [those events]...because I think they're weird. They're trying to be comforting, but I feel as though they're like treating me as an alien or a baby or something like that.

While Lauren does not seem to attribute a great deal of her identity to being Asian American, one stand-out point was her acknowledgement of the financial and pre-professional advantages that she has had. Specifically, when it comes to college, she talked highly about some of the perks.

I do like the benefits of being Asian in the U.S. because I got a lot of scholarships to UNI because I was just a minority. I was like, 'Great, that's a plus.' And then people have this expectation that we're also very smart. And I guess I can use that to my advantage, too. So, in Lauren's experiences thus far, while she has recognized the position she is in as an Asian American and some of the benefits she has received, she does not think her identity revolves around being an Asian American adoptee; nor does she really care to look into it in the future.

### **Beau**

Beau is in his first year at UNI after transferring from a community college near his hometown. He grew up in north Iowa, in a town of about 7,000 people, where he described it as about 90% White, and 10% everything else that he "didn't see very much" of. A lover of the outdoors, Beau enjoys going on walks, biking, running, and rock climbing.

Beau was adopted from South Korea around the age of four months old by a married couple who already had three kids in the house at that time. Two more adopted children followed after him, and of the six total children in the family, five of them were adopted from South Korea. Growing up, he never felt different or out of place because of his looks. This was partially due to the fact that his mom ran an at-home daycare where he and his siblings all attended. Going to school, however, was where he noticed the contrast. "At school, it was more like, [I'm] the only Asian kid - or there's like two if you're lucky - so it was a little less diverse there...not super uncomfortable, it was just noticeable," he remembered.

As a kid, Beau attended the same Korean camp that was previously mentioned. At this camp, he had the opportunity to try traditional Korean foods, make Korean crafts, and learn Taekwondo. However, he does not know a whole lot about his adoption or birth culture aside



from the camp, nor did he express any interest in it throughout his youth. Now that he's gotten older, he has considered looking into it more.

I know that as [I] grew up, [I became] more interested in it, but when I was younger I didn't care or really understand. I am interested in going back and visiting and kind of reconnecting with that part of me, but I think that I am still me without being connected to that part. And I do wonder, but like, I'm not sure if I want to test it out and see, you know, something that I don't want to know.

Although Beau is slowly beginning to have more interest in his Asian American identity, he has never considered himself to be significantly affected by any sort of stereotypes or negative assumptions made because of his race.

I'm very individualistic. And I'm not like, "Okay, I'm this, so I have to follow all those things that those people do." I'm very much like, rock the boat, make some waves. You don't have to be the perfect student or whatever. Just got to be yourself. So I don't think I've struggled with that.

He also mentioned that when he was younger and people would make jokes about him being Asian, such as about him doing their math homework or eating cats and dogs, it might have hurt him more, but now he just gets annoyed. "I've matured beyond that," he said. "I don't really care about what they're thinking, as much as they should just keep it to themselves. I've just realized how many people are not very educated in a certain sense." For Beau, it's something that with time he has learned not to take to heart.

Unlike any of the other participants in this study, Beau's transition to UNI was done during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This made for quite a unique transition because very few classes and events were being held in person, therefore he did not have much exposure

to life on campus. Still in only his second semester at UNI, he hasn't gotten to do a whole lot, but he has been able to meet people through a variety of clubs.

Despite the restrictions of the pandemic, Beau said that the university has provided him with enough resources coming in as a minority and a transfer student, if he wanted to use them. "I didn't really give much thought to [minority resources]...I figured, like, they're at least trying to reach out to people that were in the minority groups. I thought that was good, because at [my community college], I didn't get that."

When it comes to resources for Asian Americans, Beau said that he just simply has not been able to take advantage of a lot due to the scaled-down campus environment. He is aware of the new Asian Student Union, though, which is something he has considered joining. "I didn't get involved with that much because I don't think they've done anything yet, but depending on COVID and everything I would like to join."

So, up until this point, Beau has not done much identity exploration, nor has he had a lot of the opportunities to explore resources on campus yet. As he progresses through his time in college and potentially takes advantage of groups like the Asian Student Union, he may continue to develop more of an interest in this aspect of his identity.

### **Ruth**

Ruth is in her final year at UNI, double majoring in Marketing and Textiles & Apparel. She was adopted from South Korea in the year 2000 and was raised with three older brothers. Before going off to college, she lived in southeast Iowa in a town of about 23,000 people. Although it was a larger city than most of the other participants' hometowns, it was still primarily White.

Ruth was quite involved growing up. In high school she was a part of the dance team, National Honor Society, volunteered with the Silver Cord program, and was student council president her senior year. She also worked part-time at Hy-Vee.

Throughout her childhood and into her teen years, Ruth had no exposure to her birth culture. Neither her family nor her community provided much opportunity for her to do so; however, she didn't really have any interest in it when she was young.

Growing up...I never, ever thought about [my birth culture]. And it was always something that, not that I was ashamed of, but I just felt kind of out of place, or I didn't want to talk about it because it made me really uncomfortable. As far as my family, they didn't know a lot about the culture either, so they didn't have a lot to tell me. But again I think I was so, kind of like stubborn, that I wouldn't have [wanted to know]. Even if they asked me if I wanted to, I probably wouldn't [have] because I would think that made me different. Since Ruth grew up surrounded by White friends and family and did not have the chance to learn anything about her Asian identity, she faced a bit of an internal crisis when it came to how she viewed herself versus how she looked on the outside.

Growing up with my friends is when I found it like, really awkward because...like, maybe my friends were dating people and no one was interested in me at the time and I was like, "Oh, maybe it's because of like my appearance and stuff like that." I always felt kind of out of place compared to my friends...I just always really liked their blonde hair and like their blue eyes and thought that was really cool.

Another example of how Ruth struggled with identity growing up was when it came to selecting her race on standardized tests in school. She remembered having to ask her parents whether to bubble in "White" or "Asian" for her ethnicity on the scantrons.

I had to ask my parents, because for me, like obviously I'm not White. So I would always put Asian because that is what I look like and where my origins are, where I'm from. But, like, personally how I feel and who I was, I would say...it'd be more honestly White or American. It feels weird because I grew up in America so I feel like...whatever they're using it to score isn't very accurate because I am not a good representation of all Asians as a whole.

As she has gotten older, Ruth said she feels like she has been able to outgrow those "awkward" feelings of being different and is much more content with her identity. She is much more interested in learning about her adoption and birth culture now, mainly so that she can have a better understanding about where she came from and develop her overall identity further. Specifically, Ruth said that understanding her medical history is one reason for her interest in learning more about her adoption history.

One thing I never know is my family history of medical conditions, and that's something that, growing up when I would go to a doctor's office, they would always ask me, and I'd be like, "Oh like I don't know, like, I'm adopted." So I guess now that I'm getting older I'm kind of more interested in that just because I do want to stay healthy in the future, and if there were like any health conditions that I could get, I would want to know.

As far as the ability to explore her the Asian part of her identity, it wasn't really until Ruth went to college that she had several opportunities to do so. Like a few other participants, she attended the Jump Start program at UNI; however, it was not something that she was eager to do at the start.

I didn't want to do it because I felt like they were just pushing me into a box really hard and I was like, I just don't identify that way. Like some of the people who are going to be there may have grew up very differently from me, so I really didn't want to go.

She brought up the fact that since she had never experienced anything that acknowledged her race before in school, it made her apprehensive. "I was kind of more confused as to why a university would be interested in doing a program like this and what the meaning of it was, and I had a really bad attitude [about it]," she explained.

Despite the unease about Jump Start at first, it wound up being something that Ruth is very glad she went through.

I think what made it click for me was that all the other students who were there were exactly like me. Like they didn't really think they needed special attention or needed this opportunity...they're also just some 18-year-old college students. We had more in common than I actually thought, and I realized it wasn't supposed to like marginalize us or anything, it was just was to bring us together.

In addition to Jump Start, another significant thing that helped Ruth navigate her first year at college was getting a mentor. As a participant in Jump Start, she had the opportunity to be connected with another student who was a part of an underrepresented population through the UNI Center for Multicultural Education (CME). She talked about having this mentor as a very impactful moment in her first year.

Through the CME at UNI I got a mentor. That was something really significant to me because it was through the CME so it was for multicultural students. We met every single week, and...it was just kind of cool to be able to hear about his experiences and...being someone who I felt was similar to me in a sense and came from maybe a similar

background stuff. I think that was something that was really monumental in the first year at UNI.

Once she settled into college after her first year, Ruth said that her experience as a student at UNI has allowed her to feel very comfortable being herself. In her four years, she has become very involved in several different clubs and organizations on campus and had several leadership opportunities, as well as worked in an on-campus office. “What’s nice about UNI is that it is a small campus so you do get to know a lot of people, like professors and students, so I’ve always felt...like I could just be myself,” she said.

Ruth also has had a lot of opportunity to get in touch with her Asian American identity through various projects in her major classes, which is something she has really enjoyed.

For one of my classes...I got to do a beauty empowerment project [about Asian Americans] which I actually got to have [published]. I really appreciate all the work [my professors] do on our campus because they promote a lot of diversity and just push towards giving students of all backgrounds and races a voice.

Throughout all of these experiences and the personal growth Ruth has done during her college years, she has found some areas of improvement that she believes UNI could work on to better the overall campus diversity climate. According to Ruth, one of the biggest areas of need is within recruiting for student organizations.

Being in student groups where we recruit other students, they talk about wanting to recruit diverse students and about wanting to have more ambassadors that are diverse. But when they say diverse, they mean by *race*, and I think that’s something that really needs to be changed. They talk about how they want students of different color because

they think that other students...will feel more comfortable...if they look the same. I think that's something that [shouldn't] necessarily be said that way.

Ruth also talked about the importance of emphasizing inclusion of all races, not just minorities, when it comes to diversity-based clubs and events. She brought up the newly created Asian Student Union as an example of a club that could be beneficial for all students, not just Asians. "You don't have to be Asian American to be a part of the Asian student group. It should be just because you want to learn and you want to be there and be supportive," she stated.

Additionally, when it comes to recognition of adopted students at UNI, Ruth thinks that it could be really beneficial to have a group on campus to support them.

It could just be for anyone who's been adopted, just to come together. Sometimes I feel like maybe people do want to talk about their stories, because they don't have the opportunity to talk about it anywhere else, so...if there was a group for adopted students who would maybe want to share their stories or...any hardships that they've had...I think that would be really interesting.

Ruth's diverse experiences throughout college have given her the opportunities to explore her Asian American identity, which opened her eyes to areas for improvement as well. As she grows and develops more of an understanding of self, it is clear that she is willing to advocate for change and make suggestions to support others who share a similar background.

### **Brooke**

Brooke was adopted from South Korea and is one of six adopted children in her family. She graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in 2018, earning her bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management. A heavily involved and passionate student during undergrad,

Brooke went on to get her Master of Education at Iowa State University. She currently works in higher education at another university in the Midwest.

Brooke's childhood was similar to that of the other participants; her Iowan hometown was small and White. Brooke said that she had always "felt White" growing up. In fact, as a child, she didn't quite understand what race or racism even was.

When I was growing up, I didn't feel the difference in color, or I didn't even realize, like, what racism was. Like when people made fun of my eye shape, I didn't realize what that necessarily meant in the bigger picture. I just thought, oh, they're picking on me like they pick on a ginger with red hair. I didn't really make those connections.

At a young age, Brooke said that her mother had conversations with her about appearances and looking different, which helped her feel more comfortable with herself.

I distinctly remember one time looking in the mirror with [my mom]. She was pointing out our different physical features, because I was about to go to elementary school. I just remember her having a conversation with me of like, "We look different, our skin color is different, our hair color is different. But that doesn't matter. It doesn't mean anything.

And just because we look different doesn't mean that we're not family."

In addition to those conversations with her mother, Brooke's parents were always open to talk with their children about their adoptions and wanted them to have a connection with their birth culture. Brooke grew up attending the same Korean Camp that other participants in the study had attended, enjoyed Korean food at home every now and then, and was even able to go back to Korea with her family to visit. As she has gotten older, her interest in pursuing her adoption history and birth culture has increased even more. However, Brooke said that there is a sense of guilt she feels in exploring these topics out of fear of hurting her parents.



I would love to go back [to Korea] now that I am older and have more of a sense of self. But I know...my parents, while they're very loving and super welcoming about the whole, like, Korean adoption agencies, I still feel a sense of guilt about wanting to learn more about my birth family and that kind of stuff, because I don't want it to seem like I'm ungrateful, or anything.

Coming to college at UNI was the first time that Brooke felt like she was able to freely explore what it meant to her to be Asian American. It was also one of the first times that she remembered experiencing racially based bias.

I did have a faculty member who absolutely disliked me. It was common knowledge within the class that they did not like me. I had no idea why they didn't like me, and the only thing that I could really think of was because of my skin color. I was the only person of color in that class and he was only picking out me. And it was just such a negative part to my experience and one that I kind of try to push out of my mind so I don't ruin the rest of my UNI time with that one faculty member, but it really started to make me think like, "Why he was singling me out?" and what that had to do with me being a student.

Brooke's recollection of this story was one of the first experiences she dealt with at college related to her identity. Then, she joined Jump Start as one of the student leaders of the program, which really was the catalyst of her identity development journey. While she didn't go through the program herself, she did learn a lot from facilitating the conversations as a group leader for the Asian/Asian American participants.

I started having more of this identity development when I was involved with Jump Start. It really hit me on the day we were doing our affinity group discussion...it was kind of interesting to have that discussion because here we are, we're all Asian Americans, yet

when we were talking about some of the hesitations that we had about going into college...I quickly realized that their experience was *so* different from my Asian American experience. And part of me was like, oh my gosh, I feel like I shouldn't be a part of the Asian group because they're all talking about traditional Asian mothers and expectations and all these things, and I couldn't relate at all. I was like, "How am I supposed to lead this conversation of what being Asian looks at UNI, if I can't even relate to what being Asian?" So, all of a sudden I was like...who am I, what am I doing, am I just a White person *trapped* in an Asian looking body?!

This reflection led her to analyze her own experiences and privilege that she had throughout her life being raised by a White family.

I really thought about how I viewed myself being within what was supposed to be a marginalized group, and I really started to recognize the privilege that I've held, not only being Asian American but then being raised by a White family, and being able to assimilate to White culture. It was a lot to absorb in that one discussion - all these like feelings and thoughts hitting me. And I won't lie, I kind of felt like I had an identity crisis, because I was like, I just don't know how I fit into society anymore.

Not feeling like she belonged to any one group, Brooke began to explore diversity in different ways at college. "I really wanted to surround myself with people of color and hear their stories and, I don't know, figure myself out," she explained. She ended up finding a close group of friends within the Latinx community, which turned out to be very beneficial in her own self-discovery process.

It was really cool for them to kind of like, accept me with open arms and feel like I was a part of a group. At that point, I probably felt like I was more in tune with the Latinx

culture than Asian culture. But I think there was something to be had about having that core of people of color that you just really felt connected to and really felt like, if you were having a bad day they, they could understand, or if you have like a racist incident or something that kind of rubbed you the wrong way, you could tell them...

While Brooke found solace in her friends of color, she did not feel comfortable taking advantage of the minority resources on campus. Although she was aware that UNI provided additional services and support for multicultural students, she did not utilize them because she didn't feel "Asian enough."

I never visited the office or that space, because I didn't feel like - because of my upbringing - that I was really welcomed in that space. Not that people were not welcoming, and I'm sure if I went in there everyone would be super welcoming, but in my own mentality, I felt like I was not Asian enough to enter that space.

Brooke's feelings about not being "Asian enough" also affected her sensitivity around people asking about her adoption. As a student who was heavily involved on campus and gave tours to prospective students, she would often get asked about her adoption, both by peers and visiting parents.

One question that I got *so* much is "What kind of Asian are you?" And, for me, I don't necessarily like that question. I think when it's asked so bluntly like that, it really makes you feel like you have no ties to your identity. Or when they ask things like, "Do you know how to make this Korean food?" and [I'm] like, no...so I feel like I don't have those connections or I don't have those answers, which makes me feel like I'm not really a Korean, and it really exposes that White part of my culture.

Brooke's experiences at college truly led her to do some serious self-reflection about her Asian American adoptee identity. From these experiences, she realized that there are many areas of improvement that UNI and colleges in general could be doing to recognize and support minorities and adoptees even more. One thing she highlighted particularly was the lack of recognition for adoptees in college. Brooke explained,

Iowa actually is one of the top five states with the most foster youth in America. The fact that none of our state schools have anything specific - at least that I'm aware of - for these student populations...and knowing that Iowa also had a huge international adoption trend in the 90s, and we were all going to college in like this pocket of time, and there's nothing there either...it kind of made me realize that [this] is one of those topics that flies under the radar and nobody really does anything about it.

She provided the example of how on most college applications, there isn't any way to indicate if you have been in the foster system or are adopted, not even a checkmark box.

Adoptees and foster youth are considered at-risk students to not be retained...so the fact that there's no way for us to even catch [these] students, I think there could be reform in the system...in order to begin these conversations.

Another recommendation Brooke had is for colleges to create an adoptee group or space on campus for interested students to talk about their experiences.

I think it's so nice to have that community of people that understand your life experience of growing up, or at least can relate in a closer way of feeling kind of like an outsider in both respects of not being Asian enough and not being White enough, but assimilating well. [It could be] a way to start unpacking some of that adoption trauma.

Brooke spent a lot of time navigating and understanding her own identity throughout her college career, and that she continues to do so today. Through her experiences both in undergrad and graduate school, and now as a student affairs professional, she has been able to process more deeply what it means to her to be an Asian American adoptee.

I'm still grappling with my identity as an Asian American. I hope that someday I feel concrete in my identity and who I am as a person, but new things happen every single year that make me realize that I maybe am not as connected as I thought I was, or there's still a lot of unanswered pieces of me. But I think right now, I'm probably the most confident [I've ever been] in my identity as an Asian American. I've come to kind of understand my adoption story and what the means, and how I navigate it.

Brooke's journey on her identity development has seen a mix of highs and lows across a variety of unique scenarios. It is clear that, despite some of the tough parts of the journey, she is ready to push forward to gain a deeper understanding of who she is so that she can find confidence and comfortability with all aspects of her identity.

### **Discussion**

Each participant in this research study had unique experiences throughout their childhoods and into college that should not be used to generalize the experiences of all individuals in this population. However, there were some findings that emerged across the narratives as significant. In this section, I will address those themes that were most notable.

#### **Ethnic Identity Development**

The first notable finding in this study was that, although all of my participants were among the same demographic and went to the same college, they fell along varying stages of interest in and understanding of their identity development as an Asian American adoptee. When

participants were asked questions about different aspects of their identity, answers seemed to range based on how much prior thought the participants had given to the topics. Lauren, for example, indicated that she had no exposure to her birth culture growing up and has no desires to learn more about it now. Although her parents told her about her adoption, she didn't "care to listen that much." This sentiment was made clearer when she said,

I'm a Christian, so I'm like, 'God has a plan for me.' I'm so blessed here. If I wouldn't have been adopted then I don't know where I would be, and my life is so amazing how it is. I couldn't see it any other way.

Consequently, she has no interest in the Asian resources available at college. "...For some reason I just don't go to [those events]...because I think they're weird," she continued.

Similarly, Jack seemed to be in more of the early stages of ethnic identity development. Although he had more exposure to his birth culture than Lauren growing up, he still does not give the Asian part of his identity much weight in his everyday life. This was noted when he said, "Once [my parents] told me [my adoption] story, I really haven't thought twice about it...it's something in my past. It's not like I'm going to let it affect me. I just live my life."

Like Lauren, when Jack got to college, he did not indicate any interest in taking advantage of resources for minorities. According to him, what he had learned growing up about being Korean was enough. "I knew a lot about my own culture so I kind of didn't really need to expand farther out into it," he explained.

On the other side of the spectrum, Brooke is an individual who has devoted much more time to processing her identity throughout her college career. Her experiences facing prejudice from a professor in her first year of college and serving as a Jump Start leader played key roles in prompting her interest in these topics, and also allowed her to reflect more deeply than some of

the other participants. She talked extensively about the “identity crisis” that she faced after becoming a student leader with Jump Start, which led her to reflect on what it means to be an Asian adopted into a White family. According to Brooke, she is “still grappling with [her] identity as an Asian American” and hopes that one day she will feel concrete in her identity. This self-analysis in and of itself indicates a deeper stage of ethnic identity development than the others.

Interestingly, even though Jayden, Brooke, Jack and Beau all were involved in some way with their birth culture growing up, this did not correlate directly with being further along in their identity development or having more interest in it than the others who had no exposure as children. Ruth, for example, had little understanding of her adoption growing up but said that she would like to learn more about it now, for both personal and medical reasons.

However, one clearer indication of the participants’ place in identity development process did seem to be the number of identity-focused activities they took part in during college. Brooke had been a part of Jump Start and gone on to get her master’s degree in a program that was heavily focused on social justice, therefore she has had plenty of opportunities to reflect on being an Asian American adoptee and talked in more detail throughout her interviews. On the flip side, Beau had just come from a community college where there were no minority-specific resources, and still has been unable to utilize all of the resources at UNI due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, he did not have as much of an opinion on these topics during his interviews and had less to say on the matters.

### **Feeling In-Between: Balancing White & Asian Identities**

Although each participant was at a different stage of ethnic identity development, a very common theme across all interviewees was that they face this sort of juggling act between

*looking* Asian but *feeling* White. Being adopted by White families and growing up in White communities essentially allowed them to feel like they were White. Brooke, Lauren and Jayden talked about how they would “forget” that they didn’t look White on the outside because they were not treated any different than their White friends or family. “I really just forget [that I’m a minority]...I feel like I blend in,” Jayden had said.

These ideas of balancing two identities and achieving honorary White status were discussed in the literature review. It seems to be a common theme across other Asian American transracial adoptees that they are often considered White by the communities they were raised in, which in turn causes an identity conflict as they grow up and meet people who aren’t familiar with their background.

Each of the interviewees seemed to take a different approach to balancing these identities. For Lauren, she leaned much farther into the White side of her identity. She found frustration with people who didn’t realize that she was “whitewashed.” She said, “I think I feel like I expect too much out of [people]. Like, just how I present myself, they should just know that I was adopted, and I’m not really involved in my culture. I’m like, very whitewashed.”

Lauren also talked about how she dislikes the minority-based events put on at college because it makes her feel even more ostracized. “I feel kind of singled out when they invite just a whole bunch of minorities together...They're trying to be comforting, but I feel as though they're like treating me as an alien or a baby or something like that.” To her, being treated as though she was any different than her White peers is almost more offensive than it is considerate, because she identifies herself as White.

Another interesting example of trying to balance Asian and White identities was in Ruth’s interview when she discussed bubbling in her ethnicity on scantrons for standardized



tests. Ruth said that it felt weird to choose Asian, because even though it is where her origins are from, how she felt inside would align more as “honestly White or American.” This concept is the epitome of the transracial adoptee paradox, because in essence, it gets at the point that Asian American transracial adoptees are a unique population that does not fit into one of the standard racial categories. In this example, Ruth highlights the feeling of being “in-between” that Asian American adoptees can experience growing up in a White family.

While Lauren tried to align more with her White identity, Brooke’s identity struggle came from the problem of never feeling “Asian enough.” Although she wanted to utilize minority resources on campus or be more in touch with her Korean heritage, she felt like her White upbringing prevented her from being worthy of seeking out these things. “I never visited [the Center for Multicultural Education] because I didn’t feel like - because of my upbringing - that I was really welcomed in that space.”

Brooke also talked about how she felt like a “White person trapped in an Asian looking body.” She felt bad that she could not relate to the traditional Asian lives that some of her Jump Start members had experienced, and did not feel qualified to be leading the conversation around what being Asian looks like at UNI. This struggle had a significant influence on Brooke, which led to her dive deeper into her self-reflection.

Another concept worth mentioning that is related to feeling in-between is the idea of disassociation, which was found across a few interviews. It was noticeable that when participants talked about other Asians at college who were more traditional, or who were international students, the participants referred to them as a completely separate group of people, despite the fact that they are all of Asian origin. For example, in Lauren’s interview she talked about her Jump Start Asian affinity group as having participants who were actually from Asia who “had

this expectation that [she] was like them.” She referred to “them” as being completely different than her, despite all of them being put together in the same category for the program.

Jayden and Ruth also talked about how they did not feel like they related to the struggles that other minorities at Jump Start as well. “I originally didn’t want to do Jump Start because I don’t relate with minority students who face adversity. My life has been pretty easy and I haven’t had to experience hardships like other minorities have,” Jayden explained. Ruth echoed this, saying, “I just don’t identify that way. Like some of the people who are going to be [at Jump Start] may have grown up very differently from me.” It is interesting to see how the participants viewed themselves in comparison to other Asians. It seems that some of them had trouble balancing the Asian part of their identities with the White part because they felt more aligned with being White because of their upbringing.

### **College Support/Resources: Jump Start**

The third major commonality that stood out across several participants’ college experience was their participation in the Jump Start program at UNI. Four of the six interviewees were involved with Jump Start, and each of them highlighted it as an impactful part of their college experience. When asked about what resources were provided for Asians at UNI, this was mentioned across five of the six interviews, which also indicates that it is a prominent feature for the university’s diversity and inclusion efforts.

For some of them, Jump Start was the first time that they were really able to reflect on the Asian aspect of their identity. As Ruth had said, she had had “no exposure to her birth culture” growing up. This program allowed her to gain a greater understanding and perspective on Asians and Asian Americans, and come together with people who might be going through similar struggles. Brooke also said that Jump Start was when she “started having more of [an] identity

development” because it prompted the conversations surrounding her Asian background. This program clearly offers opportunities to reflect on identity that aren’t found anywhere else.

In addition, Jump Start also was the first time that many of the participants were made aware of the hardships that other minorities go through, which is another powerful aspect of the program. Because they experienced that sense of White privilege being raised in a White family, some of them hadn’t ever before considered the obstacles that others face. Jayden best summed up this point in this quote:

When I got to UNI for Jump Start, that was a big awareness builder for me, that people do go through things like that. I guess for me, I really just forget [that I’m a minority]...I don’t like saying that either, because that just sounds so bad. But at the same time, I feel like I blend in.

By doing Jump Start, even though a primary purpose was for them to be able to share their own experiences, it actually served as an opportunity to educate them about additional issues surrounding race.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

One of the guiding frameworks of this study was to determine if there are any areas in which colleges and universities can better serve transracially adopted Asian American students. Based upon this research, there are a number of ways that this population could be more supported. The first suggestion is for more colleges and universities to look into providing programming similar to Jump Start. It is clear that Jump Start was a positive and beneficial program for the participants who attended, despite the initial apprehensions. There is a lot of opportunity for the program to evolve and become even more inclusive, however having

something like this available for those interested is definitely worth considering for schools who don't have anything like it yet.

Now although Jump Start is a positive and beneficial program, one last thing I'd like to mention about this theme was that, at first, three of the participants did not even want to join the program. Ruth, Jayden, and Lauren all said that they didn't think this program applied to them, or that it was putting them in a box that they didn't relate to. This may indicate an assumption that being invited to Jump Start implies some kind of deficit that needs to be overcome; or, that the way the program is being promoted does not convey the true, complete benefits of participation that could apply to these individuals. This is something of notable consideration for future structuration of the program.

A second opportunity for UNI and other schools to improve their support of this population is to have more recognition of adoptees on application documents and on campus in general. Lack of adoptee recognition is an overarching issue that should be addressed at the highest level of government and across all levels of education; however, for the purposes of this study, the focus is on efforts in higher education. As Brooke mentioned, Iowa is one of the top five states with foster youth in America. Additionally, many of the international adoptees who were adopted in the 1990s-2000s are reaching college age now. Therefore, it would be beneficial to identify these students as they are coming into college, and a simple way to do so is when they are applying to schools. Providing a simple checkmark box on applications to indicate that a student was adopted - if they wish to do so - could allow the university to provide additional follow-up information to those students for resources on campus that might be beneficial to them specifically.

Lastly, another way that college and universities could increase support of Asian Americans and Asian American transracial adoptees on campus is by putting more emphasis on their student-led groups. Beau, Ruth, and Jayden talked about how the recently created Asian Student Union at UNI is a great step towards highlighting this group of people, but there is so much more that could be done with this group to elevate it. Ruth also talked about how the mindset for recruiting diverse students for student organizations needs to be shifted, because it should not be just based on appearance as it has been in the past. Based on these comments, it is clear that student groups are an important, ground-level resource that should be utilized to foster more inclusion and equity for Asian Americans in college.

### **Limitations & Implications for Future Research**

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, there are many potential areas to explore and new questions to be answered. While this study has highlighted six unique experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees at college, the participant pool was cultivated from one mid-sized university in northern Iowa. Even though their experiences are not intended to be generalized, they could be vastly different from those who attend other universities or live in different states across the country. Additionally, all of these participants grew up in primarily White, middle-class, midwestern communities, which had a significant influence on their upbringings and experiences. It would be interesting to conduct similar studies with a wider pool of participants who may go to different colleges or are from other parts of the country in order to gain a broader perspective about the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees.

This research study explored a variety of topics surrounding the transracial Asian American adoptee experience in America. Specifically, the concept of White privilege was a

notable topic discussed across several participants' stories. It seemed that because all of the participants were raised in White households and communities, it was easier for them to disassociate themselves from some of the racial discrimination or judgement that other Asians at their college have experienced. It would be interesting to explore this idea in more detail and learn how honorary White status has impacted other aspects of Asian American transracial adoptees' lives, as well as their perspective of racism.

Additionally, because this study focused primarily on the college experience, the demographic background provided for each participants' childhood was solely for the intention of giving context. Within that background information, however, there were a lot of significant experiences and perspectives that emerged but did not get discussed in this paper. It could be beneficial in future research to dive deeper into those experiences and explore other areas of support for this underserved population. Specifically, looking into gender differences and intersectionality and how that plays a role in Asian American adoptee identity development could be really beneficial for university administrators.

Lastly, this research study focused on a very specific group of people in college - Asian American transracial adoptees. There is a lot of potential to conduct similar research with other minority college students, such as Black or Hispanic adoptees, because their experiences may be vastly different. This type of research across different underrepresented populations could be of great benefit to college administrators and may be worth exploring.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees in college. The guiding research questions were: 1) What are the lived experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees in college? and

2) In what ways can colleges and universities better serve transracially adopted Asian American students?

The purpose was not to create overarching generalizations, but rather recognize the unique experiences of individuals of this underrepresented population. Based on the findings, each participants' unique personality and background influenced where they were at in their identity development journey, ranging from no interest in their birth culture and adoption history to significant self-reflection and connection to their Asian American adoptee identity. The results from this study did indicate a few commonalities across the narratives, including the struggle of balancing Asian and White identities and the participation in and benefit of minority resource programs while at college. It also prompted suggestions for areas of improvement in diversity efforts across universities, such as providing a checkmark box to identify if you are an adoptee on college applications or improving the framework surrounding minority resources and student organizations on campus.

Asian American transracial adoptees are a very unique population of individuals, both in the college environment but also in America in general. It is my hope that by calling to light the experiences of individuals in this group, it gives more attention to this population and generates further opportunities for their voices to be heard.

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## Appendix A

*The following protocols include guiding questions that were used to frame each interview. Not all questions were asked in each interview, and some additional questions or topics may have been discussed.*

### Interview 1 Protocol

#### *Demographics*

1. Where and when were you born?
2. What is your family like? Is there any other adoption in your family?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. What was the composition of your community like growing up? (i.e., population size, diversity, location)
5. Can you tell me what your high school experience was like?
6. Currently, what things are you involved with? (i.e., major, groups, work, academics)
7. If you could describe yourself using 3 words, what words would describe you?
8. Who or what inspired you to be the person you are today?
9. What do you like and appreciate most about yourself?
10. What experiences most impacted the person you are today?

#### *Adoption/Childhood*

11. How would you characterize your adolescent years?
12. What do you know about your adoption? How did you gain that information?
13. How much exposure did you have to your birth culture during childhood?
14. Growing up, can you describe how you felt in relation to your friends and family? Did you feel like you were treated similar to them or different? How so?
15. Can you describe any significant experiences you had as a child related to being adopted?

16. How do you self-identify? Can you describe any times where someone has questioned your authenticity or identity? How did that make you feel?
17. Have you ever been subjected to stereotypes because of your appearance? If so, explain.
18. What does it mean to you to have an identity as an Asian American? Has this meaning changed over the years? How?
19. In looking back, are there one or more significant events that you feel played a crucial role in your achievement of an Asian American identity?

## **Interview 2 Protocol**

### ***College***

1. Where did you go/currently attend college?
2. How would you describe the diversity of the student population?
3. What was your initial transition into college like? Did you face any struggles (academically, socially, mentally) when you first got to college?
4. Are there any significant experiences in your first year of college that stand out to you as impactful on your identity development (non-related or related to race/adoptee)? How so?
5. How would you describe your overall college experience?

### ***Adoptee-Related Questions***

6. Prior to coming to college, how much exposure had you had with others who identified as Asian American or as Asian American adoptees?
7. Have there been any experiences in college where you have been especially aware of your Asian American identity? How did these experiences make you feel?

8. Has there ever been a time where a faculty member, administrator or other student ever made you feel uncomfortable or ostracized because of your identity? Can you describe how it made you feel?
9. Did you ever feel pressure during your college years to act more or less like how you looked vs. how you personally feel? If so, how?
10. Do you feel that there are any actions, positive or negative, that the university does to highlight your appearance? Expand on how they make you feel.
11. Can you describe any mentally or emotionally taxing experiences you have had during college as related to being adopted or Asian?
12. Have there been any experiences where your identity has been celebrated by others at college?

### ***College Support Services***

13. What do you know about resources that your college provide(s)(d) for Asian Americans or adoptees? Do/did you use any of them?
14. How do you feel that your university/college does with providing resources or programming for Asian American transracial adoptees?
15. How do you view the campus climate (campus culture) at your university/are there any improvements you suggest?
16. What types of support or programming would you like to see at your university that may not be there currently for adoptees or Asian Americans?