The Liminality of Identity and Place: Chinese Transracial Adoptees and the Built Environment

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THE LIMINALITY OF IDENTITY AND PLACE:

CHINESE TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

by

Roe Jing Draus

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

THE LIMINALITY OF IDENTITY AND PLACE:
CHINESE TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

by

Roe Jing Draus

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Adjunct Professor Chelsea Wait and Assistant Professor Lindsey Krug

International adoption of children from China began in 1992, and between 1999 and 2019, China adopted out approximately 267,000 children. At this time, around 82,000 Chinese children were adopted by American families and raised within a culturally and racially different environment. As a unique diaspora community that has been involuntarily and forcefully displaced, Chinese transracial adoptees (TRAs) are often fragmented across the United States. The outcomes have especially complex effects as their identities are often situated in perpetual in-betweenness as they must negotiate the meanings of their Chineseness, Chinese Americanness, and adopteeness. Since a sense of self and identity is fundamentally embedded in the built environment, places play a critical role in defining and perpetuating the intersectional identity shared by Chinese TRAs. Moreover, when identity and place are misaligned, a lack of belonging can emerge.

This thesis explores the experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees regarding the liminal nature of their identities and how it is related to the built environment in finding a sense of belonging. Due to recent events, this displaced population is situated in a vulnerable position as they navigate their sense of home and find belonging in places that may be or become unwelcoming. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship regarding identity, belonging, and placemaking, the study examines the in-betweenness of their identities and places, focusing on the role of memory and spatial behavior in shaping their experiences. My design methodology utilizes a framework of community building and design justice, in
which multi-sensory ethnography strategies, storytelling, and collaborative creative exercises were used.

One central objective of the study is to uplift stakeholder empowerment through understanding the design of built environments. By collaborating with five cultural informants through a series of four group conversation sessions and individual exit interviews, the study reveals that agency over their identity, as well as the physical and social aspects of the built environment, is necessary for Chinese TRAs to find comfort and belonging. The study provides a better understanding of the complex relationship between identity and the built environment. Additionally, the study’s findings will contribute to the dialogue surrounding the design for marginalized communities whose experiences may have been underrepresented and overlooked within the discourse of architecture. Moreover, the redesigned methodology rooted in empathy and humility begins to question the impact of different approaches toward engaging communities in the co-creation of their environments.
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THE LIMINALITY OF IDENTITY AND PLACE:
Chinese Transracial Adoptees and the Built Environment

Roe Jing Draus | M.ARCH Thesis 2023
INTRODUCTION

The experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees are complex as a displaced population that has crossed borders, cultures, and races. This complexity is further exacerbated by the challenges of finding agency and resilience in environments that may not always be welcoming through their spatial and social qualities. For Chinese transracial adoptees, identity and place are in a constant state of liminality and hybridity. As a Chinese transracial adoptee, I have experienced the emotions of existing in an in-between space—a duality of experience that is dominated by the conflict between how people perceive and racialize me versus how I see myself. I was adopted in 1999 from Gaoming in Guangdong Province, China. I grew up in a predominantly white area in the U.S. Midwest with my white parents and an older sister who was also adopted from China. I am often caught between my Chinese identity, American identity, and adoptee identity. By reflecting on my childhood, I realize that the built environments around me are not neutral. On the domestic scale, I have a strong attachment to my childhood home. The home is situated between rural and urban contexts. Existing on 10 acres and 20 minutes from downtown, it does not quite embody either identification. As a place that responded to each change in my life, my home was a place that actively nurtured identity exploration. Since I was raised in a white home within a dominant white society, my identity and how I saw myself was often closely aligned with the white experience. However, in public environments, I was immediately identified by my external characteristics. While public perception categorized me as Asian, it was difficult to find a connection to my Asian identity. On the other hand, when I became involved in the Asian community on campus, I was unable to share their experiences and traditions. Furthermore, when I disclosed my adoption to the Asian community, I was often seen as not Asian enough. Being situated between two cultures and communities, I often struggled to find a sense of belonging in environments that were clearly defined, either culturally or socially. As a Chinese transracial adoptee, I have gained insights into how my
surroundings have influenced my identity formation. However, the question remains: how can architects and designers consider the diverse experience and identities of individuals like me when creating spaces that foster inclusivity and a sense of belonging?

Background

The One-Child Policy and Gender Bias

During the 1960s, China was experiencing political instability and economic policy shifts due to the Cultural Revolution. By 1969, China’s population surpassed 800 million, economic growth stagnated, and China’s standard of living was deteriorating.\(^1\) The Chinese government believed that strict population control was essential to economic reform, which led to an increasingly aggressive family planning campaign. The campaign quickly shifted from voluntary participation to the coercive one-child policy in 1979, restricting the majority of families to one child. When international adoption began in 1992, China became the leading source of transnational adoption, initiating the diaspora of Chinese adoptees.\(^2\) There was an influx of international adoption into the United States, and between 1999 and 2019, approximately 80,000 Chinese children were adopted by families in the United States.\(^3\) Over 267,000 children have been adopted from China in total, which means that nearly a third of them were adopted into an American home by parents of a different ethnicity. Resultantly, these children are distinguished from adoptees who were either adopted by families of the same race.

International adoption from China is a unique situation and Miller-Loessi et al. (2001) define it as such for several reasons. Beyond the large population size and the enactment of the one-child policy, a strong son preference is a common cultural and social tradition in Chinese society, especially in rural areas. Among traditional gender roles and expectations, gender bias is derived from a historically

\(^1\)(Zhang 2017, 143)
\(^2\) (Hoshman 2006, 5)
\(^3\) (Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019)
agricultural economy and production emphasis, leading to the belief that sons are more valuable than daughters. The preference for a son leads to a disproportionate amount of girls being abandoned and adopted. While the national policy sought to slow China’s population growth, a subsequent problem was the overcrowding of orphanages with children in need of government care. As a solution, the Chinese government allowed for international adoption but reinforced a ritualized method for the adoption process.4 It was also required that adoptive parents come to China to receive the child and finalize the adoption under Chinese authority.5 Miller-Loessi et al. (2001) describe the carefully monitored process as a way to frame the adoptions as a gift, which situates the adoption between feelings of celebration but also indebtedness. Often, adoptive parents encourage and celebrate the idea that the adoptees have completed their families and that they have always been loved and found rather than forgotten.6 It is also common for adoptees to celebrate their adoption day in various ways. However, adoptees may also feel indebted due to their perception being shaped by social assumptions and beliefs in the white savior complex by the public and parents. There are tropes that illustrate Chinese adoptees as rescuable and helpless and their adoptive parents as the saviors of the children who offer them a better life and more prosperous opportunities.7 Indebtedness also stems from the efforts by the Chinese government to carefully monitor the movement of the adoptee into adoptive families.8 This context creates confusion as

4 To oversee all China adoptions, the Chinese government established the China Center of Adoption Affairs (CCAA) in 1996. The CCAA standardized the steps to adopting: complete a dossier with assistance from U.S. based agencies (2-4 months), submit a dossier to China and await a child referral (36-48 months), acceptance of the child referral by families, travel to China to complete the adoption.
5 Due to policy, Chinese international adoptions are only permitted to heterosexual couples and single women who are 30 years or older. The adoptive parents eligibility is measured by being mentally and physically fit, meet a certain income level, and complete an extensive lifestyle and household background check. Additionally, China does not permit LGBTQ+ individuals to adopt (U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Consular Affairs).
6 An emphasis on families being complete by the adoptee and that instead of being lost, they were found, was a common experience by the cultural informants in this study.
7 “The Chinese orphan girl–labeled as pitiful, rescuable, marketable, and desirable–and their adoptive parents–seen as heroic, yet necessary saviors–present a romantic and sentimental story that is both alluring and attractive… this parent-drive narrative obscures the reality of privilege and oppression that allows for such adoptions to occur in the first place” (St. Clair 2017, 16)
8 The efforts are seen in the ritualized method mentioned previously, which ensured financial stability and age dependability of the parents.
children were originally displaced by the Chinese government and their birth parents, but at the same time, the government ensured the security of the adoptive family.⁹

Within Chinese international adoption, the direction of flow is primarily from poorer to richer nations, creating an association with cultural imperialist policies. Cultural imperialist policies are amongst other controversies about international adoption. “One of the arguments commonly made is that rich nations should be helping to address the root causes of Third World children’s homelessness rather than ‘importing’ the children via adoption.”¹⁰ By encouraging cultural imperialism policies, it reinforces the white savior mentality and an assumption that adoptees are immediately given a better life in America. This mentality continues to place a hierarchy between richer and poorer nations. Furthermore, is it important to question how children’s homelessness is an issue that is solved by displacement? Once displaced, they are instantly viewed as important as citizens of the richer nation. Furthermore, given the historical context of policy and gender bias, Chinese international adoption is viewed as a human rights issue with implications for social justice.

**The Diaspora of Chinese Adoptees**

Globalization has destabilized local places, practices, and identities. For Chinese Americans, the meanings of “Chineseness” and Chinese ethnic identities are diverse, especially in the context of the American reconstruction of Chineseness.¹¹ Emigration from China has not only been defined by the outward flow of migrants but also by the back-and-forth movement and exchange.¹² Louie’s 2004 fieldwork and studies that focus on the experience of non-adopted Chinese Americans highlight two themes: the ways that Chinese identities are renegotiated across national borders, and the continued

⁹ “When parents stress Chineseness, they end up having to explain a very difficult and delicate situation in a complex context where they deliberately give some credit to Chinese politics and traditions that ultimately caused the abandonment” (Miller-Loessi et al. 2001, 249).

¹⁰ (Miller-Loessi et al. 2001, 244). Hoshmand et al. (2006) state that issues of cultural socialization also stemmed from this movement of children from the developing world to developed countries in the West.

¹¹ (Louie 2004)

¹² (Louie 2004, 43)
importance of place and rootedness to the diverse Chinese identities. The study finds that return trips to China serve as a transnational process of root searching, contributing to the creation of their Chinese identities. Chinese American identity narratives are defined by the search for roots, negotiating Chinese culture through the notions of traditions, customs, food language, and history through both the interpretations from America and homeland China. Given the unique circumstances of first-generation Chinese Americans living in the United States, one could draw connections between their experience and Chinese TRAs. Yet, Lee (2006) argues that Chinese TRAs are distinct as a unique diaspora community due to being involuntarily and forcefully displaced. Chinese TRAs are given an adoptee consciousness, and in addition to negotiating meanings of Chineseness and Chinese Americanness, they must also navigate their Chinese adopteeness.

There are six defining aspects of Chinese adoption, which correspond to the diaspora phenomenon: an involuntary dispersion to widespread areas, collective memory and myth about homeland and birth family, a developed symbolic return movement, a strong ethnic group consciousness, hostility from the host country, and a sense of empathy and solidarity with other Chinese TRAs. Lee (2006) frames these aspects as necessary to the Chinese TRA experience. Yet, this thesis argues that these defining aspects are not required in any capacity to determine the value and legitimacy as a Chinese TRA. Some Chinese TRAs may feel a closer relationship to specific aspects based on their own experience and navigation of identity. Often, some aspects are related to cultural networks, racial socialization, and financial means, which are beyond Chinese TRA control and are directly related to location and family. According to scholars, there are also documented factors that foster transracial adoptees’ ethnic identity, which contrasts with the factors Lee (2006) described for Chinese Americans. The factors include: “returning to the adoptee’s native country,” taking Chinese language courses,

13 (Lee 2006; Miller-Loessi and Kilic 2001; Cohen 1997; Safran 1991)
14 For Chinese Americans who grew up in an Asian home, returning to China may serve as retracing ancestral roots and inform specifics of their own family history and the culture taught by their parents (Louie 2004, 98).
initiating searches for birth parents, engaging in conversations about race and ethnicity, and having conversations with the adoptive parent(s) about potential interests in exploring ethnic roots. The factors indicate that because culture is not inherent, it is dependent on the adoptee’s intentionality to construct their identity. The existing studies forefront Chinese adoptees as active participants in defining and shaping their lives. Therefore, with the interdependent relationship between identity and place, I speculate how Chinese adoptees also become active agents in shaping the places around them.

**Remaking Home: Human Mobilities and Perpetual Foreigners**

The relevance of this thesis is reflected in both large and small-scale issues, such as displacement, migration, and inclusion, as well as my personal stake. In recent years, climate crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued conflict and instability have critically sparked new forms of human mobilities, exacerbating existing patterns of displacement, and also halting some flows of people. Specifically, changes in climate including extreme weather events and drought have reduced resources and safe living conditions, forcing internal and cross-border migration. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on movement such as travel bans, border closures, and quarantining. This has made it difficult and impossible for people to seek safety and resources. The reasons for displacement are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are intersectional, reflecting the global inequality that disproportionally impacts previously vulnerable and oppressed populations. Chinese transracial adoptees are one displaced group in which the reasons are intersectional, reflecting global inequality and the disproportionate impact on previously vulnerable and oppressed populations.

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15 (Blair & Liu 2018; Ponte, Wang, & Fan 2010; Randolph and Holtzman 2010; Tieman, Ende, & Verhulst 2008)
16 (McAdam 2010, Jayawardhan 2017, Martinez 2009)
17 “Environmental displacement is not solely an ecological problem. It is a multicausal problem where ecological and socioeconomic vulnerability act together to displace marginalized people.” (Jayawardhan 2017, 103).
18 Due to the social and political climate of China in the late 1900s, low income and rural families were more directly impacted by the One Child policy.
While international migration slowed overall during the height of COVID-19, the UNHCR 2021 report informed that globally, more than 100 million people were forcefully displaced due to persecution, conflict, and human rights violations. In regard to the United States, the U.S. Census Bureau anticipates that the net international migration to the United States will fully return to pre-pandemic levels this year. Displacement and human mobilities have eroded clear boundaries of culture and forefronts the dynamic nature of translocality and place. However, with the rise in human mobility, how do vulnerable displaced populations remake their sense of home and find belonging in places that may be inherently unwelcoming?  

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18 “By May 2022, more than 100 million people were forcefully displaced worldwide by persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2022).

19 “This is the first time net international migration increased since 2016, marking the largest single-year increase since 2010—an indication that net migration flows to the United States are on track to return to pre-pandemic levels this year” (Knapp & Lu 2022).

20 “…translocal spaces as ‘a set of dispersed connections across spaces, places and scales which become meaningful only in their corporeality, texture, and materiality—as the physical and social conditions of particular constructions of the local, become significant sites of negotiations’” (Daskalaki et al. 2015).

21 This is one of the main questions of the thesis.
Figure 1: Relevance Diagram
While the United States is fundamentally an immigrant nation with an ethnically and culturally diverse population, its colonial foundation has ultimately created a highly racialized landscape. The [ever-evolving] construction of race and whiteness aims to justify the oppression of racial minority communities through legal policy and institutional practices. Moreover, whiteness became defined by the exclusion of those who were not white, thus interconnecting race, place, and power. Even when racial minorities were afforded perceived opportunity, it was still defined by white terms. In the mid-1800s, when the Chinese immigrant landscape was growing due to economic prospects, Chinatowns were also developed out of survival. While Chinatowns were places of translocality and protection, the concept belonged to white, tourist communities. The racialization of space and the spatialization of race continues to oppress racial minorities within the current immigrant landscape. One outcome of the association of race and space is translated through the correlation between American identity to the white American or white identity. Within the U.S., the estimated number of people of Chinese descent was 5.2 million in 2021. Nevertheless, Asian Americans are often viewed as “perpetual foreigners,” as their nationality, ethnicity, and culture are constantly called into question or misunderstood.

While the pandemic has created disruptions that may have long-term impacts on migration, it also saw increased anti-Asian sentiment and discrimination. The usage of stigmatizing terminology such as, ‘Chinese Virus’ and ‘Asian Virus’ in association with the Coronavirus in public discourse and media

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22 “They stem from concrete policies and practices: Indian removal in the age of westward expansion; restrictive covenants during the industrial era; and urban renewal and urban restructuring in the late industrial and early post-industrial periods” (Lipsitz 2007, 12)
23 “Whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be “not white” (Harris 1993, 30). “Federal law restricted immigration to this country on the basis of race for nearly one hundred years, roughly from the Chinese exclusion laws of the 1880s until the end of the national origin quotas in 1965” (Lopez 2006, 27).
24 White architects designed the built environment and they “rebuilt Chinatown in the way that white architects, what they perceived as Chinese architecture and Chinese culture” (Vox 2021, 9:00).
25 “The lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension” (Lipsitz 2007, 12).
26(U.S. Census Bureau 2023)
27(Sue et al. 2007; Tesla et al. 2020, Huynh et al. 2011)
28 The increase can be attributed to media coverage and sociopolitical means.
outlets further reinforced the concept of “perpetual foreigners”. These outcomes have especially complex effects on Chinese transracial adoptees (TRAs), which is an already forcefully displaced and fragmented community across the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has situated Chinese transracial adoptees in a vulnerable position by being viewed as a racial threat, while also leading to questions of identity and an uncertain sense of belonging. The lack of a sense of belonging can be attributed to inconsistencies regarding feeling valued, connected, and accepted by the group that inhabits the specific place. Chinese transracial adoptees are commonly raised in predominantly white neighborhoods, and reciprocity of beliefs with these contexts through shared experiences, understanding, and behaviors also develops feelings of belonging. Since the development of identity is closely tied to group acceptance and experiences, the ongoing anti-Asian sentiments can negatively affect Chinese TRAs. They may no longer feel welcomed and belonging in predominantly white spaces or spaces in which the inhabitants express anti-Asian views. These spaces also present potential emotional and physical dangers. Additionally, they experience continued conflict between how people view them and how they view themselves as both adoptees and Asian Americans. Often, they are questioned about their relationship with their adoptive parents or their validity as American citizens. When they are seen as a “perpetual foreigner”, this creates confusion and disconnection with how they see themselves. Similarly, the Asian American community may not acknowledge the Chinese TRA experience as there is a lack of shared cultural aspects. The push from both communities situates Chinese TRA within a

29 (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020; Huynh et al. 2011; Lee et al. 2009; Wu 2002)
30 Wing & Park-Taylor (2022)
31 “Feeling valued and respected, and the influence of opinions and interactions of an individual with the group were also identified as being important to a sense of belonging. Specifically, a sense of reciprocity of exchange of feelings or beliefs between the individual and the group of interest, as well as a feeling of acceptance by the group were identified, where acceptance could stem from shared experiences, understandings, or behaviors between the individual and the group” (Mahar et al. 2012, 4)
32 Adoptees are often asked if they want to find their “real parents” or reconnect with their “real families”, which invalidates the connection to their adoptive parents as their real parents.
33 Transracial Adoption Paradox (Lee 2003).
vulnerable and perpetual state of liminality.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, the recent events of COVID-19 have exacerbated feelings of being in-between, which was already reflected in their identities, but also now even more so with shifts of group membership and feelings of belonging.

The historical relationship between race and place puts architects and designers in an opportune position. During a time of increased human mobility and displacement, architects have a responsibility to assist in the dismantling of the racialized landscape. Architects must understand that diverse stakeholders are the experts in their own spatial awareness and behaviors in their built environment. Additionally, as mediators between physical and emotional experiences, architects have the capacity to bridge the gap between disciplines and professions.\textsuperscript{35}

The Relationship Between Identity, Place, and Belonging

This thesis is framed by several key parts to question how the relationship between identity and place contribute to Chinese transracial adoptees’ sense of belonging. First, there is a reciprocal relationship between identity and the built environment. The environment and community directly shape how a person views oneself but in turn, the inhabitants have control and influence over their environment through their spatial behaviors.\textsuperscript{36} People often formulate their identity in relation to belonging to a community, as well as their cognitions of a place and group.\textsuperscript{37} When people identify with the social and emotional aspects of an environment, they experience a sense of belonging. Yet, a space becomes a place when it achieves a distinctive identity, and in an adoptee place, the hierarchical power

\textsuperscript{34} The introduction of Chinese transracial adoptee experience and how the current events and sociopolitical conditions impact the focus population previews the ongoing themes of liminality throughout this thesis.

\textsuperscript{35} This is an introduction to the positionality of architects and designers, which will be expanded upon further during the methodology section.

\textsuperscript{36} “There is a mutual and dual impact between man and his environment. Not only does the environment act upon men, but man acts on environments… More recently…increased emphasis has been given to the design of flexible, changing environments which men can manipulate, shape and alter. Here, man becomes an environmental change agent, not merely a recipient of environmental influences. And, according to this approach, the environment becomes an extension of man's being and personality.” (Proshansky 1976, 35).

\textsuperscript{37} This can be described as social identity theory and identity process theory. Both aspects of identity are always associated with a specific place.
relations are foundational. Moreover, Chinese TRAs tend to identify with a more “white identity” as the dominant influences and environments are often their white families and predominately white spaces. However, due to the recent events of COVID-19, Chinese TRAs have a heightened sense of being perceived only by their physical characteristics by the public to which they are seen as a racial threat.

The increase in microaggressions and sociopolitical tension between the U.S. and China disconnects Chinese TRAs to places and communities that may have been foundational to their identity. On the other hand, Chinese TRAs may find it difficult to feel connected to China and Chinese American communities. Often, Chinese TRAs are labeled as ‘bananas’ or ‘twinkies’—yellow on the outside but white on the inside—to imply complete assimilation to American culture and the erasure of Chinese culture. Furthermore, in spaces that reflect a dominant culture and power structure, Chinese TRAs may feel out of place as it may not completely align with their intersectional and hybrid identities.

Second, when Chinese TRAs feel disconnected from a place or if a place contributes to the fluidity of their identity, placemaking strategies create opportunities to realign identity and place. Placemaking is a means of cross-cultural exchange and individual and collective agency through which people and communities transform their surroundings to be more reflective of their identities.

Placemaking can be employed through all aspects of a place: socially, behaviorally, and physically. Chinese TRAs may be more inclined to integrate aspects of Chinese culture into their lives and environment. Similarly, they may seek out in-person and online adoptee networks and communities. Moreover, understanding how Chinese TRAs experience environments and how they are shaped by their surroundings allows for the creation of environments that encourage agency.

39 The anti-Asian sentiments just added fuel to the preexisting label of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.”
40 Wing et al (2022)
41 “Both physical and social environments may contribute to or detract from an individual’s sense of belonging. These environmental factors may be transitory, or they may permanently affect an individual’s sense of belonging, resulting in a dynamic tension” (Mahar et al 2012, 6)
42 “…Placemaking generally depicts a process of activity that leads to collective reimagining of a group’s surroundings to be more reflective of their interests or identities” (Burchell 2021; Boeri 2017)
LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity defines an individual through the ongoing interactions between the internal definitions of self and the external forces from social and cultural factors. We derive our sense of self from membership in social groups or categories, as well as from the psychological processes of memory, consciousness, and self-esteem. Moreover, these identity theories are embedded within the built environment, which develops a reciprocal relationship between people and place. Identity is impacted by place, but place is also impacted by identity. To define this, the term “place-identity” was introduced by Proshansky et al. to illustrate the aspects of self-identity impacted by the built environment. The places where people grow up shape who they are, what they value, and how they interpret and behave in certain places. Existing literature has begun to synthesize the social psychology identity theories and place-identity theory to create a framework to understand the many forces that shape identity. While there is an adequate amount of theoretical exploration of place-identity, there are some gaps in case studies that focus on the other side of the mutual relationship. Specifically, how the dynamic patterns of identity impact the built environment and places within displaced communities. Regarding Chinese TRAs as a community that is given a new identity through involuntary displacement, a review of the following literature concerning identity depicts patterns of hybridity and liminality due to the process from assimilation to accommodation and reculturation. Due to the correlative nature of identity and place, it is important to this thesis to analyze identity theories to understand how places can reflect the dynamic identities of Chinese TRAs.

43 These are social identity theory and identity process theory, respectively, and are discussed hereinafter in further detail.
Figure 2: Literature Review
Social Identity Theory: Racial Identity Negotiation

Social identity theory suggests one’s identity is defined by the sense of belonging to a social category or group, such as nationality, culture, religion, family, or neighborhood. Often, the question of “Who am I?” is answered by comparing similarities and dissimilarities with others; also known as social self-categorizations. Stets and Burke (2000) interpret a social identity as being one with a certain group, being like others, and sharing the group’s perspective. Yet, identity can also be defined when we feel a certain disconnection from a group due to a difference in values, culture, and lifestyle. Places are inherently social, and often, a place is associated with certain groups of people. Moreover, people move to specific places to gain or maintain a positive social identity, indicating that social identities have locational implications. When transracial adoptees experience changes in their ethnic or cultural identities, their social identity changes as they begin to self-categorize with groups that reflect these changes. The social identity theory is reinforced through Mohanty’s 2013 study that examines the role of multiple identities in the relationship between family socialization, social environments, and psychological well-being among Asian adoptees. It is common for anyone to experience different sides of themself depending on the environment and group of people. Yet, I would argue that often transracial adoptees experience being forced to choose depending on public perception and identification placed onto them. When transracial adoptees are denied control over how they are seen and understood, their well-being can be negatively impacted.

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44 (Tajfel 1978)
45 Sometimes it is clearer to distinguish a disconnection instead of an alignment, conceived as “us” vs “them”.
46 I use place over space as it encompasses a larger connection and meaning between the environment and people. I define place further in the following sections.
47 (Twigger-Ross et al. 2018, 206)
48 Socialization as the social interaction and process which assists a person in acquiring the culture of the group.
49 Transracial adoptees are usually identified by their physical characteristics by the public. However, if they disclose their adoptee status, public perception may shift and only associate the adoptee by their whiteness and white families.
Contrary to similar research findings, ethnic socialization (integration of cultural values, heritage, and ethnic pride) was found to contribute negatively to adoptees’ self-esteem. Parents may attempt to integrate the adoptee’s birth culture into their families, but it can be difficult to teach their child about a culture that they (the parents) did not grow up in or know very little about.\(^{50}\) While ethnic socialization may be difficult to accomplish, Mohanty (2013) found that support for racial socialization and an awareness of racial bias increased adoptees’ sense of comfort with their adoptive identity and thereby increased their psychological well-being. Yet, not all families make efforts to address racial discrimination.

**Color-Blind Racism**

Langrehr (2014) suggests that the reason why some families engage in racial and ethnic socialization while others do not can be due to color-blind racial attitudes. Color-blind racism is an ideology that “explains contemporary racial inequality as a result of nonracial dynamics”, which reproduces inequality.\(^{51}\) Parents may perpetuate color-blind attitudes to minimize racial differences, but subsequently, aspects of socialization are negatively affected. Following the idea that adoptees complete their adoptive families and have always been connected, parents may attempt to reduce any separation or differences between themselves and the adoptee. Similarly, well-intentioned adoptive families may attempt to encourage belonging by reinforcing sameness and fail to prepare the adoptees for bias and ethnic socialization. Langhehr’s 2014 study applied a three-step process to test the effects of color-blind attitudes on three different socialization variables. The study findings were consistent with prior research that suggests parents with lower color-blind attitudes positively endorsed beliefs in support of racial and ethnic socialization. When parents understand ethnic differences between themselves and their

\(^{50}\)”For transracial adoptive families, the process of cultural socialization is complicated by the apparent and immutable racial and ethnic differences between parents and children… In addition, White adoptive parents are less likely to have first-hand knowledge and experience to teach their children about life as racial/ethnic minorities in society” (Lee 2003, 721).

\(^{51}\)(Bonilla-Silva 2014, 2-3; Mctaggart and O’Brien 2020, 41)
adoptive children, it may be more likely for the adoptee to be exposed to multicultural communities through activities and organizations.  

Another issue of color-blindness is that it reflects the white privilege of ignoring or marginalizing race, thereby reinforcing the normalcy of whiteness. This issue is a historical and ongoing issue, which has been supported institutionally and legally by defining whiteness as what it is not. Moreover, if race is ignored, then whiteness continues to be seen as the default, unmarked marker. Goar et al.’s 2017 study suggests that infrastructures and communities are significant in moving from color-blindness to race consciousness. Infrastructures can be conceived of as multicultural education, organizations, resources, and activities within a diverse, representative community context. When the racial status is shared among family members, the parents’ experiences and histories are used to help guide their children. However, when white parents adopt children of color, it becomes difficult to approach teaching them their racial differences. Moreover, it is important that parents seek out resources to both equip themselves but also prepare adoptees for a racist social system. Goar et al.’s study focuses on white parents who attend culture camps and if they experience any changes regarding race consciousness.

Culture camps provided information, support, and community for transracial adoptees and their families. The camps were typically structured by different independent organizations, which led to the camps varying in size and cost. However, they all served as a resource to help adoptees connect birth and adopted cultures and create a community. The culture camps encourage open discussion about adoption

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52 “As far as transracial adoptive families are concerned, Baden et al. (2012) affirmed, in a recent theoretical contribution, that parents’ cultural socialization could serve as a crucial factor in triggering adoptees’ exploration of their ethnic identity, as it provides opportunities for adoptees’ engagement in “reculturative” activities which allow them to actively explore their heritage culture. Parental cultural socialization may promote a higher level of ethnic exploration which, in turn, could lead to an increased and more clearly achieved affirmation of ethnic identity, a sense of belonging and commitment to the ethnic group and a secure and confident sense of group membership” (Ferrari et al. 2015, 415).

53 “The first camp, Mountain Air Camp (MAC), is a weeklong program located in an exclusive resort area. Families have access to cabins and lodges and, in addition to programming, are able to participate in activities such as hiking, canoeing, and horseback riding… The second camp, One World Camp (OWC), is a weeklong day camp that focuses solely on children’s programming. It is housed in a large, suburban church in the Midwest, and most of the participants reside in that area” (Goar et al. 2017, 341).
and race and provide tools and support to the attendees. Due to the various independent organizations that ran culture camps, access was also dependent on location and financial means.

*The Transracial Adoptee Paradox*

Commonly, adoptive families choose predominantly White neighborhoods, and Chinese TRAs tend to adopt a “white identity” to align and self-categorize with the dominant group. They are also given an honorary white status and they experience a sense of white privilege. However, despite identifying with the white dominant group, Chinese TRAs are still subjected to racism. The dichotomy of experience and public perception defines the transracial adoptee paradox. Although Chinese TRAs align with a “white identity”, they are outwardly perceived as Asian and perpetual foreigners in the United States. In a study by Cheryan and Monin (2005), they found Asian Americans express identity denial when they are reminded that they are seen as outsiders. Identity denial can be in the form of claiming ignorance of Asian culture or the elimination of any signs that could associate them directly with societally authentic Asian group membership. On the other hand, when Chinese TRAs attempt to fit into society’s definition of Chinese, their “white identity” deems them as inauthentic Asian members by many within Asian American communities. Consequently, Chinese TRAs may feel shame or guilt and attempt to distance themselves from their Chinese/Asian identity.

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54 This reflects the social identity theory experienced by the white, adoptive parents. They are drawn to people with similar lifestyles, reflective of what they believe to be home and a sense of belonging from their memories and identity.

55 A study found that “individuals with European features were perceived as significantly more American than individuals with Asian features by White Americans, even when participants were explicitly told the targets had been born in the United States.” The study also found that Asian American participants did not agree with the view of themselves as less American (Cheryan & Monin 2005, 720).

56 When confronted as foreign, the social identity theory shows that people will feel a negative self-identity, leading to a desire to prove oneself and reinstate feelings of belonging with the dominant cultural group.

57 (Baden et al 2012, 389)

58 “This estrangement from their racial and ethnic identities may have arisen both from not being connected to their birth culture because of their upbringing and as an attempt to counter views of Asians as perpetual foreigners in the U.S. (Sue et al. 2007; Wing * Park-Taylor 2022).
Identity Process Theory: Towards Reconstructing Identity

Identity Process Theory (IPT) examines the socio-psychological processes that are essential for identity construction and change.\(^{59}\) These processes describe the relationship between memory, consciousness, and a person’s understanding of a situation or place. The structure of self-identity is controlled by the processes of accommodation-assimilation and evaluation. Assimilation is the absorption of new aspects into identity, while accommodation refers to the adjustments made to the existing identity structure to integrate the new aspects.\(^{60}\) The evaluation aspect is the process of evaluating the positive and negative feelings associated with the process of accommodation-assimilation. The process is guided by four identity motives. Jaspal et al. 2014 describe it as: “(i) continuity across time and situation (continuity); (ii) uniqueness or distinctiveness from, others (distinctiveness); (iii) confidence and control of one’s life (self-efficacy)\(^{61}\) and (iv) a sense of personal worth or social value (self-esteem),” as well as (v) being accepted by others (belonging) and (vi) finding purpose in one’s life (meaning).\(^{62}\) Twigger-Ross & Bonaiuto (2012) argue that places are important sources of identity elements because they embody social meanings and significance. First, places represent personal memories, and second, places frame intergroup relations and therefore reflect social memories and histories.

The structure of IDT is reflected in the process of exploring the bicultural identity negotiation of Chinese TRAs as seen in Blair and Liu’s research study (2018). One of the main themes that emerged was the emphasis on personal, self-identity compared to other-ascribed identities, which were sometimes incongruent, leading to identity gaps. The majority of the participants viewed their cultural identity as “American” rather than “Chinese-American” due to their limited understanding of Chinese customs. Yet, some participants felt a misalignment between their cultural identities and their ethnic/racial

\(^{59}\)(Breakwell 1986; Jaspal et al. 2014)
\(^{60}\)(Twigger-Ross 2003, 208)
\(^{61}\)I would like to add “control over one’s environment” to self-efficacy as well.
\(^{62}\)These identity motives can inform the moments when Chinese TRAs decide to explore their cultural identities.
identities.\textsuperscript{63} Subsequently, the scholars found that the participants favored reconstructing their bicultural identities through the preferred outcomes of assimilation and accommodation. The shift from assimilation to accommodation leads to stronger, more integrated bicultural identities.\textsuperscript{64} When transracial adoptees grow up in white families and areas, they may identify more with being American and attempt to eliminate distinct cultural differences.\textsuperscript{65} This could be seen as self-deprecating jokes to downplay their experience, agreeing with microaggressions, or denial. On the other hand, accommodation encompasses an exploration of their roots through various activities such as food, language, and traditions, which creates a balance—or bicultural identity. The study found that for each assimilation and accommodation behavior, there are also three versions of each: nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive. Nonassertive assimilation refers to when the participant expresses identity denial and over-accentuates the alignment with the dominant group. Likewise, nonassertive accommodation attempts to create change in the dominant culture through non-confrontational means, and it shows ambivalence concerning the importance of their Chinese identity. In contrast, aggressive assimilation is shown through expressions of self that are hurtful to fit in with the dominant culture. Aggressive accommodation is when “there is a deep-rooted desire for transracially adopted children to define their ethnic identity, especially when individuals misrepresent their culture or say hurtful and derogatory things.”\textsuperscript{66} The movement from nonassertive to aggressive further reveals the dynamic and complex nature of identity reconstruction.\textsuperscript{67} Moreover, assimilation refers to the emphasis on the commonalities between Chinese TRAs and the dominant culture, while accommodation behaviors serve to defend their heritage if it was being misrepresented.

\textsuperscript{63} The misalignment can be connected to a process in IDT’s identity motives (continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, belonging, meaning).

\textsuperscript{64} (Blair & Liu 2018)

\textsuperscript{65} Eliminating distinct cultural differences may also be to ensure safety, depending on the situation. Sometimes, it is easier to agree or to deny a difference in experience to avoid long, intrusive conversations.

\textsuperscript{66} (Blair & Liu 2018)

\textsuperscript{67} Chinese TRAs need to experience cycles of misalignment and awareness of the differences in their identity through social interactions and psychological responses to situations in order to intentionally explore their identities.
Reculturation: A Reclaiming of Culture

Reconnection and reclaiming of one’s birth culture are conducive to the movement from assimilation to accommodation. Baden et al. (2012) define reclaiming one’s birth culture as the process of reculturation. It is a process of identity development through which Chinese TRAs intentionally create a relationship between their birth and adoptive cultures through activities and experience. Reculturation is triggered by life events that create a desire to learn about one's birth culture. Baden et al. (2012) found five potential outcomes of reculturation, which vary in the degree of connection and disconnection a Chinese TRA has with adoptee culture, reclaimed culture, bicultural identity, assimilated culture, and combined culture.

Place Identity Theory: The Impact of Place

To explain the environment’s influence on identity, it is important to understand the interaction between people, memory, place, and space. Hayden (1995) explores the relationship between space and place within urban landscapes. She argues that the built environment actively shapes public memory and collective identity. Since memories of place differ depending on the person, Hayden expresses the importance of an inclusive interpretation of public history. Similarly, Low (2017) links space and place through the people and memory of the social and cultural aspects. Although connected, Low argues that there is a distinction between place and space. Space refers to more abstract concepts such as physical dimensions and properties, while place encompasses the social and cultural connections that

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68 Blair & Liu's (2018) accommodation incorporates the action of reconnecting and reclaiming in order to assert their bicultural identities.
69 Situating Chinese TRAs as the main initiator for identity development is a recurring pattern.
70 The built environment can act as a trigger, especially when an environment is misaligned with social identity and self-identity.
71 “Hayden maintains that places (buildings, sites) have great potential for an inclusive interpretation of public history because the memory of experience is rooted in specific physical locations. Tapping that memory—bringing it back for persons who were part of shaping a given landscape or recreating it for those who are experiencing it for the first time—is a powerful tool that draws strength from its inclusiveness” (Roak 1996).
72 Low (2017) compares how space and place are connected and disconnected by linking current discourses within the disciplines of philosophy, geography, architecture, environmental psychology, anthropology, and archaeology.
give space meaning and values. Her literature breaks down the relationship through several conceptualizations between space and place. First, they are separate constructs with no overlap. Second, “space and place are separate constructs, but overlap such that, at least conceptually, there is an area where they intersect and come together.” The intersection is where they merge pieces of their properties. A space may be designed for a specific program and then encourage certain types of social and cultural aspects, which crosses over to the definition of place. Yet, I argue that this is the traditional flow of power experienced in architectural education and practice. Often, architecture is designed to encourage social and cultural aspects, whereas, place highlights the importance of the stakeholders to determine those aspects.

Finally, the most common conceptualization is that place is the lived space constructed from spatial practices and is directly experienced. In other words, place is defined as a space that is inhabited and given personal and group meanings through emotions, sensory perceptions, and shared understandings. Similarly, Massey (1995) suggests that place and senses of place develop from all aspects of a person’s life experience. Place represents the deeper meanings of a community through social and cultural aspects, concluding that a “sense of place” expresses emotional bonds and shared values with the community. Connecting with the community is reflected in shared experiences and storytelling, which both uphold shared values. Additionally, people can sense familiarity to a place through its environmental qualities and materiality. When these aspects feel familiar and comfortable, people are naturally drawn to the place. Other measures of place identity development include cognitions about certain places through place attachment and place dependence, in addition to a sense

73 (Low 2017, 12)
74 (Low 2017, 32)
75 This is reflective of the concepts of social identity theory, and racial and ethnic socialization strategies. (Twigger-Ross et al. 2003, 212). The emotional bonds and belonging can be to the built environment itself but also to the people and communities associated with the place.
of place. The perceptions and comprehensions of the environment can be organized into two types: one that consists of memories, thoughts, and values, and the second is the relationship among different settings. These cognitions can impact a person’s selective engagement with their environment.

Proshansky (1970) describes place identity as the reciprocal relationship between people and place, stating that, “spaces and places like people change, and these changes, in turn, induce change in the behavior and experiences of the people who brought about these changes in the physical environment in the first place.” While there are theoretical developments to describe how people and identity are embedded in place, relatively little empirical work has been undertaken to understand place identity as it applies to displaced communities. Proshansky (1970) argues that by comparing the physical world with one’s past environments, reflection enables a person to recognize and understand the world around them. Duncan (1982) argues that “environments effectively communicate identity when they are congruent with identity.” Therefore, what does it mean for environments to reflect the multi-layered phenomenon of Chinese TRAs’ identity development?

Contemporary research that focuses on transracial adoptees suggests that their adoptee identity has a strong impact on where they choose to live during adulthood. Rienzi (2012) conducted a study that analyzed the identity development of Korean adoptees in the U.S. Midwest as they aged. In the study, “place” structured the opportunities available to adoptees for ethnic and racial exploration and more direct relationships with Asian communities. During early adulthood, those who left the Midwest and moved to the West Coast for college were more likely to make connections with

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76 “Place-identity as a cognitive sub-structure of self-identity consists of an endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical settings that define and circumscribe the day-to-day existence of the person” (Proshansky et al. 1983, 77).

77 (Hauge 2007, 4-5). This could be interpreted as “place attachment”, a subcategory of place identity, which refers to the bonds that people develop with places (Qazimi 2014).

78 (Proshansky et al. 1970, 5)

79 “Environmentally, identity can be communicated at many scales, ranging from humanity, through countries, regions, cities, neighborhoods, villages and so on. It can be communicated by buildings, spaces, and semi-fixed feature elements…” (Duncan 1982, 28).
non-adopted Asians. Rienzi notes that while cities feature great ethnic and racial diversity, it doesn’t always indicate inclusiveness. Rather, small towns may protect from racial bias due to a sense of familiarity. Nevertheless, the adoptees in the study were consistent in seeking greater Asian representation. During mid-adulthood, it was found that exposure to a Korean adoptee community was the preferred method of exploration of ethnic identity and reinforced a strong emotional connection to one another. Based on the research findings, a “sense of place” can be directly related to the social aspects of the environment. Place becomes more significant when it “provides opportunities for adoptees to interact on a personal level with others who share similar life circumstances.” Direct socialization also refers to the connection with non-adopted Asian communities in which there can be an exchange of experience and found commonality.

Since both social identity and identity process theories rely on social aspects and psychological responses that are congruent with their self-identity, new and different places affect identity. Breakwell (1996) emphasizes that new places affect identity through unfamiliar places that may diminish the positive supports often found in familiar places. Similarly, new places may impose new expectations which invalidate earlier experiences and associations (threat), and soon new places may outweigh the old place (dislocation). However, new places may function as triggers of reculturation. It is a common pattern that when people feel a conflict between their identities and a new place, they attempt to reconnect the two. The process of reconnecting identity and environment indicates strategies of placemaking and agency of people.

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80 The identity stage at which a transracial adoptee was at in terms of reculturation and identity development was unclear, but prior studies suggest those with a greater reconnection to culture and ethnic identity choose locations with greater representation and social diversity.
81 This reinforces Mohanty’s (2013) study, demonstrating the importance of racial and ethnic socialization.
82 This aligns with Social Identity Theory.
83 (Rienzi 2012, 136).
84 Breakwell (1996) provides another framework for analyzing a process of identity development.
85 This is similar to social identity theory: if our identity and values are different from a group’s identity and values, we can immediately identify the incongruence.
Placemaking: Creating Environments of Belonging

Placemaking is the process that leads to a collective reimagining and reshaping of the surroundings to be more reflective of their interests or identities.\(^{86}\) Main and Sandoval (2015) found that in the context of displaced communities, placemaking is a vehicle for “cross-cultural learning, individual agency, and collective action.”\(^{87}\) In Main and Sandoval’s 2015 study, they analyzed MacArthur Park in Los Angeles during the process of revitalization by the local Latino immigrant community. It is important to note that the location features many community-based organizations that assist the community by providing immigration advocacy work, affordable health care, and housing, as well as cultural services.\(^{88}\) Through surveys, it was found that the majority of the participants had strong ties with their homeland but also felt that MacArthur Park reminded them of their homeland due to the park reflecting important places of the past.\(^{89}\) “The need to connect with and reproduce significant past environments motivates immigrants to engage in everyday and political practices of placemaking in receiving communities.”\(^{90}\) Past environments are then transformed into the possibility of future and reimagined environments. Furthermore, MacArthur Park reflected the ties to their homeland through social or cultural elements, as well as a feeling of comfortability and belonging associated directly with others with shared ethnic identities.

In-Betweenness: Liminality, Identity, & Translocality

Reflecting fluid and temporary identities, Burchell (2021) finds that transracial adoptee-generated spaces are characterized by their grayness, intimacy, and existence completely

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\(^{86}\) (Burchell 2021; Boeri 2017). Placemaking is the method and process Chinese TRAs can use unconsciously or consciously to align place with identity.

\(^{87}\) (Main & Sandoval 2015, 73). Cross-cultural learning, individual agency, and collective action could be reflected in Chinese TRA’s experiences as navigating acculturation and bicultural identities, intentional identity exploration, and socialization strategies, respectively.

\(^{88}\) (Main & Sandoval 2015, 76)

\(^{89}\) In reminding the stakeholders of places of the past, it demonstrates the cognitions of place identity through place attachment.

\(^{90}\) (Main & Sandoval 2015, 83)
separated from the superiority of whiteness. In New York, transracial adoptee placemaking is a manifestation of space claiming to assert an idea, belief, or identity. It removes the binary between American and Asian and creates an in-between space for transracial communities. In-between spaces are translocal in nature, and they are dispersed and are liminal experiences. Liminality refers to an experience that is common with transracial adoptees in which their experiences and identity are in constant movement between and across identities—Chinese, American, adoptee identities—and sometimes neither of them. By defining the identity experience of Chinese TRAs as a state of perpetual liminality, it acknowledges that the experience of identity and place are not fixed entities. Furthermore, this concept suggests that liminality is not a temporary experience, but one that is a fundamental aspect of the human condition regarding spatial awareness and spatial behavior. Burchell (2021) finds that the Asian transracial adoptee experience is manifested in places that are both independent from Asianness and whiteness, while also situating itself in between each.

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91 (Burchell 2021, 31). This resembles characteristics of Chinese TRA’s bicultural identities.
92 “The concept of translocality disengaged the experience of locality and belonging from being situated in a particular neighborhood or homeland and instead locates it in the mobile bodies and multiplicity of spaces of immigrant lives. It includes, however, the possibility of simultaneous social interrelations and the integration of translocal social fields and actors occurring in the built environment…” (Low 2017, 181). Liminality refers to the state of being “neither here-nor there”, “between-and-betwixt” (Ibarra 2005; Mayrhofer & Iellatchitch 2005; Beech 2011; Daskalaki et al. 10)
METHODOLOGY

This thesis explores how Chinese transracial adoptees employ placemaking strategies to both nurture identity development but also to create a sense of belonging in place. The thesis utilizes existing literature and previous study research, which defines the experience of identity development in Chinese transracial adoptees as hybrid and liminal, to question what it means for the built environment to reflect the complexity and layered nature of Chinese TRAs’ identities. Through ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, and design justice methodologies, the study aims to foreground Chinese transracial adoptees in the construction and navigation of their racial and ethnic identities. Moreover, the objectives of this study include the use of identity theory frameworks and place identity to better understand how Chinese TRAs experience and construct identity, and how different places might affect their understanding of their self-identity.

Over a month, I facilitated four semi-structured group conversation sessions with the cultural informants: Chinese transracial adoptees raised in the U.S. Midwest. The usage of a group conversation format for data collection was intended to create a sense of community among the participants and to obtain stories and experiential detail that went beyond a survey. The sessions were organized into three focus topics: community, identity, and connecting memories to place. Each session was designed to build upon each other by expanding on themes of identity, adoption, belonging, community, and place. The topics were introduced by utilizing discussion questions, interactive storytelling, and multi-sensory, place-based storytelling exercises. At the conclusion of the group conversation sessions, I also conducted individual exit interviews. During each exit interview, I provided an overview of the main findings, sought clarification regarding specific quotes and questions, and encouraged open dialogue regarding the main topics and findings. Using the information from the group conversations and exercises, I intended to find common themes and patterns about identity and place.
Figure 3: Methodology Diagram

Ethnography

Since this thesis seeks to generate unique personal insights from a group of shared experiences, I used ethnography as a central methodology. Ethnography is a method in which the researcher seeks to understand a culture of a particular setting by becoming embedded in a community through observing and recording behavior. The method is flexible as it responds to the ideas as they emerge during a study with the goal of understanding a complex social phenomenon in an authentic setting.

Ethnography is often used in anthropology, however, within an architectural and design application, Cranz (2016) argues that an ethnographic approach will allow architects to produce more creative and human-centered designs. Architects have a responsibility to respond to users. However, historically, the field of architecture has been, and currently is, heavily dominated by the cisgender, white male lens, leading to design approaches being reflective of these narratives. As a result, misinformed design occurs as there is a lack of representation of the diverse and intersectional nature of the users within a space. Misinformed design, along with institutional and sociopolitical factors, creates environments that become inherently unwelcoming and exclusionary. Moreover, the design of and the resulting built environment is directly related to power and hierarchy because “powerful groups create and control spaces, and, conversely, spaces produce power for their users”. Further, designs that either disregard the stakeholders or are framed by the default, cis-male, and able-bodied user, reinforce the racialized and post-colonial landscape. It is important to reflect and acknowledge one’s personal biases and understand how they may influence observations and analysis of the data. Anthropologist and development theorist Arturo Escobar argues that a decolonized approach to design focuses on

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94 (Tetnowski & Damico 2014, Morgan-Trimmer, 2016)
95 (Cranz 2016, 9)
96 “Be aware of your own personal biases is central to doing field work… Your cultural background will always influence your perception of the environment and become a source of bias and distortion” (Cranz 2016, 20). I also restate and expand on these ideas further in the relevance section.
collaborative and place-based practices.\textsuperscript{97} Cranz (2016) takes a similar approach, stating that designers must see people as experts in understanding their own culture.\textsuperscript{98}

\textit{Design Justice Framework}

Since the thesis intends to forefront the stakeholders to create community empowerment and agency in the construction of their identities and the built environment, I also drew from design justice methodologies. The Design Justice Network is an interdisciplinary group that synthesized a framework that ensures design processes and practices become a tool for liberation and avoids the reproduction of existing inequalities.\textsuperscript{99} The design justice framework is a living document that centers on those who are normally marginalized by design and uses collaborative, creative practices.

![Design Justice Framework](image)

Figure 4: \textit{Design Justice Framework} (Costanza-Chock 2020)

While some aspects of the framework are more emphasized than others, the entire framework served as the infrastructure of the study.\textsuperscript{100} Regarding the design and engagement mentality, I

\textsuperscript{97} (Costanza-Chock 2020, 67)

\textsuperscript{98} Cranz (2016) defines “Cultural Informants” as those who are experts in understanding their own culture. I often use this term to label the participants, and throughout the study “cultural informants” and “participants” are interchangeable.

\textsuperscript{99}(Costanza-Chock 2020, 6).

\textsuperscript{100} Specific aspects of the design justice framework are reflected or emphasized more within different engagement parts of the study.
approached the research study less as a designer and an architect, but with more emphasis as a facilitator and collaborator with the cultural informants group.\textsuperscript{101} Additionally, the goals of the study align with questioning how community-led practices lead to non-exploitative outcomes. Beyond the project approach, specific framework components motivated strategies of data collection and analysis methods. In particular, the creative exercises for each group conversation session were designed to be accessible. Before each exercise, I discussed any knowledge and tools that may be helpful for the cultural informants. Additionally, I designed the creative exercises for each group conversation session through the understanding that each participant has a different background and experience.\textsuperscript{102} Instead of viewing the differences as a disadvantage, it was celebrated through the encouragement of participant interpretation and decision over the selection of art and images.\textsuperscript{103} Finally, to ensure accountability, transparency with the cultural informants was translated across all phases of the project. Individual meetings were completed before and immediately following the group conversation sessions, which created opportunities to communicate the goals of the project, present observations, and receive feedback from the participants. Working in tandem with more traditional research methods, the design justice framework further responded and encouraged how Chinese transracial adoptees are active agents in the construction of their identities and environments.

\textit{Auto-Ethnography}

As a Chinese transracial adoptee, my personal story of identity and the experience of place has influenced how some of the data and conversations were interpreted and constructed. The study centers around the voices of the Chinese transracial adoptee participants through the group conversation sessions, which create opportunities to question further how a transracial adoptee community is created

\textsuperscript{101} This approach as a co-creator of the space and viewing the participants as partners and collaborators work in tandem with auto-ethnography.

\textsuperscript{102} With the understanding that each participant may have a creative background and existing knowledge, I ensured that I did assume any lack of knowledge.

\textsuperscript{103} “We believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience, and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to a design process” (Costanza-Chock 2020).
through shared experiences. Additionally, existing research focusing on adoptees and identity has been completed by transracial adoptees who offer their lived experiences to reinforce critical moments and patterns. This variation of ethnography is auto-ethnography. The approach is a qualitative method where the researcher is a part of the group under investigation and provides an “insider’s” account of what is being studied.\textsuperscript{104} Anthropologist Karl Heider first used the term in 1975 during his study of students in Dani Valley, Indonesia. Heider sought to understand how the students see themselves and define their own lives by reporting the Danis’ responses devoid of researcher annotations.\textsuperscript{105} Hayano (1979) approaches auto-ethnography as studies by researchers in which they focused on their own community. Auto-ethnography can be advantageous as they create a lens into a more personal and authentic view of the experience, as well as an opportunity for reflection on the emotional experiences of the participants.\textsuperscript{106} Auto-ethnographies also highlight people processing the meaning of their struggles and offer readers and participants companionship.\textsuperscript{107} While Cranz (2016) focuses on ethnography, some aspects of her approach align with auto-ethnography. She states that a researcher should attempt to cultivate an insider’s point of view to encourage one’s own subjective view to better align with that of the focus group. Additionally, empathy leads to a perspective that can help designers advocate for users.\textsuperscript{108} However, I would argue that there must be a distinction between active listening and directly prescribing membership with the focus group to one’s self. While the attempt to gain an insider’s point of view reduces the observer’s subjective view and could assist in understanding needs, it also disregards the reality that some experiences are impossible to understand as an outsider. Moreover, the

\textsuperscript{104} (Tetnowski & Damico 2014, 2)\textsuperscript{105} Auto-ethnography created a lens into “the Dani’s own view, or knowledge, or cognitive map of their world” (Heider 1975, 9).\textsuperscript{106} (Tetnowski & Damico 2014)\textsuperscript{107} (Ellis 2007, Bochner & Ellis 2006)\textsuperscript{108} (Cranz 2016, 47)
importance relies on the ability to empathize and reaffirm experience to empower those directly affected.\textsuperscript{109}

Within this study, auto-ethnography is important to explicitly address as the foundation of shared experience and sense of community is vital to the Chinese transracial adoptee experience. As a Chinese transracial adoptee, my experiences have informed and structured the research.

**Ethnography and Auto-Ethnography: Objectivity and Ethical Considerations**

Hayano (1979) raises ethical considerations regarding bias in collecting and interpreting the information. Similarly, Cranz’s (2016) main critique of ethnography is that personal bias and ethnocentrism will result in the researcher losing objectivity, which impacts the design and analysis.\textsuperscript{110} To reduce the effect of personal bias, researchers select their data based on theory.\textsuperscript{111} Therefore, when approaching the data collection and analysis methods, the thesis is grounded in theories of identity and place identity.\textsuperscript{112} Due to being informed by theories across disciplines, I attempt to reduce the likelihood of selecting data based on its alignment with my personal experience. The theories of identity and place identity will also assist in creating pattern categories or identifying key patterns from the cultural informants.

Another method to mitigate ethical concerns is through reflection. Reflection is often used for analysis as it creates awareness of personal experience and bias that may impact the results.\textsuperscript{113} Johnson (2021) engages in a reflective, auto-ethnographic approach as a transracial adoptee studying

\textsuperscript{109} This connects to the design justice framework.
\textsuperscript{110} “Another basis for selective observation is ethnocentrism, the deeply ingrained attitude that our own culture is superior to others” (Cranz 2016, 20).
\textsuperscript{111} “…Most research employ a second means for enhancing their objectivity: they consciously select their data on the basis of theory. Researchers seldom simply go out to ‘gather the facts.’ Rather, researchers take with them an implicit theory of what is important.” (Cranz 2016, 21).
\textsuperscript{112} Social identity theory and identity process theory.
\textsuperscript{113} “This is somewhat of a meta-analysis of self; allowing for the researcher to examine their own views that can impact the findings and interpretations of their research” (Tetnowski & Damicco 2014, 5-6).
international adoption, identity, and belonging. By intentionally making oneself a subject of the study, Johnson utilized a storytelling framework to map out their own experience with kinship, identity, social identity, and key social interactions. Following this, Johnson (2021) conducted a thematic analysis to understand how different theories apply to specific moments or events. The coding and analysis methods used allowed for the separation between the researcher and the data. While I am not approaching the study with an exclusively auto-ethnographic approach, I acknowledge both the beneficial and negative implications. As a Chinese transracial adoptee, I believe my insider view will assist in the construction of a community environment and dynamic within the cultural informants group. Additionally, I attempt to address any ethical concerns raised in existing literature through the integration of reflection and developing my role as a semi-active participant within the organized group. Within any design project, the outcome and analysis will be subjective and reflect the designer in some form. However, this thesis departs from normalizing the researcher’s unawareness of bias through the acknowledgment of this occurrence. Furthermore, reflecting and understanding my own experience is vital as the designer of this thesis. I also sought to mitigate any ethical concerns by gaining an exemption from the UWM Institutional Review Board. This thesis has been categorized as a study that seeks non-generalizable information from the participants. Rather, the data analysis and final findings are intended to focus directly on the cultural informants involved in this study.

Part 1: Community Building

Co-Creating the Space

I chose to create a focus group as my qualitative data collection framework because I wanted to gain deeper insights and understand the spatial behaviors of the cultural informants. To organize the

114 (Johnson 2021, 34)
115 The exception from IRB approval came from the submission of xForm: IRB Determination Form. The contact for more details: irbinfo@uwm.edu
116 Cultural informants serve as representatives “of a cultural group who can inform you about the cultural knowledge in the sited micro-culture” (Cranz 2016, 4).
focus group, I utilized the existing network of Asian students on the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee
(UWM) campus for convenience sampling and to accommodate time constraints. I began by contacting a
representative of the UWM’s Asian Student Union (ASU) and obtaining a list of individuals who may align
with the study’s participant requirements. A limitation of the recruitment strategy is that there is a lack
of diverse representation, despite the study’s objective of having a small sample size. I emailed five
individuals a recruitment letter inviting the adoptees to participate in the study. After receiving positive
interest from the individuals, I conducted individual, introductory meetings to discuss their voluntary
participation expectations. The participants were all in their 20’s, grew up in the U.S. Midwest, and were
adopted from China between ages 9-11 months. While I intended to facilitate the group conversation
sessions in person, due to location and time constraints, the meetings were conducted virtually over
Microsoft Teams. Additionally, I used an online collaborative whiteboard, Miro, to present materials and
document the shared information. Each session lasted approximately one hour.

Since I utilized the existing network of Asian students on the UWM campus of which I have been
a member, I was acquainted with the majority of the participants. My familiarity with the participants
may heighten the subjectivity and bias outlined in the critiques of ethnography and auto-ethnographic
methods. Specifically, Cranz (2016) argues that there is a danger in analyzing familiar places or
communities as the researcher is likely to possess a level of knowledge and impressions.117 However, I
argue that the preexisting relationships allowed for the group to build off of an already developed
rapport and sense of trust, which is integral to community engagement.118 The creation of a community
between the cultural informants group underpins the methodology and data collection methods.
Through implementing the design justice framework, community building serves as a strategy to create

117 “You likely already possess a level of knowledge, impressions, and attitudes about a particular social situation
and may not be aware of it.” (Cranz 2016, 27).
118 While I did have preexisting relationships with the majority of the participants, the degree of familiarity and
comfortability differed. Due to these varying levels of familiarity, I started everyone at an acquaintance baseline.
This also reflected my attempt at ensuring the previously unknown members feel included.
collective agency. Therefore, the construction of community also aligns with the theories of ethnic socialization and an understanding that Chinese transracial adoptees are active components in defining and shaping their lives. Additionally, due to the nature of transnational adoption and the context of China’s One Child Policy, conversations about adoption and identity can surface emotions and trauma. Often, adoptees feel isolated in their experience of identity and reclaiming of culture. Developing an inclusive and understanding community space can emphasize a supportive network of shared experience. Moreover, my contributions to the early conversations regarding my own adoption story and identity experience created an immediate foundation of comfortability.

**Restorative Justice/Restorative Practice Circles**

The group conversation sessions were structured using methods of restorative justice/restorative practice circles (RJRP). The method has indigenous origins in which it was used to address harm and transform conflict. RJRP elevates the voices of all involved and creates a space of sharing and accountability for any wrongdoing. RJRP circles are used within school and incarceration contexts as an alternative model to formal court programs and disciplinary actions. Restorative justice is often viewed as a social movement due to healing individual harm and also transforming social structures and institutions as the one that creates harm. RJRP circles also assist in the creation of a community since the approach prefers inclusive and collaborative processes. Pranis (2005) states that the usage of peacemaking circles creates freedom of discourse, symbolizes shared leadership, and promotes participation from all. The goal of RJRP circles is to create a safe space in which participants feel safe to be vulnerable and their most authentic selves. The main principles of RJRP circles support this thesis’s intentions of community building and sharing vulnerable experiences. There is an intentional structure to

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119 Adoptees may feel isolated due to location, resources, and social aspects.
120 (Davis 2019)
121 (Davis 2019)
122 (Zehr 2002)
123 (Pranis 2005, 11)
RJRP circles: ceremony, a focal point, a facilitator, guidelines, and consensus decision-making. I also included a check-in question and breathing as a method to ground the participants into the space. The virtual environment adds challenges to RJRP circles regarding engagement and full participation. However, I encouraged the usage of the chat and writing on Miro as sharing methods. The Miro board also serves as the circle focal point, allowing the participants to focus on the collaborative board during personal story sharing. Additionally, I argue that the virtual environment creates a level of comfort due to the participants being physically in their own space and having the option to mute and/or turn off cameras.

*Group Conversation Session 1*

The first session functioned as an introduction for the participants and the virtual space. We discussed general background information including pronouns, where the participants grew up, and where they were adopted from. The majority of the group conversation session was creating multi-sensory descriptions of two places. The first was the participants’ immediate surroundings. We discussed what objects were within their eyesight, what they were hearing, what they were smelling, how they felt internally, and what they come into direct contact with. Second, they were asked to think back to a place in which they felt the most themselves, and then follow the same description structure as they did for their immediate surroundings. The exercise served as an introduction to the types of topics that the group will be further discussing, as well as the implementation of general storytelling and multi-sensory description methods.

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124 Pranis 2005, 11
Part 2: Identity

Ekphrasis: Image and Writing

Another objective of this thesis is to implement exploratory and multi-method approaches that seek to expand on existing engagement and ethnographic strategies. While the foundational data collection structure is in the form of the focus group, the categories of identity and place had different discussion and exercise methods. Elliot & Culhane (2017) introduces several new kinds of ethnography methodologies, including sensory, writing, and performance practices. It can be difficult to discuss personal experiences and vulnerable memories. Therefore, new creative practices that relate to art forms create an opportunity to serve as a new medium of conversation and memory. One creative practice is ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is a multimodal interpretive process that occurs through the transformation of one art using another. In other words, “in arts, ekphrasis or ekphrastic expression involves the transformation of concepts represented in one medium into isomorphic concepts represented in another medium”. The transformation becomes a representation of the viewer’s interpretation. This thesis incorporates ekphrasis as a creative method of ethnographic inquiry that combines art, writing, and storytelling.

Rautajoki & Toikkanen’s (2019) study utilized ekphrasis to find connections between semiotic multimodality and aesthetic intermediality in storytelling. Communication is a complex process that involves multiple modes of expression—from verbal, written, visual, and embodied actions. The study

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125 “This combination of imagination, creativity, and ethnography has the potential, we believe, to deepen, complicate, and extend our inquiry into how people make, repair, and remake the world” (Elliot & Culhane 2017, 16).
126 (Ponomareva & Ponomareva 2019). Historically, ekphrasis is the creation of poetry from a visual art piece. However, within my study, I implement creative narrative writing as it is more accessible.
127 (Gero, 2017; Fowler, 1991; Goldhill, 2007; Knapp, 2011; Leader, 2014; Newby, 2002; Scott, 1992)
128 “All externalization of mental concepts is representation and is a form of ekphrasis.” (Gero 2017, 2).
129 Semiotic multimodality refers to the various forms of communication, and aesthetic intermediality refers to the combination of various artistic medias to produce deeper meanings.
focuses on “what is told (the tellability of the story) and how it is told (the tools for mediation).” The combination of multiple forms of expression create new and unique meanings and interpretations. They argue that there are three levels of communication: sensory, environment, and cultural context. Their ekphrasis process was the transformation from the medium of a provided scenario based on an actual event to a presentation of embodied storytelling by the interviewee. They found that visual imagination caused by the scenario was translated through bodily gestures and actions. Furthermore, through ekphrasis, a person’s experience and cognitions are revealed Rautajoki & Toikkanen’s (2019) study reinforces the creative ethnographical approaches. I intended to incorporate more explicit connections to Rautajoki & Toikkanen’s (2019) study, however, due to the group conversation sessions being facilitated virtually via Teams, I sought alternative methods of ekphrasis through writing. Moreover, I found an alignment between Ponomareva & Ponomareva (2019) and Elliott & Culhane (2017) regarding creative written interpretations of a work of art. When one responds to art through text, it becomes a verbal representation of a nonverbal form. Through writing, there is an opportunity for the viewer to pay close attention to how the art elicits emotional responses and how they can draw connections between the artistic themes and their own experiences. Additionally, the written formats allow the researcher to draw direct quotes or stories using the cultural informants’ own words. However, since

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130 In our analysis, we will take into account the two modes of communicating feeling in the storytelling:
1. emotions topicalized in talk (discourse analytic verbal description – what is said about feeling in terms of emotional labels?)
2. The stream of affectivity (its multimodal realization) – how is the feeling displaced and communicated physically in the interaction?

131 “As we focus on interviewee’s bodily gestures and actions, and the visual imagination that they represent, the significance of affective intensity in the scene becomes evident” (Rautajoki & Toikkanen 2019, 4).

132 “In any case, ‘ekphrasis’ is conceived as an important tool in the study of the aesthetic impact of a description in the reader’s/spectator’s mind” (Ramos 2004).

133 “Ekphrasis is a category which realizes the transfer of specific features of art into verbal texts is also treated as the process of foregrounding and interpretation of the dominant expressive means of the original into ekphrastic texts” (Ponomareva & Ponomareva 2019, 545). I would also argue that nonverbal forms refer to both the themes found in the art, but also to the viewer’s emotions, experiences, and stories.

134 “Cvetkovich explains that the craft of writing is a way to ‘open up,’ to allow for speculative thinking, unfinished thoughts, and imagination to enter our writing… It involves slowing things down, cultivating a careful awareness and attention to both minutia and larger forces of power, nurturing a sensitivity to seeing, knowing, and representing the intimacies and rhythms of lives that sometimes slip by in everyday moments of chaos.”
ekphrasis reflects interpretive processes found in ethnography and auto-ethnography, there is a consideration of objectivity during data analysis. The method of ekphrasis was used in various forms throughout Sessions 2-4.

*Group Conversation Session 2*

The second session focused on the cultural informants’ experience as an adoptee growing up in the U.S., their navigation of identity, and any influential social factors. The organization of the meeting reflected the RJRP circle structure that was introduced during Group Conversation Session 1. Drawing from previous studies of ekphrasis, Group Conversation Session 2 incorporated art pieces from a national group of Chinese transracial adoptees to start the dialogue surrounding identity and the adoptee experience. I utilized the 2022 compilation of artistic and creative works curated by China’s Children International.\(^{135}\) The collection features poems, creative writing, and visual art. The cultural informants were asked to respond through writing to one art piece by answering a list of questions. The questions focused on the themes found in the art and then they were asked to draw a connection to personal experience. The ekphrasis process was not fully employed during this session since there was reduced time for the participants to fully reflect and respond to the art. Nevertheless, the approach to selecting the art was successful in engaging with the participants through reflection in order to expand deeper and elicit more personal story sharing.

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1. View the Art Anthology collection and select an art piece that:
   - Stands out to you through emotion, visual, and or thematic means
   - Broadly reminds you of your experience with identity

2. Add the title of your selected art piece on a sticky note

3. Questions - Reflect upon the following questions and write a response.
   - What stood out to you about the art piece and why?
   - Tell us about a memory regarding your experience with identity that came to mind when reflecting on the themes presented in your selected artwork

Strategies for Viewing Art - Some aspects to consider
- Shape
- Composition
- Color
- Setting
- Emotion
- Texture

GOALS
- Use art as a medium of conversation and memory
- Use the interpretation of art to process personal experience

Figure 5: Session 2 Activity Format
The Next Generation
Nicolette Lacy

Egg-istential Crisis
Aubrey Meling

Lost Souls
Anna Watson

Made in China
Aubrey Meling

Even
Thea Bliss

Figure 6: Session 2 Selected Artwork
Part 3: Spatial Imaginaries and Connecting Memories to Place

Spatial Behavior and Spatial Memories

Human interactions and experiences are inherently rooted in the environment. When people recall specific memories, they often associate them with and describe them through environmental qualities. Moreover, memories have behavioral, social, and spatial components. Spatial memories influence spatial behaviors when new environments are inhabited, interpreted, and imagined.\textsuperscript{136}

Group Conversation Session 3

The third session shifted from the traditional discussion structure of sessions 1 and 2 and introduced more collaborative exercises. One goal was to identify the intersections between the participants and how they interpret and describe places. Moreover, it was important to understand the influence of their own experiences over the imagined narratives and interpretation of environments. The activity reintroduced the process of ekphrasis and applied it by co-creating stories through images and text. There were considerations related to the sharing and reinterpretation of personal memories. Specifically, there was uncertainty if the cultural informants would be more focused on representing the memories accurately rather than providing their interpretation. Similarly, there may have been hesitation about providing personal memories with the understanding that others would be translating and responding directly through images and written descriptions. To mitigate these concerns, the exercise is designed around the creation of fictitious spatial memories in response to a co-authored storyboard. Between each of the five steps of the exercise, the cultural informants would switch and respond to another participant’s work. The movement between each other’s image selection and creative narratives elicited hybrid responses and contributed to the creation of community through creativity.

\textsuperscript{136} "...the individual's behavior is guided not only by the goals he seeks but also by his cognitive processes, that is, by the way he reads and interprets or even imagines his environment" (Proshansky 1970, 171).
1. Setting the Scene - Select 1 Core Image

2. Sensory Aspects of the Scene - Find 3-5 sensory images and move below the core image. The images can be representative of textures, smells, sounds, and/or taste.

3. Create Spatial Memory A - Respond to the scene and the sensory aspects through writing several sentences for each:
   - Why are you in the space and what are you doing?
   - What are you feeling? Why?
   - What is in your surroundings?
   - How does this environment affect your emotions?

4. Visually Respond to the Spatial Memory A - Find an image that expands on the written description.

5. Create a Spatial Memory B - Respond to the second image.

GOALS
- Elicit hybrid responses
- Find intersections between cultural informants
- Understand relationship between their own experiences and the imagined narratives
- Further create community through creativity

Figure 7: Session 3 Activity Format
The child is back in their ultimate comfort space—their bedroom. Cozyed up in a fuzzy blanket with their pet, and laptop, they’re ready to spend hours binge watching their favorite shows. It has been a long week between work and friends and it’s time to recharge. They’re content because the week is over and now they can spend time alone to unwind and play with their pet. It’s comforting to hear the sounds of cars and people outside, knowing that they’re not alone, but also separate from the chaos of the outside world. They’re suddenly having a hard time deciding what to do, but welcome the indolence and allow their mind to wander as it needs to. This gentle boredom is exactly what they need to rest and ground themselves.

The birdwatcher is finally abroad, searching for the last bird in their field book. They wish they weren’t preoccupied with spotting the bird because they haven’t had the time to relax and enjoy the beautiful landscape. They are nervous because they’ve been searching for several days, but they are also excited to conclude two years of birdwatching. While it has been a long journey of birdwatching, it is lattest in the spring. Birdwatching has enabled the birdwatcher to travel and visit places they’ve never traveled before. They are taking a break to eat some fruit on a dock that overlooks the mountains and forests. They are feeling warm due to the hot day and hungry to carry multiple binoculars and gear. The swishing of water can be heard from a nearby stream. The environment overall is making the birdwatcher feel peaceful but also warms them since they still haven’t found the rare species.

She is in her children’s newly painted room. Their toys are on the shelves and their favorite stuffed animals are by the window. She is feeling proud that she can give her children a safe and fun space. She has been working hard for them and to make the space for them. She lives in an apartment and tries her best to make it as comfortable and as home-like as possible. She can’t buy a house just yet, but she is saving up until she can. She lives in the city, so it is hard to come across most affordable apartments. Overall, she feels very content with her choices.

The village is walking through the mountains to find a specific herb for their meal. They are feeling indifferent. This is something that they have to do quite often. In the back of their mind, they are thinking about the possibility of running into some kind of threat like a dangerous wild animal, but for the most part, they are confidently walking through the mountains like a seasoned traveler. This slight anxiety is essential to survival. Their surroundings consist of miles and miles of trees and nature. There are many different animals that live within this forest. Some are very important to the village’s life such as deer or elk. Others are feared and the village takes great care to avoid them. Since the village is so used to traversing the mountain, their members are more centered around their goal. They are determined to look for the herbs and are hopeful that they will find it sooner rather than later.

Figure 8: Session 3 Storyboards
The sector is traveling the city and staying at a high-end, futuristic hotel. They are exploring new places, eating at Michelin-star restaurants, and relaxing by the pool. They are called the 'seekers' because they always want to experience the best and newest things. It rained a bit in the morning, so they stayed close to their hotel. In the afternoon, they walked around a bit and found a huge conservatory which ended up being the perfect spot for journaling about their travels. For dinner, they went to a nice dinner at a very popular restaurant. As the end of the night, they went back to their hotel. Surrounded by the city and hundreds of things to do, the seeker couldn't wait for the next day. They felt lots of happiness, since they are doing what they've always wanted to do.

The girl was excited to be able to visit the green house on the first time. She loved how peaceful and warm it was inside. It was her first chance on her vacation to visit before she returned home. There were plants and animals inside the only seen in pictures. As excited as she was, she was feeling very tired. Knowing that her experience with only a very small part of the world, still, she tried to enjoy every moment she could see. The auditorium had a cute café that she got a coffee and some food at, so she was just sitting at a table enjoying her watching the birds and people around her. This was one of her favorite memories from the trip. She'll look back at this eye-opening moment with inspiration to continue to be curious of the world she lives in.

She is traveling alone. A nomad, she is wandering wherever she goes. She has a backpack on her back and she's crossing under a train bridge, going to find the next right place for her. She feels safe all by herself, it's peaceful to be crossing through this wheat field. She hears the different sounds of nature, the chirping birds and wind coming through the grass. She doesn't need to know where she is going, exactly how she'll get there, or what she'll do once she gets there, but now of those things matter in this moment in the sun.

He is heartbroken. It was the perfect plan to go to the most romantic, secluded spot that overlooked their quiet town. She was the most loving and caring speech, then get down on one knee with a simple ring for her delicate finger. Instead, he had been waiting hours for her to meet him. The wind is whipping through the grass, the air is turning cold. Three shouts begin to darken in the sky. He knows that it will rain soon, but going back to their home would be much more painful than facing the constant sharpness of the frigid drops of water on his already damp cheeks.

Figure 9: Session 3 Storyboards
The girl has just moved out to live on her own for the first time and has just moved to a big city. With her dreams of owning her own business, she took a leap off into exciting here. The city is so new to her, alive with new sounds and smells that she has never heard before in her small town back home. There are so many people around her all living their own lives. So many conversations being had, foods being eaten, things to try and places to go. She is overwhelmed with the idea of starting anew in this place.

Her biggest concern is her business. Though she is excited and eager for the challenge, she is scared that she may fail. She wants to make this happen; she is determined to succeed at all costs. The worry of making new friends in a city so big also concerns her as well. Without knowing anyone, it is hard for her to call this new place home.

In her new space that she calls her own, she finds comfort in it being a place of hope. Her space feels clean and new, ready for her fresh start. In her space she doesn’t have much yet, but she proudly owns and displays the few things that she really loves. Items from her childhood, her hometown and paintings on the wall that keep her dreaming. Her new space is freezing and it fills her up with energy and motivation in her new city that she hopes to call home.

Coffee shops are his favorite place to be. There’s always so much going on around him when he spends time at the coffee shop that all his worries melt away when he is here. In this co-op space, he hears a conversation between a couple debating about what to buy for their house, he hears a professor talking mathematics over his textbook to a student taking algebra notes. There is a woman sketching in the corner, a fellow sitting on the last bar, to order just for his daughter. There is music playing over low in the background of all the other noise. He can smell espresso brewing, the same smell that comes off his cup of coffee before he sips it.

The best part of coffee shops, he thinks to himself, is the way they make him feel. With the modern lounge style to the coffee shop, he feels as though the customers and him are guests in someone’s living room. They are brought together by the need for their favorite cup of coffee and good conversation. The space feels open and free of stress, with decor on the walls making it feel warm and inviting instead of stark and cold. The lighting is warm and inviting, ready to be filled up with new thoughts and ideas. He feels hopeful here and in community with those around him.

Figure 10: Session 3 Storyboards
Group Conversation Session 4

The fourth session was an amalgamation of the practices implemented in the previous sessions. Throughout all sessions, the cultural informants were consistently asked to illustrate various experiences and environments through multi-sensory aspects. Similarly, they often reflected on significant moments in their lives that may have shifted their sense of self and identity as transracial adoptees. Session 3 served as a shift towards the integration and consideration of environmental qualities through visualizing sensory aspects within an environment. Therefore, the goal of session 4 was to describe significant memories by deconstructing them into their environmental qualities and then retelling the events as spatial memories. First, the cultural informants selected a memory from a time period: childhood (0-10), adolescence (11-18), or adulthood (19-current). Second, they provided a description of the memory. Third, they disassembled the memory into environmental qualities, which were categorized into the material, sensory, social, and emotional aspects of the memory. Finally, they used the environmental qualities as a method of reinterpretation to construct a layer of spatial awareness associated with their memory.
1. Select one significant memory that has shifted your sense of self and identity - Provide a description of the memory.

2. Describe the material, sensory, social, and emotional aspects of the memory

3. Connect the memory to the environment - Describe the memory as a spatial memory through the material, sensory, social, and emotional environmental qualities.

Reflect on the following questions:

• What is in your surroundings?
• What are you feeling? Why?
• Who is in the space with you?
• How does this environment affect your emotions?
• How would you describe your identity in this space?

GOALS
• Deconstruct memories into environmental qualities
• Use environmental qualities to retell memories as spatial memories

Figure 11: Session 4 Activity Format
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>WO</strong></th>
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<th><strong>AK</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solid, metallic, plush</td>
<td>Blanket, bed</td>
<td>Wet ground, plants, rocks, wood, water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noisy, pungent, cold, aromatic</td>
<td>Soft, cold</td>
<td>Bike, sun, wet, fresh air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative, loving, understanding</td>
<td>Family, friends, alone</td>
<td>Friend, public, frogs, turtle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident, capable, full of growth</td>
<td>Sad, burdened, numb, helpful, angry</td>
<td>Wanderlust, bliss, peace, happiness, free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 12: Session 4 Spatial Memories**
Figure 13: Session 4 Spatial Memories
Individual Exit Interviews

The sessions established a sense of community and collective empowerment through creative exercises. While the sessions were intended to prompt responses from all cultural informants, due to time constraints and the semi-structured approach, there were some gaps in the information provided by each participant. Therefore, individual exit interviews were important for the clarification of information and to ensure transparency regarding project progress. While the interviews were voluntary, I highly encouraged them and I met with 4 out of 5 participants. During the meetings, I started by sharing the main themes and commonalities that emerged throughout the group conversation sessions. The participants responded to the main themes and reflected upon their experiences in the sessions. I then described quotes and themes that the participant personally expressed, and asked a series of questions:

- Do you think you’ve thought more about your Asian identity or your adoptee identity?
- How would you describe your cultural and ethnic identity?
- In your current environment, in what ways is your identity shown?
  - How does this compare to your childhood environments?
- What kinds of places do you feel like you can fully express both your Asian identity and your adoptee identity?
- What is a space that used to feel safe to express yourself but is now the opposite?
- What would an ideal transracial adoptee space look like to you?
- What does home look like in the future for you?
Addressing Limitations of the Engagement Methods

Since this thesis intends to uplift Chinese transracial adoptees and their experiences to answer the research questions, it was a foundational intention to organize a smaller group of 5 cultural informants. While there was a lack of diverse experiences, the smaller scale allows for more opportunities for community building and story sharing in the group conversation sessions. However, the group environment often resulted in an unbalanced amount of sharing across participants. The unbalanced sharing can also be attributed to shorter discussions due to the session exercises requiring a large amount of the allotted time. While the group discussion sessions were intended to be semi-structured and conversational, the majority of the dialogue interchange between participants was reactionary rather than expanding on larger connections. To address the uneven sharing, all of the exercises implemented writing, which allowed me to obtain their responses even if they didn’t have an opportunity to verbally share. Similarly, although it was not originally integrated, I encouraged individual exit interviews following the group conversation sessions. The one-on-one meetings created another opportunity for the participants to share and expand on specific topics.

Other limitations of engagement methods were previously outlined and were associated with objectivity and ethical considerations of ethnography and auto-ethnography. During the analysis of data, I applied the theories of identity and place identity to reduce the likelihood of selecting data based on its connection to my personal experience. Moreover, the identity theory frameworks informed the organization of the main findings and their subcategories.
Data Analysis

The data analysis of the group conversation sessions and the individual exit interviews consisted of a process of transcribing, annotating, isolating themes, and ordering quotes into main categories. The multi-step method was used to draw patterns and intersections between the participants. Since the group conversation sessions were semi-structured and encouraged a conversational approach, often the stories shared were varied and not consistently aligned with the session’s focus topic. Rather, the stories each participant expanded upon were related to their interpretation and experience during the creative activities. Furthermore, it was vital that the quotes were categorized THEMATICALLY across all sessions and interviews. Due to the complex and intersectional nature of the collected data, another part of the analysis was the visualization process. The process itself was multi-step, which creates the opportunity to focus on one cultural informant and their individual experience. Yet, the process also links the participants as the steps were directly informed and shaped by the main themes and their subcategories.
MAIN THEMES

The thesis focused on the liminality that Chinese transracial adoptees experience throughout their lives regarding identity and place. Across the group conversation sessions and the individual exit interviews, common themes emerged regarding comfort and belonging, and identity. Each main theme is subcategorized to illustrate specific evidence and experience shared by the participants. The subcategories of comfort and belonging are a connection to their childhood home, having agency and resilience within the built environment, being alone or having indirect social interactions, having close social interactions through found communities, and coming from rural and small-town upbringings. Identity is divided into feelings of in-betweenness, the contrast and implications between public perception and internal perception, experiencing microaggressions during adolescence, discovering more about cultural and ethnic identity later in life, having open conversations about adoption throughout childhood, being given control to discover more about their ethnic identities, and integrating aspects of Chinese culture into their lives.
Figure 14: Main Themes diagram showing each cultural informant’s connection to the subcategories.
Comfort and Belonging: Agency in the Built Environment

Throughout the engagement strategies, the study questioned how the cultural informants found comfort and belonging in the built environment. There is a clear correlation between agency and environment to construct comfort and an attachment to place. A sense of agency is especially important when the physical place of home is temporary due to education and professional reasons. My research also found evidence to support the importance of the social aspects of a place, which aligns with previous studies and identity theory frameworks. Additionally, the cultural informants also expanded on other environmental qualities that could contribute to their feelings of comfort and belonging in a specific place.

From the beginning, a commonality was a connection to their childhood home. The home embodies comfort and belonging through familiarity and nostalgia. These personal environments are not only familiar through objects and materiality, but they are also socially predictable and associated. Often, the cultural informants discuss family socialization and connection within their memories of place.

YQ: I also think I was most comfortable at home. I grew up in an area where there wasn’t a lot of diversity, so I always felt that when I was home, I could just be myself and I didn’t have to perform anymore.137 [Session 1]

EA: I described my old house, my childhood house. I described being with my mom in the summertime in our living room. It just makes me very nostalgic and I was really happy… I’ve always been comfortable there… I guess we would always have the front door open too so we would be smelling nearby bonfires and the summer air. [Session 1]

AK: I think definitely my house growing up has like, I think with every house, nostalgia to it in terms of this is where I grew up. This is where all my childhood memories are, and my family was, and those places where I still have such nostalgia for them. [Exit Interview]

137 The recurring idea of “performing” or feeling “fake” were feelings that the cultural informants express due to their interactions with public situations. Specifically, when public perceptions and assumptions were placed onto the cultural informants. This contrast between public perception and internal perception will be expanded on further regarding identity and how the cultural informants see themselves.
The majority of the cultural informants were also raised in rural and small-town settings, leading to a prominent connection to nature and the recurring inclusion of sensory qualities of nature within memories. Therefore, nostalgia is also related to nature.

YQ [in response to Session 3 core image – description: a densely forested mountainside is in the background and a wooden boardwalk is in the foreground]: I definitely felt more nostalgia because I grew up in a very rural area… So it just reminded me of childhood. [Session 3]

LL [in response to Session 3 core image – description: a stone arch bridge stretches over a hill that is dense with tall grass]: I grew up in a small town so I just like more rural areas. When I wrote my description of what was happening in the image, I really pulled from just the peacefulness that you feel when you’re just alone and you’re in nature, like it’s just very calming. [Session 3]

While the conversations were initially connected to childhood homes, the home can be expanded into places that give more spatial agency to its inhabitants. It is important for the cultural informants to have a sense of control and decision-making power over the environmental qualities of their personal spaces. Moreover, agency refers to the capacity of the cultural informants to act independently through being given the power to affect change. This was seen when the cultural informants interpreted the various environmental images from each group conversation session based on their childhood homes and environments.

EA: I think in my environment right, when I picture that, I think of again my house… I definitely see how when I was younger, how it influences me now because when I think of my space now, I think of home and my room. Even though I still want to learn more about Chinese culture now in how I identify a little bit more with it, there’s still nothing in my environment that connects with that… [Exit Interview]

AK: Home for me growing up wasn’t really a place I enjoyed very much… For me, it was really in college when I was able to have my own space. I got really homesick from just being away for the first time, so I wanted to make the space my own… when I first moved out, that was the first
thing I did in my environment… I just made it my own by putting up a bunch of stuff that I enjoy or making it feel clean and making it feel comfortable. [Session 1]

AK defined comfort and belonging within her environment through the process of creating her own space and home. Her current surroundings somewhat contrast her childhood, which she describes as a carefully designed environment by her mother.

AK: I really realized how much I needed my own space and how sacred my own space was to me. I realized—like my mom is a really amazing interior designer, and so the space is always so pretty. But it always was meticulous and you can’t touch anything. It was really her space… I picked up pieces of that environment that I really want to keep in my own environment. But there are also things that I realize I want to change… [Exit Interview]

Once leaving her childhood home, AK was given agency over her environment. The sense of agency is experienced through being given control and making choices over the spatial qualities of a place. The impact may lead to a clearer alignment between identity and place because the changes in the environment are correlated to individual spatial awareness and behaviors. This is especially important when human mobility is more frequently occurring during early adulthood, which is a commonality between cultural informants. Specifically, there is a pattern of movement from childhood to college and then from college to career. The temporary nature of place further questions how their sense of home is reshaped and created.

LL: For the last three years, I have moved every single year to a different apartment or a different dorm. So my sense of physically where home is, as well as just mentally, has just drifted because my home where I grew up, it’s changed…I don’t see that as my home anymore because of those changes… So just the general sense of where home is constantly changing. [Exit interview]

YQ: I think I was able to control my environment a lot more. As I moved to college… like it’s your own space, but it’s so temporary that you don’t really wanna put down roots. So you try to create like a temporary home as best as you can. But I think getting an apartment, I’ve really
been able to just create spaces that I want. I definitely include a lot more Chinese material culture… [Exit Interview]

Since the physical qualities of a home can be impermanent depending on the cultural informants’ life, the study shows that socialization can greatly impact how the cultural informants prescribe meaning to a place. When reflecting upon spatial memories, the social aspects contributed to whether the cultural informants felt connected to or disconnected from a place.

WO [in response to where she felt the most belonging]: Mine wasn’t like specifically a place. It was more like the people who I was with. I was describing when I went to study abroad [in Japan]… I was with my group of exchange students… I was feeling really relaxed with them. I loved being with my group and being able to explore the country and the city with them. [Session 1]

AK: In high school over the summers, my best friend and I would bike down our town’s bike trail for miles and miles, just talking and playing music… So it was just an escape, really, to get out of the house… And I think that was the time that we [her and her friend] really had gotten the closest that we’ve ever been… We would just bike and it just was, I think our first found sense of freedom. [Session 4 and Exit Interview]

EA: I went to an adoptee meet-up in Chicago for the first time when I was 18 years old. This was the first time that I felt very close with my adoptee identity. I made a lot of new connections to other adoptees that I never really had before. This experience made me appreciate my adoptee identity even more. I realize I should be proud of who I am and that I have a support network of other adoptees. [Session 4]

The memories that involve direct social interactions can be linked to a feeling of found community. The cultural informants found comfort and belonging within these specific social spaces because of shared values, experiences, and overall group membership. While some memories involved direct social interactions, being alone or experiencing indirect social interactions was also emphasized.

LL: I was super introverted growing up, so my happy place was always my room when I was alone or with my cat… So I really do find my sense of comfort just as remote as I can be… When
it comes to me moving from place to place, I think that definitely reflects me just trying to find myself, realizing what’s comfortable for me because every single time I’ve moved, it’s been from someplace that is surrounded by a bunch of people to someplace smaller, someplace less surrounded by people. [Session 1, Session 3, Exit Interview]

YQ: A big part of the isolation was, I grew up in a very, very predominately white town. And I mean, my brother was also adopted from China, but it was something that we didn’t really talk about… When I transferred halfway through my sophomore year [of college], it was the first time I was somewhere new and completely alone… I was able to come to know myself more by being alone to navigate my world. I found I was a lot more comfortable with myself and being alone. [Session 2 and Session 4]

The correlation between being alone and feeling of comfort relied upon whether it was decided upon and shaped by the cultural informant. Choosing to be alone was often related to LL’s shared stories, which brought her comfort. On the other hand, YQ connected being alone to feeling isolated when it was uncontrollable and reliant on exterior forces such as location and public assumptions being placed on her.

Identity: In-Betweenness

Identity is a complex and multifaceted concept, especially for Chinese transracial adoptees who navigate perpetual movement between multiple cultural, social, and familial contexts. The cultural informants express their continual experiences of navigating the in-between throughout the group conversation sessions and individual exit interviews. Feeling like they exist in-between, or in an ongoing state of liminality, is often the result of the conflict between public perception and internal perception of self and identity.

AK [in response to Session 2 selected art piece – description: Egg-existential Crisis by Aubrey Meiling]: I related to their piece the most because I have struggled with my cultural identity many
times. There are times that I have found myself to be more Asian than those surrounding me, with a lot of those feelings surrounding the way I look and how others perceive me … I think for me, a lot of times it’s difficult because I don’t want to say that I choose … I do in terms of like maybe what makes me feel more comfortable in the moment or what makes another person feel comfortable in the moment … There are so many times that I feel so one side of my cultural identity, and then there’s sometimes I feel really on the other side. So I feel like they don’t necessarily merge together very often. [Session 2]

YQ: Definitely much more people see that I’m Asian first, like white Americans see that first, of course. But then going to Chinese cultural events, like people would assume that I am culturally Chinese, but I feel like then I’m faking it. So I definitely agree that you feel out of place. That you are forced to choose, but also not allowed to choose either one … I’ve maybe felt like I have an incomplete identity. Going back to the feeling of like, you’re not 100% real Asian but you don’t fit into American society because you’re not white … [Session 2]

The public perception not only made assumptions about their identity, but they also expressed microaggressions that were related to their notions about traditional family structures and adoption.

LL: Also, just growing up in a small town, I had to deal with a lot of jokes and racism, and that hugely affected my sense of humor. Just ‘cause, if you are a very easy target for getting picked on, it’s going to happen a whole lot more. [Session 2]

AK: I think kind of the hard way of learning and growing as an Asian American woman especially is in the dating pool. There are people you definitely have to stay clear of as an Asian American woman in terms of just what people are fetishizing … where it’s like, “I only want to be with you because you’re Asian,” or something like that. So that was something that I’ve had to come to terms with in a negative way, but a lot of it has just really become a deeper appreciation for who I am and how I got here. [Session 2]

YQ: It was always hard going out together with my mom, especially when my brother was with us because then she had two Chinese kids and she’s white. So people were always asking, like, either not believing that we were her children or asking because she adopted us … Then people ask like, “How do your real kids feel?” or “Do you miss your real parents?”… And I think growing up constantly getting those questions, it’s really hard to separate people’s opinions of what real
family is versus what you know growing up like that. The family that you are with is your real family. [Session 2]

The cultural informants experienced microaggressions in various forms throughout adolescence, which can be difficult to identify when there wasn’t explicit support for racial socialization and an awareness of racial bias.¹³⁸ These situations made the cultural informants vulnerable since the assumptions were often based on ignorance and generalizations. Their experiences navigating these negative public perceptions and questions could contribute to their comfort in settings of close or indirect social interactions or being alone. Furthermore, these situations of vulnerability and lack of racial socialization influence their spatial awareness and behaviors by addressing various environmental qualities with caution.

EA: I feel like with new or unfamiliar spaces, I always approach them very cautiously and it kind of dictates my behaviors and how much I speak. I feel like it’s harder for me to talk in groups. I was a shy kid and I feel like that’s still true somewhat, but especially in new places and in bigger groups… [Session 4]

YQ: When I transferred, my surroundings were completely new. I never even visited before I transferred… I was a little nervous because it was my first time that I was in a new place alone, but also excited to start this experience by myself… The environment itself was reassuring, although I was anxious about my social environment. I think I became more comfortable/familiar with my identity as an adopted Asian American. [Session 4]

AK: There are certain circumstances that I do feel like I have to be cautious about that because I do need to realize like in some places, I’m not a white person… My parents are Caucasian, and yes, that’s how I feel… More like I’m Caucasian… But there are spaces that I go into that I do need to realize, like, maybe I’m at a disadvantage because I’m Asian or maybe I’m even unsafe because I’m an Asian woman. [Exit Interview]

While parents often discussed adoption opening during their childhoods, the lack of racial socialization and ethnic socialization contributed to a sense of loss and in-betweenness.

¹³⁸ This reflects the results from Mohanty’s 2013 study in which an awareness of racial bias increased adoptees’ sense of comfort with their adoptive identity and thereby increased their psychological well-being.
EA: I feel like I forgot that I was Asian, even at some points because I was never surrounded by other Asian people… I think it [Chinese traditions] would help me embrace more of where I can from… I feel like when I was adopted and brought over here, I lost that part of myself. Like if I would have grown up in China, I would have had this really rich culture and now I have American culture instead. I just think I’d be able to embrace my identity a little bit more. And it would connect me more to like my, physical aspects too, like I am Chinese. [Exit Interview]

YQ: A big part of the isolation was just… I grew up in a very, very predominately white town… It was very obvious that we [her and her brother] were adopted and instead of processing the trauma and emotions of being adoption, it was more of just focusing on like how to survive now. I think focusing on that… burying emotions about adoption… they just marinate and grow, and they’re still unresolved. So I think growing up and still not addressing them and people thinking, “Oh you’ve adjusted really well”… It was isolating knowing and hearing people say stuff like that, but knowing that there are so many things that are unresolved.

AK: I forget that I’m Chinese and I’m adopted… it fluctuates and it changes. I would say more so through recently, I think just the for the sake of this society, I’ve definitely felt more question about just being Asian and that identity has really bubbled to the surface, just in terms of being a person of color, which is weird because I just don’t feel like ap person of color. I almost forget that I’m Asian a lot of the time… But I would say one thing I wish, or that could have been better, is my parents learning a little bit more about being Chinese and Chinese culture. [Exit Interview]

LL: Talking about being adopted wasn’t really an open thing with my family… Like yes, we’re aware of it, but we don’t really talk about it… But there’s a separation like a little bit. Like what we, as sisters, have always been a little closer… we’re naturally going to draw closer to each other… [Exit Interview]
The lack of racial and ethnic socialization in childhood also led to exploring more about their cultural and ethnic identity later in life. Between the majority of the cultural informants, high school and college was when they experienced a heightened curiosity for Chinese culture, language, and traditions. The discovery often led to integration of various aspects of Chinese culture into their lives. As their identity may experience various shifts throughout their lives depending on how they navigate their Chineseness and American Chineseness, the integration draws a connection to birthplace and cultural heritage may provide them with a sense of comfort. The act of integrating Chinese culture and traditions often are physically translated into their built environments through material culture, activities, and finding connection to social groups. It is important to note that the incorporation of these cultural elements and activities may realign identity and place, and the shift is directly initiated and defined by the Chinese TRA.

EA: *I never identified with my Asian side until late high school… It wasn’t until later where I finally was like, “Ok, I can. I wanna learn more about this.” I feel like I was ready then to discover more about my adoptee identity and where I came from, and I found a lot of community in that…* [Exit Interview]

AK: *It hasn’t even dawned on me until recently that I’m a transracial adoptee, so that, to me, is a success story in and of itself because I just don’t think anything of it… I would love to integrate the food. I love Chinese food… I do want to integrate the cooking into my life…* [Exit Interview]

LL: *I’m trying to fill that hole of like, “Ok, I lost something. So how do I fix this? How do I find a kind of replacement?” I guess looking more into my birth parents. Being more curious about Chinese culture and diving more into the language just to learn more… I’m OK where I am right now, I’m definitely very eager to get those results from ancestry just to learn more. But a big part of what I took from Chinese culture was just the cooking aspect, like I cook Chinese food all the
I use Chinese cooking techniques daily. It’s something that I really connected to and it’s just something that kind of fills that need in a small way, but it works for me. [Exit Interview]

Chinese transracial adoptees often find themselves navigating the complexity of in-betweenness, situated between multiple cultural, racial, and familial identities. This in-betweenness poses unique challenges as they seek to reconcile their Chinese heritage, their adopted American identity, and their experiences of displacement and loss.
THE VISUALIZATION STRATEGY

The project strives to understand the complexities of identity, comfort, and belonging through the experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees. These themes are central to our spatial behavior and awareness. Who we are dictate how we feel within certain spaces, social groups, and environmental conditions. For Chinese transracial adoptees, they inhabit both a psychological and physical space of in-betweenness. They exist between cultures, social groups, and internal and external definitions of self. The final part of this thesis was to develop a visualization strategy that would highlight the layering and intersectional aspects of identity, comfort, and belonging. Additionally, the multi-part visualization strategy also served as a method of data analysis and information processing. Reaching beyond traditional architectural representational drawing methods, it was important to represent the individuality of each cultural informant through a thoughtful and iterative approach. Aligning with the larger themes of in-betweenness, intersectionality, and blurring, the process to create the visualizations consisted of six steps: distortion, erasure through transfer, structural imprints, embedded memories, blurring, and connection. The process results in four images that are printed on transparent layers and are superimposed. Using the multi-step process, five visualizations were created, each highlighting a different cultural informant and the ways in which they’ve experienced various aspects of the themes throughout their lives. The usage of shared quotes and images specific to each cultural informant creates a physical representation of a part of their own story.
Step I: Distortion

The visualization process started with selecting a base image from the cultural informant’s birthplace. The selection was based on my own image search using the provided birthplaces in China. For many Chinese adoptees, their birthplace represents a crucial part of their identity and sense of self. It is a place that holds important memories and connections to birth family and cultural heritage. However, when an adoptee is separated from their birthplace, they experience a loss of access to these details, resulting in a sense of disconnection and displacement. After selecting the image, I digitally distorted the image through Photoshop by converting the image to a bitmap, adding noise, and changing the opacity.  

By intentionally distorting or obscuring parts of the image through pixelation, the viewer is left with an incomplete and fragmented view of the birthplace. Furthermore, the distortion of the image also comments on the challenges of representing and making sense of complex experiences such as transracial adoption. Chinese transracial adoptees may struggle to articulate their experiences and emotions in a way that accurately conveys their full meaning, just as the distorted image fails to capture the full details of the birthplace.

A bitmap is a method in which the graphics of an image are defined by binary data that prescribe value to the image pixels.
Figure 15: Distortion
**Step II: Erasure Through Transfer**

The distorted image from the cultural informant’s birthplace is then printed and transferred onto an art board through an acetone transfer process. When the image is transferred with acetone, the process intentionally erases more details and creates a blurred, abstracted version of the original image. Chinese transracial adoptees were involuntarily displaced, erasing the connection to their cultural heritage, birth families, and what could have been. The physical transfer can also be a metaphor of how experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees may have been similarly erased, obscured, or underrepresented as a unique diaspora community from both white and Asian communities. White parents may minimize or even disregard the occurrence of racism and microaggressions towards their children. Additionally, the Asian community may also misunderstand the Chinese transracial adoptee experience through viewing them as “not Asian enough.”

In addition to the metaphysical connection, the use of acetone to transfer the distorted image also carries its own symbolic weight. Acetone is a powerful and volatile chemical that is often used as a solvent or cleaning agent. It has the ability to strip away layers of ink or pigment, leaving behind only traces of the original image. The stripping away of layers can be seen as a reflection of the way in which Chinese TRAs may feel that their connection to their birthplace has been similarly stripped away or erased. The use of acetone in the transfer process can thus serve as a powerful commentary on the lasting impact of transracial adoption on an individual’s sense of identity and belonging. Aspects of their identity have been erased due to being displaced. Furthermore, the blurred and abstracted image may contain fragments of the original image, which can allude to the challenges that Chinese TRAs face in piecing together their own identities and sense of self.
Figure 16: Erasure Through Transfer (AK)
Step III: Structural Imprints

Structural Imprint I

Although aspects of the past are erased and fragmented, the past does have an impact. While it may not be the physical aspect and clear recollection of the past that connects Chinese TRAs to place, it still leaves an imprint and influences how they experience a space and find belonging. Therefore, the third step consists of creating a structural grid based on the original birthplace image. After the acetone transfer, the resulting image is intentionally abstracted, reflecting the erasure and fragmentation of Chinese TRA’s memories and experiences of their birthplace. However, by drawing a grid that is informed by the base image, the created structural imprint provides a sense of structure and order to the fragmented image. This structural imprint can be seen as a metaphor for the way in which the past, while erased and fragmented, still shapes Chinese TRA’s identity, spatial awareness, and connection to place. The grid becomes a part of the larger fabric to their identity and experience. Furthermore, the act of creating a grid served as an analytical method to bring order and clarity to the complexity. By providing a framework for the fragmented image, the structural imprint can help to highlight details and connections to the birthplace that may not have been apparent otherwise.

Structural Imprint II

Similarly, the second structural imprint is derived from an image that the cultural informants selected in Session 3: Spatial Imaginaries. During the discussion following the activity of collectively creating storyboards for fictitious spatial memories, themes of nostalgia, comfort, and familiarity emerged. Often, the cultural informant selected their core image based on what reminded them of home and comfort. By extracting a structural imprint from images that evoke nostalgia and comfort, it understands what Chinese TRAs are drawn to regarding environmental aspects as further intertwined and interconnected with past memories and experiences.
Figure 17: Structural Imprint I (AK)
Figure 18: Structural Imprint II (AK)
Step IV: Embedded Memories

Identity and Adoption

The next step integrates quotes within the structural imprints. By including the cultural informant’s quotes that focus on themes of adoption and identity within structural imprint I, it reinforces that although details from the past have been erased, adoption and displacement are influential in their lives. The quotes related to adoption and identity serve to amplify the narrative surrounding their personal memories, shedding light on the complexities and emotions associated with the Chinese TRA’s sense of self and connection to their birthplace.

Comfort and Belonging

The second layer of embedded memory is the integration of quotes regarding comfort and belonging within the structural imprint of their select Session 3 images. The quotes often discuss recent, future, or imagined experiences within a space, describing how they interpret certain materiality, social, emotional, and sensory aspects of the environment. The process informs what they are drawn to and what environmental aspects give them comfort. Additionally, specific moments from the stories they shared physically emphasizes that identity and memories are embedded in the built environment.

By embedding these two main categories of quotes within the structural imprint, the visualization creates a multi-layered narrative that merges visual representation of place with the voices and stories of the cultural informants. This integration of quotes adds depth and diversity of stories and experiences within the broader context of the project. It also invites viewers to engage with the complexities of adoption, identity, comfort, and belonging.
There are so many times that I feel like one side of my cultural identity, and then there’s sometimes I feel really on the other side.

So I feel like they don’t necessarily merge together very often.

There are certain circumstances that I do feel like I have to be cautious about because I do need to realize I’m not a white person.
But there are spaces that I go into that maybe I’m at a disadvantage because I’m Asian.
I’m even unsafe because I’m an Asian woman.

My identity is very much kind of set in its own just based off of how I look and how I was born.

It’s a lot of conflict... just being in two different spaces and trying to exist within these two worlds that don’t necessarily go together.
It’s not a bad thing and it’s something that I’m just used to because I’ve been in these two spaces my whole life.

Figure 19: Embedded Memories: Adoption and Identity (AK)
When I first moved out, that was the first thing I did in my environment... I just made it my own by putting a bunch of stuff that I enjoy or making it feel clean and making it feel comfortable.

As I've gotten older, there's more of an appreciation for it in terms of what it took to be here and be an Asian American in this space. I got really homesick from just being away for the first time, so I wanted to make the space my own.

I really realized how much I needed my own space and how sacred my own space was to me.

This pushed me to really work on myself and feel the most confident.

It was really in college when I was able to have my own space.
Step V: Blurring

Each layer is then individually printed on transparent sheets and superimposed on each other. The process of layering adds another dimension to the project’s visualization by creating a sense of blurriness. By printing each layer on transparent sheets, the visualization symbolizes the fluidity and interconnectedness of the themes explored. The layers are suspended within a wooden frame using string, which fastens each layer an inch away from one another. Therefore, while the layers blend together when viewing them all at once, they can also be seen individually at times. The blending of the layers results in an enhanced, visually complex image. When the layers are superimposed, the images blend and overlap, creating a sense of layered blurriness. This intentional blurriness represents the complex and layered nature of identity, memory, and experience. It reflects the inherent ambiguity and the blurred boundaries that exist within experiences of transracial adoption, comfort, belonging, and identity. The process also acknowledges that Chinese TRA’s narratives, memories, and experiences are not always easily defined, but rather created by multi-layered and interconnected elements. These pieces may align at times, but they also have the capabilities of contrasting. Through the visualization strategy, this thesis encourages viewers to contemplate the intricate layers of meaning within the Chinese TRA's journeys and the broader themes of identity and belonging.
When I first moved out, that was the first thing I did in my environment... I just made it my own by putting a bunch of stuff that I enjoy or making it feel clean and making it feel comfortable.

There are so many times that I felt so in one side of my cultural identity and then there are sometimes I feel really on the other side. As I've gotten older, there's more of an appreciation for it in terms of what it took to be here and be an Asian American in this space very often. I got really homesick from just being away for the first time, so I wanted to make the space my own. There are certain circumstances that I do feel like I'm not a woman person but there are spaces that I can be just myself but I also need to work on myself. I'm even at safe because I'm an Asian woman. This pushed me to really work on myself and feel the most confident.

My identity is very much like that. I was really in college when I was able to leave. It was really bad out there. I was just like that. It's a lot of conflict. Just being in two different spaces... trying to exist with people who don't necessarily go together. It's not even thing but it's something that I just need to because I've been in those two spaces for much of the...
I've always been comfortable there.

I described my old house, my childhood home. It just makes me very nostalgic and I was really happy.

I feel like I forget I was Asian, even at some points because I was here...
Figure 23: **Blurring (LL)**
Figure 24: *Blurring (YQ)*
Figure 25: Blurring (WO)
Figure 26: Blurring (All)
Step VI: Connection

The final step of the visualization process is using red string to connect each transparent layer. Connecting each layer with red string adds a powerful symbol element to the visualization, representing the Chinese red thread proverb and emphasizing the intersectionality of experiences. The use of the red string in Chinese culture is often associated with the belief that there are invisible red threads that originate from a child’s spirit and connects it to all of the important people in their lives. It emphasizes that children and families were destined to be together.\(^{140}\) Yet, I would argue that the red thread proverb may reduce the impact of being displaced. Within the visualization, the red string serves as a literal connection between each transparent layer, which acknowledges the significance of the proverb, while also representing the emotional reality of transracial adoption and loss. The red string further symbolizes the complex web of memories and provides a visual representation of the intersectionality of Chinese TRA identities. Moreover, it recognizes that a Chinese TRA’s identity and sense of belonging are influenced by many factors. Finally, despite all the blurring and overlapping layers of memory and spatial awareness, the red thread draws from the imprinted structures, connecting the past, present, and all the layers in between.

\(^{140}\) (Cohen 2007)
Figure 27: All Visualizations
Figure 28: AK
Figure 29: EA
Figure 30: LL
Figure 32: WO
Figure 33: Visualization Detail Photos
Figure 34: Visualization Detail Photos
CONCLUSIONS: THE LIMINALITY OF IDENTITY AND PLACE

The international adoption of children from China has created a unique diaspora community of Chinese transracial adoptees (TRAs). With approximately a third of the total number of displaced children being adopted by white American families, these children are raised within a culturally and racially different home and environment. While Chinese TRAs who grew up in America often have positive experiences and form strong familial bonds, it is important to acknowledge that the political landscape in China, which initiated the large influx of displaced children, inherently carries a foundation of trauma and loss. This has complex effects on their identity and sense of belonging as they exist psychologically and physically in a space of in-betweenness. Navigating their Chineseness, Chinese Americanness, and adopteeness, they also face conflicts between the public perception and internal perception of self. These conflicts may lead to questioning of identity and an uncertainty regarding their belonging in spaces that used to give them comfort. These experiences are deeply intertwined with the built environment, as spaces play a critical role in shaping one’s sense of self, belonging, and overall well being. Although the in-betweenness may be seen as a hybrid of Chinese and American, I would argue that it transforms into a separate identity of itself. Being constantly

This thesis builds upon the foundation of Chinese adoption and the existing political and social landscape of the United States to emphasize the responsibility architects and designers have regarding designing for equity and inclusivity. This thesis seeks to explore the experiences of Chinese TRAs regarding the liminal nature of their identities and their relationship to the built environment when finding a sense of belonging. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship and employing a design methodology rooted in community building and design justice, this study completed a series of group conversation sessions with five cultural informants. Directly informed by outside disciplines, each group conversation built upon themes of identity, place, and spatial memories through using collaborative, multi-sensory exercises. Moreover, community and collective agency was created through creativity. The
exercises focused on the role of memory and spatial behavior in shaping their experiences and identity. By collaborating with the five cultural informants, the study revealed the significance of agency over identity and the physical and social aspects of the built environment. When Chinese TRAs experience agency, they feel more comfort and belonging, ultimately uplifting their wellbeing in the built environment. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between identity and the built environment. The redesigned methodology of architectural research and engagement challenges existing discourse in architecture and promotes a more inclusive and equitable approach to design. Moreover, the employed methodology, which emphasizes empathy and humility, raises critical questions about the impact of different approaches to engaging communities in the co-creation of their environments. By centering the voices and experiences of Chinese TRAs, this thesis aims to foster dialogue and spur further exploration into designing for marginalized communities whose perspectives have been historically underrepresented and overlooked.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complex dynamics of identity, belonging, and place, offering insights that can inform more inclusive and empowering design methodologies. By recognizing the agency of Chinese TRAs and their unique experiences, it provides one perspective to the larger discourse on the transformative potential of architecture and design in creating spaces that foster comfort and belonging.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


McAdam, J., *Climate Change and Displacement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives.* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020).


Appendix A: IRB Determination

### Use this form to determine whether your project needs IRB review.

**Determination data entry**
- Submitted 01/31/2023 6:40 PM CT by Draus, Roe

**Project Title and Submitter**

Not all research involving humans requires IRB approval. A project requires review by the UWM IRB only if it meets the regulatory definition of research, involves human subjects, and UWM is engaged.

This form may be used as:

1. a tool to help you determine whether or not you need to submit a study to the UWM IRB, and/or
2. formal documentation that UWM IRB review and approval is not required.

**Research**: A systematic investigation, including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (meaning the results can be applied to a broader population).

**Human subject**: A living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains 1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or 2) identifiable private information.

**Engaged**: Generally, UWM is considered engaged if any UWM faculty, staff, or student intend to disseminate the results using their UWM credentials, or if the research results are intended to be used as part of a student’s coursework or degree requirements. UWM is NOT engaged if researchers from other institutions wish to recruit UWM faculty, staff, or students.

**Submitted by:**

| Draus, Roe | Email: rdraus@uwm.edu |

**Department**

| Architecture |
**Faculty Advisor, if applicable:**

*No answer provided.*

**Project Title**

Identity, Placemaking, and the Built Environment: Through the Lens of Chinese Transracial Adoptees in the Midwest

**Project Information**

**Describe the purpose of the proposed activities, including the overall objectives and specific aims.**

The project will focus on the ideas and experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees in the Midwest regarding how they utilize placemaking practices towards creating environments of belonging that reflect their multifaceted identities. My design methodology is informed by existing methods of community building and restorative justice practices in which multi-sensory ethnography strategies, collective storytelling, and original oral history data are used. A central objective of the study is to uplift stakeholder agency and empowerment through understanding the design of built environments.

**Describe the subject population, or the type of data and/or specimens to be studied.**

The subject population is 18+ or older, Chinese transracial adoptees who grew up in the Midwest, and have a parent who is of a different race/ethnicity.

**Describe the procedures, including how the data and/or specimens will be obtained.**

The project is comprised of 4 discussion group meetings, which will take approximately 60 minutes each. Each discussion group meeting will include 3-5 participants. After each discussion group meeting, I will diagram the information through visualization and architectural strategies. The parts of the project include:
- **Community Building:** 1 discussion group meeting and will serve as an introductory meeting to the project, other participants, and initial questions.
- **Embodied Ekphrasis of Experience:** 1 discussion group meeting and will focus on the identity development of the participants using art and multimedia from Asian adoptees.
- **Multi-Sensory Mapping of the Built Environment:** 2 discussion group meetings and will focus on multi-sensory storytelling of past and present environments.
Describe how the results will be shared and with whom.

The results will be shared through a public presentation at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning in May. Additionally, participants will receive a direct copy of the written document that will include a literature review and methodology review. Any identifying information will be removed for the presentation and final written document.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is the project funded?</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Does this project involve any other institutions or organizations?</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose Yes if your project will be conducted at a non-UWM site, such as a local hospital or another university.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you submitted a determination request to any other IRB?</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Determination of "Research"
Research is "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge."

The project may be "research" if:

- The intent is to advance general knowledge in the academic, scientific, or professional community;
- The design will lead to scientifically valid findings;
- Subjects are not expected to benefit personally from the knowledge gained; and/or
- The research is completed as part of a graduate thesis or dissertation.

Examples of projects that are systematic, but NOT research:

- Classroom projects done solely to fulfill course requirements, with no intention to share the results beyond the University community
- Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance, Evidence-Based Practice, or Program Evaluation projects designed to improve the quality or performance of a department or program. There is no intention to share the results beyond the local community.
- The project’s main goal is to improve services, and most project participants are expected to benefit from the knowledge gained.

Additionally, the following activities are deemed NOT "research:"

- Scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected;

  **Exception:** If activities are designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge, they are considered "research." Example: an oral history project interviewing individuals to create a record of a historical event would not be research. However, if the investigator plans to draw general conclusions or answer a particular question from the interviews, it **WOULD** be considered research.

- Public health surveillance activities, including the collection and testing of information or biospecimens, conducted, supported, requested, ordered, required, or authorized by a public health authority.
- Collection and analysis of information, biospecimens, or records by or for a criminal justice agency for activities authorized by law or court order solely for criminal justice or criminal investigative purposes;
- Authorized operational activities (as determined by each agency) in support of intelligence, homeland security, defense, or other national security missions.
**Is the intent of the proposed activities to develop or contribute to generalizable (scholarly) knowledge?**

Would you consider this project to be more of an oral history study, where the collection and use of information focuses directly on the specific individuals in the project? That is, you’re trying to understand the individual’s experiences but not draw broader conclusions? It also appears that the conclusions you draw would be more focused on the methods you used to engage the community.

I ask because it seems like the nature of the study, rather than the sample size, may impact whether the project is contributing to generalizable knowledge. We have many qualitative research studies that involve small sample sizes.

01/31/2023 • Resolved

**No**

Activities ‘designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge’ are those activities designed to draw general conclusions (i.e., knowledge gained from a study may be applied to populations beyond the specific study population), inform policy, or generalize findings.

*Generalizable does not mean simply that the results could be applicable to other groups, in a theoretical abstract sense. Instead, it means that you are specifically designing your project to ensure that your results can be used by others.*

**Explain your answer.**

The thesis is an oral history study, in which the information focuses directly on the specific individuals in the project. The methodological process is informed by pre-existing methods within other disciplines, such as ethnography and restorative justice practices. Commonly found in the field of anthropology, ethnography refers to the study of cultures and individual narratives. Further, it focuses on the community or individuals who inhabit a particular site. Restorative justice practices are frequently used in conflict resolution within communities, schools, and prisons as a method towards creating open dialogue. The study seeks to apply the pre-existing methods to better understand the individual’s experiences as it relates to the design of their specific environments. The main research product is an ethnographic portrait, which is a conceptual representation of their space or environment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do the proposed activities involve a systematic approach?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

A “systematic” approach involves a predetermined method or a plan for studying a specific topic, answering a specific question, testing a specific hypothesis, or developing theory. A systematic approach incorporates collection of data, either quantitative or qualitative, or specimens; and analysis.

**Explain your answer.**
The study incorporates a predetermined method for engaging with the participants, which is informed by pre-existing methods. The series of discussion meetings involve a systematic approach to analyze and theorize how identity informs placemaking strategies that will be reflected in the built environment.
The design and key components of the ethnographic portrait will be directly informed by the participants. The project does not intend to inform policy or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Additionally, I do not intend that the results or the process will be used by others.

**Is your project Quality Improvement, Evidence-Based Practice, or a Program Evaluation?**

None of the above

**Human Subjects Determination**

A Human subject is a living individual about whom a researcher:

- obtains information or biospecimens through intervention or interaction with the individual, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information or biospecimens, or
- obtains, uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens.

*Interaction also includes anonymous online surveys*

*Private, identifiable information includes datasets with any kind of identifiers (student ID, date of birth, address, etc.), even if names are removed*

**Are the human subjects living individuals?**

Yes

*For chart reviews and secondary data analysis, answer No only if you are sure that every person whose data you will review is deceased. If any may be alive, answer Yes.*
Do the activities involve UWM personnel obtaining information or biospecimens through *intervention* or *interaction* with the individuals?

**Definitions:**
*Intervention*: physical procedures or any kind of manipulations of the subject or their environment.

*Interaction*: any kind of communication or interpersonal contact between researcher and subject, even if indirect or anonymous (e.g. online)

| Yes | If you have any direct contact with participants, answer Yes. If you are administering any type of survey, questionnaire, etc. (even anonymous online surveys), answer Yes. |

_Private information_ is information about behavior that occurs where a person can reasonably expect they are not being observed or recorded. It also includes information a person provided for specific purposes and which they can reasonably expect will not be made public. Most commonly this includes medical, educational, or non-public criminal records. It can also include data collected for research purposes that is now being used for another purpose.

Do the activities involve UWM personnel accessing private information about living individuals?

| No | This applies to charts, records, datasets, and specimens. Common examples include medical records, educational records, and non-public criminal records. |
### Do the activities involve UWM personnel obtaining or receiving private information about living individuals?

| No | This applies to charts, records, datasets, and specimens.  
Answer Yes if you will collect the data from any non-public records, or if someone is providing you a non-public dataset for analysis.  
Answer No if you are obtaining data directly from participants (i.e. through some kind of interaction), or if all the data you will receive is publicly available to anyone. |

### Engaged

| Are UWM faculty, staff, or students performing any of the following as part of their role at UWM? |
| --- | --- |
| ☑ Obtaining informed consent | If you're performing these duties for another purpose, such as employment through another institution, but will also use data from this research for UWM purposes (publications, thesis, dissertation, etc.), this is considered part of your role at UWM.  
If data will NOT be used for a UWM thesis or dissertation, and if publications will NOT list your affiliation with UWM, mark "None of the above".  
If the research is being conducted ONLY by non-UWM researchers, and UWM personnel are ONLY being recruited as research subjects, mark "None of the above". |
| ☑ Interacting with subjects (e.g., conducting research interviews or administering questionnaires) | |
| ☑ Performing any kind of manipulation of subjects or their environment | |
| ☐ Performing procedures with subjects (invasive or noninvasive) | |
| ☑ Obtaining private identifiable information | |
| ☐ Receiving a federal grant, award, or contract as a Direct Awardee | |
| ☐ None of the above | |
Are you conducting this project ONLY as a consultant or employee of another institution?

No

If you intend to publish or present the results using your UWM credentials, answer No.

If you are a UWM student and plan to use any of the data for your UWM thesis or dissertation, answer No.

IRB Determination: not human subjects research

UI  UWM IRB <no-reply@uwmyirbmanager.com> 2:59 PM

To: Roe Jing Draus

Thank you for submitting your determination request. Upon reviewing the information you provided, we have determined that your project identity, Racializing Gender, and the Built Environment: Through the Lens of Chinese Transracial Adoptees in the Midwest does NOT require review and approval by the UWM IRB.

Rationale:

Not generalizable

IRB Determination Form

Please contact us if you have any questions.

IRB Office
irbinfo@uwmy.edu
414-862-3544
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research – Cultural Informants Group

Study Title: Identity, Placemaking, and the Built Environment: Through the Lens of Chinese Transracial Adoptees in the U.S. Midwest

Study Overview
The research study seeks to study the relationship between identity and the built environment through the experience of Chinese transracial adoptees living in the Midwest. The study is applying a redesigned method for engaging with diverse communities and stakeholders, which is comprised of three parts of participant.

Study Goals

- Uplift the voices and experiences of Chinese transracial adoptees
- Questions the impact of identity in how people use and experience spaces
- The study seeks to contribute to the dialogue surrounding the design for communities whose experiences have been underrepresented or overlooked within architecture

What will I do?
You will be in a focus group with 3-4 other people. The focus group will have semi-structured, informal conversations about specific topics. You'll discuss and share your experience as a Chinese transracial adoptee pertaining to the navigation of identity as well as how you experience and use spaces. In addition to the conversations, you will be asked to respond to a selection of art, reflect on your experience in spaces, and participate in general drawing/mapping exercises.

There will be 4 group conversation sessions between February and March 2023. You will be provided the Session structure prior to the scheduled meeting. The conversation sessions are intended to be in-person and to take place at a UWM campus building; however, they may become virtual to mitigate issues of location or time constraints.

Pre-Session Introduction: Individual meetings to discuss project details and expectations (10-15 mins)

Session 1: Community Building - Co-creating the space (60 mins)

During: Introduction to research study and participants, session structure, group values, introduction questions and conversation

After: Complete a short reflection survey

Session 2: Embodied Elphrasis of Experience - Understanding complex, intersectional identities (60 mins)

Before: View a provided handout containing meeting agenda and reflect provided artwork

During: Using art, we will be discussing experience and identity as transracial adoptees
After: Complete a short reflection survey

Session 3 & 4: Multi-Sensory Mapping of the Built Environment – Finding connection to our past and present built environments (60 minutes)

Before: View a provided handout containing meeting agenda and reflect upon impactful environments

and places

During: Using cognitive mapping and multi-sensory storytelling approaches, we will discuss our

experiences in environments

After: Complete a short reflection survey

[Potential] Individual Interview: After the group conversation sessions, if there is any additional information or
details needed from participants, you may be asked to schedule an individual meeting (30 mins)

Risks/ Benefits
Risks that you may experience from participating are considered low. Some questions and conversations may be
personal or emotional, and you may skip any questions at any time during the conversation session or during
the reflection surveys. Potential benefits include uplifting the voices and experiences of Chinese transracial
adoptees and to create a community and network.

Confidentiality
Since potentially sensitive topics may be discussed, I ask that everything said during the conversation sessions
be confidential. While I cannot control what others say, through the collaborative approach to create a
community environment, it is expected that everyone will abide by the collective confidentiality agreements of
the group.

Recordings
The conversation sessions will be recorded, and the recordings will be used for diagramming and analysis. The
recording won’t be used or published in the final presentation or written document.

Identifying Information
In the beginning of the study, you will select initials to be used in association with your information during data
analysis, visualization, and the final presentation and written document. The initials you choose do not need to
be reflective of your actual initials. The usage of initials is to document the relationship between identity and the
experience of built environments.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to
take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to not answer any
questions or stop participating in this research project at any time.
Cultural Informant’s Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must be 18 years of age or older. By signing the consent form, you are giving your consent to voluntarily participate in this research project.

__________________________________________________________
Name of Participant (print)

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Participant                    Date

Research declaration
I have given this research subject information on the study that is accurate and sufficient for the subject to fully understand the nature, risks and benefits of the study.

__________________________________________________________
Name of Researcher obtaining consent (print)

________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Researcher obtaining consent                    Date
Background Information: Please complete the following questions.

Preferred name:
Selected study initials:
Email (if not provided already):
Age:
Gender identity:
Ethnic identity:
Hometown:
Current city of residence:

At what age were you adopted?

What area were you adopted from?