Recognizing Difference: Adopted Chinese Girls and their Chinese Counterparts in the Public School

By Virginia Ross Taylor

When writer Virginia Ross Taylor and her husband moved to Boston, they chose a suburb with a large Chinese population (20%). Life would be easier for their two adopted Chinese daughters, they reasoned, if many of the girls' classmates were also Asian. Although the Taylors enjoy friendships with Chinese families and access to cultural activities, the demographics of the high school also brought unexpected complications.

Another has left the high school. Like most of those who left before her, she had intended to stay until graduation. But these girls adopted from China left the public school early and enrolled in private schools instead. They left because of a misfit between what is expected of them and what they bring to the educational experience. The girls adopted from China who stay in the public school still struggle, in large part because they are misperceived.

About one of every four students in our public high school is Asian. Of this quarter of the school population, the adopted Chinese girls appear indistinguishable from the daughters of Chinese families. Most have long black hair pulled back in ponytails and wear jeans and hooded sweatshirts emblazoned with Hollister or Abercrombie & Fitch. Although the girls adopted from China may look like the other Chinese students, they are different in many ways. The differences begin with their life experiences, their parents' priorities, and the nature of their families' lives in America.

While distinguishing between the adopted and non-adopted Chinese students may oversimplify the variability within each group, I believe there are some generalizable differences. Recognizing these differences between the small group of adopted girls and the much larger group of Chinese students is critical. Viewing both groups through the same lens results in misunderstanding. Moreover, this misunderstanding inadvertently complicates the adopted girls' tasks of understanding themselves.

The profound differences begin with the life experience of their families. Most of the Chinese families here, by far our town's largest ethnic minority, came to the U.S. with a clear and sustained sense of purpose. Coming from a densely populated country with relatively tight government control on all resources, they witnessed deprivations of freedom and loss of opportunity, and they dedicated themselves at a young age to improving their own lives. The recognition that most people do not have opportunities to improve their condition and that these rare opportunities are worth working for served as forceful motivations.

Millions of Chinese students worked to achieve these opportunities; the Chinese families in our town represent a small subset of Chinese people who actually qualified for an elite education and the professional success that followed. For years they prepared for the *gaokao*,

China's national standardized achievement test that students have one chance to take. Their score determines their academic and professional futures. In some cases the Chinese parents who live here achieved the highest scores among all other students in their own school, city, or even province, and earned a scholarship to one of America's prestigious universities. Then they found jobs in computers or biotechnology here in the Northeast, and stayed, eager to provide for their children the bountiful educational resources available here. Perhaps because of their life experience, they evidence more seriousness and urgency about academics than is typical of American families.

The personal success of Chinese parents in distinguishing themselves among thousands of applicants leads to a goal-oriented style of parenting. As Amy Chua explains in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* Chinese parents often feel justified in overriding their children's early preferences on the theory that children don't enjoy an activity until they learn to be good at it. The children of Chinese immigrants are strongly aware of their parents' sacrifice, work ethic, and passionate belief in the power of education, as confirmed through their parents' astonishing success. The confident expectations of these parents usually reap rewards; their children are expected to be superior students-- and perhaps swimmers and pianists—and in most cases, the children make their parents proud.

Although Chinese families moving to suburbs like this one must forge a path amid the dominant white culture, they have developed their own cohesive subculture that includes other Chinese people with similar experiences and values. Perhaps they even cling to the traditions of their culture more strongly because they are so far from their homeland. For instance, the Chinese dance training they make available for their daughters gives the families a visible tie with their own traditions. Outside work they have poured energy and talent into launching and sustaining a heritage Chinese school, which has become its own thriving center of Chinese culture. This cohesive cultural connection sustains immigrant families as they create a family home in the United States.

Chinese children adopted by American parents may look like their classmates from Chinese families, but the differences begin with their family heritage. Their biological parents probably came from the countryside rather than from high-powered urban centers. Because these girls had to be given up in accordance with the national one-child policy that limits family size, they did not have continuous parenting from birth. First, the babies lost their original family home. And then they were taken from the orphanages, or social welfare institutes, perhaps at a time when their surroundings had just become familiar and comfortable, and they were just beginning to understand some words and the structure of the first language they heard. There is no way of knowing the impact of these dislocations on a developing child.

These Chinese babies then became the children of American adoptive parents whose families had lived in the U.S. for more than one generation. American adoptive parents may know stories from their ancestors about a harrowing passage to the new country, but the

knowledge is not firsthand. There is no personally experienced "other" culture as a frame of reference fueling a constant struggle to achieve. Most adoptive parents have grown up comfortably, taking America's opportunities for granted. Although they may admire and even envy the Chinese sense of educational purpose, it is difficult to replicate its intensity, even for those American parents who themselves have attained academic and professional success. American culture at least partly promotes a view of childhood as a life stage of creative development that is all too short. To spend July in a classroom is considered a deprivation rather than an opportunity.

Adopted Chinese girls growing up with American parents, then, usually lack the sustained academic focus that characterizes the home backgrounds of their counterparts from Chinese families. In addition, their cultural identity is more complicated. Although children growing up in Chinese families in American suburbs must find their way in a white culture, within the family itself the cultural heritage is singular and consistent. Most adopted Chinese children, on the other hand, have been taken to Chinese New Year parties, Autumn Moon Festivals, and years of instruction in Mandarin, but also to Christian churches or Jewish temples. Even if their adoptive parents try to help connect them to people and activities promoting Chinese culture, these girls inherit sets of grandparents and an extended family that may know nothing about China. They must navigate on their own the experience of intersecting cultures.

The unique situation of living in an adoptive family contributes other layers of difference. If Chinese parenting in general tends to be more authoritarian than American parenting, the parenting style of adoptive parents is likely to be less authoritarian still. Traveling to a foreign country to adopt a child, an adoptive parent is not in same position of authority and control a birth parent immediately occupies. Someone else knows more about the child's early life than the new parent does. From the beginning, then, parenting an adoptive child is a process of discovering together whom the child is and what she is capable of rather than imposing one's own preferences and expectations, assuming the child will have the same genetic predispositions and capacity for achievement.

The adopted girls from China bring from home to school less singleness of academic drive and purpose, a less coherent cultural background, and usually a less firmly held set of parental expectations. This heritage from home puts them at a disadvantage in the context of grades, standardized tests, and nearly every other measure of academic success. Yet when others—their teachers, other classmates—see their faces, they expect the highest levels of achievement. These girls learn through daily school experience that they are doomed to disappoint. "How could you get a B- on a math test? You're Chinese!" a girl adopted from China tearfully reported hearing from a Chinese classmate. "I'm the only Chinese person who's not in honors algebra!" lamented another adopted girl. What a white person might shrug off as average skill in math is experienced as a humiliation by someone whose ethnicity is Chinese. After all, the Chinese students generally outperform not only the adopted Chinese students but all other students in the school as well.

The adopted Chinese girls experience the reverse of the phenomenon called *stereotype threat*, defined as the fear of confirming in oneself a negative stereotype about one's race or ethnicity. Instead, adopted Chinese girls can be preoccupied with anxiety and distracted from schoolwork by fear that they will NOT confirm the stereotype of the model minority; they will painfully witness in the eyes of their teachers and classmates a downward correction of original expectations.

So far I seem to have made a case that the children adopted from China are *less than* the Chinese students who grow up in Chinese families. They can never deliver what is expected of them in a high-pressured academic setting. But the situation is more complicated than that! In early adjustment to school and life outside the home, they have an advantage because of their parents' roots in America and familiarity with the ways of American culture. And more importantly, these girls often have special qualities that have evolved from their own particular histories. Because they have had to deal with loss and abandonment, adopted girls are often sensitive to others' pain in a way few teenagers are. On their own, and not within the protective cocoon of their families, they have adapted to moving between two different cultures. "I was dropped into the world with no connections," says one 17-year old girl adopted from China. "I think that makes me more open to other people and helps me better understand people from all different groups." This openness and awareness are often accompanied by humility, a sense of humor, alertness to other people's strengths and emotions, and a capacity to function effectively in a diverse social group. Although these abilities are invisible on standardized tests, it would be difficult to overestimate their importance as life skills.

The saddest aspect of mistaking girls adopted from China for who they are not—those other Asian faces in the school hallways—is the failure to recognize their own very real gifts. When they are misunderstood and move on, the loss is not only theirs but also belongs to the public school they leave behind.