“Yuan Fen”: Fortuitous Connections, Gender, and Chinese Identity Transnationally

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Since the rise of Chinese nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century, different political groups have sought to mobilise regional support by identifying with the national agenda of regional preferences. There have been changing contestations appealing to north, south, center, west and east. By analysing these moving identities, one can escape a misleading homogenisation of actual multi-strandedness and better understand the nature and potential consequences of ongoing political struggles using conflicting nationalisms on behalf of diverse political agendas, some more war-prone than others (Edward Friedman, “Where is Chinese nationalism? The political geography of a moving project” Nations and Nationalism 14; 4 (October 2008): 721-738.)

Introduction

The usage of actual people’s multi-stranded, malleable, and moving identities for political purposes—some nefarious, others liberating—has become an important focus of Edward Friedman’s scholarship over the last four decades. In fact, challenges to reified, politically-motivated categorization has informed his work on Chinese identity, whether it was tied to national projects and nationalism or was more individually and culturally grounded. However, I’d like to suggest that contemporary transnational and gendered experiences of Chinese identity, such as those I explore in my current work on international adoption of Chinese daughters in America, underscore the idea that historically rich and politically complex identity categories, while offering deep insights on political struggles and players, are insufficient avenues for fully appreciating the multitudinous diversity of Chinese identities as revealed in people’s choices and lives in our globalizing twenty-first-century world.

About a year ago, at a regional Asian Studies conference held at University of Colorado, Boulder, Emily Ting Yeh, a geographer of Chinese descent who writes on Tibetans’ transnational migrant identities, recommended that I use my current research on international adoption to follow three paths. The first was to challenge impact models of globalization and the second was to think from China to rethink globalization. The final avenue of exploration was to focus on those “mutually transformative, historically contingent conjunctures of geographically specific processes” that characterize transnational flows of people, ideas, and resources. Looking back on this initial foray into my new research project, I now see both the influences of Ed Friedman’s scholarship on my own work and the changes and innovations I have made to the intellectual foundation he offered at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This brief utilizes these three suggested paths as a framework by which to find the fortuitous connections between the impact of Ed Friedman’s work concerning Chinese identities on my own scholarship, the progression in my own work from women’s activism in Hong Kong to Chinese adopted daughters in the U.S., and my thesis that...
the diversity of Chinese identities in our current globalizing world both reinforces and subverts categorization. For instance, because they are primarily top-down, causal or impact models of globalization draw attention away the significance and strength of local, grassroots, marginalized, and societal struggles. That is, these models often misconstrue or misunderstand the ways in which Chinese women’s activism has shaped official political agendas, the agency of adoptive Chinese daughters in negotiating their identities in America, and the malleability of political caste as lived experience in China (jati) as opposed to idealized, hierarchical caste (varna).¹

Reformulations of “globalization” from a non-American perspective both reflect and counter Ed Friedman’s ideas about Chinese identity. Using China as a basis for rethinking globalization highlights those varied societal experiences and alternative perspectives that figure into the uneven, circumstantial, and tumultuous interactions between transnational flows and people’s lives locally. Rural indigenous women organizing to gain inheritance rights in Hong Kong used notions of both “entitlements and rights” and “filial daughters” as the basis of their activism during Hong Kong’s transition (1984-1997). Adopted Chinese daughters in the U.S. differentially identify with their Chinese background among adopted Chinese girl friends in the U.S. and with their American background among adopted Chinese girl friends in Hong Kong to “fit in” as uncertain teenagers. Both examples support the idea that cultural explanations alone are inadequate explanations of future possibilities for the paths of nations and groups; however, they also illustrate that cultural specificity is important in different social constructions of Chinese identity. ²

Finally, finding the mutually transformative, the historically contingent, and the geographically specific in people’s transnational interactions between America and China emphasizes an Asian American context, as did Ed Friedman’s earlier work, but moves beyond it in its ties to Chinese migration, identity, and diaspora. Choosing Hong Kong women’s activism during the 1994-1997 period as my dissertation topic took me far afield from Ed Friedman’s focus on regional categories (“north, south, center, west, and east”) of Chinese political identity and showed me the importance of hidden, marginalized, and misunderstood struggles in shaping outcomes of political projects.³ Exploring the micro-level stories of American families adopting daughters from the PRC, as well as connecting these family journeys to the macro-level histories of both international adoption in the U.S. and Sino-U.S. relations offered the additional insight that the sheer inventiveness used by people to negotiate their lives is always a step or two ahead of the identity categories by which people comprehend our current globalizing world. What follows is a succinct attempt to make explicit the implicit connections between Ed Friedman’s scholarship, my
own work, and my claims about identity categories that I have set up in this introduction.

**Circumstantial Globalization**

In this section, I will discuss the factors in both the PRC and the U.S. that set in motion the early 1990s intercountry adoption of China’s daughters and the circumstantial depiction of globalization they offer, so as to acknowledge how my research is both influenced by and differs from Ed Friedman’s scholarship on Chinese identity. The factors shaping adoption in both China and the U.S. were and are closely connected to core public policy issues and demographic, economic, and reproductive patterns, but, in the case of American families adopting girls from the PRC, not directly linked causally. In the U.S., contributing factors included the 1972 movement to discourage white families’ adoption of African-American babies, the 1980s media hype over “crack babies” from impoverished families, and changing rights of birth parents in the early 1990s. In the PRC, the one child policy instituted in 1979-1980, the dramatic rise in abandoned female children in orphanages, and the 1991 implementation of China’s adoption law primarily facilitated the adoption of children from China by American families that began in the early 1990s.

Only the 1991 legal reform in China directly precipitated adoption by U.S. families, yet the other factors just mentioned, while domestic and local, shaped a globalizing process of exchange between the PRC and America. The PRC’s 1991 decision to implement an adoption law helped complete the globalizing picture, in which one country becomes more closely tied and increases its exchanges (in people, information, and resources) with others in ways not thought possible in the past, of adoption between America and China. One popular view in the U.S. asserts that the government’s legal choice was designed to counter the alarming growth in the number of abandoned female babies in domestic orphanages, which was the longer-term result of the 1979 one child policy. More nuanced versions suggest that while the 1991 adoption law was designed to stop “birthparents from arranging adoptions for ‘excess’ daughters so they could try again for a son” it also served the state’s interest in family planning more than it did children’s welfare. Being even more state-driven than the popular view suggests, the 1991 adoption law, by which intercountry adoption from China became more accessible by 1992, could be officially directed to meet the needs of American families. As one source puts it, “while adoption in China was arduous, it was for the most part well run and, most importantly, unlikely to be reverse by a birth mother’s change of heart.” This ease and certainty was achieved through policy-serving state control that more tightly connected China and the U.S. and deepened and broadened the types of transnational exchanges between them.
Domestic historical trends in the U.S. helped create, but did not directly bring about, the transnational exchanges of international adoption between the PRC and America. While not immediately connected in time, the 1972 actions of the National Association of Black Social Workers to attempt to prevent the placement of African-American babies in white adoptive families, which represented the racial tensions surrounding domestic adoption, indirectly shifted to 1980s adoptive families’ media-stoked fears of “underweight babies,” reportedly addicted to crack cocaine at birth, which represented “growing popular tensions about the emergence of an underclass of poor, urban, African Americans.” Less than a decade later, these national concerns of race and class were exacerbated, as far as domestic adoption was concerned, by the surprising outcomes of court cases (like Baby Jessica in 1993), wherein the courts returned adopted children to their biological parents provided both birth mother and father were involved, and by stories of children brought illegally to the U.S. from Central and South America. Wanting a less risky, uncertain adoption process, American families increasingly looked internationally, not just generally, but to particular countries, for other options.

While this short analysis of international adoption of Chinese daughters by American families echoes Ed Friedman’s concerns with state control when faced with globalization, it also reflects my own conclusions that gender experiences reveal key societal dynamics often hidden in state-society analyses. Deconstructing Chinese domestic policies, as with the incentives for the 1991 Adoption Law, into differential interests comes out not only in Kay Johnson’s 2004 book, but also in Ed Friedman’s 1995 work on national identity. A deconstructionist approach to politics was what I took with me into the field when I began dissertation research in 1994. It was only after interviewing women activists—including those whose primary group affiliations were urban, rural, local, expatriate, indigenous, housewife, social worker, and intellectual—and seeing both the differences and cooperative aspects among them that I realized the deeper, as yet unexplored implications of Ed Friedman’s approach to political analysis when it was applied to gender. Later, as I began my project on international adoption, I began to see the beneficial ambiguities in Ed Friedman’s thoughts on identity, such as when he both refers to the Chinese leadership as quite dichotomous in its responses to globalization and chastises Waldron for predictions for China’s future based on seemingly uncomplicated regional divisions. Rather than confusing me, these different, somewhat contentious strands of Ed Friedman’s intellectual ruminations on identity have enabled me to better comprehend the real choices of American families who have adopted daughters from China.
Globalization Between China and America

In this section, I explore the possible tradeoffs between being seen as a happy and fulfilled adoptee and not as an Asian immigrant, indicate ways in which these tradeoffs represent modifications to globalization defined as “interconnectedness,” and reflect on Ed Friedman’s conclusions about Chinese identity. American cultural imaginings offer significant insights into the amazing opportunities and potential inequities shaped by U.S. families’ adoption of China’s daughters. One of the hallmarks of globalization, in broader definitions that emphasize interconnections between nations, places, and individuals, is the emphasis on speed and immediacy. Globalization is a series of “complex, independent yet interrelated processes of stretching, intensifying, and accelerating worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of human relations and transactions…such that events, decisions, and activities in one part of the world have immediate consequences for individuals, groups, and states in other parts of the world.” However, circumstantially-related domestic public policy decisions in the U.S. and the PRC, cross-cutting facets of identity, and individualized life-cycle paths may shape the globalized process of intercountry adoption from China by American families only gradually and indirectly.

Given contemporary stereotypical perceptions of, racist attitudes toward, and unattainable expectations for Asian Americans among a significant portion of the U.S. population, concerns about adopted daughters from China being seen as “foreign-born” adoptees, happy and fulfilled in their American families, rather than “immigrants,” are important, but also ignore the complex history of adoption in the U.S. Up until recently, adoptions were kept secret even within families, children were not informed of their birth heritage, and biological kinship was given primacy in the national hierarchy of family worth and value. When it began in the early 1990s, American adoption of children from China joined other developing trends: the rise in adoption of nonwhite children by white parents, the increase in open domestic adoptions, and growing frequency of adoptees’ search for birth parents. In other words, this development represented a more open, free, and liberal view of adoption, generally, than in the past. Contemporary self-perceptions of China’s adopted daughters in the U.S. are illuminating. Some do not see themselves “as different at all”; others are still too young to ask questions about physical differences between themselves and their parents, for still others “being Chinese and Jewish is normal” especially with friends whose identities are similar. The American perception that one’s roots constitute one’s identity may, in fact, misconstrue what actually represents “authenticity.”
In contrast, history and life-cycle developments serve as reminders that the consequences of globalization may be gradual and indirect. The tortuous experiences of babies adopted from Korea and Vietnam be Americans in the wake of U.S. wars in those countries, as shown in films like “Daughter from Danang,” reveal that the negative outcomes for of a traumatic childhood in an adoptive family and a lack of knowledge of one’s birth heritage, particularly its socio-cultural expectations or practices, may only surface much later in adulthood. Accounts specific to the situations of adopted girls from China in the U.S. suggest that most may be too young to be facing an identity crisis such as experienced by older adoptees. One adult adoptee from South Korea noted that it was only in college when she “really began to understand what people saw in my face.” Yet, professionals dealing with the health and well-being of international adoptees in the U.S. also add that issues of race ought to be discussed by parents with their adopted children early on so as to provide the life-skills by which to cope with potential future identity problems. Unlike adoptees from Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, whose parents tried to Americanize them without teaching them to value their roots, adopted parents of daughters from China “emphasize Asian culture” and attempt to connect them with Asian communities in a variety of ways. So, while many of America’s adopted daughters from China may balk at learning Mandarin or actively engaging in Chinese popular rituals or holiday celebrations, they also seem to realize that they would miss their parents pushing them to link more with their birth heritage.

This section about the possibilities embedded in processes by which adoptive Chinese daughters, in interactions with their families and societies, may negotiate their own identities is reminiscent of Ed Friedman’s discussion of China’s reimagining itself as global. At this time, different political stripes of the Chinese leadership were either learning from Singaporean authoritarianism or from “Tang-Song commercialization,” depending on their pre-existing political views. Similarly, while some American adoptive families of Chinese daughters are learning from the childhood and teen traumas of adult Korean adoptees (such as some families in the greater New England area chapters of Families With Children from China (FCC)), others seek out the limited Asian resources in their own communities and engage more deeply with Chinese Americans (such as some families from Eastern Pennsylvania FCCs). Based on my ongoing research on international adoption from China, I’d like to suggest that Ed Friedman’s conclusion that China is “now increasingly a plural noun” and that “plural identity is increasingly an experiential reality within the Chinese mainland” was deeply insightful, but does not go far enough in a globalizing world. The idea of plural Chinese identities needs to be diversified even further, and the indeterminacy of future outcomes made even more clear as far as the life-cycle trajectories of Chinese adopted daughters in
America is concerned if we wish to better understand these girls’ and their families’ lives and choices between China and America. Not every adopted Chinese daughter may face an identity crisis; not every family situation may be ideal, happy, or fulfilled. Despite the fact that their parents’ demographic may be “white, upper middle class, educated, white collar, and older,” these girls’ experiences may be just as strongly impacted by “factors like the level of diversity in their neighborhoods and schools, and how their parents expose them to their heritage.”

Contingent Conjunctures Transnationally

In this section, my exploration of the ways in which girls adopted from the PRC by American families are taught to engage with selective aspects of their heritage highlights the hybridity of both transnational flows, particularly international adoption, and of Ed Friedman’s work on Chinese identity. The global circulation of peoples, information, ideas, goods, and services challenges leaders and activists more than ever before due to the contingent ways in which these factors rapidly shape countries’ interdependence and interconnectedness. One assumption undergirding the “hybridity” of globalization tells us that “global processes are mediated through local practices, institutions, political structures, ideologies, and divisions of labor and prevailing cultural values.” Many of the polities or societies upon which this notion of globalization is based are, like post-1997 Hong Kong, considered “post-colonial” and neither fully linked to the international community nor solely indigenous and local, but in-between, cultural hybrids. Yet, this analytical framework also is relevant to contemporary U.S. society because the ways in which “Chineseness” is represented to girls adopted from the PRC can be both a positive survival strategy and a marginalizing influence, depending on the particular sector of “the Chinese experience” considered. The international adoption of China’s daughters by American families encompasses economic, political, and social dimensions of transnationalism in the Sino-American relationship, but remains an as yet under-researched and underappreciated lens by which to better understand how the local and the global are complexly interwoven in the twenty-first century, how “Chinese identity,” “kinship,” and “community” are being reimagined in both the U.S. and the PRC.

In my own interviews, in journalistic accounts, in academic sources, in documentaries like National Geographic’s “China’s Lost Girls, and in comparative documentaries like “Adopted,” people affiliated through adoption, profession, supportive organization, or friendship with China’s adoptive daughters and their American families describe events, celebrations, and rituals that engage these girls with their Chinese heritage as “traditional.” Yet, in practice, even while adoptive daughters can dress in qi pao, eat zongzi, or do rural folk dances, they also can
dress in Ann Taylor, eat macaroni and cheese at the local Chinese eatery, have a yin/yang yarmulke, and eat kosher lo mein. These possibilities represent globalization as “hybridity,” new and emerging practices of cultures in a rapid, immediate, transnational world. Moreover, the few existing studies that offer some comparisons of Asian adoptive experiences in the U.S. over the 20th century suggest the positive aspects of Chinese daughters adoptive experiences relative to the past. Unlike the “isolation and confusion” that Korean adoptees in the 1960s and 1970s faced, Chinese adoptees and their “(mostly) white parents are visible not just to the public but (intensely so) to each other, through the formation of play groups, dance troupes, cultural celebrations and camps, reunions, Websites, electronic mailing lists, and publications intended for the adoptive community. Visibility is entwined with vocality. The processes of travelling to the PRC in groups from the U.S. to adopt, meeting their adoptive babies at the orphanage, getting citizenship papers and visas at the U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou, and other group experiences not a part of adoption for American families in the cases of children from Korea (1960s and 1970s) and Vietnam (1975, Operation Babylift out of Saigon) have shaped a kinship community among the American families, likened to the “kinning of foreigners.”

In the vein of Ed Friedman’s contentious exhortations to China scholars to delve more deeply into the complex political dynamics underlying conventional categories of Chinese identity, I’d conclude that it is in the interstices between beneficial opportunities and disadvantageous barriers that the uncertainties and ambiguities embedded in the processes of globalization can be more fully understood. Yet, as the future of China’s daughters in America is as yet unwritten, there is no clear way to conclusively, or pessimistically as Ed Friedman might suggest, balance the positive and negative aspects of what will most certainly be their individualistic paths to adulthood. In other words, rather than pitting the continued relevance, sovereignty, and integrity of the nation-state against the universalizing trajectory of American pop culture, consumer culture, and capitalist economy and trade patterns, scholars might come to better understand the future if interactions were seen as potentially mutually transformative, simultaneously national and transnational, and not just objective relationships but also “subjective and agentive.” I may have taken my research far beyond what Ed Friedman’s intellectual concerns offered to me, but my scholarship, from earliest to contemporary, carries both traces of his scholarship’s influence and, of course, its transmutation through my own experiences.

as Crawford Young, who have made distinct differentiation between Louis Dumont’s version of caste, \textit{Varna}, as it characterizes all of India, and caste, \textit{jati}, that changes from village to village and depends on particular people’s experiences of it.


\textit{xiii} Kahan, op. cit.


\textit{xvii} “Journey From a Chinese Orphanage to a Jewish Rite of Passage” \textit{New York Times} (March 8, 2007).

\textit{xviii} Cheng (2004), op. cit.


\textit{xx} Author’s interviews with adoptive families, Pennsylvania, March 2009.

Families With Children From China (FCC) is a nation-wide organization, with diverse local chapters, that offers support for families waiting to and those that already have adopted children from China. Also, based on author’s interviews of FCC members in New England and Pennsylvania.

