

The Tangled Thread of Adoption

The Red Thread is a popular legend within the transnational adoption community, particularly with children coming from East Asian countries into White families. This legend roots many adoption stories and ties children and parents as objects of fate. The popular conceptualization is problematic in that it erases critical historical and political contexts that led to the proliferation of adoptions in the West. The author argues that transnational adoptions are oversimplified and painted in a generalized positive light, overlooking the real and intricate feelings of adoptees, particularly during National Adoption Month. This paper weaves research and lived experiences, including the author's, by drawing on popular hashtags and blogs to untangle the complexity of adoption as well as its role in upholding the White Saviour Complex. This exploration sheds light on the importance of adoptee voices and what is lost when they are not part of the conversation.

Keywords: transnational adoption; white saviour complex; Chinese legends; social media; healing

*"Don't tell us we're lucky...Tell us that home can be a place we start
and a place we end up"*

-Bridget Dolan, 2018

A woman walks along a street all alone in Tokyo, Japan. She is grieving the death of her beloved younger sister, just a few months before. She asks for some guidance, a way to make her feel better when suddenly, she feels a sense of relief fall over her, a weight lifted. At that moment, thousands of miles away, a baby girl is born in China. This is my adoption origin story, as told by my mom. Through fate and the red thread that ties us together, we became a family.

The aforementioned red thread is based on a Chinese proverb: "an invisible red thread connects those destined to meet, regardless of the time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but never break" (Red Thread Broken 2019). Since the rise of transracial adoption, this legend has been accepted as part of the mythos that roots countless adoptions. The legend has flourished in popular culture and has become the title or the foundation of many adoption books, resources, and narratives. However, what needs further discussion, are the implications of using this legend as a basis for adoption origin stories as well as how the positive tales of transracial adoptions are rooted in the White Saviour complex. Due to my positionality, I will focus specifically on Chinese girls adopted into White households.

My story began when China enacted the one-child policy as an attempt to address population growth. Couples were limited to a single child; however, for many parents, it became a "one son/two children" policy, where parents could try for a second child, a boy if the firstborn were a girl (Volkman 2003). There were "steep fines for 'over-quota children,' sterilization, and the threat of forced abortion in the event of future pregnancies" (33). This policy caused a proliferation of international adoptions, with many parents coming from the United States and Canada. Indeed, the United States saw over 40,000 adoptions from China between 1985 and 2003 (Grice 2005).

Between 1999 and 2009, 8,000 adoptions took place from China to Canada, and in 2000, I was one of these adoptees (Statistics Canada 2016). My single mom, like other waiting parents, spent months with an adoption agency, raising money through fulltime work, odd jobs and the generosity of family, friends and colleagues. Also, like many parents, my mom went through a naming process,

choosing an anglicized name for me, as my Chinese name, Xiang Xiang, is not so easy to pronounce. However, that does not mean that my Chinese name suddenly disappeared at the inception of my English name. I have Xiang Xiang in Chinese characters proudly and visibly hanging in my mom's living room. This visibility is essential in that it is a relatively new phenomenon for adoptees, one that was not the case with transracial adoptions in the 1950s (Volkman 2003).

The visibility of Chinese adoptees in North American media began in the 1990s, where adoptees were able to start to feel and express pride and reclaim their adoption story without ignoring where they came from (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013). As well, "art and language and ancient history loom large in the imaginary that is China, and holiday celebrations abound. [However], far less is mentioned about Chinese politics" (Volkman 2003:39). This practise has been criticized by some Asian American parents saying that parents choosing what parts of Chinese culture to package and produce through adoptees is problematic and a form of racism. This racism is evident in that they are omitting critical moments in time where there has been oppression, colonialism and struggles around Asian American immigration (Volkman 2003). Some adoptees have echoed this, criticizing the "failed attempts at assimilation and colour-blind racism" of their adoptive parents (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013: 259). This criticism is part of ongoing resistance against the power structures within the transnational adoption industry.

While many adoptees may not think of adoption in this way, opening a dialogue to recognize inherent, invisible power structures, I feel, is essential for adoptees. While writing this essay, I had to reflect on my own experiences growing up and try to reflect upon which kind of adoptee I am. Am I one of the critical ones, or am I one of the ones who are a lot more accepting and connect positively with adoptions? Through this reflective process, I have come to realize that there is not one category I, and probably many others fit into.

Adoptee Mila published a thought-provoking and evocative piece titled, "Colonized through Adoption", where she reflects on her role in society as a way to elevate Whiteness. For her, "to emerge from the darkness of the suffocating White Fog as a mind colonized through adoption is to realize that my existence was being used to uphold and perpetuate White Supremacy and White Saviorism" (Mila 2019). Mila's statement is crucial, as it shows a way in which transracial adoption, as an institution, implicitly can uphold a system of oppression and White superiority. Importantly, Mila (2019) had to add a disclaimer at the end of the piece stating:

More specifically, it is not that I believe that White parents do not love their adopted children of color. But...White adoptive parents struggle to escape the fog of implicit bias and privilege that clouds their vision and ability to acknowledge and affirm the racial and historical realities of their adopted children of color and the communities from which they originated.

I think that this disclaimer shows how entrenched the fairy-tale idea of adoption is in our society, and how having a part of the White Fog lifted can challenge people.

In another post, Mila states that she does not regret coming to the United States, but regrets losing her culture and not being able to grow up with her birth family as well as her American family (Mila 2010). These mixed emotions are not uncommon but often hidden. Society expects adoptees, to inherently place our adoptive parents on a pedestal because they "saved" us. This expectation, however, puts adoptees in the middle of something that is not so easy to contend with, placing loyalty to one family over another.

There is an invisible hierarchy that comes with society's expectations of how an adoptee views her birth and adoptive parents. These expectations are inherently damaging because they dismiss the complicated feelings that underly an adoptee's experience. As another adoptee so aptly tweeted,

“adoption [is] complicated, often messy & difficult to understand, even for those of us who are adoptees” (Clow 2014). Further, adoption is not a neat box of loyalty and love; it is about entangled regrets, joys, anger, losses, and gains (Mila 2010). To sum up the complicated feelings of it all, “I am left wishing that I could have grown up in two places...that I could have been two people at once, that I could have been a part of two worlds and two families simultaneously” (Mila 2010). Therefore, to say, “you must love one family over another” is overly simplistic, and ultimately reinforces complicated and traumatic feelings within the adoptee because it also emphasizes the idea of the White parent as the saviour.

A White saviour is a person who has been raised in (White) privilege and taught that they possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation (Walsh 2020). Indeed, the saviour wants to support communities in need, but they are not amenable to listening to the communities; accordingly, they want to lead the communities, not follow directions (Windholz 2019). As Windholz (2019) comments, by “helping” these groups and communities, the saviour is taking away the sense of “a people’s own ability to help themselves”(n.p). It is thus imperative for allies to avoid saviourism in their attempt to help marginalized groups by listening, not talking over and by acknowledging privilege (Walsh 2020). Finally, developing an intersectional lens to understand systemic oppression is critical and imperative in creating change and moving forward without simultaneously taking steps back (Walsh 2020).

Part of the reason Chinese transracial adoption is overly simplified is because of the red thread. The Red Thread is known as a legend of fate, where destiny brings two lovers together no matter where they are or their circumstances. Though there are many iterations of the legend, it is the one in Chinese folklore that has been co-opted by the community of predominantly White parents. In the adoption community, “red threads spring from a newborn’s spirit and attach to all people who will be important to the child, shortening as...[the child] grows and bringing closer those who were meant to be together” (Volkman 2003: 41). While this may evoke a lovely image of bringing a family together from miles apart, there are underlying issues to explore. Even in Chinese folklore, it does not have such a positive meaning (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013).

Below is a summary of the most well-known version of the legend:

Wei Ku is a man who longs for a wife to give him the perfect family. He seeks out a matchmaker, Old Man and the Moon, who grants Wei Ku a vision of his fated wife, a three-year-old girl. Wei Ku is horrified because she is ugly and too poor to be an acceptable wife and employs a servant to kill her. The servant fails and only wounds the girl, leaving a mark on her forehead. Later, the girl's adoptive father, a police officer, offers her to Wei Ku as a form of gratitude for his years of service. Wei Ku and the girl, at seventeen, end up marrying and “the folktale ends with the observation that man cannot change his fate, try as he might...Since all marriages are predestined, no prospective partner needs to get upset over...individual lack of choice (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013: 261).

In this reading, the legend does not evoke a heartwarming feeling of bringing a family together. Moreover, I do not believe that most parents and children would want their story of a new ‘found family’ to have this underlying connection to an account of forced marriage and attempted murder. Having explained these connotations to my mom, she no longer uses the red thread as our romanticized origin story. Therefore, if this legend and fate are used as origin stories, then parents need to understand and unpack the legend in this context, instead of continuing to promote the legend in this positive idealized way.

Furthermore, modern adaptations do not refer to the Old Man and the Moon, nor do they address the complexity of what it means to be a Chinese girl in a White household (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013). Consistent with a rags-to-riches fairy-tale, “all Red Thread tales conflate and compress difference of race, ethnicity, nationality into class alone” (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013: 265). This conflation means that the one-child policy and China’s gender-bias is not addressed, which was the basis for many international adoptions from China. Thus, the idea of fate is problematic because it “silences complex moral issues of entitlement and glosses over the social inequality that underlies the transfer of children from destitute parents in developing countries to...couples in the West” (Gonzalez and Wesseling 2013: 268). As well, it upholds the idea that the White parent was ‘fated’ to save their Chinese daughter in need. Therefore, there needs to be an emphasis on the intricacies of gender politics and biases in China, to ground origin stories and not just rely on the Red Thread fairy-tale.

The legend has risen in popularity because it is an idealized narrative for White adoptive parents to engage in transracial adoptive practices with China without challenging the underlying social and political contexts. This misappropriation of the legend helps to perpetuate a positive resonance toward transnational adoptions with China. Moreover, the adoptee voices that are emphasized echo the positive adoption stories, helping to uphold this hegemonic view. Even if adoptees are very happy in their family, it is essential to talk about the circumstances that led them to their adoptive families, as well as exploring the way the adoption community has misappropriated the legend. Importantly, not all adoptees experience adoption the same, and they very much grieve their birth families and birth cultures in distinct ways. In only uplifting the voices of adoptive parents, as a society, we are missing this new perspective that can help create a paradigm shift in what we consider a ‘better life’ and who needs the White Saviour.

One instance where adoptees do not have a space to express their feelings is when their voices should be uplifted the most: National Adoption Month in November. This month highlights many views and experiences from the perspectives of adoptive parents or professionals in the industry who are not adopted. These voices are primarily on social media, through the hashtag: *#nationaladoptionmonth*. Recently, counter hashtags have become popular during the month, including: *#flipthescript*, *#askanadoptee*, and *#nationaladopteeawarenessmonth* (*#naam*). These hashtags are critical, as they open up a particular space for adoptees to express themselves, and for the public to see adoption from a new angle. They also show that the idea of home is a complex concept that, for some, may never be untangled.

#flipthescript first emerged in 2014. The hashtag was founded by a member of the Lost Daughters, a blog that was seeking to create an open space for adult adoptees (Lost Daughters 2019). As described on the Lost Daughters, blog, the goal was:

To promote acceptance of all adoptee voices as important whether they express happiness, ambivalence, grief and loss, or anger—or all of these themes at once; and to unlabel adoptee narratives as “happy” or “angry” by accepting and expecting complex conclusions from complex life experiences (Lost Daughters 2019).

Below are some particularly relevant tweets that I have curated while searching through Twitter:

“During National Adoption Awareness Month, one would expect to hear stories from all different sides of adoption...The reasons vary, as do the outcomes. There are some happy stories, there are some horrific stories, and usually there is a mix of good and bad...When it comes to adoptees, people only want to hear the happy stories, the Hallmark movie material” ([lodi 2019](#)).

#NAAM should be an entire month of adoption agencies, adoptive parents and legislators listening to adult #adoptees tell them what adoption is actually like. There are plenty of #adopteevoices. We should be heard ([Gulledge 2019](#)).

"Loving your adopted family and not being grateful for the circumstances that brought you together are not mutually exclusive" ([punkelevenn 2019](#)).

In sum, "*#flipthescript* for *#nationaladoptionmonth* isn't about giving adoptees a voice. We have a voice. It demands we stop being silenced" (AmandaTDA 2014). This silencing is an ongoing attempt to control the narratives surrounding adoption and the White Saviour narrative. This silencing is also shown through the reactions towards this narrative shift.

For example, when I first came across these tweets, I was not as accepting, and my immediate reaction was shock and sadness that they were so critical. As I went through them, I realized I had to take a step back and reflect. This meant recognizing that it is imperative for me, as an adoptee, to listen and not be so quick to dismiss, just because their experiences did not mirror mine. I also had to examine why I had such a strong reaction to their stories, and why I immediately thought that it did not fit the 'right' adoption narrative. By exploring these reactions, and through reading the literature, I have come to realize that my responses are at least partly based on how society and adoption narratives within the media want me to react to "ungrateful" adoptees.

As one Twitter user explains:

"I don't have a problem with adoptees who have had a positive adoption. I consider my adoption to be overall 'positive.' I have an issue with those who use their positive experiences to invalidate others. I will acknowledge all aspects of my adoption. Since society speaks for me when it comes to the 'positives,' I will speak up when it comes to the complexities and challenges" ([lilly_fei 2019](#)).

Some adoptees do not have any doubts about their adoption origin story and the idea of the fated red thread. In contrast, other adoptees are critical and question adoption as an institution and its place in perpetuating the White Saviourism. Even still, there are others, like me, who are in-between: appreciate their adoptive parent(s) and families, while also questioning the deeply-rooted ideology underlining transracial adoption and the conditions that made Chinese adoptions such a phenomenon in the West. Regardless of what kind of adoptee someone is, their voice is just as essential to the adoption conversation and should be viewed as such by society, and most importantly, the adoption community.

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