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## Adopted in China, Seeking Identity in America

By [LYNETTE CLEMETSON](#)

Molly Feazel desperately wants to quit the Chinese dance group that her mother enrolled her in at age 5, because it sets her apart from friends in her Virginia suburb. Her mother, though, insists that Molly, now 15, will one day appreciate the connection to her culture.

Qiu Meng Fogarty, 13, prefers her Chinese name (pronounced cho mung) to Cecilia, her English name. She volunteers in workshops for children in New York adopted from [China](#) "so that they know it can all work out fine," she said.

Since 1991, when China loosened its adoption laws to address a growing number of children abandoned because of a national one-child policy, American families have adopted more than 55,000 Chinese children, almost all girls. Most of the children are younger than 10, and an organized subculture has developed around them, complete with play groups, tours of China and online support groups.

Molly and Qiu Meng represent the leading edge of this coming-of-age population, adopted just after the laws changed and long before such placements became popular, even fashionable.

Molly was among 61 Chinese children adopted by Americans in 1991, and Qiu Meng was one of 206 adopted the next year, when the law was fully put into effect. Last year, more than 7,900 children were adopted from China.

As the oldest of the adopted children move through their teenage years, they are beginning — independently and with a mix of enthusiasm and trepidation — to explore their identities. Their experiences offer hints at journeys yet to come for thousands of Chinese children who are now becoming part of American families each year.

Those experiences are influenced by factors like the level of diversity in their neighborhoods and schools, and how their parents expose them to their heritage.

"We're unique," Qiu Meng said.

A view that Molly does not share. "I don't see myself as different at all," said Molly, whose friends, her mother said, all seem to be "tall, thin and blond."

The different outlooks are normal say experts on transracial adoption.

Most Americans who bring Chinese children to the United States are white and in the upper middle class.

Jane Brown, a social worker and adoptive parent who conducts workshops for adopted children and their families, says the families should directly confront issues of loss and rejection, which the children often face when they begin to understand the social and gender politics that caused their families in China to abandon them.

Ms. Brown also recommends that transracial adoptive families address American attitudes on race early, consistently and head on.

"Sometimes parents want to celebrate, even exoticize, their child's culture, without really dealing with race," said Ms. Brown, 52, who is white and who has adopted children from Korea and China.

"It is one thing to dress children up in cute Chinese dresses, but the children need real contact with Asian-Americans, not just waiters in restaurants on Chinese New Year. And they need real validation about the racial issues they experience."

The growing population is drawing the attention of researchers. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a research group based in New York, is surveying adopted children from Asia who are now adults to try to find ways to help the younger children form healthy identities.

Nancy Kim Parsons, a filmmaker who was adopted from Korea, is making a documentary comparing the experiences of adults who had been adopted a generation ago from Korea with the young children adopted from China.

South Korea was the first country from which Americans adopted in significant numbers, and it is still among the leaders in international adoptions, along with Russia, Guatemala, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, India and Ethiopia. The experiences of those adopted from Korea have provided useful lessons for families adopting from China.

Hollee McGinnis, 34, the policy director at the Donaldson institute, was adopted from South Korea by white parents and was raised in Westchester County. Ten years ago, she started an adult support group, called Also Known As, which now also mentors children adopted from China.

"College was when I really began trying to understand what other people saw in my face," she said. "Before then I didn't really understand what it meant to be Asian."

It is a process McKenzie Forbes, 17, who was adopted from China and raised in towns in Virginia and West Virginia where there are few other Asians, is just starting to absorb. For her, college holds the promise of something new.

"I am feeling ready to break out a little bit," McKenzie said. "When I am around other Asians, I feel a connection that I don't feel around other people. I can't explain it exactly. But I think it will be fun to meet other people and hear their stories."

McKenzie, who was accepted by Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, applied only to universities with Asian student groups. Confident and pensive, she likes classical music and punk rock. She is wild about Japanese anime, a hobby she hopes to turn into a career, and to travel to Japan. Exploring China, she said, "is what everyone would expect."

Adopted at 2, McKenzie is among the oldest of the current wave of children adopted from China. Like many Americans adopting from overseas at the time, McKenzie's family turned to China because of a movement started in 1972 by the National Association of Black Social Workers discouraging the placement of African-American children with white adoptive families.

"With an African-American child we had no guarantee that the mother or a social worker wouldn't come and take the child away," McKenzie's mother, Maree Forbes, said. "With the children from China, we felt safe that there wouldn't be anyone to come back to get them."

McKenzie has a younger sister, Meredyth, 15, also adopted from China, and brothers Robert and John, 11-year-old twins, adopted from Vietnam. The family left Culpepper, Va., when McKenzie was 5, after children at school ostracized her because she is Chinese.

More frequent than outright racism though, McKenzie and Meredyth said, are offenses of ignorance. They were called out of class at their current school, for example, because a counselor wanted them to take an English language test for immigrant students. "We probably spoke better English than the instructor," Meredyth said.

The experience has been different for Qiu Meng Fogarty. As she recovered from a fit of giggles about something having to do with a boy, Qiu Meng looked at her friends Celena Kopinski and Hope Goodrich, who were also adopted from China, and breathed a cheery sigh.

"It's like we're related," she said, sitting on her bed in her home on Manhattan's Upper West side. "It's nice because we're all on the same page. We don't have to be like, 'Oh, you're adopted?' or 'Oh, yeah, I'm Chinese,' It's just easy."

The three girls have been friends for as long as they can remember. Their parents helped form Families With Children From China, a support group started in 1993 that now has chapters worldwide.

Some teenagers lose interest in the group because many of its activities focus on younger children. But Qiu Meng, a perky wisp of a girl with an infectious laugh, is still enthusiastically involved. She sold "Year of the Dog" T-shirts at a Chinese New Year event in January, and is a mentor at group workshops.

She said she remembers how hard it was to talk about painful things when she was younger and children at school would stretch their eyes upward and tease her. "There

aren't a lot of children who can talk openly and easily about things like that," she said. "So it feels good to be able to help them."

Last summer, Qiu Meng, Celena and Hope attended a camp for children adopted from around the world. When it ended, counselors gathered the campers in a circle and connected them with a string. The campers all went home with a section of the string tied to their wrists, as a reminder their shared experience.

When a volleyball coach later told Qiu Meng to cut off the string for a game, she carefully tucked it away, took it home and hung it on her bedroom wall among numerous Chinese prints and paintings.

The teenagers all acknowledge that they are just beginning a long process of self-definition, and even though Molly is still trying to persuade her parents to allow her to quit the Chinese dance class, she admits privately that she benefits from the struggle.

"If my parents didn't push, I know I would just drop it all completely," she said. "And then I wouldn't have anything to fall back on later."

Molly, Qiu Meng and McKenzie said they would not have wanted to grow up any other way, and they all said they would one day like to adopt from China. "It's a good thing to do," Qiu Meng said. "And since I'm Asian, they wouldn't look different."



Jennifer A. Altman for The New York Times

From the left, Hope Goodrich, Celena Kopinski, Mei Lan Fogarty and Qiu Meng Fogarty all were adopted from China by American families.

