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# Exploring the Educational Implications of the Third Space Framework for Transnational Asian Adoptees

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## Abstract

*Transnational Asian adoptees are a unique and understudied population that potentially faces oppression and confusion. Educational institutions are often unresponsive to the needs of immigrant groups, particularly ones with unique circumstances like transnational Asian adoptees. Not only is there a gap generally in the critical and empirical literature across fields when it comes to this population, but it is almost entirely missing from the educational literature. This conceptual paper contributes a better understanding of transnational adoptees through a third space framework. We seek to critically analyze and synthesize the literature on transnational Asian adoptees. The outcome of the investigation bridges the adoption and education literature, situating it within the educational context. In doing so, we present educational implications of transnational Asian adoption that lay the groundwork for much needed empirical analyses.*

*Keywords:* transnational Asian adoptees, third spaces, immigrant education, immigrant studies

Studies of immigrant communities in the United States appear in the social science literature, particularly in ethnic and cultural studies, and counseling and psychology literature. Broadly, these studies demonstrate that immigrant groups find themselves in a unique transnational psycho-social space which transcends the borders of both the home country and the host country, thereby allowing migrants to morph their identities and customs (Hübinette, 2004). Researchers focusing on a specific immigrant population—*transnational adoptees*—situate their work in the literatures on adoption (Hübinette, 2004, 2007; Tessler & Gamache, 2012), counseling (Baden, Treweeke & Ahluwalia, 2012), ethnic and cultural studies (Barn, 2013; Fang, 2009), identity (Bhabha, 1990; Cherot, 2006; Grice, 2005; J. Lee, 2004), and psychology and psychiatry (Arnett, 2000; R. M. Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & the Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2006; Kim, 1995). Although there is a growing body of literature on

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transnational adoptees, studies of this population are almost entirely missing from the educational literature.

It is critical to understand how transnational adoptees, particularly those from Asian countries, fare in U.S. educational contexts because, since the 1970s, they have been enrolling in American public schools at increasing rates. Indeed, the United States has historically been the largest receiving country of transnational adoptees, predominantly from Asian nations (Choy, 2009). According to Choy (2013), Asia sent the largest number of adoptees to the United States between 1971 and 2001 (156,491 or 59% of transnational adoptees). Education typically equips people with both knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the society in which they live (Tyack, 1974). Yet, American educational institutions and systems are often unresponsive to the needs of immigrant populations, particularly transnational adoptees, who face unique challenges in navigating and understanding their identities (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000).

In this conceptual paper, we critically analyze and synthesize the literature on transnational Asian adoptees in the United States. We focus on the literature on the three largest transnational Asian adoptee populations in the United States: (a) Chinese, (b) Korean, and (c) Vietnamese. *Transnational adoption*, *international adoption*, and *inter-country adoption* each refer to the transfer of children from one nation to another into families that are often “racially and culturally different from them” (Barn, 2013). Because the population on which we focus encompasses the three terms above, we have chosen to use the term *Asian adoption* to refer specifically to the adoption of children from China, South Korea, and Vietnam—the largest sending countries from Asia in the last few decades. Studying these groups together is a meaningful exercise for exploring similarities and differences within and across groups. This paper aims to bridge the adoption and education literatures as we focus on transnational Asian adoptees within the educational context. In doing so, we present educational implications for transnational Asian adoptees that lay the groundwork for much needed empirical analyses.

To understand the experiences of transnational Asian adoptees, it is critical to generate a theoretical approach that allows not only for their voices to be heard, but also for carefully recognizing the hybrid spaces in which they live, i.e., between their countries of origin and the United States. Bhabha’s third space framework (1990, 1994) allows us to see how transnational Asian adoptees construct identity through an understanding of their cultural difference. The third space is a hybrid, interstitial place on the boundary of two cultures where individuals may create a new, more accurate depiction of reality. Within the third space, transnational Asian adoptees create new personal narratives, unhinging the histories preceding them and fostering opportunities to create new meanings.

Two questions guide this conceptual article: First, how does being a transnational Asian adoptee situate the individual within the third space? Second, how does the third space context help us understand the educational needs of Asian adoptee children?

Following this introduction, this paper unfolds in five sections. The first section outlines how using the third space framework fosters increased knowledge and understanding of transnational Asian adoptees in the educational context. Next, we

provide a brief history of transnational Asian adoption in the United States, which creates critical perspective and context. We then synthesize the literature on several important contexts within which adoptees exist in relation to the third space framework. Next, we offer considerations for working with adoptees within educational contexts via a third space framework. Finally, we conclude with implications for practitioners and researchers, paired with five questions to guide future empirical research.

## **Transnational Asian Adoptees and the Third Space**

### **Defining the Third Space**

Recall that Bhabha (1990, 1994) describes the third space as a hybrid space incorporating two distinct cultures. Moje, et al. (2004) similarly define the third space as an amalgamation of the first space (family and community contexts) with the second space (institutional contexts such as schools). Empirical applications of the third space framework abound in the educational literature. For example, Isik-Ercan (2014) uses the third space framework to illuminate how Turkish parents learned to negotiate an interstitial concept of respect and decency somewhere between the home culture and the culture children learned at school. Other educational researchers have used the third space framework when examining literacy and language issues (Fitts, 2009; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez & Chiu, 1999; Moje, et al., 2004), student teacher preparation (Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman & Nichols, 2011; Phompun, Thongthew & Zeichner, 2013), and the intersection of identity, culture, and schooling (Isik-Ercan, 2014), which is relevant for this paper. Together, these authors demonstrate how the educational context can help support children living in the third space.

### **Understanding Transnational Asian Adoptees within the Context of the Third Space**

The third space illuminates both the challenges and opportunities transnational Asian adoptees experience in navigating their identities. Indeed, transnational Asian adoptees can be found in the liminal (i.e., on the borderline or boundary) third space that Bhabha (1994) describes as the “interstice” between the colonized and the colonizer. Derived within this space are iterative representations of meaning; ongoing, infinite negotiations; and an indeterminate, unsettled existence in terms of how culture is typically explained. Similarly, transnational Asian adoptees live in a context very different from that of their adoptive families and from that of other Asian immigrants to the United States. Hübinette (2005) explains that Korean adoptees are “severed, estranged, and isolated” from their birthplace while they are “marginalized” and “otherized” in their Western host countries (p. 168). Miller-Loessi and Kilic (2001) and Williams (2001) argue that Chinese and Vietnamese adoptees have had similar experiences to Korean adoptees.

Thus, transnational Asian adoptees arguably live within a third space in that they are practically severed from their birth culture and exist as an accepted *other* in the Western world in which they live (Bhabha, 1994). This forces them to live on the border of each culture, which can be confusing and challenging for an individual. Bhabha (1990) posits

that it is impractical for members of society to combine different forms of cultural practices assuming they will easily coexist.

Hübinette (2007) acknowledges that third space concepts are typically associated with colonized subjects and postcolonial diasporas. However, he theorizes that Korean adoptees are the quintessential case of third space existence as they lack the common connections associated with the immigrant experience, such as native language and culture. Miller-Loessi and Kilic (2001) argue that while the Chinese government created an adoption program encouraging adoptive parents to foster the child's Chinese identity both in their adoptive country and transnationally, this program may be a form of exacerbation. The adoptive parents cannot authentically carry out Chinese culture like most Chinese immigrant parents can. In turn, the adopted Chinese child lives in a forced state of hybridity, where they are "none of the above and all of the above" at the same time (Miller-Loessi & Kilic, 2001). These adopted children were involuntarily placed into this situation living on the borderline between cultures. Thus, hybridized existences in third spaces do not necessarily create a harmonious, pleasant state (Hübinette, 2007).

The third space is an appropriate lens for understanding how transnational Asian adoptees navigate different spaces within the educational context as they are bound to confront issues of identity through their schooling experiences. For example, Williams (2001) describes how Vietnamese adoptees beginning school for the first time notice racially homogeneous families and encounter questions from peers about the difference between their physical features and that of their family members. Events like this illustrate the arc of adopted children's journeys into the liminal, fluctuating third space. These experiences foster opportunities for adoptees to acknowledge and explore their identity in the third space. The next section provides a brief historical overview of Asian adoption in the United States with key information needed to examine transnational Asian adoptees in the third space.

### **Asian Adoption History in the United States**

The history of transnational adoption into the U.S. dates back over sixty years. Though this article highlights the experiences of Asian adoptees from China, South Korea, and Vietnam specifically, it is important to note how transnational adoption from Asia began and how it has transformed in more recent years. The onset of transnational adoption between Asia and the U.S. immediately followed American military involvement in Asia during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, during which U.S. servicemen and Asian women produced mixed-race offspring who were largely ostracized from their countries of birth (Barn, 2013; Choy, 2009). These children, called "G.I. babies" or "war orphans," faced intense racial discrimination in their birth countries, and their birth mothers were confronted with societal pressure to give up their children, often to families abroad. Since then, other factors contributing to the rise of U.S. transnational adoption from Asia include the following: (a) changing adoption practices in the United States, (b) sociopolitical and economic concerns, and (c) U.S. legislation supporting transnational adoption. In what follows, we discuss how each of these factors

impacted transnational adoption during three periods: 1940s–1960s, 1970s–1990s, and 2000–present.

### **Transnational Adoption: 1940s–1960s**

In the 1940s and 1950s, thousands of orphaned children born into war-stricken, impoverished conditions and receiving limited sources of support in Japan and Korea were adopted abroad (R. M. Lee et al., 2006). Following World War II, approximately 20,000 mixed-race children were born out of wedlock, which signified the visible mark of U.S. military presence; these children confronted much racial discrimination. After the Korean War, mixed-race Korean children were often reported as being outcasts within their society and denied education and employment opportunities within their birth country. In the monolithic societies of Japan and Korea, mixed-race children were destined to a life of dreadful conditions, both because of the strong prejudice against mixed-race children and the impoverished living conditions into which they were born (Choy, 2009). Due to rampant racial discrimination, domestic adoption was strongly discouraged; therefore, approximately 2,000 Korean children were adopted in the U.S. (Hübinette, 2005).

The Refugee Relief Act of 1953, which provided visas for up to 4,000 orphans from overseas, opened the door for mixed-race children from Japan and Korea to immigrate to the U.S. and receive U.S. citizenship (Oh, 2012). One of the first organizations to take advantage of the 1953 Refugee Relief Act was the Holt Adoption Agency (Holt), created after the Holt family adopted eight children from Korea in 1955. Viewing transnational adoption as “a call from God,” Holt’s purpose was to “save” orphaned children born to American soldiers and Asian women (primarily in Korea) by bringing them to the U.S. (Nelson, 2009). Word spread quickly of the Holt family’s multiple adoptions, and a surge of interested American families sought the Holts’ help to adopt children from Korea. Holt supported these families if they abided by a Christian faith, rather than using the family background criteria used by social welfare organizations (Nelson, 2009; Winslow, 2012). The lack of adoption policies and government oversight between 1948 and 1961 allowed for an expedited adoption process that did not require parent presence or a proper family screening process. It remains questionable whether or not, during this time, adopted children were properly placed into families that would support their cultural heritage (R. M. Lee, et al., 2006). Consequently, the United States, during the 1950s, became the world’s highest receiving country of Asian adoptees (Choy, 2009).

Transnational adoption from Japan quickly declined by the 1960s when the economy of Japan improved. However, transnational adoption from Korea continued. In addition to mixed-race children, American families adopted over 100,000 non-mixed race Korean children between 1953 and 2012 (Hübinette, 2004).

### **Transnational Adoption: 1970s–1990s**

During the 1970s, interest in adoption among White parents increased; however, the legalities of custody between birth mothers and adoptive parents constrained potential adoptive parents from moving forth in the domestic adoption process (Nelson, 2009).

Meanwhile, there was an overall decrease in the number of adoptable White children (Nelson, 2009). Furthermore, the National Association of Black Social Workers and the Indian Child Welfare Act contested U.S. transracial adoptions, in which parents adopt a child of a racial background different from their own (Nelson, 2009). This academic group and legal mandate characterized the adoption of Black and Native American adoptees into non-Black and non-Native American families (mostly White) as a repeated historical practice of cultural genocide (Barn, 2013; Nelson, 2009; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). Given the controversial nature of domestic transracial adoption, White parents wishing to adopt often looked beyond the U.S. borders.

Vietnam was one country to which potential adoptive parents turned. The Vietnam War produced another wave of mixed-race adopted children born to U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese women. During the war, White families in the U.S. adopted 1,000 mixed-race Vietnamese children. Following the war, in 1975, Operation Babylift, which the U.S. government framed as a humanitarian effort to rescue suffering children from the Vietcong, allowed an additional 2,000 Vietnamese children to be placed into the homes of predominantly White families in the U.S. (Cherot, 2009).

At the same time that American families were adopting children from Vietnam, American families continued to adopt children from Korea. As adoption from Korea continued through the Seoul Summer Olympics of 1988, Western media, particularly from the U.S., described adoptive children as South Korea's largest export. This brought worldwide negative attention to an ongoing matter that Korean governmental officials had been covering up, focusing instead on building the country's economy and reputation as a highly industrialized nation. With the issue of Korean adoption at the forefront of the global media, the South Korean government felt pressure to address the problem (Hübinette, 2007; Selman, 2012). The government mandated a deadline for ending international adoption in 1996. This mandate failed, and in 1994, the government set a new deadline for 2015 (Hübinette, 2007).

### **Transnational Adoption: 2000–Present**

Adoption from Vietnam continued through the 1990s until accusations and investigations of corruption and fraud ensued, leading the Vietnamese government to reduce the number of intercountry adoptions in 2004–2005 and to reexamine the country's adoption process. Though sending and receiving countries developed formalized authorization and intercountry adoption from Vietnam once again, the sudden spike of abandoned Vietnamese children remained questionable, given continued accounts of child trafficking and of adoption agencies' coercive practices, including offering money to healthy, childbearing women and then falsifying records of children sold to adoption brokers (Blair, 2005; The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, 2011). Due to the U.S. Department of State and embassy's warnings to adoptive parents of these practices and the nonrenewal of U.S.-Vietnam Memorandum of Understanding, adoption from Vietnam is now restricted in the U.S. (The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, 2011).

More recently, the increase in transnational adoption in the United States is due to many factors, including “increased infertility rates, perceived difficulties associated with domestic adoption, preference to adopt infants rather than older children, and a disinclination toward foster care adoption” (R. M. Lee et al., 2006). Since 2000, the number of adoptions from China has exceeded those from Japan, Vietnam, and South Korea. Table 1 provides evidence for this with raw adoption numbers of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese children since 2000. Adoptions from China currently comprise over a fourth of total overseas adoptions into the United States (Gates, 1999; United States Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2014). Continued adoption from China includes a large number of healthy girls abandoned in orphanages (Poncz, 2007; Selman, 2012). This is due to China’s one-child policy and cultural preference for boys. Additionally, an increased percentage of older boys with special needs reside in these orphanages.

Table 1  
*Transnational Asian Adoptees Adopted by U.S. Citizens by Country of Origin and Year, 2000–2014*

<i>Year</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>South Korea</i>	<i>Vietnam</i>
2014	2,040	370	-----
2013	2,306	138	-----
2012	2,696	627	-----
2011	2,587	736	-----
2010	3,401	865	9
2009	3,020	1,079	481
2008	3,912	1,064	748
2007	5,453	938	828
2006	6,492	1,373	163
2005	7,903	1,628	7
2004	7,038	1,713	21
2003	6,857	1,793	382
2002	6,116	1,776	766
2001	4,705	1,862	736
2000	5,058	1,784	728

*Source:* United States Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs (2014)

In this section, we reviewed the sociopolitical, economic, and legal contexts surrounding transnational Asian adoption. In the following section, we explore how the stereotype of Asians as a “model minority” also contributed to the interest among American families in adopting Asian children.

### **Transnational Asian Adoptees and the Model Minority Stereotype**

The literature on the model minority stereotype often locates the stereotype’s beginnings in the 1960s, yet historical research indicates that such discourse began right after World War II (Oh, 2012; Wu, 2006). There is also a lengthy history of stereotyping transnational Asian adoptees as a model minority dating back to the Cold War era. This stems initially from the passing of the Refugee Relief Act (RRA) of 1953 (Oh, 2012). According to Winslow (2012), Asian refugee children were considered peace offerings at a time when America desired to rebuild its international reputation. The U.S. State Department’s Subcommittee on Immigration viewed orphans from abroad as the ideal immigrants because they were young, and due to their lack of cultural ties, would supposedly assimilate easily into the United States (Winslow, 2012). At the time, the government viewed Asian “war brides,” refugees, and orphans generally as model immigrants; however, the orphan had the most merit and posed the least threat. They were seen as “the ideal future citizen, at once a model minority and a model immigrant” (Oh, 2012, p. 48). The United States government saw this as a “win-win” situation; these children would easily adapt to American culture and the U.S. could improve its international reputation through what it saw as a humanitarian effort.

Christian missionaries, the Korean Government, and U.S. military personnel together promoted the idea that Korean children were model, “manageable,” immigrants. Categorizing all displaced children as orphans and making their physical appearances similar (e.g., girls with bob cuts and boys with shaved heads) proved effective (Pate, 2010). Photographs of cute, smiling children helped fuel the understanding, in the U.S. and abroad, that these children would be easily absorbed into American society, more so than children from other backgrounds.

Organizations like Holt took it upon themselves to utilize the RRA in a manner they saw fit (Winslow, 2012). Bertha and Harry Holt’s organization promoted the notion of the Asian model minority through their marketing of these so-called “orphans.” The agency’s adoption practices mirrored the American racial hierarchy of the time with biracial Korean-White children as the most preferred adoptees, followed by Korean and biracial Korean-Black children (Pate, 2010). While the Holts believed that Korean children who were 100% Korean could assimilate into the dominant White culture, they felt Korean-Black children would be forever marked (Winslow, 2012).

In addition, compared with domestic transracial adoption of Native American and Black children, White families perceived transnational Asian adoptees as the “safest” choice. This perception emerged from the model minority stereotype (Nelson, 2009). Cohen (1996) suggests that White adoptive parents fostered a stratified adoption system in favor of the Asian adoptee, versus the less desirable Black adoptee. Indeed, Cherot (2006) suggests that White families saw Asian adoptees as more governable and

adaptable to middle-class White American life. Stereotypes associated with the model minority myth may have increased adoptive families' preference for Asian children, resulting in higher rates of transnational Asian adoptees at this time (Kim, 1995). Today, Asian children, particularly those from China, form the largest group of transnational adopted children.

Although White parents and families may unconditionally accept their adoptive Asian children, the model minority stereotype, which seems benign on the surface, can engender psychological and social difficulties that surface as these children experience racism and navigate their racial and cultural identities (R. M. Lee, 2006; Palmer, 2011). Arguably, situating Asian adoptees within the model minority stereotype is contradictory since they are considered both a model American and a racial *other* (J. Lee, 2004). Unlike other Asian immigrants, transnational Asian adoptees were selected by White Americans to become part of the fabric of their culture. Yet, given differences in their racial and cultural heritage, Asian adoptees live at the boundaries of both their adoptive and birth cultures, in the liminal third space. Their identity fluctuates between marginal and yet central to the "all-American" ideal (J. Lee, 2004). Their third space existence positions them to inhabit neither their birth nor American cultures, but somewhere on the border of both.

### **Experiencing the Third Space through Families, Schools, and Online Communities**

#### **Family in Transnational Context**

The family context for Asian transnational adoptees is very different from that of most Asian immigrants (Miller-Loessi & Kilic, 2001). Whereas most immigrants to the United States arrive with family or cultural ties and knowledge of their birth culture, transnational Asian adoptees are often detached from their birth culture, typically raised by White families in largely White surroundings (Hübinette, 2007). For example, Hübinette (2007) demonstrates that most Korean children adopted even in the 2000s were born in secluded clinics and maternity homes to high school girls or middle class college-aged women who gave their babies up due to the patriarchal nature of the culture. Nelson (2009) further reveals that Korean adoptees' connections to their biological families are far more complex than those of most immigrants due to their physical and legal separation. Because Korean adoptees leave so young and their adoptive parents typically do not escort them to the United States, they cannot turn to anyone in their immediate adoptive families to learn about their birth culture nor do they have the connections most Asian immigrants have to their birth culture. Moreover, adoptive families may unintentionally reinforce the model minority stereotype and racial prejudice. For example, Hübinette (2007) shares the story of one adoptee whose adoptive family called her obedient, attributing her supposed obedience to her genetics while also using negative words to describe her and other Asians. Examples like these illuminate how adoptees often straddle the borderline of their birth and adoptive cultures, occupying a third space despite widespread perceptions that adoptees will easily assimilate.

Scholars have demonstrated how adoptive families may be encouraged to adopt for political reasons. For example, in the Vietnamese context, many Americans “reconciled” the violence of the Vietnam War by adopting babies through Operation Babylift (Phan, 2012). This offered the children a “normal” American life. The famous photo of President Ford holding a Vietnamese baby from the first successful flight into the U.S. sparked a symbolic, paternal image that America had liberated these children and given them the opportunity to live an American life. Phan (2012) mentions that the hoopla ensuing from the political play in the media not only stimulated conversation about the heroism of America but also made adopters of these children feel like heroes.

Arguably, the more recent wave of Chinese adoption is also politically motivated. The large-scale out-migration of Chinese adoptees to 14 Western countries comprises almost all girls (Miller-Loessi & Kilic, 2001). This is largely a byproduct of the one-child law and the patriarchal culture in China, which prizes male children, particularly in rural communities. While intracountry adoptions do occur, Grice (2005) suggests that China favors transnational adoption. Chinese adoption regulations are strict and regimented, and the government politically spins Chinese girls as “gifts” to the adoptive parents. The Chinese government requires prospective parents to come to China in order to complete the adoption process and participate in a ritualized ceremony encouraging them to pay homage to the children’s Chinese culture throughout their lives (Miller-Loessi & Kilic, 2001). Volkman (2003) points out that the demographic characteristics of the U.S. families who adopt Chinese children often differ from the demographic characteristics of parents of the Korean and Vietnamese adoptees. The parents of Chinese adoptees tend to be well-educated, older urbanites, often with higher incomes, who postponed having children. Some of these parents are unmarried or in same-sex partnerships, and many are Jewish.

Tessler and Gamache (2012) conducted an empirical study that demonstrated that when adoptive parents invest in their children’s learning of Chinese culture, it is likely that, as teenagers, they will explore their cultural identities. However, these children still exist in a third space. Evidence demonstrates that girls involved in cultural exploration often feel self-conscious, believing that people look at them as an “other” (Tessler & Gamache, 2012). Shiao and Tuan (2008) emphasize that some Asian adoptees purposely avoid interacting with other Asian children in order to protect their personal visibility and, therefore, their mind-set of dissimilarity. One teen participant from Tessler’ and Gamache’s study explains the third space best when she states that the distinction regarding her birth culture and adoption is not black or white. She insists that while sometimes she wishes she were simply “American,” she is not averse to being a Chinese adoptee. It is a gray issue that she contemplates regularly. White parents can offer their adoptive children opportunities for cultural exploration, yet they themselves are not from the same cultural heritage or background and cannot transfer cultural knowledge in the same way as an ethnically Chinese family member. Although avenues for cultural exploration for Chinese adoptees appear to be more well-thought out, difference still exists, the model minority status often still marks the children, and they are still left in a fluctuating state, constantly redrawing the boundaries of their identity.

### **Schooling Experiences**

Early childhood experiences with family often minimize transnational Asian adoptees' conception that they are different than other family members. However, Williams (2001) suggests that schools provide adopted children with some of their earliest meaningful experiences of feeling different as this is often the first time adoptees are asked why their skin color is different from that of their families. Highly cognizant of their racial difference, transnational Asian adoptees often struggle to navigate where and how they fit into their families, schools, and society at large (Kaanta, 2009). For example, Willing (2004) describes how she tried to fit in with her White peers at school and evaded being referred to as Asian as best she could. Yet, at the same time, she searched for ways to feel positive about her Vietnamese heritage. Willing's contradictory and fluctuating feelings regarding her identity illuminate how she lived in the third space. The model minority stereotype often complicates transnational adoptees' experiences of identity exploration as well. Tessler and Gamache (2012) document the experience of an adoptee from China who yearns to be perceived as an average American youth, yet her friends assume she is intelligent and always want to study with her. Whereas these examples demonstrate transnational adoptees' struggles with fitting in, Hübinette (2007) shares stories from several Korean adoptees who are relatively comfortable with their third space existence. As one individual mentions, "I've accepted my *liminal* status. I'll try to dance while trapped in this perpetual *limbo*" (Hübinette, 2007, p. 156, italics added).

As transnational Asian adoptees enter more multicultural spaces, they have the opportunity both to recognize their own difference from Whiteness and to explore their identities more explicitly (Shiao & Tuan, 2008; Williams, 2003). This often occurs during college, which can serve as a supportive third space for adoptees (Palmer, 2011). For example, Phan (2012) conveys the story of an adoptee who rejected her birth culture until she reached college. In contrast to her childhood experiences growing up in what she described as a bigoted all-White neighborhood, college allowed her to explore and accept her Asian identity. Shiao and Tuan note different types of explorers in their empirical study of Korean adoptees. Modest explorers joined Asian American organizations and forged friendships with Asians. More substantial explorers took Asian language and ethnic studies classes and may have studied abroad in their birth countries. However, adoptees experience mixed levels of comfort in their identity explorations. As Williams (2001) reveals, one Vietnamese male adoptee tried joining Asian student groups in college but felt detached due to his lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge relative to other club members. However, this did not discourage further exploration as he has connected with other Vietnamese adoptees via the Internet. In the next sub-section, we describe in greater detail how online communities can be supportive third spaces for transnational adoptees.

### **The Fluctuating Borderline: The Third Space through Technology**

Building on Bhaba's (1990) third space theory, Asian transnational adoptees can construct a third space of their own—a space that allows open dialogue for transnational Asian adoptees, uninhibited by their adoptive environments and countries of birth. The

process of claiming and creating a third space, however, can be frustrating and may sometimes feel limiting, given the persistence of dominant narratives regarding their experiences. For example, as Cherot (2009) describes, Vietnamese adoptees often “struggle for a voice independent of their adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and Babylift volunteers” (p. 116). Other transnational Asian adoptees may suffer from the same constraints due to the strong cultural influence of their adoptive families and societal acceptance of the model minority stereotype, which conceals the diversity of transnational adoptees’ experiences, including experiences of suffering.

However, the continuous development of technology has brought the world closer together. Communities of transnational Asian adoptees have coalesced through multiple forms of online media, including chat rooms; social networks (professional and personal); websites and blogs catering to adoptees from specific countries and time periods; and online meetings, events, and social organizations. Technology serves as a window to worldwide communities for transnational Asian adoptees. It also serves as a valuable resource for transnational adoptees seeking to reclaim their birth cultures, languages, and customs. The multitude of online platforms allows adoptees to create and experience their own third spaces. Through online communities and platforms, transnational adoptees can craft their own counterstories to the more popularized narratives of adoptive parents and adoption agencies that “saved” them (Cherot, 2009).

One must also consider the process of creating a space for transnational adoptees to have a voice during their adolescence and early adulthood, which is considered the most critical period for their ethnic identity formation (Arnett, 2000; R. M. Lee, 2006; Phinney, 1990). To assist in this process, technology can be a significant tool for adolescents and emerging adults to explore and reflect upon areas of their lives that were previously suppressed or overlooked. Unlike previous generations, today, transnational adoptees in their adolescence and early adulthood have access to information regarding their birth countries and cultures through the Internet. As technology continues to bring people closer together, it can fill the gap between transnational adoptees and their home culture. While Hübinette (2005) suggests that living in a third space is not always a pleasant existence, the advent of advanced technology platforms offers adoptees far greater prospects for conducting more nuanced and deep searches about their birth culture and for forging connections more easily with other adoptees. This may result in new ways for transnational Asian adoptees to engage with their identity.

In the following section, we discuss another promising context—schools—in which transnational adoptees can experience support and affirmation. Specifically, we argue that innovative pedagogical approaches can better support adoptees as they navigate the third space.

### **Supporting the Third Space in the Educational Context**

As scholars have demonstrated in their studies of colonized, refugee, minority, and oppressed populations, it is necessary to use appropriate pedagogy that will not only assist these populations in achieving academic success, but also support them in building strong identities, becoming active members of their community, and feeling empowered.

However, the question of how to address appropriately the specific needs of transnational Asian adoptees in an educational context is an area that is rarely addressed in the literature. To support transnational adoptees as they manage multiple identities, caring educators can employ innovative pedagogical approaches, such as critical pedagogy, critical multiculturalism, feminist pedagogy, and a qualitative approach to instruction, focusing on funds of knowledge.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Educators have used Freire's (1968) and McLaren's (1998) groundbreaking work on critical pedagogy in diverse contexts throughout the world, reaching not only oppressed groups in developing countries, but also future educators seeking to serve in underprivileged and empowered neighborhoods. Critical pedagogy is a philosophical approach to education through critical theory. It is based upon the dialogical teaching practices of Paulo Freire, who argued for the value of having students engage in open dialogue. Dialogue, according to Freire, changes the traditional student-teacher relationship, in which a student is a passive listener and the teacher is the lecturer, to the idea that "a humanistic and revolutionary educator begins with engagement of critical thinking with her students and the search for mutual humanization through a partnership which builds trust and creative power" (McLaren, 1998, p. 75). Within a classroom, the teacher's role shifts from the center of instruction to an equal part of the learning process. Freire (1968) also suggests that, when teachers connect with their students through shared experiences, they dismantle traditional power dynamics within the classroom. Within this context, Freire (1968) argues that students will each feel empowered and can then "gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it" (p. 32).

Despite its common application to historically oppressed students and those in developing countries, educators can also use critical pedagogy to support transnational Asian adoptees as they navigate their complex identities. A critical pedagogical approach helps adoptees to question dominant narratives and power dynamics. For example, three narratives emerge from the literature on Vietnamese adoption, from the perspectives of adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and Babylift operators (Cherot, 2009; Willing, 2004). Missing are the voices of the adopted children and their biological parents. However, by employing a critical pedagogical approach, teachers can encourage adoptees, from Vietnam and elsewhere, to question such narratives and feel empowered to craft their own counternarratives.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Overlapping with some of the ideas of critical pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching is also appropriate for teaching transnational Asian adoptees and supporting their identity exploration (Gay, 2010). Through this approach, educators encourage students to question power and facilitate spaces for adoptees' own stories to be heard. Culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to understand their students' diverse ethnic, racial, and sociocultural backgrounds and values while recognizing heterogeneity

of experiences and behaviors even among students of the same background. Teachers then leverage these understandings in their approaches to instruction with the goal of supporting the achievement of children from all backgrounds (Gay, 2010). Features of a culturally responsive program for transnational Asian adoptees could include supporting students' voices, building a sense of community that allows for discourse, using cooperative learning as a method of instruction, allowing for choices, and providing opportunities for empowerment through gaining knowledge, critical thinking, and making personal connections.

### **Feminist Pedagogy**

According to Noddings' (2003) feminist approach to education, which focuses on aspects of care, a caring relationship is fundamental to teaching children. The concept of care as a feminist pedagogical approach may differ from most preconceived ideas of what defines care. Noddings (2003) describes care as considering others' points of view, objective needs, and expectations. This may be particularly important for transnational Asian adoptees who experience the challenge of navigating their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities. A feminist pedagogical approach can support adoptees as they begin the process of consciously understanding differences between themselves and their adoptive parents. Given the complicated nature of their identities, adoptees may continue to face challenges throughout adolescence regarding their identity exploration, ability to form healthy relationships, and how to cope with feelings of abandonment, depression, and grief (Baden, et al., 2012; Grice, 2005; Hoffman & Peña, 2013). This is where the role of a caring educator is most important, as such an individual can support transnational Asian adoptees as they resolve the opposing messages they may receive from their White families and peers asking questions about their ethnicity in school (Hoffman & Peña, 2013; R. M. Lee, 2006). Although some aspects of caring cannot be taught to teachers (i.e., genuine care vs. aesthetical care), Noddings' (2003) approach to caring in education involves trust and receptivity as necessary parts of a caring relationship. In education, the teacher (one-caring) resists any form of influence that shapes the child's views or perceptions, instead providing her with the opportunity to see for herself what is available, the possible changes, and the potential outcomes. The child ultimately determines her decisions (Noddings, 2003, p. 60). This allows the child to take ownership over her situation; the teacher is supportive of the child's behaviors while never allowing her to feel alone or abandoned.

Furthermore, a caring teacher, according to Noddings (2003), fully accepts, or "receives," each student and their complexities: "The other is received, his reality is apprehended as possibility for oneself" (p. 60). While not all teachers may be able to provide such complete attention toward all children, Noddings (2003) suggests that teachers can still provide a supportive environment that shows affection for the students who may not encounter this receptivity at home. This approach assists transnational Asian adoptees whose unique experiences may need additional support through a caring adult. In turn, the children can learn to respond accordingly and perhaps provide the same

attention to one another (Noddings, 2003, p. 61). The child will respond to an educator (one-caring) who exhibits trust and love, making the tasks and challenges motivating.

### **A Qualitative Approach to Instruction**

The work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) bridges aspects of critical, multicultural, and feminist pedagogy through their qualitative approach to instruction by building lessons based on the individual student's *funds of knowledge*. Funds of knowledge, according to Moll, et al. (1992), are defined as "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). This approach requires the active participation not only of teachers, but also of administrators, school counselors, and all staff involved in the student's schooling experience. The educator's role is to become a learner rather than a teacher in understanding both the student's adoptive family culture and birth culture. With the knowledge gained from learning about the student's home (through communication among parents, students, and teachers; observations; and more importantly, home visits), teachers can use the student's background as a springboard to construct lessons that connect with the student's prior knowledge and background. Teachers may include family members to take part in their child's learning at school by bringing family members as guest speakers on topics that are familiar to them. This pedagogical approach acknowledges differences among families while also valuing these differences, in turn helping adoptees to value their own differences.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Researchers and Practitioners**

This paper adds to the existing literature on transnational Asian adoptees by critically examining this population using the third space framework. We explored key factors affecting their lives, including the model minority stereotype, family in transnational context, role of technology, and schooling experiences. We see this exploration as the beginning of a broader research and practice agenda. First, we contend that researchers need to consider the ways in which adoptees in the third space could be supported in educational contexts. While Fang (2009) points out that some researchers have studied Korean Americans in relation to school-level factors, we call for additional research, particularly on adoptees from other Asian nations. Future research should also consider transnational adoptees' identity formation during adolescence and early adulthood. In addition, the impact of technology on third space theory for transnational adoptees needs to be further explored.

Second, we call for the expansion of professional development opportunities for teachers serving transnational adoptees. Although transnational adoptees may comprise a small percentage of the total student population in the U.S., it is important for educators to understand their experiences and support their identity exploration within the classroom. Professional development can help educators develop a firm understanding of the population they are serving so that they do not assume that all Asian students in their classes have similar cultures and upbringings. Professional development can also help teachers to understand transnational adoptees' unique home and family circumstances.

To close, we offer below a series of questions, which emerged from our critical analysis and can guide researchers and practitioners:

- In what ways do transnational Asian adoptees differ from other transnational and domestic adoptees? How are their schooling needs and experiences different?
- Within transnational adoption, what are the dangers of assuming cultural diversity as a universal concept? How can, or should, school personnel address this?
- How can educators support transnationally adopted children and their families in the K-12 setting?
- What are the educational implications of transnational Asian adoption?
- In what ways can technology build a bridge to make a stronger connection between adoptees' birth countries and experiences as Americans? In what ways can technology support the third space for transnational adoptees in the educational context?

We hope these questions invite further thought and discussion that can lead to much-needed empirical work and continued professional development.

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