

Article

A Norwegian Soul in a Chinese Body? Ethnic Identity and Chinese Adoptees in Norway

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Abstract: The ethnic identity of international adoptees has been a transdisciplinary field of inquiry over the past decades. Taking China-born adopted Norwegian citizens as research subjects, this study uses a mixed-method approach to explore how they perceive their ethnic identity and origin in the host society of Norway. We find that Chinese adoptees mainly identify as racially Chinese but culturally Norwegian, and their Chineseness lies primarily in their appearance. They generally feel secure about their ethnic background despite the challenges and paradoxes caused by their Chinese looks. Most adoptees have no attachment to their birth country, and their interests in China and Chinese culture are usually instrumental and individual-based. Three main socio-cultural factors shape the ethnic identity of China-born adopted children: (1) the negligible impact of their pre-adoptive history upon them, (2) a supportive family environment acknowledging their differences, and (3) an inclusive socio-cultural environment that respects ethnic diversities. No clear tendency towards constructing or enacting double identities among the adoptees was found. Finally, our respondents reported fewer racist experiences than suggested by recent literature on migrants and international adoptees in current literature. This aspect needs further research, also in reference to other cohorts of adoptees.

Keywords: international adoption; China-adopted Norwegian; ethnic identity; ethnic Chinese; China



Citation: Shang, G.; Marinaccio, J.C.; Honne, T.L. A Norwegian Soul in a Chinese Body? Ethnic Identity and Chinese Adoptees in Norway. *Societies* **2022**, *12*, 117. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12040117>

Academic Editor: Vsevolod Konstantinov

Received: 19 June 2022

Accepted: 8 August 2022

Published: 11 August 2022

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1. Introduction

Since World War II, the upsurge in international adoption has been an increasingly important manifestation of the social phenomenon known as “quiet” migration [1]. Also termed intercountry adoption or transnational adoption, international adoption refers to “the transfer of all parental rights and responsibilities from a child’s birth parent(s) to biologically unrelated, adoptive parent(s) who live in a country different from the child’s country of origin” [2] (p.928). Economically developed countries in North America and Western Europe, such as Canada, the US, Spain, France, and Italy, have always been the major receiving countries of international adoptees. In contrast, developing countries such as China, Russia, Ethiopia, and Guatemala have been the primary sending countries [3,4]. Given this unidirectional trajectory, some commentators have labeled international adoption a neo-colonialist practice (e.g., [5]).

China has long topped the list of international adoption sending countries, though the rates have steadily declined due to the tightening of domestic adoption laws in recent years. The International Adoption Organization estimates that between 1999 and 2016, around 267,000 children were adopted from China [6]. One important contributing factor was the One-Child Policy implemented by the Chinese government to control population growth from the late 1970s until early 2016 ¹. This policy was strictly enforced in population-dense provinces, where couples found to be in violation could face harsh punishments ². Moreover, together with the long-standing traditional preference for sons in Chinese

society [7–9], the One-Child Policy resulted in a high number of parentless babies, mostly girls who were abandoned or put up for adoption [10] (p. 294–295).

International adoptees' ethnic self-identification, an "identity that develops as a function of one's ethnic group membership" [11] (p. 792), has been a transdisciplinary field of inquiry over the last few decades, and there is a large body of literature focusing on Chinese adoptees in the North American context [12–16]. Much less is known about this specific group of adoptees in other parts of the world [17,18], particularly concerning their ethnic identity and attitudes towards their birth country. Our paper takes Norway as a case study and raises two research questions: (1) How do China-born adopted Norwegian citizens perceive their ethnic identity? (2) To what extent do they feel attached to their country of origin?

With regard to international adoption, Norway used to be one of the top ten adoption-receiving countries in the world [4], and the official statistics show that in the past three decades, the total number of international children adopted in Norway amounted to 13,191 [19]. Norwegian couples started adopting Chinese children through licensed adoption agencies in the early 1990s, concomitant with China's opening up to intercountry adoption [10]. Official statistics show that between 1998 and 2020, 2595 Chinese children were adopted from China to Norway [19]. The largest number of adoptions from China occurred in 2005, with 326 Chinese children adopted to Norway in a single year. Norwegian trends reflect international developments. The vast majority of Chinese adoptees ($n = 2304$) were female, accounting for 88.8 percent of the total. Numbers declined in recent years, and between 2010 and 2020, only 15 Chinese children were adopted by Norwegian families; no Chinese adoption has been registered since 2018.

Norway affords an intriguing opportunity to study the ethnic identity formation of Chinese adoptees given its specific political environment and the recent changes that have occurred within its society. Although Norway has never been among the most popular destination countries for Chinese emigrants, the number of Chinese immigrants and their descendants has steadily risen from 369 in 1970 to 11,758 in 2022 [20]. In conjunction with China's increasing global economic and political importance, and an exponentially rising number of Chinese tourists flocking to the country every year [21], the exchanges with, and visibility of, both Chinese people and China have considerably increased.

With a population of approximately 5.3 million, Norway stands out internationally for its high per capita income, equitable social welfare system, low crime rate, and anti-discriminatory policies, thus regularly ranking among the highest on the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI). However, the high level of social cohesiveness obscures challenges that immigrants and foreign-adopted children with distinct racial characteristics have faced in recent decades [22–27]. For a long time, Norwegian society has been considered culturally and racially homogenous [28,29], but this changed dramatically in the 1990s. Since 2000, the proportion of immigrants and their descendants has risen from around 6 percent to 18.9 percent in 2022 [20]. Yet despite anti-discriminatory and other integration policies, discrimination and racism against non-white people in Norway have become a persistent problem. Since the terrorist attack by the rightwing extremist Andreas Behring in 2011, which led to the deaths of 77 people, it has been established that Norway is no longer perceived to be homogeneous by sections of its own population. Racism and xenophobia have taken root, in open opposition to cultural diversity, and these are also directed towards individuals of (East-) Asian descent [30,31].

Against this backdrop we hypothesize that China-born adopted Norwegian citizens have developed their own ethnic identities based on their individual experiences in a comparatively cohesive society with strong anti-discriminatory policies and equal educational opportunities. However, these experiences were also influenced by increasing social tensions related to immigration, and China's growing visibility in Norway and internationally.

2. Race and Ethnic Identities of International Adoptees

The literature on international adoptees usually distinguishes race as a physical characteristic or social category from ethnicity as a cultural identification [32] (p. 225). However, the terms race and ethnicity are not only overlapping, but also differ across historical and geographical contexts [33] (p. 2). Particularly in Europe, race has largely been abandoned in favor of ethnicity [34]. In countries such as Germany and Austria, government officials and scholars refer to the “ethnic majority” instead of “white” people, and to “individuals with migration backgrounds” to differentiate between individuals with citizenship and those without citizenships, or individuals whose parents do not possess citizenship in the host country [33] (p. 3). In Germany, more than in Austria, race is a highly contentious term associated with the historical guilt brought about by the racially inflected cruelties inflicted during World War II, in which the state and people were actively involved. By contrast, in Norway, the absence of “race” as an explanatory concept for current social divisions” [35] (p. 9) can be explained by a persistent popular self-image of Norwegians as victims of racism, and supporters of anti-racist activism and politics in other parts of the world [36,37], rather than as actual perpetrators of racist policies and actions. In the last two decades, scholarship and political activism have increasingly challenged this self-idealizing image that ignores the participation of Norwegians in colonial oppression and the role of state institutions in the systematic oppression of minorities in Norway [37–39]. Moreover, studies on embedded racism, discrimination, and exclusion have been on the rise, with many adopting the concept of Whiteness [22–25,27,30,40,41].

In this paper, we deploy ethnicity and ethnic identity as our primary operational terms, as we are interested in the attitudes of Chinese-born Norwegian citizens towards China as their country of origin, and towards Chinese culture. Ethnic identity “develops as a function of one’s ethnic group membership” [11] (p. 792), thus with “people who see themselves and are seen by others as having a common ancestry, shared history, shared traditions, and shared cultural traits such as language, beliefs, values, music, dress, and food” [32] (p. 225). The decision to prioritize one operational term over the other does not make us blind to the tensions of self-ascription (i.e., identify) and ascription by others caused by the physical, i.e., racial, characteristics of international adoptees.

The experience of adoption can pose a myriad of emotional and psychological problems for the adoptees. According to Silverstein and Roszia, the most significant challenges that international adoptees must face include loss, grief, rejection with accompanying feelings of guilt and shame, as well as identity and/or intimacy and relationship issues [42]. Smit argues that the loss of birth parents and the connections, histories, or stories related to that family are the primary adoption-related issues for adopted people [43]. Grieving for such an *ambiguous loss* [44] is natural for every adoptee. However, for many adoptees, loss and grief may set the stage for further negative feelings, such as rejection, resentment, sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, and depression [43,45,46].

One of the paramount issues that international adoptees are struggling with is their identity, an issue “associated with a root or ground of belonging that is inside the child [. . .] and unchanging” [47] (p. 8). According to Burke and Stets, identity refers to the set of meanings that defines who one is as one takes up a particular role in society, gets involved in specific groups, or identifies one’s unique qualities as a person. People possess multiple identities as members of different social groups [48] (p. 3). For international adoptees, adoption is a significant aspect of their identities, even when they grow up and enter adulthood [49]. Defining the personal “sense of self” is a lengthy and challenging process for adopted individuals [45,50]. The barriers to the adoptees’ identity formation are multifaceted, such as a lack of knowledge about their pasts, an inability to obtain information, and social attitudes that stigmatize adoption [49].

For international adoptees, one significant layer of identity formation is their ethnic identity, i.e., the aspect of an individual’s social identity that “incorporates individuals’ self-label, sense of belonging, attitudes toward their own ethnic group, and involvement in ethnic group social and cultural practice” [51] (p. 92). Ethnic identity as a social construct

is admittedly “a matter of immense, yet important, uncertainty” [52] (p. 1) due to its interweaving with other social categories such as religion, nationality, culture, and race. According to Yinger [53] (p. 200), the ethnic group members “are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients.” The international adoptees’ identification with a particular ethnic group is usually not a straightforward matter. They often must reconcile a “transracial adoption paradox”: on the one hand, they belong to a minority group in society by virtue of birth and physical appearance; on the other hand, they identify themselves with members of the majority culture due to their adoption [54]. Torn by such identity dilemmas, international adoptees tend to score lower on measures of self-esteem and self-confidence in comparison to non-adopted persons [55,56].

The ethnic identity issues of adopted Chinese people have been widely discussed, mostly in North America, but to a certain degree also in other receiving countries of international adoptions [13–15,57–61]. One consistent finding is that the Chinese adoptees demonstrate a strong sense of belonging to the host country’s culture and society. For example, in a study of a group of female Chinese adoptees in Britain, Bagley found that the girls universally identified themselves as English, while half showed a strong interest in Chinese culture and institutions [62]. Tan and Nakkula’s study [14] of eleven white North American families with adopted Chinese daughters shows that the parents tended to view their daughters as racially Chinese but culturally American. The parents deployed many approaches for the daughters to learn about Chinese culture and their racial background to develop an ethnic identity. In school contexts, Adams et al. found that children adopted from China attending schools with greater diversity show a preference for being white rather than Chinese [63]. Such ethnic attitudes can have crucial implications for ethnic minority children and their identity formation.

The most substantial body of literature dealing with international adoptees is arguably concerned with the US, particularly in reference to adoptees of Chinese origin. Yet, research on this topic in Norway is well advanced. While some studies focus on the cognitive and linguistic development, academic performance, and physical health of internationally adopted children [64], the majority tackle questions of belonging and transracial identity, thereby also touching upon experiences with racism, discrimination, and exclusion [27,29,65–69]. Regarding ethnic identity, Brottveit’s study [70] indicates that adoptees from South Korea and Colombia have demonstrated three types of ethnic identity: (1) double ethnicity in terms of root-seekers making trips to their countries of origin; (2) cosmopolitan ethnicity, in terms of ethnic identification with neither Norway nor the country of origin; and (3) Norwegian ethnicity, in terms of entirely embracing Norwegian ethnic identity (see also [68]). Howell (2001, 2002) [65,66] argues that cultural attitudes towards the significance of looks constitute the determining factor for inclusion or exclusion in the dominant society. Her research shows, however, that most adoptees in Norway have weak identification with their birth country or the people from that country. Recent studies corroborate these findings [27,69].

These relatively comprehensive studies use cross sectional samples of international adoptees originating from Asian, African, and South American countries, providing intriguing insights into the varied identities and experiences of international adoptees in historical and contemporary Norway. Our study builds on these works but also turns the analytical focus to one specific cohort: China-born adopted Norwegian citizens born between 1996 and 2004. In doing so, we aim to shed light on commonalities and variations in ethnic identity within one age cohort with a common country of origin. Moreover, we attempt to extrapolate how external factors, including China’s increasing international importance, visibility, and contestation, might have affected the attitudes and sensitivity of these adoptees towards their origins.

3. Research Methodology

To analyze how China-born adopted Norwegian citizens enact their ethnic identity and relate to their country of origin, we deployed a mixed-method design composed of a survey and semi-structured interviews. Some interviewees were sampled through snowballing with the personal connections of the third author, who is an adoptee from China. Other interviewees and survey respondents took up our invitation to participate in the study that we distributed with the help of Norwegian international adoption agencies via their social media and online forums. These two research tools will be explained in greater detail below.

3.1. Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure

In this study, the researchers developed an online survey to measure the adoptees' ethnic identifications. The questionnaire was adapted from The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) [71,72] to examine the China-adopted Norwegians' perceptions of their ethnic identity. MEIM has been one of the most widely used measures in ethnic identity research. It originally contained 14 statements to measure the ethnic identities of various groups [71]. Roberts et al. [72] deleted the two reverse statements and revised them to a 12-item measure of ethnic identity for adolescents and youths. The new standard has three subscales. (a) Affirmation and belonging refer to the sense of group membership and the individual's attitude toward their own ethnic group. An example of the belongingness and affirmation category is "I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to." (b) Ethnic identity achievement refers to the extent to which a person has achieved a self-assured and confident sense of their own ethnicity. An example of this category is "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me." Finally, (c) ethnic behaviors refer to activities associated with group membership. An example of ethnic behavior is "I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group." Each item is evaluated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree through 4 = strongly disagree) based on the three subscales.

Our study adapted the MEIM in order to make the statements relevant to the Chinese ethnic group. In the survey (see the Appendix A), five items belong to the subscale of affirmation and belongingness, including "sense of belonging to the group" (Q6), "happy to be a member" (Q7), "pride in ethnic group" (Q10), "strong attachment to group" (Q12) and "feel good about culture" (Q13). Four items belong to the subscale of ethnic identity achievement, including "spend time to learn" (Q2), "clear sense of ethnic background" (Q4), "think about group membership" (Q5), "understand group meaning" (Q8) and "talked to others about the group" (Q9). The remaining items, "active in ethnic organizations" (Q3) and "participate in cultural practices" (Q11) pertain to ethnic behaviors. In addition, one question was added at the beginning, inquiring to what extent the participants identified themselves as ethnic Chinese. The survey was created in English on the SurveyXact platform, and the link was sent to the participants. Based on the trial results of 30 samples, the internal consistency of the items assessed by Cronbach's alpha was 0.900. This shows that the survey effectively measures Chinese adoptees' ethnic identity.

From May to August 2021, 54 valid responses were obtained through the online survey, forming the database for quantitative analysis. Most participants were female, accounting for 93 percent ($n = 50$) of the total, and about 95 percent ($n = 52$) were young people aged 18–25 years or 17 and below. This suggests that most of the China-born adoptees in Norway were baby girls adopted between 1996 and 2004. Although the gender bias is admittedly problematic in terms of representativeness, it still reflects the general trend in adoption statistics. Furthermore, based on the demographic information obtained through the survey, most respondents were college or high school students.

3.2. Semi-Structured Interview

In the wake of the survey, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the adoptees' opinions of their ethnic

identity and attachments to China. The interview protocol entailed open-ended questions concerning the participants' attitudes towards their ethnic background, birth country (i.e., China), and ethnic identity. More specifically, the questions posed to the participants included, "have you ever felt Chinese", "how did you react when you were thought of as a Chinese?", "are you curious about your birth country?", "what does a Chinese appearance in Norway mean to you?", and so forth. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian to accommodate participants' language preferences, and with the consent of the participants, the interview sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed by the researchers. As Table 1 below illustrates, interview partners were mainly female students between the ages of 16 and 23 (see comments on gender bias above). All participants were adopted to Norway before the age of two, and thus have almost no memory of their time in China.

Table 1. Particulars of the Interviewees.

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Age of Adoption
F1	Female	18	Student	14 months
F2	Female	19	Student	2 years
F3	Female	16	Student	1 year
F4	Female	17	Student	11 months
F5	Female	16	Student	18 months
F6	Female	17	Student	13 months
F7	Female	21	Graduate	10 months
F8	Female	21	Student	8 months
F9	Female	21	Student	18 months
F10	Female	21	Graduate	15 months
F11	Female	23	Student	6 months
F12	Female	19	Student	2 years
F13	Female	22	Student	3 months
F14	Female	20	Student	2 years
F15	Female	20	Student	20 months
M1	Male	18	Student	9 months

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Ethnic Identification

4.1.1. Ethnic Affirmation and Belongingness

We first investigated how the China-born adopted Norwegian citizens identified themselves, and how the environmental circumstances influenced their perceptions. In the survey, the participants were asked to what extent they agreed to identify themselves as ethnic Chinese. The responses show that the majority (61 percent, $N = 33$) identified themselves as Chinese in terms of an ethnic group, though most (24 out of 33) only weakly subscribed to this ethnic identification. The rest of the survey participants (39 percent, $N = 21$) disagreed with labeling themselves as Chinese, suggesting that they were more inclined towards being Norwegian. In the survey, the subscale of affirmation and belongingness had five statements. The results of the participant responses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Affirmation and Belongingness Subscale.

Question Number	Items	Agree (Number and Percentage)	Disagree (Number and Percentage)	Average (1 = Strongly Agree. 4 = Strongly Disagree)
Q6	Sense of belonging to group	15 (27.8%)	39 (72.2%)	3.1
Q7	Happy to be member	38 (70.4%)	16 (29.6%)	2.2
Q10	Pride in ethnic group	35 (64.8%)	19 (35.2%)	2.4
Q12	Strong attachment to group	20 (37.0%)	34 (63.0%)	3.0
Q13	Feel good about culture	42 (77.8%)	12 (22.2%)	1.3

As shown in Table 2, only 27.8 percent of the participants (N = 15) reported a strong sense of belonging to the Chinese ethnic group (Q6), and 37 percent (N = 20) demonstrated a strong psychological attachment to the Chinese ethnic group (Q12). In contrast, those objecting to such positions accounted for about 72 percent (N = 39) and 63 percent (N = 34), respectively. The mean scores for the two statements ($x^- = 3.1$ and $x^- = 3.0$) also indicate that the participants largely disagreed with such a strong stance of affirmation or belongingness to the Chinese ethnicity. Nevertheless, the survey results also demonstrate that the majority (70.4 percent, N = 38) had positive feelings about belonging to the Chinese ethnic group (Q7); most of them took pride in the achievements of the Chinese ethnic group (Q10) (64.8 percent, N = 35), and felt good about their Chinese backgrounds (Q13) (77.8 percent, N = 42). In addition, a Pearson Correlation analysis shows that the respondents' ethnic identifications have a significantly positive correlation with their affirmation and belongingness ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3). Thus, those who tended to identify as ethnic Chinese were more likely to affirm and appreciate the Chinese ethnic group and its culture.

Table 3. Correlation between ethnic identification and belongingness.

		Q6	Q7	Q10	Q12	Q13
Q1	Pearson Correlation	0.655	0.389	0.502	0.544	0.327
	Sig. (2 tailed)	0.000	0.005	0.000	0.000	0.019
	N	54	54	54	54	54

In our interview, many participants stated that they primarily felt themselves to be Norwegian since they grew up in Norway, spoke the local language, and thought and behaved similarly to their Norwegian peers. Therefore, they identified themselves as “normal” Norwegians. In response to the question “have you felt anything other than Norwegian”, F7 and F13 gave a definite negative answer, “No”, and F9 remarked that “it has always been obvious to me that I am European, Norwegian.” For F8, this ethnic identification has remained consistent, although it did not remain entirely unchallenged:

“You always want to think about having roots from another place, and I have memories from primary school where other children commented on my features that I myself knew were different. But this has never made me insecure, and I have always felt Norwegian.”

While for some their ethnic identity was unambiguous, despite instances in which they had to cope with racialization, others showed a more ambiguous attitude regarding their ethnic identity. Responses like “I really don’t know” or “I’m not sure” suggest that they faced ethnic dilemmas due their different physical traits. As F10 put it, “I usually feel Norwegian, but of course, in some situations, you do not feel Norwegian, especially if you have a different appearance than the people you are surrounded by.” The first encounter with this paradox usually occurred at a very young age in the educational setting. As F6 explained, “I have felt that I have sometimes not belonged to being Norwegian, but it was more when I was little and went to kindergarten or primary school.”

However, when asked whether they had ever felt Chinese, some interview participants claimed that they never felt that way, while others were unsure or gave ambiguous answers. Several participants made the point that their Chineseness lay only in their appearance. As M1 remarked, “in appearance, I feel Chinese, but in behaviour and personality, I feel Norwegian.” F9 held a similar view: “I have never really felt Chinese as I do not share the same culture and language. I know I have a Chinese look, but I do not feel Chinese for that reason.” Apart from appearance, the topics of birth and origins may also sharpen their awareness of Chineseness. As indicated by F4, “the only times I feel Chinese are when people comment that [I] do not come from Norway.” Some participants had conflicting feelings of belongingness, as according to them they belonged to both groups, but to neither entirely. F3 noted, “In a way, I feel Chinese since I’m from there, and everyone seems to see that I’m not from Norway. But in a way, I am also mostly Norwegian. It is very complicated to put this into words.” F15 gave her reasons for not identifying as Chinese:

“It is difficult to answer because I was born in China, but I do not know Chinese culture.” These expressions echo the survey results, according to which most participants did not identify as ethnic Chinese. In our interviews, F12 stood out from the other participants as she expressed strongly ambivalent and conflicting feelings primarily caused by her desire to be Chinese. In distinction from the others, she claimed that she wanted to be Chinese in addition to being Norwegian.

4.1.2. Ethnic Identity Achievement

The survey found that nearly 60 percent of the participants (N = 32) were curious about their Chinese origin and took some time to explore Chinese culture and society (Q2). In contrast, 41 percent (N = 22) showed little interest in such topics, suggesting that their personal or psychological attachment to Chinese-related matters was relatively weak. However, most participants tended to make ethnic background explorations privately, and 35.2 percent of the survey informants (N = 19) often talked to others to learn more about ethnic Chinese groups (Q9). Such exchanges can be seen as a means to negotiate their ethnic identity. About 57.4 percent of the participants (N = 31) indicated a clear sense of their ethnic background and its possible implications for their lives (Q4). Yet less than half (48.1 percent, N = 26) clearly understood what their ethnic membership meant to their lives (Q8). Those often thinking about this question accounted for 42.6 percent (N = 23) (Q5). These results suggest that the China-born adopted Norwegian citizens were aware of their perceived “otherness”, but did not feel concerned about their appearance or Chinese ethnicity as ascribed by others negatively impacting their lives. The here-explained results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Ethnic Identity Achievement Subscale.

Question Number	Items	Agree (Number and Percentage)	Disagree (Number and Percentage)	Average (1 = Strongly Agree. 4 = Strongly Disagree)
Q2	Spend time to learn	32 (59.3%)	22 (40.7%)	2.4
Q4	Clear sense of ethnic background	31 (57.4%)	23 (42.6%)	2.4
Q5	Think about group membership	23 (42.6%)	31 (57.4%)	2.7
Q8	Understand group meaning	26 (48.1%)	28 (51.9%)	2.7
Q9	Talk to others about group	19 (35.2%)	35 (64.8%)	3.0

Regarding ethnic behaviors, the results show that only a tiny proportion (9.3 percent, N = 5) indicated they were actively engaged with so-called overseas Chinese associations (Q3). Among them, none expressed a strong agreement with this position. About 24 percent (N = 13) asserted participation in Chinese cultural practices when possible (Q11). The low degree of ethnic behaviors might be explained by the relatively small population size (11,758 in 2021) and low density of the Chinese migrant community outside cities such as Oslo and Bergen. Compared to traditional countries of Chinese emigration, such as the US, Great Britain, and France, Chinese adoptees probably encounter fewer occasions to interact with other Chinese people in social and cultural events organized by overseas Chinese associations. On the other hand, due to language and cultural differences between Chinese adoptees and migrants with stronger attachments to China, many might feel reluctant to partake in such activities.

4.2. Ethnic Sensitivity and Commitment

4.2.1. Reactions to Country of Origin

Ethnic and racial sensitivities were immediately sharpened when respondents were asked pointed questions about their ethnic origin and cultural background. Though most of them identified themselves as Norwegians, such questions or comments made them realize that their self-ascribed Norwegian-ness was not taken for granted. The degree to which they reacted varied from indifference or being barely affected, to more negatively

affected. For example, both F2 and F15 did not have strong feelings in relation to the question concerning their ethnic origins.

“It’s not something I see as a problem or strange. If people correct themselves and ask where I am originally from, I only answer China. Just the way it is.” (F2)

“[. . .] if they ask further, I say that I am from China, so I do not look Norwegian. [. . .] I think it’s going just fine; it’s okay that they ask.” (F15)

Some participants considered questions about their origin to be irritating, but did not show strong reactions to them. As M1 stated,

“I have no problem with them having an interest in knowing where I’m from. But it is a little strange sometimes since I consider myself Norwegian.”

Other participants responded more negatively to questions and comments about their origin and Chinese appearance. F9 and F13, for example, stated as follows:

“I must admit that I have never liked being asked this question by others. But it bothered me more before than now. Maybe this is because [the question] was a confirmation that it was not clear to others that I was Norwegian. Something that I felt, though.” (F9)

“I don’t think it is a good question because [others] feel entitled to it just because you are not equal. [. . .] That would have been very unusual because Norwegians never ask other Norwegians where they are from; that is why I react that way. You would never ask a Norwegian from where they really come. You would never ask a white person from where she really comes, because it would be seen as an odd question. So why do you think it is okay to ask someone from where they really come just because of their skin colour?” (F13)

Two participants reacted negatively when asked about their origin because they were perceived as different from Norwegians due to their racial origins. In other words, they perceived such questions or comments as racist because they implied an ethnic label that denied them Norwegian authenticity. F13 was also more bothered by her Chinese appearance than the other participants, and admitted that she sometimes wished to look like native Norwegians. Thus, F13 relates “socially desirable traits” with being Norwegian, rather than Chinese. The answers here show that China-born adopted Norwegian citizens respond differently not only to their racial appearance in identity work, but also in terms of what they perceive as racist, and how they cope with the transracial paradox (see also [27]).

4.2.2. Attitudes towards Being Adoptees in Norway

When asked about what the participants liked and disliked about being adoptees in Norway, the majority focused on the positive side of adoption and being adopted. For instance, they considered it “interesting” and “special” to have a different past; others felt more wanted and loved by their Norwegian parents because they were adopted. Many interview participants reported that they openly talked with their parents about the fact that they were adopted and described their parents as being sympathetic. Therefore, adoption was not a taboo topic for the adoptive family. Most participants confident that their adoptive parents loved them and did not need any particular reassurance. In addition, the act of adoption was considered an opportunity for children without parents and involuntarily childless couples [73]. The only reported negative aspect of being adopted was the issues of feeling Norwegian while not appearing so. Almost all interviewee partners reported having received negative comments about their appearance, or being exposed to racist jokes. Although most instances happened at a very young age at school, and remained sporadic later in their adolescence and young adult lives, these experiences reflect clearly what Richard Lee has coined the “transracial adoptee paradox” [54]. While within their families, adoptees are treated as ethnic and racial Norwegians, once outside the protective walls, international adoptees are faced with other, harsher rules of racial engagement [74] (p. 205).

4.2.3. Adoptees’ Attitudes towards the Birth Country

How the Chinese adoptees growing up in Norwegian families related to their own racial, ethnic, and cultural origins is another issue our study examined more closely. In

the interviews, the participants expressed interest in their birth country to very different extents. Not all participants developed an interest in China. Some strongly desired to learn more about China as an academic subject or as a world power. As F14 noted, "I would like to learn more about China. I thought it is a fascinating country with a lot of culture and politics." F10 emphasized China's economic prospects: "I'm excited about the culture there compared to here, and the big economic differences compared to Norway." Other respondents were not so clear as to why they were interested in China. For instance, F2 could not determine whether her curiosity about China was because she was adopted from there or for other reasons. Some participants expressed a somewhat superficial interest in China. F11 was only keen on learning what was relevant to her history. Some participants had no interest in their birth country, or deliberately avoided getting more connected with it. As F1 stated, "I'm not very curious about China. I have always liked to keep some distance from China, where I was from." Several other participants had been to China for various purposes after being adopted, yet there was little evidence to show that they made the trips because of their interest in China.

Finally, our interviews show that the adoptees held diverse opinions regarding learning Chinese. The majority believed that Chinese was a critical or exciting language, and as such they would like to learn it. However, the findings also indicate that this desire was primarily driven by utilitarianism or practicality relating to China's economic and political importance, both in Norway and the world; only a few participants were motivated to learn Chinese because of their birth country or belonging to an ethnic minority. Some participants took a neutral stance, stating that they wanted to learn Chinese for neither instrumental nor emotional reasons, but "just for fun." A few participants indicated they were not keen to learn Chinese at all because they did not consider it beneficial.

5. Discussion

We have investigated a cohort of China-born adopted Norwegian citizens' perceptions and attitudes toward their ethnic identity. Our survey results show that most adoptees identified themselves as racially Chinese but ethnically Norwegians. Thus, regarding behavioral and cultural habitus, they perceived themselves as Norwegian with no difference between them and their Norwegian peers. In general, they showed no particular interest in China's history and culture, and most did not pursue exchanges with ethnic Chinese through overseas Chinese organizations.

However, comments on their racial differences by others, and our questions about their origin, stimulated in some strong and even defensive reactions. Most respondents related to an identity paradox caused by their ethnic belonging to Norwegian society and racial otherness. Some interview respondents were rather uncertain about their ethnic identification, and one even claimed that she desired to be Chinese and Norwegian. This suggests that Chinese adoptees in Norway face identity dilemmas concerning "the desire for conformity and the need to admit to nonconformity" [66] (p. 85) in Norwegian society.

The identity paradox is a common problem for international adoptees. Saetersdal and Dalen [28] (p. 101–102) have posited that the psychological systems of the adoptees have three dimensions: (1) acknowledging the difference in family situations; (2) rejecting the difference, particularly in school situations; and (3) stressing the difference in social situations outside family and school. The adoptees are thus beholden to three different sets of value systems in relation to their behaviors in their daily interactions, and which dimension is predominant for an adoptee will be determined by factors such as relations with their family, social and economic factors, and pre-existing networks. In our interviews, we noticed that the participants did not use the term Chinese Norwegian to categorize themselves, nor did they stress their differences from Norwegian people, except for their physical appearance. This strong Norwegian identity of China-born Norwegian adoptees could be attributed to three major social-cultural factors.

Firstly, the adoptees have a very weak attachment to their birth country of China. Riley-Behringer [2] indicates that traumatic pre-adoptive experiences may have a significant

effect on the adopted children's psychological development or identity formation. However, since the participants were adopted very early, their biological parents or pre-adoptive lives in China had left no imprints on their memory. Moreover, they had little connection to the culture and society in China, and their interests in the country were primarily practical or based on individual desires to learn more about China. China's increasing visibility and importance on the global stage did not affect Chinese adoptees' development of a Norwegian ethnic identity other than Norwegian, nor did it encourage them to learn more about their country of origin.

Secondly, the Chinese adoptees were raised like native Norwegian children and integrated well into Norwegian society and culture. When Norwegian parents adopt a child from another country, they perceive the child as typically Norwegian and try to create kinship sociality with them [73]. Therefore, adoptive parents are not keenly interested in or concerned with their children connecting with their ethnic backgrounds or history. This stands in stark contrast to the North American context, where parents care more about their adopted children's ethnic roots or origins. Moreover, the adoptive history of Chinese adoptees is not a taboo topic in the Norwegian family. The present study demonstrates that the adoptees who openly communicate with their families are more secure about their identity [44]. As Chinese adoptees can talk with their adoptive parents about their ethnic background, and adoptive parents educate their children as Norwegians, they gain a sense of security in the family setting. These aspects enable the Chinese adoptees to develop a stronger foundation of identity similar to their Norwegian peers³. In our interviews, we noticed that the China-born adoptees speak Norwegian as a native language, share similar interests and values with their Norwegian friends, and act indistinguishably from their Norwegian peers. Therefore, they are racially Chinese but culturally Norwegian. While some might have a low degree of "double identity", as they attempted to find out more about their origin, most of our participants entirely embrace Norwegian ethnic identity [70].

Thirdly, our respondents' self-identification as belonging to the Norwegian majority has been occasionally challenged due to their Chinese appearance and racial otherness (i.e., non-Whiteness), but most unhappy happenings took place at a young age in educational settings, and became rarer over time. Racial Chineseness has not resulted in unequal treatment by family members, friends, acquaintances, or strangers, thus not affecting the social interactions of our respondents in various life-situations. Neither did our respondents experience structural disadvantages during their education and primary work experience, and none reported severe racial attacks (physical or verbal). Therefore, racialization in Norwegian society did not affect the Chinese adoptees' strong ethnic and cultural self-categorization as Norwegians. Nevertheless, the respondents' sensitivity to racialization and interpretations about what to label as racist varied.

Conspicuously, the lack of discriminating and racist experiences stands in great contrast to the findings of NIBR's 2021 report on racism, discrimination, and the belongingness of international adoptees in Norway [27], and other recent surveys among immigrants in Norway [25,75]. According to the NIBR report, 60 percent of international adoptees experienced unequal treatment from the majority population, 13 percent experienced physical abuse or threatening behavior, and 30–40 percent faced verbal abuse, suspicion, sexualized comments or exclusion [27] (p. 14). The lack of such experiences among our respondents can indicate an important variation vis-à-vis the experiences of other international adoptees—for example, adoptees with dark skin. However, due to the relatively low number of participants in our study, this aspect needs further substantiation.

6. Conclusions

Our study has used mixed methods to explore China-born adopted Norwegian citizens' attitudes towards their ethnic identities and origins. In the survey, the MEIM scales adapted from Phinney [71] and Roberts et al. [72] were used to measure the Chinese adoptees' ethnic identity. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit the adoptees' perceptions of their Chinese origins and ethnic identification.

Despite our focus on one cohort from one country of origin, our study corroborates other research on the identity and belonging of foreign-born adoptees in Norway. In general, the participants felt they were Chinese in terms of appearance, but they mainly identified themselves as ethnic Norwegian. Though several participants experienced a “transracial paradox” [54], racialization by others did not affect our respondents’ feeling of belongingness to the majority society. The participants showed some interest in the history and culture of China. Yet, most had only a weak attachment to Chinese people and culture, and they lacked a strong desire to search for a Chinese identity. We could not find strong evidence to support the hypothesis that external and global societal changes have affected our group, particularly concerning their interest in their Chinese origin, due to the increased visibility of China and Chinese people in Norway. Only a few adoptees explicitly attributed their interest in China to its rise as a global economic and political power.

Further, there was no clear tendency towards constructing or enacting double identities, though some participants experienced identity paradoxes. The reasons for Chinese adoptees’ predominant identification with Norwegian society and culture include the negligible impact of pre-adoptive experiences on the adoptees, a supportive and race-neutral family environment, and the inclusive socio-cultural environment Chinese adoptees have experienced throughout their lives. Nevertheless, many interview participants reported earlier experiences of racialization, but no unequal treatment, structural discrimination, or severe forms of racism. Our findings suggest that people with a Chinese appearance might be less exposed to assaults, especially if they have been fully socialized in Norway. However, due to the low number of participants, this finding should be treated with care. Additionally, as all our respondents were college or graduate students, it is possible that their experiences will change once they leave the rather sheltered educational setting.

Despite the limitations, our research yields new and highly relevant results concerning the ethnic identity of China-born adopted children in a social environment that significantly differs from other contexts wherein such studies have heretofore been conducted. Future research needs to recruit more participants in order to validate the tendencies identified and conclusions drawn in this study. Further, we need more studies in Norway (and Scandinavia) on international adoptees from one country of origin to test to what extent experiences with racism, discrimination, and exclusion differ according to origin and physiognomic characteristics.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.S. and T.L.H.; methodology, G.S., J.C.M. and T.L.H.; software, G.S. and J.C.M.; validation, G.S.; formal analysis, G.S. and J.C.M.; investigation, T.L.H.; resources, T.L.H. and J.C.M.; data curation, T.L.H.; writing—original draft preparation, G.S. and T.L.H.; writing—review and editing, J.C.M. and G.S.; supervision, G.S. and J.C.M.; project administration, J.C.M.; funding acquisition, J.C.M. and G.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study did not require ethical approval because of national laws and non-existence of such practices as IRB.

Informed Consent Statement: The oral or written informed consent was obtained from all respondents before participating in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding authors.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to extend sincere thanks to the participants and the adoption agency Adoptionforum (<https://www.adopsjonsforum.no/om-adopsjonsforum/english/4527/what-is-adopsjonsforum>, accessed on 26 July 2022) involved in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure

In Norway, many people come from different cultures or backgrounds. Every person is born into a specific ethnic group. Still, people are different in how important their ethnicity is to them, how they feel about it, and how much their behavior is affected by it. This survey targets the Norwegians who were adopted from China in their early years but grew up in Norway. These questions are about your ethnicity or your ethnic group, and how you feel about it or react to it. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. The survey takes about 3–5 min to complete. Its answers are used for research purposes only, and your particulars will be kept confidential. Gender_____ My Age_____

Table A1. The Ethnic Identity Measure for China-Born Norwegian Citizens.

Statements	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1 In terms of ethnic group, I consider myself Chinese.				
Q2 I have spent time trying to find out more about Chinese ethnic group, such as its history, tradition, customs, and language.				
Q3 I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of Chinese ethnic group.				
Q4 I have a clear sense of my Chinese ethnic background and what it means for me.				
Q5 I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my Chinese ethnic group membership.				
Q6 I have a strong sense of belonging to Chinese ethnic group.				
Q7 I am happy that I am a member of the Chinese ethnic group.				
Q8 I understand pretty well what Chinese ethnic group membership means to me, in terms of how to relate to my group and other groups.				
Q9 In order to learn more about my Chinese ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about Chinese ethnic group.				
Q10 I have a lot of pride in Chinese ethnic group and its accomplishments.				
Q11 I participate in cultural practices of Chinese group, such as special food, music or customs.				
Q12 I feel a strong attachment towards Chinese ethnic group.				
Q13 I feel good about my Chinese cultural or ethnic background.				

Notes

- ¹ This family planning policy has since been relaxed to a two-child policy (in 2016) and a three-child policy (in 2021).
- ² Recent research reveals the critical role of frontline bureaucrats in the repressive capacities of the Chinese state. The Chinese state's deep organizational penetration "helped the state infiltrate society and strengthened implementation of the One Child Policy" [76] (p. 270).
- ³ See also Zhao Yan's discussion on being adopted as a majority Norwegian position in ethnic identity [69] (pp. 98–107).

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