

LIVING

The riddle of Julia Ming Gale Chinese by birth, adopted by white Americans, she looks in the mirror and asks: Who am I?

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3,329 words

8 October 1996

The Boston Globe

City Edition

E1

English

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Some sociologists say that self -- one's identity -- arises out of social interaction. You are, in large part, that which surrounds you. If this is so, then who is Julia Ming Gale? Born to unwed Chinese parents in the spring of 1972, she was adopted in Taiwan by an American family and raised in the United States. Back then, she was a rarity -- one of just 66 Chinese babies adopted by American families in that year. Today the adoption of Chinese babies, mostly girls, has taken off: 2,153 babies were adopted from China and Taiwan in 1995. An even higher number is predicted this year. The life of the 24-year-old Julia Ming Gale is a kind of fast forward of what may be expected for these babies.

I. The mirror

There is no way around it, she looks Chinese -- always has, always will. Her hair, black and straight, hangs softly, shoulder-length. Her brown eyes shine when she smiles, seated in the living room of the Malden apartment that she will soon leave to return home to Seattle to attend graduate school.

But for as long as Julia Ming Gale can remember, she has been surprised when she looks into the mirror to see the narrow eyes, the flat nose. "I look and I see my eyes. I see my nose. But it's all separate. It's never an Asian face looking back at me. It's, like, 'Oh, there are brown eyes. And there's a wide nose.' "

The face seems to belong to someone else. To her, all of this has become a riddle that goes round and round. There is the image in her mind's eye and then the reality of the mirror.

"I'll often compare myself to other Asians and try to figure out what I look like. I might be on the T and I'll look around and try to figure out if I look like someone or not.

"Which is hard, because I don't know what I look like."

Ming laughs nervously. Though she is disarmingly open, her words cause her discomfort. But she believes she has something to offer the increasing number of cross-cultural families on the inevitable difficulties of growing up in the United States as a foreign adoptee, even in a family as stable and loving as her own. She's followed the news reports on the "growth industry" in Chinese adoptions, and one reason she now wants to earn a master's degree is to put to good use something she knows about; she'll be the adoptee who counsels foreign adoptees.

For Ming, it begins with the mirror and the broken image that gets reflected in everyday life, often unexpectedly. She recalls that during her first year at the Rhode Island School of Design, she and her fellow first-year students drew a series of self-portraits as part of a required drawing course. Though taken with art since her early teens, she'd never been one to draw herself; she always preferred drawing shoes.

"The teacher came to mine on the wall and said, 'Who is this?' " Ming had drawn a simple line figure that was "cartoony and Caucasian," she says. "Big eyes. No real emotion to it."

Embarrassed, she studied the portraits afterward.

"I realized it didn't look like me, and it was more like the person I saw inside me."

And who is that person she sees inside her mind's eye?

"I have curly red hair and green eyes and a few freckles. That's who I see in my head."

Here is a moment when her laughter is soon mixed with a few tears, as this is not an easy admission to make, her feeling that she is white in a world that treats her as if she is Chinese.

"For a long time, I wasn't Chinese, didn't want to be Asian, so my anger was directed outward, toward the rest of the world -- why are you treating me this way?"

II. Daydreams

Ming was born in Taiwan in May 1972. The date is either May 1 or May 3, a confusion devised at the time to prevent her birth mother from finding her. To make later tracking even more difficult, her adoption papers do not list the name of her birth mother, but report that she was a "foundling," meaning a baby who was abandoned. Her birth mother actually resisted giving her up, Ming has since been told. But the mother's parents would have nothing to do with a girl born out of wedlock; the father's social standing was unacceptable, marriage out of the question.

Diana and James Gale, meanwhile, wanted to adopt a Chinese baby. Having lived in Taiwan for nearly three years, they were due to return to Seattle. She had a master's in urban planning, and he was a doctor specializing in public health. The couple had two children of their own, but wrote a number of agencies in Taiwan explaining their desire to adopt. They'd both come from large families and wanted to increase their own, but were also concerned about "the problem of population growth." By adopting, "we could have a larger family without contributing another mouth to the world."

Such adoptions were rare, and the Gales had no luck until just before their departure. "We had not been making a lot of progress with the agencies," says Diana Gale in an interview from Seattle. Working against them, she says, were the reasons Chinese families usually adopted girls: to acquire a maid or to hand-pick a girl to raise and train to marry a family son. "We already had kids, so the agencies questioned our motives."

Then Ming was born. "It was the mother's parents' decision to give her up for adoption, and it was good we were leaving the country. There couldn't be any tracing."

Named Julia Ming Gale, she uses Ming, which she was always called by her family. Her new parents had studied Chinese, had worked in Taiwan, had Chinese friends and had in their home in Seattle a number of Chinese items -- books, scrolls and furniture -- that were not mere props but were meaningful links to the family's time in a foreign land. Even so, Ming's world soon became predominantly Caucasian, and she cannot recall a time when she did not feel Caucasian. But at the same time she also remembers sensing acutely the physical differences between herself and her siblings and her peers in the nearly all-white, upper-middle class neighborhood where she grew up. The moments came periodically, the little stuff of everyday life, but they nonetheless reminded her she was outwardly not the same.

"I can remember doing the dishes, and my little brother came in with a friend, I guess a new friend, and he introduced me as the maid. He said, she doesn't speak any English, so you can say whatever you want to. So the friend came up and started swearing and using the bad words little kids know." The prank was not aimed at her, she realizes, but the joke hurt all the same.

When she was 8, walking to school with her older brother, a car clipped her and knocked her down. She cried, shocked more than hurt, and cried harder as she watched her brother walk away, off to school. Five years would pass before she'd ask her brother, why? How could he leave her like that? Just doing what he was told to do, her brother explained. The adults at the scene had directed him to go on, unaware they were siblings, that they could possibly be brother and sister.

Ming calls these moments "slights" that were usually unintended -- she mostly got along well with her siblings in Seattle -- but they caused private pain. They also sharpened the confusion about her adoption, even though she'd never been flat-out told. ("Nobody ever said, 'Oh, you're adopted. They did things like point to someone and say, 'She's adopted too.' ") Not until she was a teen-ager did she ask about her birth mother, but that doesn't mean she did not spend time along the way wondering. And these were daydreams, she later realized, that served a purpose, to help her cope with the slights and confusion.

"When I was very little I used to pretend my mother was a princess, and that she was forced to give me up and that she was searching for me." She smiles at the silliness of long ago, but also mentions that even now she still relies on daydreams. She mentions one she worked up two years ago after hearing about the sudden death, at the age of 40, of the Asian pop singer Teresa Teng. "My daydream was, maybe she was my mother. It was one of those weird things again, and I thought about it a lot.

"They happen when I'm down and depressed, and they can bring me back out," she says about their usefulness. "I think part of it was wanting someone to be looking for me."

In this way, the daydreams were a kind of Asian solution.

III. Someone please say something

Most of the time, however, Ming did not want to be any more Chinese than she had to; she's long had the feeling the best solution was simply to be treated as Caucasian. "I think I was always hoping I would just become white," she says.

Trying her best to blend in, she fought her parents' efforts to revive or develop her Chinese side. When Ming turned 12, her mother took her to the city's international district to enroll her in a drill corps made up of Taiwanese girls. "I had this awful gut reaction; I just didn't want any part of that," says Ming. Her parents hired a tutor for her to get her started with the Chinese language. "I freaked out. I couldn't get past his face -- like a caricature of a Chinese person." The lessons stopped.

It was about this time when her mother made the first attempt to discuss her adoption. "We were in the car, and I asked her if there was anything she wanted to know about her adoption," recalls Diana Gale. "Ming said, 'I've always assumed I was the result of China's one-child policy and I was a second child.' I said, 'Well, Ming, that was in effect on the mainland. You were actually born in Taiwan.'" A dark silence overtook the car.

"She didn't want to know another thing," says Gale. "She cut me off, by being silent. That was always Ming's way of saying, 'I don't want to talk any more.'"

Looking back, Ming today realizes she was in a kind of free fall, unable to find her cultural footing. "The thing I most resent is the loss of culture," and here she is not talking about Chinese culture, but Caucasian culture. "The fact that I can't really claim the culture I grew up in, because people will never really let me." This conflict is what she believes is a given, a fact of life for any interracial adoptee.

There came a time when she briefly tried going all Asian. New to college, she noticed Asian students approaching her, making the nervous contact freshmen make in a new college life. "That made me want to be Asian." She decided to give it a whirl, following her new classmates into Chinese restaurants to eat out, mingling socially with other Asians talking in Chinese. But she quickly realized the role did not suit her. "Basic things we didn't have in common, like language, food. I don't know. I just felt uncomfortable. I felt I was putting on a show."

Her pendulum swung back, and she was angered more than ever by all the assumptions she'd always faced -- that she innately knew the culture and the language and possessed a clear-cut identity as a young Chinese woman. She found herself again wishing that someone would stand up and challenge the expectation that she is Chinese while she feels Caucasian.

The conflict plays out time and again. She recalls a dinner party at her parents' house, and one of the guests had a grandson who was dating a Hawaiian. The guest kept after Ming, who is engaged to a Caucasian, Jeff Souphard, asking about the difficulties of cross-cultural relationships. Ming was offended. "Jeff and I grew up in basically the same kind of environment, and there is no real racial tension. There wouldn't be."

The man knew Ming was adopted, but he nonetheless assumed that she was more Chinese than she is, and therefore could speak to the differences between herself and her fiance. "I was really upset." No one stopped the persistent inquiries, and she wished they had, wished they would explain and verify her Caucasian place. It's a wish she's long had, and one that will always go unfulfilled.

"What I really wanted someone to say is, 'There's really no chance there is any racial problem.' I basically think I wanted someone to say, just to stand up and say, 'How could there be any problem? She's white.'"

"It comes back to the white thing," she says at the end of this and other stories about other people's assumptions.

"That's pretty much the big chip on my shoulder."

IV. Standing up for myself

"She was adopted in 1972?" the professor asks, his voice rising to reveal an academic's eagerness for the unusual find, and, in this regard, Ming is just that. Having just been told about Ming, and the story that will be written about her, Professor Richard Tessler is curious to know more. No surprise there. Tessler is a sociology professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who has begun researching Chinese-American adoptions. In the language of the field, "The purpose is to study bicultural child socialization focusing on the development of both American and Chinese identities."

With a grant from the Institute for Asian Studies in Boston and by advertising on the Internet and elsewhere, Tessler has tapped into 281 families from 35 states in his study. He hopes to reach 350 families, all of them with recently adopted Chinese babies. If funding continues, Tessler plans to follow the families in the years to come, which of course would mean bringing the children directly into the study as they grow up.

Noting that during the surge of Korean adoptions the conventional thinking was to raise the children to be "as American as possible," Tessler says that view has changed. Many parents of the Chinese babies, he says, believe they can nurture Chinese heritage and culture to "reduce the kids' social marginality.

"So when they look in the mirror they are not so confused."

Ming can relate to that. Her mother can too. "The last two or three years, in my talks with Ming, I've learned a lot about how much she identified with being Caucasian. I was certainly not aware of the scope of that.

"I think I should have started younger," Diana Gale says about efforts to introduce Chinese culture. "In junior high, she was at an age when kids want to be like everyone else. We were probably naive, and Ming has had a really hard time the past couple of years as she began to really grapple with these issues. But she's also made a lot of progress. I just think parents should be aware that this will happen at some point."

During the past couple of years, while working as an apparel designer, Ming has done a lot of thinking about her upbringing, about adoption generally. Not long ago, she searched the Internet for a chat-group for Chinese adoptees, but did not find one. She found information for adults seeking to adopt a foreign-born baby, and she found a chat-group for Korean adoptees, but she's too far in front of the China curve, she realizes.

In some ways, and she's not sure exactly when this happened, a bubble burst. For the longest time, her cultural choice seemed a stark one -- Chinese or Caucasian. She felt unfinished and adrift while awaiting a resolution to all the confusion she felt about her identity. But now she's thinking that the resolution, in fact, came 24 years ago when she was put up for adoption to solve a family problem. Her challenge is to learn to live with the duality created by that cross-cultural solution.

For one thing, she's finding she doesn't get as upset as she used to when confronted with the assumption that she is Chinese. She was visiting relatives on Cape Ann this summer and her aunt kept asking questions about tea -- about different kinds of tea, how best to brew it. The assumption was Ming would know. Instead of fuming and wishing secretly that someone would stand up and defend her, Ming says she talked to her aunt about why she "supposed that somehow, genetically, I know all about tea." Ming laughs now as she recalls this exchange.

In her own way, at her own slow pace, she's also circling back into Chinese culture; she took a Chinese history and anthropology course in college, and her reading combines overlapping interests about China and adoption.

"Definitely my interest to learn more about the Chinese culture is growing. It's like I'm no longer automatically rejecting anything Chinese or Asian." She has a standing offer her mother made after her college graduation, to travel with her to Taiwan. Diana Gale -- and she says it's only her intuition telling her so -- thinks Ming will someday make such a trip. Ming has no immediate plans to do so, but she admits the intriguing idea has taken hold of her. "It's sort of always in the back of my mind now," she confesses.

Most of all, she's focused on her decision to stop working as a clothing designer to pursue a degree in counseling. She's already taken the first step, registering back home in Seattle to take some course work in psychology at a satellite program run by Antioch College. "I have basically discovered that I'm interested in this new wave of adopted children, and helping them grow up and helping them with their own identities.

"It's time to do it."

SIDEBAR

Aid for parents, Chinese children

With the number of Chinese adoptees on the rise, two local groups now offer programs for both adopted Chinese children and for their American parents.

The Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association in West Newton holds Chinese language classes as well as culture and dance classes. For information, call 332-0377.

Meanwhile, a parent group was created last year to organize lectures, workshops and gatherings. Write Families with Children from China, New England, at P.O. Box 274, Boston 02258.

PHOTO; CAPTION:1. GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/PAT GREENHOUSE / Julia Ming Gale plans to pursue a degree in counseling and help other Chinese children adopted in the United States. 2. Ming's adoptive parents, Jim and Diana Gale, shown in the mid-'80s. 3. GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/PAT GREENHOUSE / When she looks in the mirror, says Julia Ming Gale, "I see my eyes. I see my nose. But it's all separate. It's never an Asian face looking back at me. It's, like, 'Oh, there are brown eyes. And there's a wide nose.' "

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