Going Back "Home": Adoptees Share Their Experiences of Hong Kong Adoptee Gathering

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The Study

Context:

Gathering of 30 HKADs in Hong Kong (Nov. 2015)

Research Questions

1. Were there differences between pre- and post-HKAD 2015 Gathering survey ratings by Hong Kong adoptee attendees?

2. What led the adult HKADs to attend the 2015 Hong Gathering?

3. How did HKADs describe their experiences and emotions while attending the Gathering?

4. What is the significance of HKADs returning to and gathering in Hong Kong?

Timeline

1949   Communist Party of China est. People's Republic of China

1956   700,000 mainland Chinese are refugees in HK

1955   1st HK child adopted to the US

1958   International Social Services, HK est.
- ISS launches HK Adoption Project in US

1960   1st HK child adopted to the UK
- As a part of HK Adoption Project in UK

1961   500 children adopted
- Targeted Chinese American/British parents
- Earlier children – older, male, and "Known"
- White PAPs also interested

Total Adoptions: Approximate 700 in USA and 106 in UK

Four Refugee Orphans From Red China Adopted Here

The four Chinese orphans who arrived yesterday at Idlewild from Seattle after flight from Hong Kong. From left to right are Tung Yau, 10; Chow, 8; Karen, 3, who is held by her adopting parent, Mrs. Thaddeus Cebula of Springfield, Mass., and Tai Tung Tom, 10.

Other studies on HKADs

Bagley and Young (1979 and 1993) – 40 UK families
- Some discrimination and challenges, but in general "Angelicised" well
- Good educational and occupational achievement
- Maintained interest in Chinese culture
- "Enjoyed [their] life as an adopted child"

Feast et al. (2013) – 72 HKAD women in UK
- HKADs in general "fared well" and experienced "nurturing homes"
- Challenges: psychological adjustments, connectedness to Chinese communities, alienation, identity (e.g. comfort with appearance), and racism
- Majority (86%) felt sense of belonging in UK and similar life satisfaction scores as other adopted and non-adopted group

Intervention

HK Adoptees present a unique cohort
- Understudied, age, and experiences
- Same-race and transracial adoptions that are also transnational

Gatherings as response to complexity of adoption

HKADs from different countries *and* attended Gathering

Adult adoptee-oriented topics and concerns
- Identity
- Gatherings
- Return to birth country
- Search for birth relatives

Methods

Quantitative and Qualitative

Two Surveys (N=21 and 17):
- One survey before *and* one after the Gathering
- Demographic questions
- Likert-type scale questions
- Open-ended response questions

Interview (N = 20):
- Conducted during the Gathering in HK
- Structured yet open-ended
- Averaged 80-90 minutes each

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and self-reported ethnicity of HKADs.

	n = 14[a]	n = 6[b]	n = 20[c]
Age range	50 to 61	38 to 57	38 to 61
Mean age	55.3 years	49.8	53.7 years
Female	93%	83%	92%
Male	7%	17%	8%
Mean Age at adoption	2.6 years	3.5 years	2.7 years
Adopted sibling from Asia	29%	67%	29%
Non-adopted sibling	57%	40%	50%
Adopted country			
USA	57%	17%	45%
Non-USA	36%		55%
UK		33%	35%
Hong Kong	7%	17%	10%
Canada		33%	10%
Type of adoption			
TRA (Both white)	50%	50%	55%
Same-race (at least one Asian parent)	50%	50%	45%
Identity as An Adult	n = 14[a]	n = 6[b]	n = 20[c]
Asian-American	7.1%		5%
Chinese	14.3%	17%	15%
Chinese American	28.6%	17%	25%
Chinese British	14.3%		10%
Chinese Canadian	7.1%	17%	10%
Chinese English		17%	5%
Chinese from HK	7.1%		5%
British Hong Kong Chinese Adoptee	7.1%		5%
British	7.1%	17%	10%
English		17%	5%
American	7.1%		5%
Have searched/in process	50%	33%	45%
Made Contact with Birth Family	7.1%	0%	5%
Partnered/Married	85.7%	50%	70%
Spouse white/Caucasian	85.7%	100%	90%
Visited HK Prior to Gathering as Adults	100%	100%	95%

Note:
[a]HKAD attendees who completed pre- and post-Gathering surveys and an interview.
[b]HKAD attendees who completed the pre-Gathering survey and an interview but did complete the post-Gathering survey.
[c]KAD attendees who completed the pre-Gathering survey and an interview.

Adoptee Community: The Early Years

How many adoptees did they know during childhood and adolescence?

- Domestic Adoptees, M = 1.06 SD = 2.38 (0 to 9)
- Hong Kong Adoptees, M = .82 SD = 1.47 (0 to 5)
- Transracial Adoptees, M = 1.17 SD = 1.90 (0 to 6)

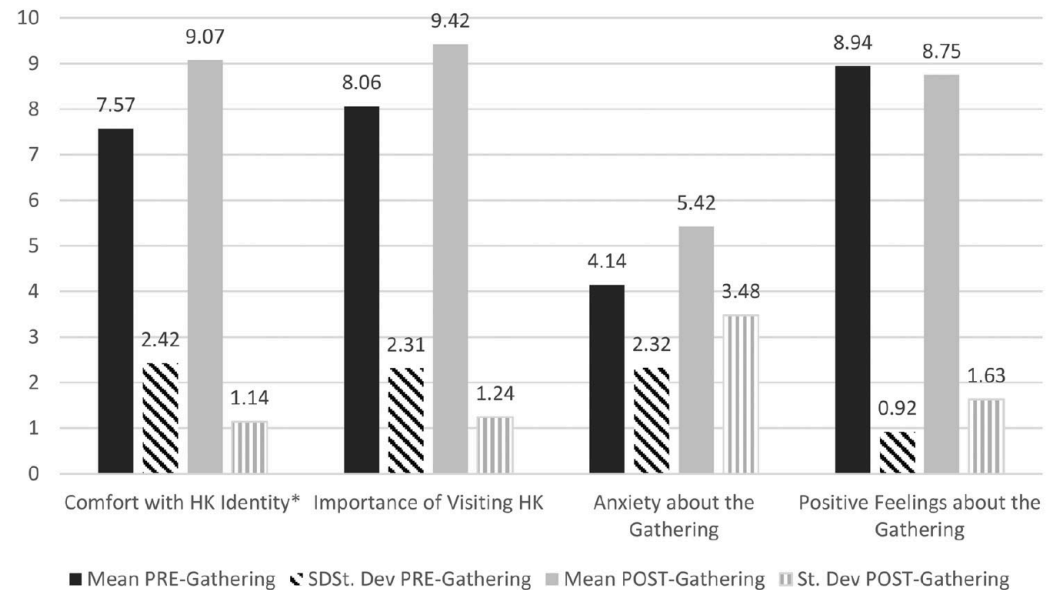**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for pretest and posttest.

Pre-Gathering	All participants			Attendees (completed all measures and interviews)		
	n	M	SD	n_{sub}	M_{sub}	SD_{sub}
Comfort with Identity as HK Adoptee	20	8.0	2.15	14	7.57	2.24
Degree to which Identify with Hong Kong	20	4.73	2.07	14	4.86	2.25
Degree to which Identify with Being Chinese	20	5.60	2.91	14	5.57	2.68
Importance of Visiting Hong Kong	20	7.94	2.46	14	8.06	2.31
Importance of Info About Orphanage/ Personal History	20	8.70	1.89	14	9.00	2.00
Importance of Info About or Meeting Birth Family	20	6.56	3.20	14	7.65	2.59
Positive Feelings About Attending the Gathering	20	8.61	1.67	14	8.94	.92
Anxiety About Attending the Gathering	20	4.45	2.30	14	4.14	2.32
Post-Gathering	n	M	SD	n_{sub}	M_{sub}	SD_{sub}
Success of Gathering	17	9.18	1.02	14	9.21	1.05
Comfort with Identity as HK Adoptee	17	9.06	1.09	14	9.07	1.14

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for pretest and posttest.

Pre-Gathering	All participants			Attendees (completed all measures and interviews)		
	n	M	SD	n_{sub}	M_{sub}	SD_{sub}
Interest in Applying for Hong Kong ID Card	16	5.69	3.55	13	6.62	3.25
DNA Testing Interest	16	5.81	3.54	13	6.23	3.77
Root Tracing Interest	16	6.44	3.29	13	7.38	2.72
Search Interest	15	7.20	3.12	13	7.54	3.23
Importance of Visiting Hong Kong	15	9.13	1.81	12	9.42	1.24
Satisfied Orphanage/ Personal History Info	14	7.07	2.64	11	6.73	2.61
Satisfied Finding Birth Family Info	3	4.00	5.20	2	1.00	0.0
Positive Feelings about the Gathering	15	8.87	1.51	12	8.75	1.63
Anxiety about Gathering	15	4.53	3.68	12	5.42	3.58
Expectations Met for Gathering	14	8.64	2.59	11	8.27	2.83
Experiences Match Expectations for Return to HK	12	8.17	1.99	10	8.40	1.90
Experiences Match Expectations for Birth Search	9	3.33	3.00	8	3.63	3.07

Pre- and Post-Gathering Responses

HKADs who completed the pre- and post-Gathering surveys showed an increase in their comfort with HK identity.

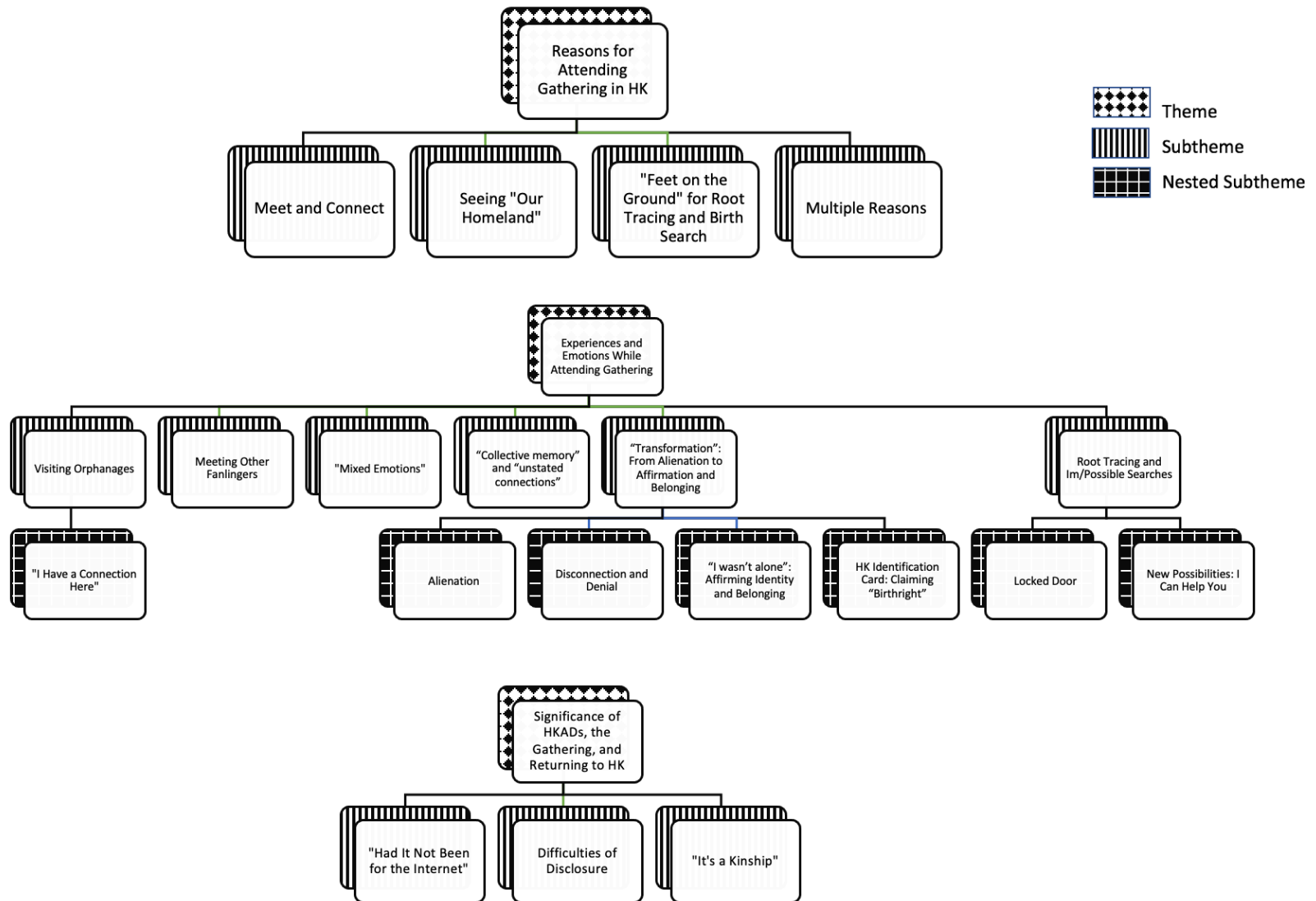**Figure 1.** Pre- and post-Gathering means and standard deviations for HKAD attendees. *Note*: $n = 14$. *$p < .05$

Legend:
- Theme
- Subtheme
- Nested Subtheme

Reasons for Attending Gathering in HK
- Meet and Connect
- Seeing "Our Homeland"
- "Feet on the Ground" for Root Tracing and Birth Search
- Multiple Reasons

Experiences and Emotions While Attending Gathering
- Visiting Orphanages
  - "I Have a Connection Here"
- Meeting Other Fanlingers
- "Mixed Emotions"
- "Collective memory" and "unstated connections"
- "Transformation": From Alienation to Affirmation and Belonging
  - Alienation
  - Disconnection and Denial
  - "I wasn't alone": Affirming Identity and Belonging
  - HK Identification Card: Claiming "Birthright"
- Root Tracing and Im/Possible Searches
  - Locked Door
  - New Possibilities: I Can Help You

Significance of HKADs, the Gathering, and Returning to HK
- "Had It Not Been for the Internet"
- Difficulties of Disclosure
- "It's a Kinship"

Figure 2. Themes and Subthemes in HKAD Interviews.

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Theme 1:
Reasons for attending the gathering in HK

Meet and connect
- HKADs from all over the world

See "our homeland"
- Range: 0 to more than 10
- More than tourist/family holiday

"Feet on the ground" for root tracing / birth search

Theme 2:
Experiences and Emotions

Visiting orphanages: "I have a connection here."

"When we went up to Fanling where the area is, because the home's not there, when we went there and took a group picture something happened inside. And it's the first time I actually felt like I have a connection here and not just as a tourist."

Mixed Emotions:

"We couldn't stop laughing."

"I can't verbalize the sadness or the feelings that things are triggering"

"Collective memory" and "unstated connections"

"I feel there is this really deep bond, and I think it just has to do with us being adoptees that we understand… there are just some unstated things that we don't have to explain to each other. I don't know if I can put it into words."

Theme 2:
Experiences and Emotions Cont'

Alienation

"[A]ll through my childhood I felt I was the only child like me. I didn't realize there were loads and loads of us."

Racism (*n=10*)   Alienation (*n=9*)

Disconnection and denial

"I didn't feel like I had that connection [to Hong Kong] until recently. In fact, it was more of that whole denial that I was subconsciously denying that I was adopted … so I didn't really ever have that urge to look for my birth parents."

"I wasn't alone" and affirming identity and belonging

"I just had a really negative sense of who I was. I knew that I had a face that I really hated and being stared at or being told that I was different and called names and teased. It was not a positive experience. I didn't have positive images of Chinese or Asians and then just being an adoptee. I just felt so isolated and alone, but after meeting Hong Kong adoptees I just felt like I wasn't alone, and I felt more connected."

Theme 2:
Experiences and Emotions Cont'

HK ID card & claiming birthright

"[M]oral support and applying with others encouraged me."

"[I] don't want my Hong Kong heritage denied from me."

Root tracing & (im)possible searches: "Locked door"

"I felt hopeless, like I'm never going to find her."

"[B]eing told that my records are sealed anyway, to me it was like what's the use?"

" ... a locked door and no one gave you the key."

New possibilities: "I can help you"

"But now of course people are talking about it I'm kind of, it's pricking my consciousness in thinking, 'Oh, yeah, maybe.'"

"I just found that everybody was so supportive of everyone .... Many people have said, 'Oh I can help you.'"

Theme 3:
Challenges and benefits of the gathering and returning to Hong Kong

"Had it not been for the internet"	*"It's a kinship"*
For me, I think everybody looks for a purpose of why they have been brought on this earth. For me, I feel this is my calling, this is what I have been brought on this earth to do. … [HKAN] would not have been possible had it not been for the internet."	"It's a kinship, and understanding, and it's a bond that we're all family of adoptees no matter what home we come from." "We are searching for the wrong people, not parents, we really should be searching for each other."

Implications for research and practice

Importance of cultural socialization, reculturation, and adoptee socialization in a group setting with other adult adoptees

Attaching returns to birth country to particular places (e.g., orphanages or finding sites) can engender greater meaning and fulfillment than tourist or work trips.

Interest in birth search (even at such a late stage) indicate the importance of avoiding narrowly defined concepts of family and kinship.

Benefits of broader notions of kinship that include not only birth family but also bonds with other adoptees.