Seminar - Co-organized with Sociology Department

How Chinese are you?: Chinese American adoptive parents and their children from China

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Chinese Americans are often referenced by white adoptive parents as models of authentic Chinese parenting. But how do Chinese American parents who adopt from China understand their children’s “Chineseness” and how do children re-work their parents’ productions of Chineseness? Drawing on ethnographic research with Asian American adoptive parents, and teens who were adopted by Asian American parents, I examine how issues of cultural authenticity and tradition play out in relation to the flexibility that comes with racially matching one’s child, and the ready access to and incorporation of global influences that accompanies the cosmopolitan ideals that many parents envision. Parents conceive of Chineseness in multiple ways, as a political entity, as an ancestral homeland, as a set of family-rooted cultural traditions, a racialized category, a form of cultural capital, or a mixture of the above. Particularly for American-born Chinese who grew up during the Cold War, their children’s Chineseness is both familiar and strange. While parent’s own relationships with their Chinese or Asian American identity may have shifted over the life course, they continue to engage with multilayered forms of Chinese identity as part of their parenting strategies. These processes do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, meanings of Chineseness are produced, circulated, and re-made in the context of global flows, which are shaped by the contours of capital and state power. This paper illustrates that something as seemingly “fixed” and “primordial” as Chineseness is re-worked, as Chineseness becomes both a liability and at times a form of cultural capital.

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Selected Publications by Professor Andrea Louie:


