Lesson Two: Touching Home

Big Idea: How personal identity is shaped.

Guiding Questions:
What parts of who I am are influenced by what I think of as "home?"
How does where my family or ancestors come from affect how I think about my own identity?

Our Challenge: To explore how individual identity is shaped by physical, societal and cultural environments and traditions.

Guiding Activities
This lesson invites students to immerse themselves in the many meanings associated with the idea of "home" and how it relates to one's personal sense of identity. In *Touching Home*, Maya Xia Ludtke and Jennie Yuchang Lytel-Sternberg, who were born in China and adopted into Caucasian families in the United States, get to know Chinese girls who grew up in the rural towns where the Americans were abandoned as babies by their birth families in the time of China's one-child policy. Through these girls' cross-cultural encounters, students explore the central roles that place, language and culture hold in shaping a person's evolving sense of identity.

Setting the Scene

Read the opening section of *Touching Home* and watch this short video. Stop at the story's "Home" subtitle.

Ask students to react to the ideas and interactions they find in the opening of this story. Encourage them to talk about relationships they see forming among the girls in the video and discuss the following questions:

- Why is Maya returning to Xiaxi Town?
- Can the students imagine what it would be like to go back to a place they don't remember but where their family or ancestors lived? To a different country? To a different town?
- Have students revisit what the local Xiaxi women talk about when they first meet Maya. What assumptions do they have about her? Where she comes from?
- If the students could ask Maya about meeting these village women and the young woman who combed her hair, what would they want to know?

Following this discussion have students use what they've read and seen in *Touching Home* so far – and any prior knowledge they bring to their reading – to respond to several writing prompts. At the end of this lesson, the students will return to their initial reflections to gauge how their perspectives might have shifted as a result of what they learned in moving through this Challenge Based Learning lesson.

- What makes someone an American?
- How does someone decide whether to add a hyphen to describe who she is in relation to her nationality, such as Chinese-American or Mexican-American?
- If you went back to the country that your ancestors are from, do you think you'd feel like a foreigner? (If you have made such a visit, describe your feelings when you were there.)
- What role do a nation's cultural traditions play in shaping identity?
- How does knowing the language deepen cultural understanding?
- How can a person go about getting to know a culture different than his own?

Setting the Foundation

For adopted children, like some first-generation immigrants, feeling at "home" in their families, schools and communities can be challenging. It's not easy to fit oneself into the American narrative of the "melting pot" when that requires assimilating into the dominant culture. Often there are feelings of being sandwiched between the family's ancestral cultural roots and one's own striving to plant "new" roots of identity in America. An exploration of such feelings is woven into the fabric of Maya and Jennie's journey "home" to China as adoptees. Each girl grew up as a daughter in a transracial family and now, as teenagers, she is constructing her own identity using the many pieces of her life as a baby born in China and a girl raised in America.

This lesson plan directs students to delve more deeply into topics of personal identity and adoption by reading "White Rice (with Soy Sauce)" from Lily Rau's blog "Little Lily, Big World" and "Meet Lilach" by Lilach Brownstein. Ask each student to choose a sentence from either piece, one that captures an aspect of her challenge in searching for her own identity. In pairs, small groups, or before the entire class, students will explain why they chose this particular sentence by describing what it says to them and by connecting the girl's insight to their own understanding of identity.

Transition from this discussion to asking students to read the entire story of *Touching Home*. This story offers glimpses (via words and videos) of the initial meetings of the American

adoptees with the Chinese girls from their rural "hometowns." As students absorb this story, ask them to keep in mind how the American and Chinese girls think about their identity.

Remind students that the hyperlinked words in the website version of *Touching Home* take them to material that expands their contextual knowledge about these topics and prompts new paths of inquiry. (Students should be directed to source material appropriate to their age, reading level, conceptual understanding, and learning objectives.)

Ask students to watch each video in this story. Doing this will help them get to know some of the eight girls, the two Americans and six Chinese teens who are the main characters. Students should take notes on their new learning.

Engaging Our Challenge

In *Touching Home* Maya and Jennie confront this core question: **"How does this place that I left as a baby contribute to my sense of who I am today?"** Their search for identity is informed by their adoptive experience – being uprooted from this place and their birth family and raised as a member of a family of a different race and in a wholly different culture. By having students engage with these girls' search reminds them how as individuals we carve our own identity out of varied elements that comprise the entirety of our lives.

This Challenge Based Learning lesson has students use the experiences of Maya and Jennie as a springboard to considering people's journeys of discovery about their identity. In examining this theme, students will gain insight into ways that their life experiences inform their own sense of identity. To do this, divide the class into small working groups in which they explore in-depth one of the four themes about identity that emerges from *Touching Home*. In these small groups, they will discuss how their own journeys connect with or diverge from those of Maya, Jennie and the Chinese girls. To foster constructive discussion, encourage students to share new insights and questions from their readings and keep a questions and connections log.. What they learn in group interactions will resurface when they work on the culminating Reflection and Action Project.

(1) Before dividing the class into groups, spend time as a class building students' background knowledge on international adoption and Asians in America by reading, exploring and discussing the following source materials.

- A general background of the history of international adoption in the United States
- The Adoption Project Timeline
- A graphical display of the Asian immigrant experience in coming to the United States.

2) Divide the class into the four thematic discussion groups (or more groups, based on class size, with roughly five students to a group.) Assign each group one the following four topics that relate to what they've encountered in *Touching Home:* "International Adoption;" "Identity, Race and Adoption;" "Living in a Transracial Family," and "Being Asian in America".

Group A: International Adoption

Views vary widely about the opportunities and the challenges that international adoption presents to children and families. For each family and adoptee the experiences, struggles and celebrations will be different. After reading a selection of sources about international adoption, students should be prepared to discuss these questions:

- What are common beliefs about the benefits of international adoption? What are some of the challenges experienced by adoptees, adoptive families, and birth families?
- In what ways does being removed as a child from one culture to be raised in another make identity formation more complex and challenging?
- How is international adoption different than adoption within the United States? What, if anything, is similar?
- What ethical issues arise when a family considers adopting a child from one culture into another and/or from a country with fewer economic resources and opportunities to one with more economic advantages?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group A.

Group B: Identity, Race and Adoption

International adoption adds a layer of complexity to conversations we have about identity and race. Race is inalterable, so families and adoptees learn to navigate through the range of societal perceptions about racial difference. Individuals make personal choices about their lives as a result of the environments and attitudes they encounter; a person's sense of self changes based on experiences she has. After reading a selection of sources about identity, race and adoption, students should be prepared to discuss these questions.

- How do the cultural inheritance of one's birth country and then adoption into a different culture interact to shape a person's sense of identity?
- Which elements of personal identity are inalterable? Which are fluid?
- What experiences can lead to changes in self-identity?
- How does being adopted from China and raised in America complicate the search for personal identity?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group B..

Group C: Living in a Transracial Family

Most children adopted from China grow up in a family in which the parents (or a parent) do not share their racial or cultural heritage. Visible differences distinguish members of transracial families in ways that often make strangers question (and sometimes ask) if they are a family. As students discover more about the lived experiences of transracial families, they should reflect on the following ideas and be prepared to discuss these questions:

- Counselors often advise families considering the adoption of a child of another race or from a different country to confront both the negative and positive internalized attitudes about adoption and race. An article referring to *Inside Transracial Adoption* quotes the book's authors, Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, as saying "When you choose to become a family that is different from most, you must be prepared to confront your own biases in both overt and subtle ways … You can expect to find that you carry within yourself both negative and positive internalized attitudes about adoption and race." Why is it important for parents to acknowledge this?
- When strangers react to a family's mixed racial composition, how might parents and children, depending on their age, respond?
- Think about the various ways and strategies that families use in raising a child of a different race and/or culture?
- [Upper high school and university level.] How do the words used to describe foreign adoptions and the families created by them – "multiracial," "transracial," "international" and "transnational" – convey different meanings about the experience? Does it matter which word is used? Why?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group C..

Group D: Being Asian in America

As children move through adolescence, they are very aware of how others perceive them. At the same time, they wonder how, as individuals, they fit into the larger society. Chinese adoptees growing up in Caucasian families bump up against societal perceptions based primarily on how they look - while at the same time they wrestling with visible differences within their own family. This second layer of complexity sets them apart from children born and raised in Chinese-American families. As students read more about being Chinese in America, they should keep in mind these questions as they read and discuss this topic.

- Is it important for a person to explore his/her own identity? Why?
- When you see a person whom you assume is Chinese in America, what do you think you know about him or her? How did you learn this?

- What compels us to classify people into categories based on their looks and/or where their family comes from?
- What is a stereotype? How are stereotypes created? In what ways do we internalize these external descriptions of whom we are?

Click here to explore the curated resources for Group D..

All Groups: Wrap-Up

Each group selects one question that deeply engaged them and chooses the resource that most significantly informed its discussion. If time permits, organize students into smaller jigsaw groups to allow for greater exchange of learning. When time is short, each group chooses a representative to present the question and a summary of the group's selected resource to the class.

Reflection and Action Project

A critical element of this curriculum involves students completing a culminating project to assess and demonstrate their learning. In doing this project students have an opportunity to try out various approaches to the issues or topics they explored through Engaging the Challenge. The students should not expect to "solve" the problem – in the sense of finding a definitive answer – though they can try to come up with ideas about how to draw greater public awareness to the situation and/or its consequences. This might lead them to develop messages that try to shift attitudes and behaviors and inspire action. By reflecting on what they've learned and using this knowledge to inform ideas about actions, students gain deeper appreciation for the many strands of challenges that people confront when they set out to "solve" a problem or try to excite others to act in some way..

This Reflection and Action Project asks students to consider their own identity – and ponder the journey leading them there - as they respond to these related questions:

"When I think of my identity, what words do I use to describe myself?"
"How do others, including friends and family, describe me?"
"What do I want others to know about who I am?"

Encourage students to use their questions and connections logs, compiled during small group learning, as a source of inspiration for their their Reflection and Action Project. The choice by students of how they express their ideas is intentionally open-ended. Since this type of self-expression might already feel new in a classroom setting, teachers might consider encouraging each student to challenge herself by choosing a method of expression that is new and unfamiliar. For example, if a student is comfortable expressing herself in writing,

she might use clay or paint for her project or expand her writing by using digital media as a part of her storytelling. Another student who is more comfortable expressing himself through art might try writing and performing a spoken-word poem, and so on. Offering students the option to choose to take this challenge can open up avenues for creativity that will deepen their experience with the content.

Working in teams (and not necessarily the same ones as formed for Engaging the Challenge), students support each other in this creative process. As each student begins to think through ideas, team members serve as sounding boards for one another. Once a student completes a draft, a team member reads and critiques this effort. As the student's draft nears completion, the original reader acts now as an editor and/or critic. With this start-to-finish collaborative process – along with the teacher's oversight and guidance – each student's final submission will be of publishable quality. The students decide how, when, and where to publish their work. Ideally, their projects will be shared among all members of the class, and then possibly with other students in the school, and potentially made public on a digital platform.