

“China’s Hottest New Export”
The Marketization of Transnational and Chinese Adoption
in American Mainstream Newspapers, 1992-2007

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In 1979, China instituted the One Child Policy to curb massive population growth. With most families limited to one child and a general preference for boys, many baby girls were placed in China’s orphanages. In 1992, China opened up adoptions to foreigners to ease the strain on the welfare system. In the following three decades, around 160,000 Chinese babies were adopted out of China, 80,000 of whom were adopted by Americans. My thesis analyzes articles from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, as well as articles from popular Christian newspapers, published from 1992 through 2007. I explore how these articles reflected and promoted certain ideas about international adoption and adoption from China. I situate these articles’ statements and portrayals in historical context and discuss the implications of such depictions. I argue that mainstream newspaper articles about Chinese and intercountry adoption reflected and perpetuated adoptive-parent-centered practices and the marketization of adoption, which over-simplified and dehumanized adoption and led to child trafficking in China’s transnational adoption system.

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This thesis is dedicated to my birth mother
and to all the Chinese mothers who lost their daughters.

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Note on Text

In my thesis, I use the term “adoption” to mean the formal legal process that permanently transfers all parental rights and responsibilities from a birth family or an institution to an adoptive family. I use the terms “international adoption,” “transnational adoption,” and “intercountry adoption” interchangeably to refer to adoptions that cross national borders.

When I use the term "trafficking" in adoption-related contexts, I am referring to the sale of children to orphanages, who then put these children up for adoption. Oftentimes the children who are sold to orphanages are obtained through kidnapping or coercion. In my thesis, I do not mean that intercountry adoption itself is a form of trafficking.

Throughout my thesis, I also avoid using certain words: Instead of “abandon,” I use the phrase “give up” to describe when a birth family separates from their child. “Abandon” connotes unwantedness or cruelty, but as I argue in my thesis, oftentimes Chinese baby girls were desired and birth parents were forced to separate themselves from their children because of larger social, political, and economic policies and pressures. In a similar vein, I also avoid the term “orphan” to describe Chinese babies and instead use phrases such as “children up for adoption” or “children in China’s orphanages” because orphan connotes the death of birth parents but in most cases, Chinese birth parents were very much alive.

Additionally, instead of “available,” I use “up for” to refer to babies in orphanages who were able to be adopted. As I explain in my thesis, “children available for adoption” frames children as objects in a supply. Similarly, I avoid using the word “popular” and instead use phrases such as “increase in” to describe the proliferation of adoptions from China. As I will discuss in my thesis, “popular” is another term that objectifies Chinese babies.

Introduction

“An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.” That is the Chinese proverb featured on the first page of the adoption book my mother made for me. That is the image of my adoption I have always held in my mind. At one end of the string, me, an abandoned Chinese baby, at the other end, my mother, a single woman seeking to fill her heart. I believe we were destined for each other. I love my mom and I love my adoption. While I never thought adoption was all rainbows and sunshine, for myself or for other adoptees, I had a majority positive view of intercountry adoption for most of my childhood.

However, as I grew into a young adult, I began to understand more of the nuances and complexities surrounding adoptees and international adoption. I learned that many adoptees face extreme identity crises or complete estrangement from their birth culture. I learned how white saviorism, white hegemony, and American exceptionalism tie into adoption. I learned that adoption was often the result of poverty, war, fear, and loss. My majority positive view of intercountry adoption was changing.

And then in the last few years, I was exposed to the even darker sides of transnational adoption. I read stories of adoptees being deported from America and of adoptees who were forcibly taken away from their birth parents. I realized that adoption was not always as humanitarian or win-win as it seemed. When contemplating the general topic of my thesis, I decided this is what I wanted to explore in depth. I wanted to gain a better understanding of the history and implications of international adoption’s dark sides.

Initially, I wanted to write my entire thesis about adoption-related fraud and kidnapping in China. I had read about it in newspaper articles, such as the 2025 *New Yorker* article titled

“The Chinese Adoptees Who Were Stolen,” and I learned a little bit about it while studying abroad in China.¹ But I soon ran into a wall. I could not find many primary sources on the topic. While there is plenty of evidence of fraud and kidnapping found in documented legal cases and investigative journalism, this evidence is only presented in mainstream media or scholarly articles. I found few primary sources from which I could make an original argument.

So I pivoted. I contemplated: “What is something related to adoption from China that is a primary source and that I can analyze?” I landed on newspapers. Newspaper articles about Chinese adoption were accessible and plentiful. Thus, I decided the primary focus of my thesis would be examining the ways in which major newspapers discussed international and Chinese adoption to America in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Placing My Story in Context

Discussion of adoption from China cannot begin without first understanding China’s One Child Policy. Notions of population control to curb fertility and promote economic development first appeared in China in the 1950s and 1960s.² In the 1970s, the central government implemented the “later, longer, fewer” campaign which advocated for later marriage and later and fewer births.³ The government also promoted equal regard for girls and boys and encouraged quality over quantity.⁴ In 1973, the first government offices were established to help promote these campaigns.⁵ Throughout the 1970s, China’s fertility rate decreased.⁶

¹ Barbara Demick, “The Chinese Adoptees Who Were Stolen,” *New Yorker*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/american-chronicles/the-chinese-adoptees-who-were-stolen>.

² John James Kennedy and Yaojiang Shi, *Lost and Found: The “Missing Girls” in Rural China* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2019), 19.

³ Barbara Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove: From China To America, A True Story Of Abduction, Adoption, and Separated Twins* (New York: Random House, 2025), 22-23.

⁴ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 23.

⁵ Kennedy and Shi, *Lost and Found*, 19.

⁶ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 23.

However, by 1979 China's population was almost at one-billion and China's per capita income remained one of the lowest in the world.⁷ In 1979, China's central government passed a law that limited most Chinese couples to one child. The policy took effect in 1980 and in 1981 the State Family Planning Commission was established.⁸ Family Planning offices were installed in every province, township and village.⁹ In 1982, birth limits were written into the Chinese constitution.¹⁰ From the 1980s to 2000s, the policy was strictly enforced by Family Planning offices, which included millions of workers across China.¹¹ In some places, women were required to have an IUD inserted after their first child. Sometimes pregnant women were forced to undergo abortions. There were also periodic sterilization campaigns for both women and men.¹² If a couple had more children than they were allowed, they faced many consequences, including a fine two to six times their annual earnings.¹³ To force the family to pay the fine, or if they could not pay, Family Planning officials would vandalize their house, confiscate their livestock, repossess their household belongings, or administer beatings.¹⁴ Propaganda with statements such as "one person gives birth, the whole village must ligate" were everywhere.¹⁵ Over time, exceptions were made allowing certain families to have two children, but overall, Family Planning was brutally enforced across the country.¹⁶

Despite the promotion of equal regard for girls and boys, the policy often led parents to give up their daughter in hopes of having a son.¹⁷ Sons would ensure the continuance of the

⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 23.

⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 23.

⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 24.

¹⁰ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 24.

¹¹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 24.

¹² Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 25-26.

¹³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 24.

¹⁴ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 12.

¹⁵ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 26

¹⁶ Kay Ann Johnson, Banghan Huang, and Liyao Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," *Population and Development Review* 25, no. 3 (September 1998): 475, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2808152>.

¹⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 69.

family name and take care of his parents while daughters moved to her husband's home and served her in-laws.¹⁸ Boys were also able to conduct the ritual displays of filial piety and ancestor worship, while girls were not.¹⁹ Therefore, many birth parents secretly left their daughters on the side of the road or in front of an orphanage.²⁰

With an estimated 100,000 to 160,000 new children filling up China's orphanages every year, the government needed a way to ease the strain on the welfare system.²¹ In addition, the government sought to close the loophole whereby family members or friends of a couple would adopt the couple's daughter so they could try again for a son.²² So in 1991, China established its first comprehensive domestic and international adoption laws, which were fully implemented in 1992.²³ Before, only foreigners with close family ties to China were allowed to adopt. But now, adoption was open to all foreigners who only had to meet a small set of requirements.²⁴ At the same time, domestic adoption was limited to childless couples at least thirty-five years old and the legal fees to adopt were greatly increased.²⁵

Opening international adoption enlarged the pool of potential adoptive parents without disturbing population control aims.²⁶ It also helped to provide needed funds for orphanages as adoption agencies and adoptive parents were required to pay fees to the government and orphanages and adoptive parents spent money when they made the requisite trip to China.²⁷ In addition, China also saw international adoption as a tool for soft power. The government

¹⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 69.

¹⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 69.

²⁰ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 69.

²¹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 63.

²² Kay Ann Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China," *Law and Society Review* 36, no. 2 (2002): 379, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512181>.

²³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 63.

²⁴ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 63.

²⁵ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 63.

²⁶ Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China," 379.

²⁷ Nancy E. Riley, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls: The Socio-political Matrices of Individual Decisions," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20, no. 1 (January-February 1997): 87-102, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(96\)00075-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(96)00075-1).

imagined adoptees would become people-to-people envoys between China and foreign countries.²⁸ Soon, the China Center of Adoption Affairs (CCAA) (later renamed the China Center for Children’s Welfare and Adoption in 2011) was established to handle the adoption process and work with international adoption agencies. Eventually over 400 social welfare institutions in China participated in intercountry adoption programs.²⁹ Between 1992 and 2024, over 80,000 children were adopted from China to America.³⁰

I am one of these 80,000. I am a product of the One Child Policy.

Weaving Past Scholarship About China, America, and Intercountry Adoption

My thesis brings together scholarship on intercountry adoption, adoption from China to America, China’s One Child Policy and adoption system, and societal changes and beliefs in America. I weave together different strands of literature about China, the United States, and transnationalism. The first strand of articles and books have looked at international adoption more broadly. In *Somebody’s Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*, Laura Briggs has examined international and domestic adoption in America and America’s foster care system.³¹ In the introduction, Briggs has provided an informative overview of how intercountry adoption began in America, which she has claimed is rooted in anti-fascism and anti-communism.³² Briggs has also argued that international adoption is not wholly good or bad because adoption can be the best outcome for a child but is shaped by political, economic, and racial inequalities.³³ In *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of*

²⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 64-65.

²⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 66.

³⁰ Amy Qin and Vivian Wang, “An Era of Chinese Adoption Ends, and Families Are Torn Over Its Legacy,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/15/world/asia/chinese-american-adoption-program.html>.

³¹ Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 25, 127, 239.

³² Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 130.

³³ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 4.

Belonging, Eleana Kim has examined adoption from Korea to America and Korean adoptees' process of identity formation.³⁴ Similarly to Briggs, Kim has argued that global inequalities and conceptions of race have shaped transnational adoption and that intercountry adoption involves both humanitarianism and commodification.³⁵ *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective*, edited by Howard Altstein and Rita J. Simon, also provided an overview of the history of intercountry adoption in America.³⁶ They have argued that adoption started as a humanitarian response to World War Two but morphed into an imperialistic and selfish practice driven by the needs of adoptive parents.³⁷ Kathryn Joyce's *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel Of Adoption* has taken a deep dive into the Christian adoption movement.³⁸ Joyce has argued that intercountry adoption has been heavily shaped by evangelical Christian ideology and market forces and is now a system controlled by demand and religious mission rather than children's best interest.³⁹

Like other scholars, David Smolin has discussed whether adoption itself can be considered trafficking and has highlighted the gray area between legitimate adoption and selling children.⁴⁰ In "Intercountry Adoption as Child Trafficking," Smolin has ultimately claimed that intercountry adoption is a form of child trafficking because current laws and systems allow it to operate as such.⁴¹ Vanessa Virgiel has taken an even stronger stance against international adoption. In "Adoption and Child Trafficking: Structural Violence in the International Adoption

³⁴ Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 38-39.

³⁵ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 12, 27.

³⁶ Howard Altstein and Rita J. Simon, *Intercountry Adoption: A Multinational Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 3-6.

³⁷ Altstein and Rita J. Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 1, 3.

³⁸ Kathryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel Of Adoption* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), xvi-xvii.

³⁹ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, xvi-xvii.

⁴⁰ David Smolin, "Intercountry Adoption as Child Trafficking," *Valparaiso University Law Review* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 281, <https://scholar.valpo.edu/vulr/vol39/iss2/1/>.

⁴¹ Smolin, "Intercountry Adoption as Child Trafficking," 281.

System,” she has claimed that intercountry adoption is a form of structural violence because global inequalities and power imbalances systematically enable child trafficking and the coercive separation of children from their families.⁴² Similarly to other authors, Virgiel has argued that transnational adoption shifted focus from children to adoptive families.⁴³ In addition, Virgiel is one of only a few scholars to have discussed the contents and impacts of the mainstream newspapers that constitute my primary source base. But her discussion was very brief. Virgiel stated, “it is not uncommon to find a news piece speaking of a so-called global orphan crisis of children awaiting families” and “correspondingly, there is also ample news and ‘infotainment’ materials promoting the ‘gift’ of adoption, with adoptees and adoptive parents alike sharing praise for the adoption mechanism that allowed them to become family, as well as advocacy from non-parties to adoption.”⁴⁴

In contrast to these scholars, Elizabeth Bartholet has maintained a more positive view of transnational adoption. In “International Adoption: The Human Rights Position” and “International Adoption: The Child's Story,” just two of her many publications that I examined, Bartholet has criticized those who focus on the evils involved in adoption and who advocate for bans on international adoption, which would deprive millions of orphans the opportunity to be in loving homes.⁴⁵ She has also claimed there is limited evidence of baby-buying and kidnapping.⁴⁶ E. J. Graff, however, has argued the opposite. In “The Lie We Love” and “They Steal Babies, Don't They,” Graff has explained that because most children in need are not the healthy infants

⁴² Vanessa Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking: Structural Violence in the International Adoption System” (PhD diss., Portland State University, 2014), 16-17, <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1133&context=honorsthesis>.

⁴³ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 13-14.

⁴⁴ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 3.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Bartholet, “International Adoption: The Human Rights Position,” *Global Policy* 1, no 1 (January 2010): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-5899>; Elizabeth Bartholet, “International Adoption: The Child's Story,” *Georgia State University Law Review* 24, no. 2 (2007): 371-372, <https://dash.harvard.edu/entities/publication/73120378-a443-6bd4-e053-0100007fdf3b>.

⁴⁶ Bartholet, “International Adoption: The Child's Story,” 374.

that Western adoptive parents desire, countries with healthy infants up for adoption quickly become overrun with more requests than a country can manage and adoption agencies work to find children for families, not families for children.⁴⁷ This has led to corruption and kidnapping within intercountry adoption programs.⁴⁸ Graff has argued that the best hope for eliminating these bad practices is the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption that established international standards to safeguard intercountry adoptions.⁴⁹ Ethan B. Kapstein's "The Baby Trade" had also claimed that transnational adoption involves corruption and coercion because it behaves like a commodities market determined by supply and demand.⁵⁰ However, Kapstein has stated that the distinction between trafficking and adoption is not always clear and that complete bans on adoption are not the correct solution.⁵¹ Both Graff and Kapstein have argued that greater regulations and restrictions are needed to ensure the integrity of international adoption.⁵²

The second strand of books and articles have focused on adoption from China to America. In the first chapter of *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*, ethnographer Sara K. Dorow has taken a deep dive into the reasons why American adoptive parents chose China, especially over domestic adoption.⁵³ Dorow has argued that Chinese babies fit American parents' desires which were largely shaped by notions of race.⁵⁴

Similarly to other scholars, Dorow has also highlighted the gray area between commodification

⁴⁷ E. J. Graff, "The Lie We Love," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, no. 169 (November/December 2008): 59-60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25462359>; E. J. Graff, "They Steal Babies, Don't They?" *Pacific Standard Magazine*, November 24, 2014, <https://psmag.com/news/they-steal-babies-dont-they-international-adoption-schuster-institute-95027>.

⁴⁸ Graff, "The Lie We Love," 60.

⁴⁹ Graff, "The Lie We Love," 65.

⁵⁰ Ethan B. Kapstein, "The Baby Trade," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6, (November-December 2003): 117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20033761>.

⁵¹ Kapstein, "The Baby Trade," 115.

⁵² Graff, "The Lie We Love," 66; Kapstein, "The Baby Trade," 123.

⁵³ Sara K. Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2026): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qghz1>.

⁵⁴ Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 37.

and care.⁵⁵ Elizabeth Vonk, Peggy Simms, and Larry Nackerud's "Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States" has discussed adoption from China to America as both a political process and personal experience.⁵⁶ In their discussion, they have highlighted scholarship from the early 1990s that critiques international adoption as exploitation.⁵⁷ Their article is another of only a few that have briefly discussed the contents and effects of mainstream newspapers. They have stated that debates over the ethnics of transnational adoption have not reached mainstream media.⁵⁸ "In fact, media coverage in the United States, showing happy families returning home with new daughters or sons along with stories about dismal conditions in Chinese orphanages, highlights a positive interpretation of international adoption."⁵⁹ Nancy E. Riley's "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls: The Socio-political Matrices of Individual Decisions" has claimed that broader social and political forces, such as gender norms and racial stereotypes, shape individual decisions to adopt from China.⁶⁰ Riley is the only scholar I came across that has directly connected newspapers to commodification. Riley stated, "the attitude that foreign children are commodities for the consumption of richer western nations can be seen in some –although certainly not all– recent articles about adoptions from China."⁶¹ Riley then briefly analyzed the example of a 1993 *New York Times* article titled "China's Market in Orphan Girls" and has argued that such articles commodify and exoticize Chinese children.⁶² My thesis greatly expands on Riley's findings.

⁵⁵ Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 17.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth M. Vonk, Peggy J. Simms, and Larry Nackerud, "Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States," *Families in Society* 80, no. 5 (September/October 1999): 496, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/political-personal-aspects-intercountry-adoption>.

⁵⁷ Vonk, Simms, and Nackerud, "Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States," 499.

⁵⁸ Vonk, Simms, and Nackerud, "Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States," 499.

⁵⁹ Vonk, Simms, and Nackerud, "Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States," 499.

⁶⁰ Riley, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls," 87-88.

⁶¹ Riley, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls," 99.

⁶² Riley, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls," 99.

The third strand of articles and books have centered on family and adoption in America. In *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*, Stephanie Coontz has claimed that notions of “the American family” have diversified because of major economic, political, and social changes.⁶³ In “What's Marriage (and Family) Got to Do with It? Support for Same-Sex Marriage, Legal Unions, and Gay and Lesbian Couples Raising Children,” Amy B. Becker has discussed public opinion toward gay civil rights.⁶⁴ Her study found that Americans have broadened their definition of what constitutes a family.⁶⁵ Abbie E. Goldberg’s “Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Gay Preadoptive Parents’ Preferences About Child Gender” has discussed gender preferences among adoptive parents and has hypothesized particular reasons why parents may prefer girls.⁶⁶ In “Making a ‘Real’ Family: Matching and Cultural Biologism in American Adoption,” Judith Modell and Naomi Dambacher have examined racial matching practices within American adoption history.⁶⁷ Nikki Khanna and Caitlin Killian’s “‘We Didn't Even Think about Adopting Domestically’: The Role of Race and Other Factors in Shaping Parents’ Decisions to Adopt Abroad” has argued that adoptive parents’ decision to adopt internationally were based on ideas about race and risk involved with domestic adoptions.⁶⁸

Finally, the fourth strand of books and articles has covered abandonment, adoption, and trafficking in China. Kay Ann Johnson’s *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China* has argued that widespread abandonment of girls was

⁶³ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 47-48.

⁶⁴ Amy B. Becker, “What's Marriage (and Family) Got to Do with It? Support for Same-Sex Marriage, Legal Unions, and Gay and Lesbian Couples Raising Children,” *Social Science Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (December 2012): 1007, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42864111>.

⁶⁵ Becker, “What's Marriage (and Family) Got to Do with It?” 1011.

⁶⁶ Abbie E. Goldberg, “Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Gay Preadoptive Parents’ Preferences About Child Gender,” *Sex Roles* 61, (2009): 56-57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9598-4>.

⁶⁷ Judith Modell and Naomi Dambacher, “Making a ‘Real’ Family: Matching and Cultural Biologism in American Adoption,” *Adoption Quarterly* 1, no. 2, (1997): 4, https://doi.org/10.1300/J145v01n02_02.

⁶⁸ Nikki Khanna and Caitlin Killian, “‘We Didn't Even Think about Adopting Domestically’: The Role of Race and Other Factors in Shaping Parents' Decisions to Adopt Abroad,” *Sociological Perspectives* 58, no. 4, (Winter 2015): 572, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44290130>.

not simply because of a preference for sons, as most people believe, but because of state policies, economic pressures, and family survival.⁶⁹ Kay Ann Johnson, Banghan Huang, and Liyao Wang's "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China" has discussed their 1995-1996 study of 237 Chinese parents who gave up children in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷⁰ Contrary to international public belief, their study found that girls were not readily abandoned.⁷¹ Another publication by Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China," has argued that there was a desire among Chinese families to domestically adopt girls, but after China opened up international adoptions, domestic adoption became extremely limited.⁷² John James Kennedy and Yaojiang Shi's *Lost and Found: The "Missing Girls" in Rural China* has argued that a substantial population of Chinese girls are not truly "missing" because of the One Child Policy but are hidden as a result of mutual noncompliance between local leaders and rural residents.⁷³

Susan Tiefenbrun's "Human Trafficking in China" has looked at various types of trafficking in China since the institution of the One Child Policy.⁷⁴ Tiefenbrun has highlighted that the Chinese government promoted the value of girls because widespread sex-selective abortion, infanticide, and abandonment led to troubling demographic problems.⁷⁵ Through telling the true story of a Chinese adoptee who was forcibly taken away from her birth family, Barbara Demick's *Daughters of the Bamboo Grove: From China to America, A True Story of Abduction, Adoption, and Separated Twins* has taken a deep dive into the One Child Policy and child trafficking.⁷⁶ Another scholar who has written extensively on adoption-related trafficking is

⁶⁹ Kay Ann Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China* (St. Paul: Yeong and Yeong Book Company, 2004), xviii.

⁷⁰ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," 471.

⁷¹ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," 475, 503.

⁷² Johnson, "Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China," 379.

⁷³ Kennedy and Shi, *Lost and Found*, 24.

⁷⁴ Susan Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 6, no. 247, (2008): 247, <https://researchonline.stthomas.edu/esploro/outputs/991015131050903691>.

⁷⁵ Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," 266-267.

⁷⁶ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, " 23, 325.

Brian Stuy, founder of Research-China.Org, an organization focused on gathering information about China's adoption program and the individual histories of adoptees.⁷⁷ Stuy also posted articles on Research-China.Org about his own investigations and thoughts.⁷⁸ Stuy's article, "Open Secret: Cash and Coercion in China's International Adoption Program," has argued that financial incentives and coercive practices led to baby-buying in China's international adoption system.⁷⁹ Stuy's article is the third of only a few that have discussed the contents and impact of newspapers.⁸⁰ "Open Secret" has mentioned that mainstream popular press promoted China as having an extreme humanitarian need, which encouraged adoption from China and discouraged any questioning of China's adoption system. Stuy has explained that with countless news articles constantly stating tens of thousands of girls are abandoned each year because of the One Child Policy, "most families adopting from China have seen little reason to question the reality of their child's orphanage story or the integrity of the program itself."⁸¹

No previous scholarship takes a deep dive into how major newspapers discussed and portrayed transnational and Chinese adoptions and the implications of these portrayals. I fill in this gap because I believe that by examining newspapers, we can better understand how people thought about adoption and why Chinese adoption became a commodity market that led to child trafficking. In my thesis, I use this past scholarship about the historical shifts of international adoption to place major newspaper articles in context and explain how these articles reflected and perpetuated adoptive-parent-centered practices and the increased marketization of adoption

⁷⁷ "What We Do," Research-China.Org, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://www.research-china.org/what-we-do>.

⁷⁸ The Rest of the Story, Research-China.Org, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://research-china-trs12.blogspot.com/?zx=79e1cda1d0f4297f>.

⁷⁹ Brian Stuy, "Open Secret: Cash and Coercion in China's International Adoption Program," *Cumberland Law Review* 4, no. 3, (2014): 388-389, https://www.academia.edu/91850443/Open_Secret_Cash_and_Coercion_in_Chinas_International_Adoption_Program.

⁸⁰ Stuy, "Open Secret," 361.

⁸¹ Stuy, "Open Secret," 361.

from China. I also use this past literature to inform my discussion of the implications of commodification and the positives and negatives of international and Chinese adoption.

Searching for Newspaper Articles

I decided to examine the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* because I wanted two well-known, reliable sources with slightly different political leanings. The *New York Times* skews left while the *Wall Street Journal* skews right and both are very reliable.⁸² I used the search tool on both newspapers' websites to search for articles about international and Chinese adoption from 1992 through 2007. I limited my search to these years because I wanted my thesis to focus on the start of Chinese adoption to just after its peak in 2005.⁸³ In the search tool, I entered terms such as "One Child Policy" "adoption" "international adoption," "adoption from China" "Chinese adoption" and so on. Then I briefly skimmed each article that came up to ensure it could apply to my thesis. After I found what I believed was every article that may be useful for my thesis, I carefully analyzed each article and took notes. I considered the words and messages of each article and what ideas they may reflect or encourage about Chinese adoption.

I also decided to examine popular Christian newspapers because Christians, especially Evangelicals, played a prominent role in transnational adoption. According to Joyce, the Christian adoption movement was seen as the opportunity for conservative Christians to play a compassionate role in the supposed global orphan crisis.⁸⁴ Since the mid-nineteenth century, Christians spearheaded efforts to support domestic orphans and save children from the dangers of

⁸² "Media Bias Chart: Through the Years," Ad Fontes Media, accessed April 12, 2026, <https://adfontesmedia.com/gallery/>.

⁸³ Hannah Bates and John Gramlich, "International Adoptions to the U.S. Have Slowed to a Trickle, Matching Trends in Other Countries," Pew Research Center, July 25, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/25/international-adoptions-to-the-us-have-slowed-to-a-trickle-matching-trends-in-other-countries/>.

⁸⁴ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, xiii.

urban poverty.⁸⁵ After the Korean War, Christians turned their attention abroad, particularly because of one evangelical couple: Harry and Bertha Holt.⁸⁶ In 1955, these two evangelical farmers from Oregon adopted eight children from Korea. The Holts' story became a national sensation and inspired thousands of Christian families to adopt. The Holts spent the rest of their lives promoting adoption and leading efforts to transport Korean children to America.⁸⁷ The Holts' ad-hoc adoption agency based in their basement later became the longest-standing international adoption agency in the world: Holt International Children's Services. From then on, the "history of international adoption became inextricably linked to Christian Evangelism."⁸⁸

After a quick Google search of the top evangelical newspaper, I landed on *Christianity Today* (a monthly magazine). Because *Christianity Today's* website did not have a search tool for archived issues, I went through each issue individually and looked for any articles that related to my thesis. However, I only found a few articles that were of use, so I decided to search in other Christian news outlets. I found a few articles of use in *Today's Christian Woman* (a branch of *Christianity Today*) and the *Baptist Press*.

In total, I analyzed over ninety articles across the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christianity Today*, *Today's Christian Woman*, and the *Baptist Press*.

Where This Thesis is Headed

My thesis analyzes mainstream newspapers to explore how they reflected and promoted certain ideas about domestic American adoption, international adoption, adoption from China, and Chinese babies. I situate these articles' statements and portrayals in historical context and

⁸⁵ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 44.

⁸⁶ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 47.

⁸⁷ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 47-48.

⁸⁸ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 50-51.

discuss the implications of such depictions. I argue that mainstream newspaper articles about Chinese and international adoption, published from 1992 through 2007, reflected and perpetuated adoptive-parent-centered practices and the marketization of adoption, which over-simplified and dehumanized adoption from China and led to child trafficking in China's transnational adoption systems. Chapter One of my thesis examines the history of international adoption to America and how newspapers reflected and contributed to the focus of intercountry adoption on the needs of adoptive parents. I look at how newspaper articles encouraged adoption as a means of family formation, misrepresented or erased birth parents, promoted adoption as a biblical mandate, and highlighted particular reasons why Americans were drawn to adoption from China. In Chapter Two, I explore how newspaper articles portrayed Chinese adoption as a trend, discussed costs related to adoption, and used commodifying language. These articles framed adoption as a transaction in the global economy and underscored the rise of an expanded transnational adoption industry. Finally, Chapter Three discusses the ramifications of adoptive-family-centered practices and the marketization of intercountry adoption. This includes the dehumanization of adoption, adoption-related fraud and trafficking in China and other countries, and adoptee deportation from America.

Chapter One

“Finding Children for Families”

Introduction

Briggs has argued that the rise in international adoption began in the 1930s with a humanitarian response to war. From the 1930s to 1940s, heart-rendering images of growing fascism and World War Two horrors caused Americans to become obsessed with saving children.⁸⁹ But during this time, prevailing anti-Semitism and anti-immigration sentiment prevented any U.S. efforts to bring Jewish children to America.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, post-war images of destruction and hunger in Germany and Japan pulled at the heartstrings of Americans and governmental programs emerged to provide food and aid to these devastated countries.⁹¹ Additionally, a few non-governmental initiatives were launched to financially support orphans. For example, many Americans “morally adopted” Japanese orphans by sending money to orphanages because they felt guilty about the consequences of the atomic bombs.⁹² Briggs has stated, “in the years that followed, Americans became ever more schooled in how to believe that only U.S. intervention could solve the problems that U.S. intervention had wrought.”⁹³

At the start of the Cold War, anti-Communist sentiment overpowered anti-immigrant feelings. Briggs has argued, “joining the refugee question to anti-Communism was what finally made transnational adoption possible. If it proved impossible to bring the refugees from Fascism to the US, the refugees from Communism were more than welcome.”⁹⁴ Anti-Communist groups, evangelical churches, and other organizations set up fundraising programs to support children in

⁸⁹ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 131-132.

⁹⁰ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 147-149.

⁹¹ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 136-137.

⁹² Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 138-139.

⁹³ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 137.

⁹⁴ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 150.

their respective countries.⁹⁵ The State Department and other groups also launched initiatives to bring children from foreign Communist countries to America. From 1960 to 1962, the State Department launched Operation Pedro Pan in Cuba which transported over 14,000 Cuban children to America for what was originally supposed to be a short time but for many became permanent. Most of these children grew up in foster homes.⁹⁶ At the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Operation Babylift brought over 2,000 children for adoption by American families. Then a few years later, there was a considerable effort to bring the “left-behind” Amerasian children of American servicemen “home” to the U.S. for adoption.⁹⁷ Starting in the 1950s and lasting throughout the 1970s, the number of children brought to America and “welcomed into U.S. American hearts and homes” increased rapidly. With the potent image of children fleeing from Communism, America’s focus turned from primarily fostering to primarily adoption, “from supporting children’s return to their communities and parents when possible, to adoption, conversion, and finding them new identities as young Christian Americans.”⁹⁸

Similarly, Altstein and Simon have argued that transnational adoption began as a philanthropic response to World War Two. During this first phase which lasted until the early 1950s, most adopted orphans came from Germany and Greece and a handful came from Japan.⁹⁹ Adoption to America during this time was aided by the 1948 Displaced Persons Act and the 1953 Refugee Acts which granted thousands of visas to mostly European and some Asian orphan refugees.¹⁰⁰ Then, when Europe rebuilt, America turned its attention to conflict-ridden, less developed countries with high birth rates. During this phase, which lasted from the 1950s

⁹⁵ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 151.

⁹⁶ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 153-155.

⁹⁷ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 156.

⁹⁸ Briggs, *Somebody's Children*, 150.

⁹⁹ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 3.

through the 1980s, most adoptees were from Korea and Vietnam.¹⁰¹ During the 1970s and 1980s, Americans also adopted from Latin America.¹⁰² Intercountry adoptions more than doubled from about 4,000 in 1973 to about 10,000 by 1987.¹⁰³

Beginning in the late twentieth century, changes within America also began to encourage international adoption. The first change was delayed marriage and attempts at childbearing. Women married later in life and couples tried to conceive at an older age. Therefore, a greater number of women experienced infertility or failed in vitro-fertilization efforts by the time they desired to have children.¹⁰⁴ Coontz has explained that because of economic recession and social movements such as the women's movement and sexual revolution, "by the mid-1970s, maintaining the prescribed family lifestyle meant for many couples giving up the prescribed family form. They married later, postponed children, and curbed their fertility; the wives went out to work."¹⁰⁵ In addition, American society encourages and cherishes motherhood: "Women are expected to be mothers, to want to be mothers, to enjoy that role and to find fulfillment through their family roles, even if they have other roles in the labor market."¹⁰⁶ As fertility decreased but societal pressure and personal desire to be a mother remained, intercountry adoption became an avenue for American women to have children.

The second change that occurred in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century was increasingly relaxed notions of what constitutes a family and greater social acceptability of singles and gay couples having children. Becker's study argued that Americans have broadened their definition of what it means to be a family. Citing a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center, the article states that 86% of Americans say a single parent and child constitute a family and

¹⁰¹ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 3.

¹⁰² Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 6.

¹⁰³ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 47-48.

¹⁰⁶ Riley, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls," 94.

63% say a gay or lesbian couple raising a child is a family.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the number of single parents in America (including through divorce and birth outside of marriage) rose from 3.8 million in 1970 to 12.2 million in 1996, suggesting greater destigmatization.¹⁰⁸ The third change was related to domestic adoption, which will be discussed in greater detail later. A decrease in white American babies up for adoption and an increase in power granted to birth mothers made domestic adoption less desirable.¹⁰⁹

As a result of these changes, transnational adoption was no longer solely a humanitarian or philanthropic response to war or poverty but also a desirable way to start a family. The decision for Americans to adopt internationally began not with instability in another country, but rather the circumstances and desires of prospective adoptive parents. Thus, the focus of intercountry adoption shifted from centering on children to centering on adoptive parents.¹¹⁰ In this chapter, I examine how newspaper articles discussed adoption as family formation, misrepresented or erased birth parents, framed adoption as a biblical mandate, and highlighted particular reasons why Americans chose to adopt from China, which reflected and contributed to the centering of intercountry adoption on the needs of adoptive parents.

Creating a Family

Nigel Cantwell, an international consultant on child protection policies, has argued, “from the 1950s to the early 1970s, international adoption was driven by a humanitarian response to the perceived problems of newly decolonised countries, and to war and disaster. But then this saviour ideology was rapidly reinforced – and even overtaken – by the realisation that

¹⁰⁷ Amy Becker, “What’s Marriage (and Family) Got to Do with It?” 1011.

¹⁰⁸ Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 79.

¹⁰⁹ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 26.

¹¹⁰ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 1; Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 56; Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 13-14.

intercountry adoption was a means of family formation.”¹¹¹ Many newspaper articles reflected and promoted this idea of adoption as a way to start or expand a family. A 1997 *New York Times* article, “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York,” discussed the proliferation of New Yorkers adopting from China. The article stated: “Many families have been drawn to each other, in part through the shared experience of traveling halfway around the world to start a family.”¹¹² A 1998 *New York Times* article was titled “With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families.”¹¹³ Another *New York Times* article from 1998 titled “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions” explained: “Once the ‘other’ option for becoming parents, adoption is now one of many ways that men and women create families.”¹¹⁴ A 2003 *Wall Street Journal* article titled “Adoption's New Geography” discussed changes to the intercountry adoption landscape. The article stated, “U.S. parents increasingly are crossing borders to build families.”¹¹⁵ These articles expressed that Americans were turning towards transnational adoption to build families.

Later articles quoted adoptive parents who revealed that family formation was a reason for adopting. A 2003 *Wall Street Journal* article by Opdyke titled “It’s Time for Another Child At the Opdyke Residence” discussed the financial decisions involved in adoption. Opdyke explained: “We are trying to figure out how to expand our family while still living the life we seek.”¹¹⁶ A 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article, “Tax Break, Ingenuity Can Help When Planning to Adopt a Child,” quoted an adoptive couple: “We had wanted to have a family and what

¹¹¹ Rosie Swash and Thaslima Begum, “‘My Mother Spent Her Life Trying to Find Me’: The Children Who Say They Were Wrongly Taken for Adoption,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/aug/11/the-children-who-say-they-were-wrongly-taken-for-adoption>.

¹¹² Janny Scott, “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1997, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/19/nyregion/orphan-girls-of-china-at-home-in-new-york.html>.

¹¹³ Lynne Ames, “With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1998, 357, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/19/nyregion/orphan-girls-of-china-at-home-in-new-york.html>.

¹¹⁴ Esther B. Fein, “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1998, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/25/us/secrecy-and-stigma-no-longer-clouding-adoptions.html>.

¹¹⁵ Jeff D. Opdyke, “Adoption's New Geography,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2003, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB106608641026008000>.

¹¹⁶ Jeff D. Opdyke, “It's Time for Another Child At the Opdyke Residence,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2003, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB106104497652725300>.

propelled us was a very strong feeling that our daughter was in China.”¹¹⁷ A 2007 article by Elizabeth Fitzsimons titled “My First Lesson in Motherhood” told her story of adopting a girl from China. After learning her adopted daughter, Natalie, has a form of spina bifida, Fitzsimons stated: “I held on to him [her husband] and cried into his chest, angry that creating a family seemed so impossible for us, and that life had already been so difficult for Natalie.”¹¹⁸

These articles portrayed the shift in international adoption from humanitarian response to self-driven desire. The phrases “start a family,” “create families,” “build families,” “expand a family,” “have a family,” and “creating a family” promoted adoption from China as a means of family formation. Such an idea centered prospective parents and decentered the child when considering who gains and what they gain in the process of transnational adoption.¹¹⁹ Rather than highlight that adoption can provide a child with a parent, these articles emphasized that adoption can provide a parent with a child.

Misrepresenting and Erasing Birth Families

Moreover, most articles also oversimplified the explanation for the abundance of girls in Chinese orphanages and glossed over the fact that for one family to gain a child, another family had to lose their child. These articles typically stated that because of the One Child Policy and a preference for boys, Chinese parents abandoned their daughters. For example, a 1992 *New York Times* article, “Chinese Might Simplify Adoptions by Foreigners,” summarized, “Chinese orphanages have many unwanted babies, mostly girls who have been abandoned by parents who

¹¹⁷ Terri Cullen, “Tax Break, Ingenuity Can Help When Planning to Adopt a Child,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB110719623221941284>.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Fitzsimons, “My First Lesson in Motherhood,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/13/fashion/13love.html>.

¹¹⁹ Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 56-57.

wanted boys.”¹²⁰ A year later, a *New York Times* article by Bruce Porter titled “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital” stated, “should a daughter arrive, it takes a strong-willed mother indeed to resist pressure from her husband, her in-laws and her parents to get rid of the girl in some fashion and clear the way for the birth of a boy.”¹²¹ In 2005, a *New York Times* article, “In Their Adopted Land, Discovering the Land of Their Birth,” declared, “all the children were adopted from Chinese orphanages, where large numbers of abandoned baby girls wind up, largely as a result of China's ‘one child’ policy and the Chinese preference for boys.”¹²² These oversimplifications portrayed Chinese daughters as completely unwanted, which was not always true.

As Johnson has explained, the presence of the One Child Policy and a general preference for boys did not mean that all birth parents were forced to abandon their daughters or that daughters were considered undesirable.¹²³ According to the study of 237 Chinese parents who gave up children in the 1980s and 1990s, by the late 1990s only a minority of rural areas had a true one child policy. In most rural areas, parents were allowed to have a second child if the first-born was a girl.¹²⁴ Therefore, many parents gave up a daughter only if she was the second girl so they could try again for a son without having to face the consequences of a third child.¹²⁵ At the same time, many other families chose to keep their second daughter and some even paid the fine to keep a third daughter. Thus, many girls who were given up were the third or

¹²⁰ Sheryl Wudunn, “Chinese Might Simplify Adoptions by Foreigners,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1992, 5, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/22/world/chinese-might-simplify-adoptions-by-foreigners.html>.

¹²¹ Bruce Porter, “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1993, 24, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/11/magazine/i-met-my-daughter-at-the-wuhan-foundling-hospital.html>.

¹²² Roberta Hershenson, “In Their Adopted Land, Discovering the Land of Their Birth,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/20/nyregion/in-person-in-their-adopted-land-discovering-the-land-of-their.html>.

¹²³ Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son*, xviii.

¹²⁴ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, “Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China,” 475.

¹²⁵ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, “Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China,” 477.

fourth-born daughters.¹²⁶ Additionally, the study found that parents rarely gave up their firstborn daughters, even if they had a son and had to pay a fine for the second child.¹²⁷ Most couples wanted at least one daughter and one son and felt their family was incomplete without both. Parents stated that they desired the emotional closeness and attentive care that daughters provide.¹²⁸ Therefore, these articles misrepresented birth families and their decisions to give up their daughters. Unlike what these articles suggested, Chinese girls were not readily abandoned by their birth parents.¹²⁹

Furthermore, only a few articles acknowledged the loss experienced by birth parents. In Porter's article, he discussed how to tell adoptees they were left by their birth parents: "When they ask, 'Why?' you don't want to say, 'Oh, because your parents were vicious, awful people,'" says Professor Johnson. 'That's not the legacy you want to leave your daughter. You want them to understand why their parents did what they did.'"¹³⁰ Porter then quoted an adoptive mother who explained what she will tell her adopted daughter:

"The mother of that baby went through a great risk to leave her so close to an official place, to make sure the baby would be found in time. To me, someone who would do that loved her baby very much, and wanted it to have a better life than she could give it. So that's what I'm going to tell Catherine, that it was a brave thing for that woman to do, and that that's the same kind of mother she must have had."¹³¹

A 2000 *New York Times* article discussed the children's book *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* by Rose Lewis. The book recounted the author's journey adopting a daughter from China. The article explained, "[the book] closes with the American mother crying for the lost Chinese mother: 'I wanted her to know that we would always remember her.' This is an important

¹²⁶ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," 475, 478.

¹²⁷ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," 478.

¹²⁸ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," 503.

¹²⁹ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," 478.

¹³⁰ Porter, "I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital."

¹³¹ Porter, "I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital."

sentiment that acknowledges the daughter's origins and the adoptive mother's debt. It also, however, reminds us of the losses running just underneath the surface of the story and how they seem to have no explanation."¹³² Similarly, A 2007 *Christianity Today* article titled "Blessed are the Barren" stated:

Adoption always begins with at least one tragedy and sometimes two. The parents who can have the child don't want or can't keep the child. The child always loses them. The parents who do want a child often can't have a child. The child they end up raising is not theirs alone. Their joy comes from someone else's grief. Adoptive parents are in the strange position of having to wish their own family not to be necessary, not dependent on someone else's destitution.¹³³

These three articles acknowledged the grief, sacrifice, and love Chinese birth parents experienced when giving up their daughter. Unfortunately, these are the only articles I read that discussed such loss. The majority of articles erased birth parents and focused only on adoption from the perspective of adoptive parents. Most articles promoted adoption from China as a simple win-win because they failed to recognize the pain experienced by birth parents who gave up their child and suggested that Chinese parents readily abandoned their daughters.

Adoption As a Biblical Mandate

Christian newspapers add another layer to the move away from intercountry adoption as a humanitarian response and the decentering of adoptees. Many articles in Christian newspapers centered on God. A 2003 *Today's Christian Woman* article titled "Surprised By Joy" featured an interview with Mary Beth Chapman. Chapman and her husband, Christian music star Steven Curtis Chapman, adopted three girls from China in the early 2000s. Chapman explained, "God

¹³² Heather Davis, "Children's Books; How I Found You," *New York Times*, November 19, 2000, 217, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/19/books/children-s-books-how-i-found-you.html>.

¹³³ Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Blessed Are the Barren," *Christianity Today*, September 2007, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2007/12/blessed-are-barren/>.

spoke to Steven during a church service in which some friends of ours dedicated several kids they adopted. Once he felt this was God's will for our family, Steven was completely on board [with adopting].”¹³⁴ Chapman then stated, “every morning when I get up and see Shaoey and Stevey Joy’s smiling faces [her adopted children], I’m reminded of the lengths to which God went to bring them into a loving Christian family.”¹³⁵ A year later, another article titled “God’s Family Picture” featured an interview with Mary Beth and Steven Chapman. Mary Beth explained, “after listening to God, I felt it [adopting a third child from China] was right for us.”¹³⁶ She later said, “I know God put Shaoey in our lives; God put Stevey Joy here, and God put Maria here. Whether it’s all peaches-and-cream or it’s miserable, this is God’s work.”¹³⁷ The interviewer also asked Steven how families can figure out if adoption is right for them. Steven replied, “if you’ve had the thought, there’s only one person who would put that in your mind—the Father to the fatherless. Just having the idea indicates God’s inviting you to something.”¹³⁸ The article ended by stating: “November is National Adoption Awareness Month. If you’ve ever had an inkling God is leading you to become an adoptive parent or to support a family trying to adopt, there’s no better time to find out what God has in store for you and your family.”¹³⁹

Similar articles are found in the *Baptist Press*. A 2000 article titled “‘Grandma Holt’ Was Pioneer in International Adoptions” explained, “together, the Holts sought a personal relationship with God. They also asked God to give them some work, some way of serving him. A few years later they got an answer.”¹⁴⁰ In a 2004 article titled “Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Says

¹³⁴ Camerin Courtney, “Surprised by Joy,” *Today’s Christian Woman*, September 2003, <https://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2003/september/1.40.html>.

¹³⁵ Camerin Courtney, “Surprised by Joy.”

¹³⁶ Carla Barnhill, “God’s Family Picture,” *Today’s Christian Woman*, December 2004, <https://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2004/december/godfamilypicture.html>.

¹³⁷ Barnhill, “God’s Family Picture.”

¹³⁸ Barnhill, “God’s Family Picture.”

¹³⁹ Barnhill, “God’s Family Picture.”

¹⁴⁰ Art Toalston, “‘Grandma Holt’ Was Pioneer in International Adoptions,” *Baptist Press*, August 15, 2000, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/grandma-holt-was-pioneer-in-international-adoptions/>.

Adopting Helped Him Appreciate Gospel” Chapman stated: “‘Until we adopted Shaohannah, I didn’t fully understand the depth of what Jesus has done for us. [...] God’s done amazing things in our family. Without a doubt, adoption has been the most profound experience in God.’”¹⁴¹ A 2005 article titled “The Joy of Adoption” argued, “we need to support those who are called to add to their family by adoption and ask God if we should adopt or be foster parents to a child without a family. [...] Ask God if you should open your heart and open your home to a child who needs a family.”¹⁴² These articles promoted adoption as a calling from God or as God’s will.

In addition, a few articles framed adoption as a scriptural or biblical concept. In *Today’s Christian Woman*, a 2000 article was titled “The International Adoption Option” and subtitled “Adopting a child from another country can be a powerful way to share God’s love. And it’s easier than you think.”¹⁴³ The article claimed, “adoption is a biblical concept that dates as far back as Moses, who was adopted by the pharaoh’s daughter.”¹⁴⁴ The article then explained that “for many Christians, adoption is a form of ministry. ‘I think caring for orphans is a call from Scripture,’ says Sue Eitemiller, whose adopted daughter, Joelle, is from China. ‘A desire to adopt reflects the heart of God.’”¹⁴⁵ “The Joy of Adoption” article explained, “not only is Scripture replete with commands for followers of Christ to care for the fatherless [...].”¹⁴⁶ The article “Blessed are the Barren” discussed many examples of adoption in the Bible. For example, the article highlighted, “hidden behind the covenant of sons for the childless, another story has

¹⁴¹ Shannon Baker, “Eye-opener: Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Says Adopting Helped Him Appreciate Gospel,” *Baptist Press*, December 29, 2004, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/eye-opener-singer-steven-curtis-chapman-says-adopting-helped-him-appreciate-gospel/>.

¹⁴² Dwayne Hastings, “First-Person: The Joy of Adoption,” *Baptist Press*, January 14, 2005, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/first-person-the-joy-of-adoption/>.

¹⁴³ Suzanne Woods Fisher, “The International Adoption Option,” *Today’s Christian Woman*, September 2000, <https://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2000/september/5.50.html>.

¹⁴⁴ Fisher, “The International Adoption Option.”

¹⁴⁵ Fisher, “The International Adoption Option.”

¹⁴⁶ Hastings, “First-Person: The Joy of Adoption.”

played itself out. It is the story of the three great prophets, Moses, Samuel, and Jesus—all adopted” and “Pharaoh’s daughter and Eli and Joseph are not the only adoptive parents of the Bible. So is the most praised ‘biological’ mother of all, Mary.”¹⁴⁷

Moreover, a few articles connected intercountry adoption to the theological concept that Christians are adopted children of God. “The International Adoption Option” quoted an adoptive mother: “Adopting OnNi has given us all an increased sense of purpose and meaning as we look at who she is and how she’s become part of our family [...] OnNi makes us so aware of our status as adopted children of God.”¹⁴⁸ In “Surprised by Joy,” Mary Beth Chapman described the moment she first held her oldest adopted daughter: “‘As a believer, I suddenly understood so clearly what it means to be adopted into God’s kingdom. From the first moment, I loved this child desperately [...] Even though I’d been a Christian since I was nine, it didn’t hit me until that day, *That’s how much God loves us.*’”¹⁴⁹ The article “Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Says Adopting Helped Him Appreciate Gospel” stated, “calling adoption the ‘visible gospel,’ a term he borrows from Christian author John Piper, Chapman said, ‘Adoption is the perfect picture of what God has done for each of us in making us His children through Christ.’”¹⁵⁰ Chapman also declared, “if God can adopt us into His family and call us His own, it is our hope that others consider following His example by adopting a ‘fatherless’ child into their families.”¹⁵¹ “The Joy of Adoption” article stated, “[...] but Romans 8 also informs us the Holy Spirit testifies with our spirit that we have been adopted into the family of God.”¹⁵²

These articles in Christian newspapers portrayed intercountry adoption as God’s will, as a biblical concept, and as connected to being an adopted child of God. Because of this, the articles

¹⁴⁷ Wilson, “Blessed Are the Barren.”

¹⁴⁸ Fisher, “The International Adoption Option.”

¹⁴⁹ Courtney, “Surprised by Joy.”

¹⁵⁰ Baker, “Eye-opener: Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Says Adopting Helped Him Appreciate Gospel”

¹⁵¹ Baker, “Eye-opener: Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Says Adopting Helped Him Appreciate Gospel.”

¹⁵² Hastings, “First-Person: The Joy of Adoption.”

centered God and took away responsibility from adoptive parents. These framings of transnational adoption ignored the fact that adoption was often rooted in poverty, instability and global inequalities. As Joyce has argued, “tens of thousands of evangelicals were sent overseas to adopt, not so they could start a family in the wake of infertility but instead in answer to a biblical mandate to care for orphans.”¹⁵³ The decision to adopt should start with the desire to provide a child with stability and love, not with a sign from God or a desire to be a good Christian. These articles encouraged intercountry adoption as a means to become closer to God or fulfill a Christian duty. Adoption was promoted as serving God, instead of serving a child in need.

Throughout these subsections, I have illustrated that by the late twentieth century, ideas and decisions regarding international adoption no longer centered on the particular conditions of a poor or unstable country that led to an increase of children in orphanages. Rather, intercountry adoption centered on the desires of and benefits to American adoptive parents. As Altstein and Simon have explained, in the 1940s, the West was interested in intercountry adoption as a solution to the problem of parentless children. But by the 1980s, interests were sparked primarily by the needs of childless couples.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Virgiel has stated, “if from the 1940s through the mid-1970s international adoption’s first wave was characterized by ‘finding families for children,’ there emerged beginning the mid-1970s a second wave of ‘finding children for families.’”¹⁵⁵ This shift was not only shown in newspaper articles through discussion of family formation and connections to God, but even more so through discussion of why China was the ideal country from which to adopt.

¹⁵³ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, xiii.

¹⁵⁴ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 13-14.

Why China?

The Process: Open and Easy

Many newspaper articles focused on the many ways adoption from China fit the needs and desires of American adoptive parents. The first way was related to the inclusivity and ease of China's adoption system. Unlike domestic adoption or adoption from other countries, the requirements of prospective adoptive parents were relatively open in China. Many articles highlighted how adoption from China could offer a solution to infertility or to often excluded groups, such as single people, older people, and gay couples, wanting to have children. In "I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital," Porter highlighted: "Far from disqualifying middle-aged parents, as other countries did, China actually preferred older couples. It also smiled on adoptions by single women, which, again, are difficult to accomplish anywhere else."¹⁵⁶ Similarly, A 1996 article in the *New York Times* titled "Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies" observed that many parents choose China because "they are open to older parents -- in fact, adoptive parents must be at least 35."¹⁵⁷ The 1998 article "With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families" claimed: "Thousands of infertile couples -- and a handful of single men and women wanting to be parents -- now had another avenue to finding a child."¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, restrictions continued to loosen between the late 1990s and early 2000s. In "Surprised By Joy," Chapman described that at the time of wanting to adopt from China, an adoptive family could only have a maximum of two biological children, while Chapman had three. But, her husband called the adoption agency headquarters and discovered that a month earlier the law changed. Now, an adoptive family could have up to four biological children.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Porter, "I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital."

¹⁵⁷ Felicia R. Lee, "Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies," *New York Times*, January 18, 1996, 49, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/18/garden/anxious-vigils-for-chinese-babies.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Ames, "With Adoptions From China."

¹⁵⁹ Courtney, "Surprised by Joy."

Several articles also highlighted that parents chose to adopt from China because the process was relatively shorter, easier, and more reliable. A 1995 *New York Times* article titled “Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S.” explained that “what also lures Americans is the relatively speedy 3- to 10-month adoption process, once papers are approved. It also helps that the adoptions are final, and that the new parents can return home, baby in tow, after only two to three weeks in China.”¹⁶⁰ “Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies” summarized, “Chinese adoptions are increasingly popular because they tend to be fast and efficient.”¹⁶¹ The 1997 article “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York” observed, “The Chinese system had come to seem more reliable than the systems in other countries and at home.”¹⁶² Another 2003 *Wall Street Journal* article by Opdyke titled “Why We Decided To Adopt From China” explained that one factor in his decision to adopt was the travel time: “China requires that at least one parent travel to the country for two weeks to complete the adoption. (Both Amy and I are going.) Some countries require a stay of as long as six weeks. Neither of us has that sort of vacation time available and it would consume a big chunk of the maternity and paternity leave we expect to take.”¹⁶³ A 2006 *Wall Street Journal* article titled “China Weighs Rules Restricting Adoptions” stated: “At the same time, the numbers of overseas-adoption requests have multiplied, in part because China's adoption process is centralized, predictable and low-cost.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly, a 2006 *New York Times* article titled “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners” explained, “the ease of

¹⁶⁰ Elaine Louie, “Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1995, 46, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/27/garden/now-chosen-chinese-girls-take-to-us.html>.

¹⁶¹ Lee, “Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies.”

¹⁶² Scott, “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York.”

¹⁶³ Jeff D. Opdyke, “Why We Decided To Adopt From China,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2003, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB106407481369705000>.

¹⁶⁴ Geoffrey A. Fowler, “China Weighs Rules Restricting Adoptions,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2006, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116652366139454396>.

China's earlier standards was probably one reason for the deluge in applications, agencies said. But China is also popular because its system is well organized and efficient."¹⁶⁵

The requirements and process to adopt from China were indeed inclusive and efficient until the late 2000s. As explained previously, in 1991, China established its first comprehensive intercountry adoption laws. With an estimated 100,000 to 160,000 new children filling up China's orphanages every year and putting a strain on the state welfare system, China opened up adoptions to foreign applicants.¹⁶⁶ China's intercountry adoption process was intentionally inclusive, centralized, systematic, and easy for adoptive parents because China wanted to quickly decrease the number of children in its overcrowded orphanages.¹⁶⁷ In addition, international adoption was a way for China's orphanages to receive much needed cash.¹⁶⁸ Demick has stated:

China's approach was perfectly tailored to meet the preferences of Western families [...] China's regulations favored older adoptive parents—at least thirty-five years old—which happened to fit the demographics of Western couples [...] At least initially, the Chinese law allowed adoptive single parents, which opened a pathway for gay couples to adopt, although they couldn't openly declare their sexual orientation."¹⁶⁹

China's policies were made to fit the demographics of Western prospective adoptive parents, which subsequently drew many American families towards China.

The Perfect Child: Healthy, Infant, and Female

Numerous articles further explained that adoptive parents were drawn to China because they could adopt healthy infant girls. Porter highlighted, "And only in China were you guaranteed a girl. That's the part I liked. In my experience, you had to work pretty hard to go

¹⁶⁵ Pam Belluck and Jim Yardley, "China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners," *New York Times*, December, 20, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/20/world/asia/20iht-adopt.3962223.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 63.

¹⁶⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 63.

¹⁶⁸ Riley, "American Adoptions of Chinese Girls," 96.

¹⁶⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 64-65.

wrong as the father of a daughter; and only with difficulty could I see myself 10 years hence chasing a boy around some Little League diamond.”¹⁷⁰ Avra Wing, an adoptive mother, explained in her 1997 *New York Times* article titled “Lives; Lost and Found” that “it occurred to me that without further stressing my middle-age body, I could have my baby. I could even insure [sic] that it would be a girl.”¹⁷¹

There are numerous reasons as to why adoptive parents may have preferred daughters over sons. Demick has claimed that “adopting families usually wanted girls, not boys, believing that they would assimilate more easily in new environments.”¹⁷² One study about preferences among adoptive parents found that girls may be favored because of enjoyment of female-typed activities, the desire among mothers for mutual identification and companionship, the belief that girls will be easier to raise, and the perception that girls are more neat, helpful, cute, affectionate, and relationship-oriented than boys.¹⁷³ The preference for girls may also be tied to racial stereotypes. American popular culture has promoted the idea of Asian females as exotic beauties and therefore adoptive parents were drawn towards the idea of a “china doll” daughter.¹⁷⁴ Dorow found that some prospective adoptive parents said they had become enchanted with their friends’ or neighbors’ adopted Chinese daughters.¹⁷⁵ Dorow also highlighted that adoption agencies consistently used photos of cute, dolled-up Asian girls in their advertising.¹⁷⁶

As for the desire to adopt healthy infants, Mary Beth Chapman recounted in “Surprised By Joy” that she originally had reservations about China because she wanted an infant, but at the

¹⁷⁰ Porter, “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital.”

¹⁷¹ Avra Wing, “Lives; Lost and Found,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1997, 100, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/14/magazine/lives-lost-and-found.html>.

¹⁷² Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 65.

¹⁷³ Goldberg, “Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Gay Preadoptive Parents’ Preferences About Child Gender,” 56-57.

¹⁷⁴ Riley, “American Adoptions of Chinese Girls,” 98.

¹⁷⁵ Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 48.

¹⁷⁶ Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 48.

time, the youngest children up for adoption were around fifteen months. But after a change in Chinese adoption rules, babies could be adopted at six to eight months, which solidified her decision to adopt from China.¹⁷⁷ A 1994 *New York Times* article titled “Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children” explained that there was increasing interest in Asian adoption because of the perception that Asian children are more likely to be healthy and therefore adoptive parents are able to avert the emotional and financial strains of raising a child with disabilities.¹⁷⁸ The article then quoted an adoptive mother: “‘You’re talking about a lot of things,’ she said, ‘from fetal alcohol syndrome to mothers with drug problems. We don’t have this problem overseas. Once you have a child who is older he’s got his own habits and way of doing things. That’s when you run into problems. They have a lot of baggage.’”¹⁷⁹ Another adoptive mother explained:

I didn’t want to adopt a baby with a handicap or a child who was older or sexually abused. We just wanted to have another baby, to start from scratch. I wanted one as young as possible. I really love the whole baby stage, the toddler stage, watching them progress. For me that is part of the whole package. Adopting a child at 13, it’s just not for me. I don’t have the desire or calling. [...] It’s very hard to deal with. It’s always easier to start with an infant. When they’re younger they grow up knowing everything you teach them, your habits, your home life.¹⁸⁰

In “Why We Decided To Adopt From China,” Opdyke explained, “we also felt the medical risks were somewhat lower if we adopt a child from China. [...] with China’s one-child policy, lots of otherwise stable, healthy Chinese couples grudgingly release their daughters to adoption so they can try to have a boy. The upshot is that lots of healthy baby girls are up for adoption in China.”¹⁸¹ A 2003 *New York Times* article titled “A Chinese Hotel, Full of Proud American Parents” highlighted the White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou, China where many adoptive parents

¹⁷⁷ Courtney, “Surprised by Joy.”

¹⁷⁸ Jeff Leibowitz, “Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1994, 299, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/11/nyregion/parents-look-to-asia-to-adopt-children.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Leibowitz, “Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children.”

¹⁸⁰ Leibowitz, “Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children.”

¹⁸¹ Opdyke, “Why We Decided To Adopt From China.”

stayed when they traveled to China to finalize the adoption.¹⁸² The article stated, “some of the parents here at the White Swan said they came to adopt in China because the children here are generally bright and healthy.”¹⁸³ Similarly, the 2006 “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners” article claimed China was the ideal country because “Chinese orphans are generally well cared for and have a good chance of being healthy when adopted.”¹⁸⁴

Most babies up for adoption in China were healthy infants. According to the study of 237 Chinese parents who gave up children in the 1980s and 1990s, 86% of those children were reportedly healthy and without any known disability at the time of being given up and the vast majority were given up within the first six months after birth.¹⁸⁵ The study explains that Chinese birth parents gave up their children during infancy because there was not yet a bond between child and parent and any intense disappointment over the gender of the child was still present. Additionally, if the pregnancy was known to local Family Planning officials, the birth parents could easily claim a stillbirth or miscarriage, rather than attempt to hide a growing child.¹⁸⁶ Chinese babies were also more likely to be healthier than other international adoptees because Chinese women tended not to drink or smoke and fetal alcohol syndrome was rare. China also did not have high rates of malnutrition nor obesity.¹⁸⁷ The study concluded, “the typical profile of an abandoned child is a healthy newborn girl.”¹⁸⁸ As will be discussed in the following subsection, healthy infants were harder to come by in American domestic adoption.

¹⁸² David Barboza, “A Chinese Hotel, Full of Proud American Parents,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/31/world/a-chinese-hotel-full-of-proud-american-parents.html>.

¹⁸³ Barboza, “A Chinese Hotel, Full of Proud American Parents.”

¹⁸⁴ Belluck and Yardley, “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners.”

¹⁸⁵ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, “Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China,” 475-477.

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, “Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China,” 477.

¹⁸⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 65.

¹⁸⁸ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, “Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China,” 477.

Domestic Adoptions: Too Risky, Too Black

Many articles explained why adoptive parents chose international adoption as opposed to domestic adoption. Porter stated:

Adopting newborns in the United States is also becoming problematic, especially for couples in their late 30's and 40's, which teen-age birth mothers -- now in the driver's seat when it comes to declaring who gets the child -- tend to regard as the old-fogy years. Because of the pill and legalized abortion, the supply of white infants since the 1960' and 70's has lagged woefully behind the estimated 200,000 sets of parents who want them, currently by a ratio of about 1 to 8. And depending on state law, birth mothers can have several months after the adoption to change their minds. The process of private adoption can also prove wearing: advertising for children in newspapers and working through local lawyers, maybe talking price with a pregnant 17-year-old calling from a pay phone.¹⁸⁹

In "Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children," an adoptive mother explained that she and her husband turned to China because of an increase in disabled and abused children up for domestic adoption. The mother stated, "We did not feel that we could deal with a handicapped child financially or emotionally [...] We're adopting a baby girl from China."¹⁹⁰ A 1995 article in the *New York Times* titled "Single and Following the Urge to Adopt" highlighted "singles adopting internationally don't have to advertise or look for a biological parent" and "they don't have to worry if a biological parent changes his mind. If that happens internationally a reputable agency or orphanage will assign you to the next available healthy child."¹⁹¹ This idea that international adoption is safer because birth parents are less likely to reclaim their child was expressed in other articles. A 1997 *New York Times* article titled "Chinese Schools Drawing Both the Young and Old" quoted an administrator for the organization Families With Children From China: "A lot of Americans have considered Chinese adoptions for a number of reasons; the most important being the security of knowing that it's not likely that a birth mother will show up out of the blue, years

¹⁸⁹ Porter, "I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital."

¹⁹⁰ Leibowitz, "Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children."

¹⁹¹ Nancy S. Hochman, "Single and Following the Urge to Adopt," *New York Times*, November 19, 1995, 268, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/19/nyregion/single-and-following-the-urge-to-adopt.html>.

down the line, demanding her child back.”¹⁹² “The International Adoption Option” explained, “overseas adoptions lack many of the legal hurdles that cause domestic adoptions to drag on for months, sometimes years. Domestic adoptions also carry the risk of the adoption being challenged by a birth parent or other family member. In most overseas adoptions, the adoption is final before you leave the country. Most of the children have been abandoned, thus there are no concerns of birth parent rights.”¹⁹³ “A Chinese Hotel, Full of Proud American Parents” observed, “there is also less of a risk that Chinese biological parents will come to the United States to press legal action to reclaim the child later, some parents said.”¹⁹⁴

These articles accurately reflected the international and domestic adoption landscapes in America in the 1990s and early 2000s. Compared to intercountry adoption, domestic adoption involved: an increase in private adoption; greater power and rights of birth parents who could decide the recipients of their newborn and the level of openness in the adoption; the possibility that birth mothers could change their mind before the adoption is finalized or want their child back later in life; and a less formalized, centralized, and efficient system.¹⁹⁵ In contrast, there was little chance a birth mother in China would take back her daughter. Besides the fact that the child would be living halfway across the world, if a Chinese birth mother wanted to find or reclaim her daughter, she would likely have to admit she abandoned her daughter, which was illegal, and had more children than she was allowed under the One Child Policy.¹⁹⁶ In addition to the factors described in these newspapers articles, Dorow has also found that many prospective parents believed they did not meet the requirements for domestic adoption in terms of age, health, sexual

¹⁹² Ramin P. Jaleshgari, “Chinese Schools Drawing Both the Young and Old,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1997, 218, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/30/nyregion/chinese-schools-drawing-both-the-young-and-old.html>.

¹⁹³ Suzanne Woods Fisher, “The International Adoption Option.”

¹⁹⁴ Barboza, “A Chinese Hotel, Full of Proud American Parents.”

¹⁹⁵ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 26; Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*, 50-55.

¹⁹⁶ Johnson, Huang, and Wang, “Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China,” 480.

orientation, or marital status and that some prospective parents disliked the increasingly “buy-a-baby” tone of domestic adoption that often involved competition for and solicitation of birth mothers.¹⁹⁷ For these reasons, prospective adoptive parents chose international adoption over domestic adoption.

A further factor was related to race. Until the 1994 Multiethnic and Interethnic Placement Acts, which eliminated race and ethnicity from consideration in domestic adoption placements, adoption agencies implemented the practice of “matching” which “assumes a child should *look like* and *be like* [their] parents.”¹⁹⁸ This meant that children were often placed in families of the same race or ethnicity. Policies frowned upon transracial adoptions, particularly Black children with white parents.¹⁹⁹ One prominent proponent of racial matching was the National Association of Black Social Workers. In 1972, the association stated that “only a black family can transmit the emotional and sensitive subtleties of perception and reaction essential for a black child’s survival in a racist society” and “we know there are numerous alternatives to the placement of black children with white families and challenge all agencies and organizations to commit themselves to the basic concept of black families for black children.”²⁰⁰

In addition to long-standing racial matching practices, attitudes and beliefs about Black children discouraged domestic adoption. Non-Black parents were concerned about being able to effectively socialize Black children.²⁰¹ There was also the stigmatization of Black birth mothers and Black babies. Black mothers were seen by white prospective adoptive parents as unreliable and unhealthy mothers on government welfare who gave birth to “crack babies.”²⁰² Black babies

¹⁹⁷ Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 53.

¹⁹⁸ Modell and Dambacher, “Making a ‘Real’ Family,” 4; Khanna and Killian, “‘We Didn’t Even Think about Adopting Domestically,’” 572.

¹⁹⁹ Modell and Dambacher, “Making a ‘Real’ Family,” 20.

²⁰⁰ “Position Statement on Trans-Racial Adoption,” National Association of Black Social Workers, The Adoption History Project, accessed April 11, 2026, <https://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/archive/NabswTRA.htm>.

²⁰¹ Khanna and Killian, “‘We Didn’t Even Think about Adopting Domestically,’” 571.

²⁰² Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 53.

were seen as tainted or “unsaveable” and more likely to suffer from drug dependency or fetal alcohol syndrome.²⁰³ In contrast, Asians were more often associated with positive stereotypes so prospective adoptive parents believed Asian babies were “saveable.”²⁰⁴ Asian babies were also perceived to have an easier time adjusting to a new family and be easier to raise than Black children.²⁰⁵ Dorow has argued, “Chinese children become flexibly rescuable, then, in contrast to a continuity of abject (black, older, special-needs) and unattainable (white, young, healthy) children at home. And just as important, they are seemingly less burdened by a volatile history of intractable black-white relations.”²⁰⁶ Dorow then explained that for white adoptive parents, Chinese birth mothers were seen as “unfortunate but healthy victims” who abandoned their daughters just because of their gender. By adopting abroad, adoptive parents believed they “would not have to worry about the poor prenatal care, drugs, and alcohol that characterized the birth mothers—implicitly black and/or poor—whose children were in the American public welfare system.”²⁰⁷ Additionally, Kim has explained that Asian babies were “construed as a safe choice for financially able Americans to adopt more ‘flexibly’ racialized children” who could more easily assimilate into white American culture.”²⁰⁸ Only one newspaper article addressed this aversion to Black children. A 1998 *New York Times* article titled “New Families Redraw Racial Boundaries” stated:

‘There’s a variety of reasons why people go to China for a child,’ said Randall Kennedy, a Harvard Law School professor who often writes about race. ‘Part of it is that they can close their eyes and imagine themselves the parents of a little Chinese girl, but not of Shaniqua with the kinky hair. But another part, which I’ve had white friends talk about,

²⁰³ Khanna and Killian, “‘We Didn’t Even Think about Adopting Domestically,’” 573.

²⁰⁴ Khanna and Killian, “‘We Didn’t Even Think about Adopting Domestically,’” 572.

²⁰⁵ Khanna and Killian, “‘We Didn’t Even Think about Adopting Domestically,’” 572.

²⁰⁶ Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 55.

²⁰⁷ Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 60.

²⁰⁸ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 27.

was the worry that given the debate over transracial adoption, they'd be looked at coldly by African-Americans if they adopted a black child.²⁰⁹

Therefore, white prospective adoptive parents did not want to adopt Black American children. Compounding this, there were fewer white children in America's foster care system or who were put up for adoption by white American birth mothers due to delayed childbearing, widespread use of contraceptives, the legalization of abortion, greater acceptability of keeping children born outside of marriage, and increased welfare support and social acceptability for single parents.²¹⁰ Thus, white adoptive parents turned to international adoption, particularly Chinese babies.

Chinese Babies: Needy and Beautiful, Strange and Familiar

A few newspaper articles included quotes by adoptive parents who merely stated that China felt right. The article "With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families" quoted an adoptive mother: "I had China in the back of my mind all along. My brother is married to an Asian woman, and I had been thinking, a Chinese baby would be wonderful."²¹¹ In "The International Adoption Option," another adoptive mother explained, "We were always intrigued by China [...] We knew we wanted to adopt when we married, and China was a pull to us. We always felt 'sure' about a Chinese baby."²¹² In "Surprised By Joy," Chapman stated, "I always pictured us with an Asian baby."²¹³

The pull towards China that these parents expressed likely involved gendered and racialized perceptions of Asians. As discussed previously, Asian girls were fetishized and

²⁰⁹ Tamar Lewin, "New Families Redraw Racial Boundaries," *New York Times*, October 27, 1998, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/27/us/new-families-redraw-racial-boundaries.htm>.

²¹⁰ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 26.

²¹¹ Ames, "With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families."

²¹² Fisher, "The International Adoption Option."

²¹³ Courtney, "Surprised by Joy."

considered exotic or enthralling.²¹⁴ Dorow has explained that Asian babies possessed the dual traits that adoptive parents desired: needy and beautiful.²¹⁵ Dorow also highlighted that Asianness in America was seen as both strange and familiar, as insider and outsider. White adoptive parents regarded Chinese culture as admirably different but accessible. Chinese culture was something worthy and able to be incorporated into their lives.²¹⁶ Many adoptive parents in Dorow's study also cited a direct connection to China because they had lived in or frequently visited China. Therefore, the "Asian difference" was flexible and adaptable and Chinese children "could be imagined as neither white nor black—interesting without being so different that they would not 'fit in.'"²¹⁷

Ultimately, the answer to "why China?" involved less restrictive requirements of adoptive parents, a relatively easy and reliable process, the guarantee of a healthy infant girl, the near impossibility that a Chinese birth mother would reclaim her child, and beliefs regarding domestic adoption and Asian and Black babies.

In this first chapter of my thesis, I have discussed how mainstream newspaper articles reflected and perpetuated adoptive-parent-centered practices within international and Chinese adoptions. By framing adoption as a means of family formation or as God's will, by misrepresenting or ignoring birth mothers, and by detailing the reasons why China was the ideal place from which to adopt, especially as opposed to domestic adoption, these articles decentered the child and the primary purpose of adoption: providing a child in need with permanence and love. Instead, these articles exhibited and promoted a way of thinking about adoption that

²¹⁴ Dorow, "Transnational Adoption," 48.

²¹⁵ Dorow, "Transnational Adoption," 37.

²¹⁶ Dorow, "Transnational Adoption," 43.

²¹⁷ Dorow, "Transnational Adoption," 41, 47.

emphasized what adoption could bring to the adoptive family and how adoption from China could fit the desires of adoptive parents. As Dorow has stated:

International adoptions have moved from a dominant discourse of rescue and humanitarian outreach for children who need families to one that just as emphatically endorses the needs and desires of prospective adoptive parents [...] Adoption professionals prefer this as a more “honest” acknowledgment that prospective adoptive parents adopt for themselves as much as for children. Parents’ expressed reasons for adopting from China are, in fact, dominated by how the characteristics of the program and of available children meet those of their own situation. Chinese children need rescue, and China is underdeveloped, but not so much as to threaten the desire for healthy, young infants whom parents can claim as their own.²¹⁸

Although prospective adoptive parents should consider which characteristics (i.e. race, gender, age, health needs) of a child they would best be able to support, and although adopting for themselves as much as for the child is not necessarily an evil act, these newspaper articles painted an overly-simplified and rosy picture of intercountry adoption. Most of these articles discussed and encouraged transnational adoption based on fulfillment for adoptive families and did not acknowledge the complexities, loss, racism, and selfishness involved in international and Chinese adoptions. Moreover, as will be discussed in the following chapter, the historical changes that led to the practice of “finding children for families” contributed to the commodification of adoption and objectification of adoptees, which can be seen in the language and content of these newspaper articles.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 56-57.

²¹⁹ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 13-14.

Chapter Two

Babies For Sale

Introduction

The historical shift of international adoption as a humanitarian response to a self-serving act has generated discourse among scholars linking adoption to imperialism and exploitation by the West. Vonk et al. has highlighted scholarship from the early 1990s that claimed transnational adoption is a result of exploitation of women and children and that “the country from which the children are adopted is being exploited, victimized through colonialism, and perhaps prevented from finding internal alternative solutions for homeless children.”²²⁰ Similarly, Kim has claimed that “global inequalities determine the scope of women’s reproductive choices and the distribution of labor, often serving to reproduce the stratifications on which those inequalities are based. The production of intimate kin relations out of stark economic and political asymmetries and the intensification of these inequalities in the global ‘free market’ constitute the mundane and troubling heart of transnational adoption.”²²¹ For example, the ability of women in the West to choose to adopt internationally is “based on constrained choices of underprivileged women in developing countries who often have few options but to surrender children for adoption.”²²² Thus, “critics view transnational adoption as encouraging exploitation of third world women’s labor in lieu of reforming structural inequalities that force women to give up children.”²²³ Altstein and Simon have noted that the perception of transnational adoption has changed “from being a win-win for both sending and receiving countries to being an imperialistic, colonial, and self-serving practice” where, since the 1970s, “children were the natural resource being exploited

²²⁰ Vonk, Simms, and Nackerud, “Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States,” 499, 502.

²²¹ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 27.

²²² Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 27.

²²³ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 27.

and out of which developing nations were being cheated.”²²⁴ Virgiel has argued that international adoption involves structural violence and social injustice:

An example of structural violence in adoption would be adoptive parents who possess the greater resources—money and housing, class, social perception of a supposedly superior family structure and other privileges—compared to families who, for lack of resources, are pressured to relinquish their children for adoption when they would otherwise choose to keep them [...] Thus, children who are adopted by loving, supportive families can still be said to have been victims of a form of structural violence, given that the possibility of their remaining to be raised within their natal families and ethnic heritage was denied them due to social injustice. [...] social injustice—the harm caused by the “lack” that an adoptee and the adoptee's birth family suffers—is a major driving force in the emigration of adoptees to the United States.²²⁵

Along with exploitation, scholars have claimed that intercountry adoption has become a market in which children are the commodity being sold from non-white developing countries to privileged Western nations. Virgiel then explained that such social injustice has resulted in “a hegemony of saving orphans from abroad, which has contributed to furthering an adoption market.”²²⁶ Vonk et al. has also highlighted that critics claim international adoption is a result of “supply and demand.”²²⁷ Riley has written that “China continues to be a source of commodities important to the west, whether they be tea or children; the ‘exotic’ nature of these commodities shipped from the east harks back to colonialism and the history of orientalism in the west.”²²⁸ Joyce has explained that because so many evangelical couples sought to adopt, they created a market fuelling the demand side of the adoption industry.²²⁹ In “The Baby Trade,” Kapstein has stated, “children are our most precious resource-and, like most precious resources, they are traded across borders. As more parents have adopted babies from abroad over the past decade,

²²⁴ Altstein and Simon, *Intercountry Adoption*, 2.

²²⁵ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 16-17.

²²⁶ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 17.

²²⁷ Vonk, Simms, and Nackerud, “Political and Personal Aspects of Intercountry Adoption of Chinese Children in the United States,” 499.

²²⁸ Riley, “American Adoptions of Chinese Girls,” 99.

²²⁹ Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, xiii.

the international market for children has boomed.”²³⁰ He later claimed that transnational adoption “now behaves much like a commodities market, with demand informing supply.”²³¹ In the following subsections, I examine how newspaper articles portrayed Chinese adoption as a trend, discussed costs related to adoption, and used commodifying language, which reflected and promoted the increasing marketization of international adoption.

“Country Du Jour” and a “Lucrative Industry”

As discussed previously, Riley has argued, “the attitude that foreign children are commodities for the consumption of richer western nations can be seen in some –although certainly not all– recent articles about adoptions from China.”²³² Many newspaper articles portrayed this marketization of adoption in various ways. A handful of articles framed the increase in adoptions from China as a “trend.” “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital” described China as the “country du jour” for international adoptions.²³³ Similarly, the article “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York” reported that the “Chinese-baby boom is just the latest wave of international adoptions.”²³⁴ The article “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions” declared, “In the 1990’s, it became a kind of social phenomenon to adopt a child from abroad. Last summer, Vanity Fair magazine quipped that a Chinese baby was the season’s hot accessory in the Hamptons.”²³⁵ Other articles used the term “popular” to describe adoption from China. As highlighted previously, a 1996 article explained, “Chinese adoptions are increasingly popular because they tend to be fast and efficient” and a 2006 article asserted

²³⁰ Kapstein, “The Baby Trade,” 115.

²³¹ Kapstein, “The Baby Trade,” 117.

²³² Riley, “American Adoptions of Chinese Girls,” 99.

²³³ Porter, “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital.”

²³⁴ Scott, “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York.”

²³⁵ Fein, “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions.”

“China is also popular because its system is well organized and efficient.”²³⁶ Another *New York Times* article titled “Adopted as Children, Chinese in America” discussed the experiences of Chinese girls adopted in the early 1990s who, in 2006, are in their teenage years. The article stated, “Molly and Qiu Meng represent the leading edge of this coming-of-age population, adopted just after the laws changed [referring to the 1991 laws allowing adoption by foreigners] and long before such placements became popular, even fashionable.”²³⁷

Terms such as “country du jour,” “Chinese-baby boom,” “social phenomenon,” “latest wave,” “the season’s hot accessory,” “popular,” and “fashionable” objectified China and Chinese babies. On the one hand, it was true that adoptions from Chinese to America increased exponentially: from 206 in 1992 to 7,906 in 2005.²³⁸ As Demick has explained, “by the mid-1990s, Chinese babies had become the international adoptee of choice. New Yorkers joked about seeing so many Chinese girls in the strollers of New York City that people did a double take if the mother also appeared to be Chinese.”²³⁹ On the other hand, these words and phrases dehumanized adoption. China was framed as the latest, stylish brand while Chinese babies were portrayed as the newest designer handbag. These articles discussed Chinese adoption as something that went “viral.” But adoption is a lifelong and deeply personal experience for everyone involved, not just a fad that comes and goes.

Furthermore, as discussed in two 1998 *New York Times* articles, people capitalized off of this “trend” by offering adoption-related goods and services. The “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions” article highlighted, “in stores, that book [*Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis] shares shelf space with an expanding list of

²³⁶ Lee, “Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies”; Belluck and Yardley, “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners.”

²³⁷ Lynette Clemetson, “Adopted as Children, Chinese in America,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/23/world/americas/23iht-adopt.html>.

²³⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 65.

²³⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 66.

adoption-related titles from large and niche publishers. Hallmark sells baby albums designed for adopted children. ‘I didn’t give you the gift of life, life gave me the gift of you,’ reads a poem in the beginning of one.²⁴⁰ A day later, an article titled “A Lucrative Industry Booms on the Side” detailed various adoption-related services offered to adoptees and adoptive parents:

As the adoption industry grows, in dollars if not in resulting adoptions, peripheral services have multiplied. Some are financial products: [...] MBNA Corporation, the credit card company, offers unsecured loans for adoptive parents at a current rate of 13.99 percent. The travel industry pitches packages to popular adoption destinations like China and Russia, and ‘adoption cruises’ with workshops and socializing. International adoption has also generated translation services, hospital ‘child evaluation’ programs and ‘heritage camps,’ especially for Asian-born children. It has sold books and videos by the hundreds of thousands. [...] The adoption.com site also has commercial advertisers. The "family mall" offers products like "My Forever Family," an audiotape of songs "about adoption and being adopted." There are advertisements for genetic testing services (DNA Diagnostics Center of Fairfield, Ohio; standard service, \$475) and child evaluation clinics at hospitals.²⁴¹

These goods and services were beneficial to adoptees and adoptive parents. For example, adoption cruises and heritage camps provided Chinese children and their adoptive parents the opportunity to connect with Chinese culture. Books, songs, and baby albums that celebrated adoption may have given adoptees a sense of belonging and helped them understand their adoption background. However, these goods and services also indicated the expanding marketization of adoption. Adoption-related costs reached beyond the legal process as companies capitalized off of the “trend” and turned various aspects of adoption into targeted and profitable businesses. Not only did newspaper articles objectify Chinese babies by using terms such as “country du jour” and “the season's hot accessory,” they also promoted the commodification of adoption and the idea of adoption as an industry.

²⁴⁰ Fein, “Secrecy and Stigma No Longer Clouding Adoptions.”

²⁴¹ Laura Mansnerus, “A Lucrative Industry Booms on the Side,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1998, 16, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/26/us/a-lucrative-industry-booms-on-the-side.html>.

“Price Tags”

In addition to framing adoption from China as a trend and highlighting peripheral services, numerous articles discussed the various costs involved in the adoption process. “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital” explained, “where the orphanages are concerned, adoption by Americans comes as a boon, since the fee, between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a child, could cover a month or two of care for every baby in the institution.”²⁴² A 1997 *New York Times* article titled “The Chinese Connection” about Chinese adoption lawyer Haihai Duan Thompson explained, “since China began allowing foreign adoptions in 1992 -- and charging a fee that now totals \$6,000 for each one -- the number of children adopted by American families and individuals has risen.”²⁴³

Other articles briefly stated the total cost of adopting from China. The article “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York” asserts, “the cost is about \$15,000.”²⁴⁴ Another article, “Chinese Schools Drawing Both the Young and Old,” claimed, “The average adoption from China costs \$15,000 to \$25,000.”²⁴⁵ A 1998 *New York Times* article about the marketization of adoption was titled “Market Puts Price Tags on the Priceless.” The article listed how much the agency Adoptions From the Heart charged for various international adoptions: “The cost of adopting from China is \$17,235.”²⁴⁶ A 1999 *New York Times* article titled “And Baby Makes Two” explained how a single adoptive mother raised the fund to adopt: “Ms. Alperson wrote ‘The International Adoption Handbook’ (Holt) to finance the \$13,000 that Sadie’s adoption

²⁴² Porter, “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital.”

²⁴³ Steve Strunsky, “The Chinese Connection,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/16/nyregion/the-chinese-connection.html>.

²⁴⁴ Scott, “Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York.”

²⁴⁵ Jaleshgari, “Chinese Schools Drawing Both the Young and Old.”

²⁴⁶ Laura Mansnerus, “Market Puts Price Tags on the Priceless,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1998, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/26/us/market-puts-price-tags-on-the-priceless.html>.

cost.”²⁴⁷ The 2003 article “Adoption’s New Geography” bluntly stated, “The cost: between \$15,000 and \$25,000.”²⁴⁸ The 2006 article “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners” explained, “Adoptions cost about \$15,000, according to agency Web sites.”²⁴⁹

Another handful of articles offered a few more details about the financial components involved in the adoption process. The article titled “Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S.” observed that “the cost averages \$15,000, including a \$3,000 donation to the Chinese orphanage.”²⁵⁰ The “Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies” article explained, “The cost including fees to agencies and orphanages, transportation and lodging is generally between \$15,000 and \$20,000, parents who have adopted say.”²⁵¹ A 1996 *New York Times* article titled “The New Parents Tour Children’s Orphanage” further broke down costs: “Every family had invested about \$17,000 in the process. That included the cost to travel to remote areas of China to pick up the child, \$5,500 for the U.S. adoption agency, various paperwork fees and a \$4,900 orphanage ‘donation,’ which must be turned over in mint-condition \$100 bills at the time of a notary hearing.”²⁵² The article “With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families” asserted, “(Costs generally total \$14,000 to \$18,000, including travel and accommodations).”²⁵³

In the *Wall Street Journal*, three articles focus primarily on the cost of adoption. “It’s Time for Another Child At the Opdyke Residence” discussed the financial decisions involved in adopting. Opdyke, who at the time was planning on adopting from China, explained:

In some ways, discussing the financial factors is easier when you adopt, since you are forced to focus on money from the moment you remit the application fee. Aside from the

²⁴⁷ Robert Lipsyte, “And Baby Makes Two,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1999, 187, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/17/nyregion/coping-and-baby-makes-two.html>.

²⁴⁸ Opdyke, “Adoption’s New Geography.”

²⁴⁹ Belluck and Yardley, “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners.”

²⁵⁰ Louie, “Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S..”

²⁵¹ Lee, “Anxious Vigils For Chinese Babies.”

²⁵² George Ridge, “The New Parents Tour Children’s Orphanage,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/05/news/the-new-parents-tour-childrens-orphanage.html>.

²⁵³ Ames, “With Adoptions From China, New Parents Build Families.”

everyday, ongoing costs of raising a child, we estimate that adopting a baby girl from China will cost \$20,000 for all the various fees and travel expenses -- and for all I know that could be conservative. Whatever the case, the upfront costs require us to make financial adjustments before the fact.²⁵⁴

Then in “Why We Decided To Adopt From China,” Opdyke explained, “adopting overseas isn't necessarily that much cheaper than adopting at home. There are all sorts of costs -- everything from travel to ‘donations’ for the local orphanage. Some are small payments, like the \$92 we recently sent to the Chinese Consulate; some are substantially larger, such as the \$1,250 check to complete a home study of our family. It all adds up quickly.” Opdyke also stated, “though it was a minor point, I did compare costs among countries and noted that Chinese adoptions are roughly in the middle of the pack. I figure it will cost a total of about \$20,000 -- including all the fees, travel, etc.”²⁵⁵ Later in the article, Opdyke discussed possible medical costs:

“In many developing nations currently popular on the international-adoption circuit, adoptable kids often are the result of unwanted or accidental pregnancies, some of which stem from substance abuse. Birth moms typically continue their habits while pregnant and never receive prenatal care. Many of the kids receive no postnatal care and suffer prolonged neglect. As I mentioned earlier, the result is latent and costly medical and psychological issues that again sneak up on you and the child -- and your wallet.”²⁵⁶

The 2005 article “Tax Break, Ingenuity Can Help When Planning to Adopt a Child” highlighted various ways prospective adoptive parents could finance an adoption, including a tax credit, reimbursement from employers, and crowd fundraising. The article explained that for one couple “the only thing standing in their way was the cost. The then-struggling artists faced what they felt was an impossible task of raising the estimated \$20,000 in adoption expenses.”²⁵⁷

A couple other articles also mentioned that prospective adoptive parents could get aid from their employers to finance an adoption. A 1999 *New York Times* article titled “Nerds In

²⁵⁴ Opdyke, “It's Time for Another Child At the Opdyke Residence.”

²⁵⁵ Opdyke, “Why We Decided To Adopt From China.”

²⁵⁶ Opdyke, “Why We Decided To Adopt From China.”

²⁵⁷ Cullen, “Tax Break, Ingenuity Can Help When Planning to Adopt a Child.”

Gilded Cubicles” highlighted that “[Sun Microsystems] actively helps people interested in adoption. With a \$2,500 adoption stipend, Vicky Yee, Sun’s corporate diversity manager, went to Guangzhou, China, to adopt her daughter.”²⁵⁸ A 2006 *New York Times* article titled “Breaking the Biology Barrier” similarly claimed, “With more than 100,000 Americans adopting each year, adoption benefits are becoming a hot new perk in the panoply of workplace benefits.”²⁵⁹ Offering adoption benefits was increasingly popular among employers. According to the National Council for Adoption (NCFA), a 2015 survey by the human capital consulting firm, Aon Hewitt, found that in 1990, only 12% of the surveyed businesses offered adoption benefits. But by 2015, this number rose to 56%.²⁶⁰ The survey also found that equity for adoptive parents, a family-friendly image, and a competitive work-life benefits package were among the top reasons why employers instituted adoption benefits.²⁶¹

The constant discussion of costs had both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, these articles served as a way to educate prospective adoptive families about the cost of adopting from China. Adopting internationally is a substantial financial undertaking and prospective adoptive families should consider if they have the means to complete the intercountry adoption process and raise an adoptee. On the negative side, these articles also reflected the expanding marketization of adoption and promoted the framing of adoption as a transaction. By stating costs and highlighting ways in which prospective adoptive parents could finance the adoption, these articles also perpetuated adoption as a means of family formation and as an act that starts with the needs of adoptive parents, as opposed to a humanitarian response

²⁵⁸ Gary Andrew Poole, “Nerds In Gilded Cubicles,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1999, 92, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/04/technology/nerds-in-gilded-cubicles.html>.

²⁵⁹ Lynette Clemetson, “Breaking the Biology Barrier,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/31/fashion/breaking-the-biology-barrier.html>.

²⁶⁰ Rita Soronen, “Adoption Friendly Benefits in the Workplace: It is the Right Thing to Do,” National Council for Adoption, July 1, 2018, <https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-121/>.

²⁶¹ Soronen, “Adoption Friendly Benefits in the Workplace: It is the Right Thing to Do.”

centered on the needs of children. In addition, some articles, such as Opdyke's article that stated Chinese adoptions are "roughly in the middle of the pack," portrayed the process of deciding from which country to adopt as like shopping for the best deal.²⁶²

"China's Newest Export"

Another way in which these newspaper articles reflected and promoted the marketization of adoption was by using specific terms often associated with global trade. Porter's "I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital" was first published in the *Times Magazine* but was titled "China's Market in Orphan Girls." Because of backlash, the title was changed when the article was published in the *New York Times* newspaper.²⁶³ In the original title, Porter explicitly called the adoption of Chinese babies a "market." A 1999 *Wall Street Journal* article titled "Back Home in a Chinese Orphanage" used the term "shipped abroad" to describe intercountry adoption: "a Chinese sociology professor was once asked what his countrymen thought of the girls shipped abroad. His answer: 'It's as though they've been set adrift in a jar full of sugar.'"²⁶⁴ In 2003, Kapstein published a *New York Times* article titled "International Adoptions: Tough Love for the Baby Trade" that was adapted from his longer journal article "The Baby Trade."²⁶⁵ In this title, Kapstein equated international adoption to the trading of babies.

A few articles used the words "source" and "provider," which framed China as a supplier of goods. Porter explained, "China's arrival as the country du jour on the international adoption

²⁶² Opdyke, "Why We Decided To Adopt From China."

²⁶³ "Editor's Note," *New York Times*, April 11, 1993, 2,
<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/11/nyregion/editors-note-207093>.

²⁶⁴ Lisa Gubernick, "Back Home in a Chinese Orphanage," *New York Times*, August 26, 1999,
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB935630278734241879?>

²⁶⁵ Ethan B. Kapstein, "International Adoptions: Tough Love for the Baby Trade," *New York Times*, November 29, 2003,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/29/opinion/IHT-international-adoptions-tough-love-for-the-baby-trade.html>.

scene comes at a time when sources of newborn babies are drying up.”²⁶⁶ In the article “Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children,” the caption for a photo read, “Since 1995, China has been the top provider of babies for adoption by Americans.”²⁶⁷ A 2006 *New York Times* article titled “In an Adoption Hub, China’s New Rules Stir Dismay” explained, “China, long the world’s leading source of children for foreign adoptions, says it is enacting the rules because it is inundated with requests.”²⁶⁸ A few other articles framed Chinese babies as goods by using the terms “export” or “resource.” Porter’s article stated in bold, “unwanted and abandoned, baby girls have become the newest Chinese export.”²⁶⁹ Similarly, “The Chinese Connection” observed “one of China’s fastest-growing exports to the United States is children for adoption.”²⁷⁰ Kapstein stated, “Children are our most precious resource – and like most precious resources, they are traded across borders.”²⁷¹ Furthermore, the article “Adoption’s New Geography” portrayed adoptive parents as consumers: “but comparing one agency’s fees against another is a consumer’s nightmare.”²⁷²

Another set of articles discussed Chinese adoption as a business dependent on typical market forces and used the words “available,” “supply,” and “demand.” The 1995 article “Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S.” claimed, “it would not be overestimating to say there are tens of thousands of babies available for adoption.”²⁷³ The 2006 article “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners” stated, “the restrictions are in response to an enormous spike in applications by foreigners, which has far exceeded the number of available babies.”²⁷⁴

²⁶⁶ Porter, “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital.”

²⁶⁷ Leibowitz, “Parents Look to Asia To Adopt Children.”

²⁶⁸ Andy Newman and Rebecca Cathcart, “In an Adoption Hub, China’s New Rules Stir Dismay,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/nyregion/24adopt.html>.

²⁶⁹ Porter, “I Met My Daughter at the Wuhan Foundling Hospital.”

²⁷⁰ Strunsky, “The Chinese Connection.”

²⁷¹ Kapstein, “International Adoptions.”

²⁷² Opdyke, “Adoption's New Geography.”

²⁷³ Louie, “Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S..”

²⁷⁴ Belluck and Yardley, “China Plans to Tighten Rules on Adoptions by Foreigners.”

Similarly, the article “China Weighs Rules Restricting Adoptions” claimed, “China says its rationale for a change in rules is simply that it cannot meet the demand of prospective families.”²⁷⁵ The 2006 article “In an Adoption Hub, China’s New Rules Stir Dismay” observed, “many parents dismissed the Chinese government’s explanation that not enough orphans were available to meet the demand.”²⁷⁶ A 2007 *New York Times* op-ed titled “The Mystery of the Chinese Baby Shortage” explained, “and yet, just over a month ago, this newspaper reported that China had prepared strict new criteria for foreign adoption applications because the country claimed it lacked ‘available’ babies to meet the ‘spike’ in demand. [...] how is one to know whether the decrease in adoptions reflects a lack of supply or a lack of demand?”²⁷⁷

“Market,” “shipped abroad,” “trade,” “source,” “provider,” “export,” “resource,” “consumer,” “available,” “supply,” and “demand” are all terms often used in relation to global commerce. By using these terms, newspaper articles framed adoption as a market and promoted the commodification of babies. This objectified children and dehumanized adoption. Chinese babies were treated like inventory. Adoption was treated like a business transaction.

Only one article directly acknowledged the increasing marketization of transnational adoption and argued that such a phenomenon may be problematic. The 1998 *New York Times* article titled “Market Puts Price Tags on the Priceless” highlighted the competition and economics involved in international adoption. The article undoubtedly framed adoption as a market and objectified adoptees. The beginning of the article explained, “this is the essence of demand – unhappily infertile couples – competing for a smaller and smaller supply of white American-born infants.”²⁷⁸ Following subsections were titled “The Product: Not Enough Babies

²⁷⁵ Fowler, “China Weighs Rules Restricting Adoptions.”

²⁷⁶ Newman and Cathcart, “In an Adoption Hub, China’s New Rules Stir Dismay.”

²⁷⁷ Beth Nonte Russell, “The Mystery of the Chinese Baby Shortage,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/23/opinion/23russell.html>.

²⁷⁸ Mansnerus, “Market Puts Price Tags on the Priceless.”

to Meet the Demand” and “The Imports: Abroad, an Abundant Supply for Adoption.”²⁷⁹

However, the article ended by explaining, “there are some real tensions now between the child focus and the consumer orientation, the human services model and the market forces,’ she said. ‘Some families start looking for the cheapest, the fastest, the “we promise you a child that meets your quote-unquote specifications in so many months.” Some of us who have been in the field for 20 years get worried about this shift.’”²⁸⁰

In Chapter Two, I have examined how mainstream newspaper articles used particular phrases, such as “this season’s hot accessory” and “fashionable,” that presented intercountry adoption as a “trend.” Because of the “trend,” companies turned various aspects of adoption into profitable goods and services. I have also explored how articles discussed costs and ways of financing the adoption process, which centered the needs of adoptive families. In addition, I have highlighted the use of specific language, such as “export,” “supply,” and “demand,” that portrayed adoption as a business in the global economy running on typical market forces. These various aspects of newspaper articles reflected and promoted the increasing marketization of adoption and the framing of children as commodities. These articles also underscored that the scope of intercountry adoption expanded way beyond humanitarian aid to become an entire economic industry. By conceptualizing transnational adoption as a market, these newspaper articles objectified Chinese babies and dehumanized adoption. International adoption became a transaction, rather than a deeply personal and emotional, lifelong experience.

²⁷⁹ Mansnerus, “Market Puts Price Tags on the Priceless.”

²⁸⁰ Mansnerus, “Market Puts Price Tags on the Priceless.”

Chapter Three

The Fallout

In the early-to-mid twentieth century, intercountry adoption to America was an adoptee-centered humanitarian response to war and poverty. But by the mid-to-late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, transnational adoption became an adoptive-family-centered means of family formation in which prospective parents could pick and choose the traits of their child. China became the most desirable country from which to adopt because of conceptions about race and the large number of healthy infant girls up for adoption. This historical shift contributed to the perpetuation of imperialist dynamics between wealthy Western countries and poorer nations primarily in Asia, Africa, and South America. It also contributed to the increasing marketization of adoption and commodification of Chinese babies. Numerous articles in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christianity Today*, *Today's Christian Woman*, and the *Baptist Press* reflected and promoted these changes and attitudes surrounding intercountry adoption.

The consequences of adoptive-family-centered practices and the commodification of international adoption included the over-simplification and dehumanization of adoption and adoptees. The intercountry adoption process became like shopping for a child. Chinese babies became objects that fulfilled a checklist of preferences often rooted in racism and self-serving desires. The One Child Policy and grieving birth parents who were forced to give up their daughters were forgotten. The mental and physical challenges faced by adoptees and their life-long struggle with identity were erased. When intercountry adoption turned into a supply and demand system centered more heavily on demand, the struggle, inequality, heartbreak, and loss involved in adoption, especially for birth parents and adoptees, faded to the background.

But these are not the only consequences of the proliferation and marketization of transnational adoption. There are darker, more tangible ramifications.

Trafficking

The most troubling consequence is corruption, fraud and trafficking within intercountry adoption programs. As discussed in my introduction, numerous scholars have investigated and written about this topic. A few of these articles have argued that one cause of this phenomenon is the myth of a world orphan crisis.²⁸¹ In 2006, UNICEF reported an estimated 132 million orphans, but this estimate includes children who have lost one or both parents.²⁸² Only about thirteen million children have lost both parents and many of these children live with extended family.²⁸³ In addition, most orphans are not the healthy infants that Western families desire. Many face mental and physical health challenges and, according to UNICEF, 95% of orphans are older than five.²⁸⁴ This myth fuels international adoption and leads people to believe there are many more desirable, adoptable children than in reality.²⁸⁵ Because of this, “many international adoption agencies work not to find homes for needy children but to find children for Western homes.”²⁸⁶ Moreover, “demand” eventually outstrips “supply,” which turns people towards coercion and trafficking to “keep up with demand” and continue receiving payments.²⁸⁷

Oftentimes once word spreads that healthy babies are up for adoption in a particular country, more prospective parents sign up than the poor or unstable country can effectively manage.²⁸⁸ Governments become unable to carefully background check every child, oversee

²⁸¹ Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 18-19.

²⁸² Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 61.

²⁸³ Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 61.

²⁸⁴ Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 59.

²⁸⁵ Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 61-62,

²⁸⁶ Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 60.

²⁸⁷ Graff, “The Lie We Love,” 64; Graff, “They Steal Babies, Don’t They?”

²⁸⁸ Graff, “They Steal Babies, Don’t They?”

every adoption, or watch for children being illegally taken out of the country.²⁸⁹ It also becomes easy for actors to intentionally or unintentionally fail to ensure the orphanhood of a child or completely fabricate a child's history.²⁹⁰ In many cases, Western adoption agencies contract with facilitators, such as orphanage directors or freelancers, and pay per-child fees for each child adopted.²⁹¹ These facilitators then subcontract with "child finders" who are often paid sums way above local wages, giving individuals significant financial incentive to find or "create" adoptable babies at any cost.²⁹² To meet "demand," traffickers will often target vulnerable people, such as young, unmarried mothers or impoverished, uneducated villagers who are more easily persuaded to give up their child or more likely to lack the resources to locate a kidnapped child.²⁹³

In China, evidence of adoption-related corruption, fraud, and trafficking surfaced in the early 2000s. One contributing factor was a decrease in Chinese babies up for adoption. As previously discussed newspaper articles explain, in December 2006, China tightened the requirements of prospective adoptive parents to limit the number of adoption requests.²⁹⁴ China's adoption system was inundated and there were far more applicants than children up for adoption.²⁹⁵ Many Americans did not believe these claims.²⁹⁶ However, by the 2000s, numerous changes in China led to fewer children in orphanages while the desire for Chinese babies increased substantially in America because of popular press and adoption agency literature.²⁹⁷

Into the twenty-first century, China became increasingly urbanized and more people preferred smaller families.²⁹⁸ Rural income had risen which allowed more families to pay fines

²⁸⁹ Graff, "They Steal Babies, Don't They?"

²⁹⁰ Graff, "The Lie We Love," 63.

²⁹¹ Graff, "The Lie We Love," 64.

²⁹² Graff, "The Lie We Love," 64.

²⁹³ Graff, "The Lie We Love, 63; Graff, "They Steal Babies, Don't They?"

²⁹⁴ Fowler, "China Weighs Rules Restricting Adoptions."

²⁹⁵ Fowler, "China Weighs Rules Restricting Adoptions."

²⁹⁶ Newman and Cathcart, "In an Adoption Hub, China's New Rules Stir Dismay."

²⁹⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 67; Stuy, "Open Secret," 361.

²⁹⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 67

for over-quota children.²⁹⁹ Ultrasounds became easier to obtain so sex selective abortion replaced sex selective abandonment, although both remained illegal.³⁰⁰ In addition, China's leaders realized that the scarcity of women would create a bachelor society and future labor shortages, so they eased enforcement of the One Child Policy in many parts of the country and it became easier for families to keep their daughters.³⁰¹ In 2004, the Chinese government allowed one child in cities, two children in rural areas, and three children in ethnic minority regions.³⁰² They also implemented a "Girl Care Project" to encourage families to keep their daughters.³⁰³ The government provided incentives, such as preferential treatment in housing, healthcare, and employment and other financial bonuses, to families with only daughters.³⁰⁴ The government also cracked down on sex selective abortions, female infanticide, and abandonment.³⁰⁵ In some provinces, school fees for girls were reduced or eliminated and propaganda banners advocated that a preference for boys was outdated.³⁰⁶ With a lack of baby girls naturally ending up in orphanages, people turned to nefarious means to keep the babies and money flowing.

Instances of adoption-related deception, coercion, fraud, kidnapping, trafficking, and baby-buying in China are plentiful. Sometimes officials used deception to convince families to give up their child. Local government officials approached poor, rural birth families with the chance to send their child to a city orphanage, usually for education.³⁰⁷ In some cases, after the children were sent to the city, the officials told the families that their children had the opportunity to be adopted and educated in the West.³⁰⁸ The families were then convinced or pressured to sign

²⁹⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 67

³⁰⁰ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 67; Stuy, "Open Secret," 356-357.

³⁰¹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 67.

³⁰² Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," 266.

³⁰³ Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," 266-267.

³⁰⁴ Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," 267.

³⁰⁵ Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," 267.

³⁰⁶ Tiefenbrun, "Human Trafficking in China," 267.

³⁰⁷ Stuy, "Open Secret," 398.

³⁰⁸ Stuy, "Open Secret," 398.

relinquishment papers allowing the adoptions to be completed.³⁰⁹ In other cases, birth families were never notified that their children were adopted out of the country.³¹⁰ One specific example, documented by Stuy in his blog on Research-China.Org, involved a family who was deceived by a local Civil Affairs director.³¹¹ The director told the family that the orphanage placed children with Western families who provided a good education and ensured a happy and prosperous life for the child. The director stated to the birth father, “also, once she is grown, she will return to China to find you, and will then take care of you in your old age.” The family eagerly sent their daughter to be adopted. It was not until Stuy spoke to the birth family years later that they realized the adoption was not temporary and that they had been deceived.³¹²

There are also many stories of Family Planning officials who confiscated over-quota children and sold them to orphanages.³¹³ By taking away children, officials were able to satisfy the demands of the central government to limit births while helping orphanages maintain a flow of babies.³¹⁴ As Demick has explained, “officials were strategic in picking their victims. The families targeted all had a vulnerability that could be exploited. The parents were often migrants who had left their children with illiterate grandparents; they were exceptionally poor. They lived deep in the mountains, out of touch with others and less likely to make a fuss.”³¹⁵ If people refused to give up their child or fought to get their child back, they were beaten or jailed.³¹⁶

³⁰⁹ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 398.

³¹⁰ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 398.

³¹¹ Brian Stuy, “Promises, Promises!” The Rest of the Story, Research-China.Org, November 20, 2009, <https://research-china-trs12.blogspot.com/2009/11/promises-promises.html>.

³¹² Stuy, “Promises, Promises!”

³¹³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 50.

³¹⁴ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 387.

³¹⁵ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 52.

³¹⁶ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 53.

In some cases, Family Planning officials confiscated children by deceiving parents. For example, one day when Shuiying Yang's husband was working in town and her other children were at school, Family Planning officials arrived at her doorstep and seized her baby.³¹⁷ They informed her that they were legally allowed to confiscate babies in excess of the quota and that she was not allowed to protest. Yang believed them. "I'm illiterate. I didn't know any better" Yang later said in an interview with Demick.³¹⁸ When her husband returned, he was so distraught that he tried to kill himself.³¹⁹ Other cases involved families who were told by Family Planning officials that if they sign a document saying the child was found abandoned, the family could then domestically adopt their child back. But when the family tried to adopt, they were told they did not meet the qualifications to do so.³²⁰

Another method used by Family Planning officials was imposing huge fines. For example, Libing Yang's father (no relation to Shuiying Yang) was watching his granddaughter when Family Planning officials surrounded the house and confiscated Yang's daughter. When Yang raced home and demanded his daughter's return, Family Planning officials told him he could have his daughter back for 8,000 yuan, more than two years' income. A few days later, the ransom was increased to 20,000 yuan. Then, Family Planning officials notified Yang that his daughter was sent to an orphanage and he could no longer get her back, no matter how much money he could pay. Later investigations found that while officials were negotiating with Yang, the orphanage was simultaneously preparing paperwork for his daughter's adoption.³²¹

At other times, Family Planning officials used brute force. For instance, when Xiuhua was home with her niece who was an over-quota child, a group of Family Planning officials burst

³¹⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 97.

³¹⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 97.

³¹⁹ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 97-98.

³²⁰ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 57.

³²¹ Stuy, "Open Secret," 388-389.

through the door.³²² Two men held Xiuhua's arms behind her back and two others held her legs. Another man swept her screaming niece into his arms. The officials quickly drove off as Xiuhua and other neighbors chased after the car.³²³

Beyond the work of Family Planning officials, sometimes children were snatched off the street. For example, in 2003 a man walked out of his house without realizing his baby daughter followed him.³²⁴ When he returned and realized she was missing, he and his wife put up posters and he asked to search the local orphanage but was refused. After a few weeks, his wife snuck into the orphanage under the pretext of volunteering and recognized her daughter. Fortunately, they were able to get their daughter back just in time. The orphanage had already started the international adoption paperwork.³²⁵

Stuy has stated in "Open Secret" that his research into China's orphanages shows that baby-buying programs were extremely common. He claimed, "collectively, orphanages that either have confirmed baby-buying programs as of 2012, or currently display characteristics that make baby-buying nearly certain, provide 63% of all the children from Chongqing, 90% of those from Jiangxi, 80% of those from Hunan, 63% from Guangxi, and 57% from Guangdong."³²⁶ In one blog post, Stuy explained that Changde Orphanage in Hunan province openly admitted to international reporters that the orphanage bought babies.³²⁷ Stuy also described a conversation between his friend and Ms. Jie, the gatekeeper of Changde Orphanage.³²⁸ Ms. Jie asked his friend if she was from the area and knew of anyone that had babies they did not want. Ms. Jie said that the orphanage would pay 2,500 yuan plus any travel expenses per child brought to the

³²² Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 46.

³²³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 46.

³²⁴ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 74.

³²⁵ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 74.

³²⁶ Stuy, "Open Secret," 385-386.

³²⁷ Brian Stuy, "The CCAA's Tacit Approval of Trafficking," *The Rest of the Story*, Research-China.Org, September 3, 2009, <https://research-china-trs12.blogspot.com/2009/09/the-ccaa-tacit-approval-of-trafficking.html>.

³²⁸ Stuy, "The CCAA's Tacit Approval of Trafficking."

orphanage.³²⁹ In a different blog post, Stuy argued that the China Center of Adoption Affairs maintains a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and rarely punishes perpetrators of baby trafficking.³³⁰ For example, in a 2003 trial of three traffickers, the defense lawyers asserted that no one was harmed and that the traffickers had done a good deed for saving the babies’ lives. The judge accepted the rationale and the traffickers were acquitted.³³¹ In 2006, the CCAA held a conference of orphanage directors to address scandals of baby trafficking. During the conference, directors were told that they would be protected if they paid no more than 1,000 yuan for a baby.³³²

One of the most widely publicized stories of trafficking and baby-buying was discovered in 2005.³³³ After stopping a bus in the city of Hengyang in Hunan province, police found boxes filled with sixteen babies. The suspects were taken into custody and charged with human trafficking. Over the next few weeks, police arrested more suspects. Twenty-seven people were arrested, many with the surname Duan. In the following months, the Duan family trafficking ring was uncovered.³³⁴ Since the early 1990s, members of the family had solicited and sold unwanted or abandoned babies.³³⁵ During the 2006 trial, prosecutors presented evidence of 300 babies sold to six orphanages in Hunan, but the Duans later told journalists that they sold thousands of babies to orphanages all over China.³³⁶

One of the major incentives that drove continuous baby-buying by orphanages was the mandatory cash donation of \$3,000-\$5,000 from each adoptive family.³³⁷ Orphanages genuinely

³²⁹ Stuy, “The CCAA's Tacit Approval of Trafficking.”

³³⁰ Brian Stuy, ““If you don’t pay any money, how will you find any babies?”” *The Rest of the Story*, Research-China.Org, September 30, 2009, <https://research-china-trs12.blogspot.com/2009/09/you-dont-pay-any-money-how-will-you.html>.

³³¹ Stuy, ““If you don’t pay any money, how will you find any babies?””

³³² Stuy, ““If you don’t pay any money, how will you find any babies?””

³³³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 62.

³³⁴ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 62.

³³⁵ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 69.

³³⁶ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 72.

³³⁷ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 363.

needed the money, especially because funding for orphanages was part of a larger social welfare system that also included caring for the disabled and elderly.³³⁸ In most cases, the cash was used to fix orphanage infrastructure, improve staffing, or provide higher quality medical and developmental care.³³⁹ But in some cases, orphanage directors pocketed the money. For example, one director bought himself a luxury car.³⁴⁰ Another bought high-end real estate.³⁴¹ In addition, orphanage directors were also incentivized to keep adoptions flowing because of ongoing donations from adoptive families, opportunities to travel to other countries, and official recognition in China.³⁴²

Another important aspect of fraud and baby-buying was finding ads. These ads, published in local newspapers, briefly described the children “found abandoned” and stated the finding dates and locations. They also stated that if the children were not claimed within sixty days, they would be classified as orphans.³⁴³ Finding ads were implemented to comply with international law, which stated that countries had to search for birth families before putting children up for intercountry adoption.³⁴⁴ These ads were problematic for numerous reasons. First, many villagers were illiterate and the newspapers including these ads were rarely sold in rural villages.³⁴⁵ Second, for those who were literate and got a hold of the newspapers, many would not have recognized references to their own child because orphanages altered the circumstances under which children were found and referred to the children using the names given by the orphanage.³⁴⁶ Third, only beginning in 2002 did ads feature pictures of the children.³⁴⁷ Stuy did

³³⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 68.

³³⁹ Johnson, “Politics of International and Domestic Adoption in China,” 388.

³⁴⁰ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 363.

³⁴¹ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 364.

³⁴² Stuy, “Open Secret,” 364.

³⁴³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 74.

³⁴⁴ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 74.

³⁴⁵ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 82.

³⁴⁶ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 82.

³⁴⁷ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 82.

extensive investigations into tens of thousands of finding ads and found too many coincidences to make each finding ad completely true. For many orphanages, too many babies were found on the same day, at the same location, or by the same person.³⁴⁸ In 2005, an accountant at an orphanage in Hunan province admitted that finding ads were fabricated.³⁴⁹

American mainstream newspapers did publish stories of adoption-related trafficking in China beginning in the early 2000s, though I could not find any in Christian newspapers. For example, a 2003 *New York Times* article titled “Bias for Boys Leads to Sale of Baby Girls in China” highlighted twenty-eight babies who were found stuffed in bags in the back of a bus, some of whom were reportedly destined for international adoption.³⁵⁰ In 2006, Peter Goodman published an article in the *Washington Post* titled “Stealing Babies for Adoption” but was then discouraged by his editors from further pursuing the subject.³⁵¹ In 2009, Demick published an article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Stolen Chinese Babies Supply Adoption Demand.”³⁵² At the same time however, the Chinese government worked hard to contain any scandal and downplay the extent to which such misconduct occurred. This was especially true of the 2005 Hunan baby-buying scandal involving the Duan family. Demick has explained that the Chinese government tried to preserve the system by demonizing the Duans and pinning all the blame on these “lone, greedy criminals.”³⁵³ Stuy has stated that nearly every intercountry adoption program suffered from evil misconduct, but “what is unique to China is the ability of the Chinese

³⁴⁸ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 95.

³⁴⁹ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 381.

³⁵⁰ Elisabeth Rosenthal, “Bias for Boys Leads to Sale of Baby Girls in China,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/20/world/bias-for-boys-leads-to-sale-of-baby-girls-in-china.html>.

³⁵¹ Peter S. Goodman, “Stealing Babies for Adoption,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2006, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/03/12/stealing-babies-for-adoption-span-classbankheadwith-us-couples-eager-to-adopt-some-infants-are-abducted-and-sold-in-china/>; Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 93.

³⁵² Barbara Demick, “Stolen Chinese Babies Supply Adoption Demand,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-sep-20-fg-china-adopt20-story.html>.

³⁵³ Demick, *Daughters Of The Bamboo Grove*, 73.

government to control the flow of information and prevent national governments from assessing the quality and truthfulness of that information.”³⁵⁴

Because Chinese adoption became so “popular” and behaved like a commodity market, “demand” outstripped “supply” and people turned to all sorts of nefarious means to ensure the continual flow of babies up for adoption. Government officials and ordinary citizens used deception, coercion, fraud, and kidnapping to illegally obtain babies and sell them to orphanages. We will likely never know just how many Chinese adoptees were stolen from their birth families.

Deportation

Another dark aspect of international adoption that is worth brief discussion is the deportation of adoptees who do not have American citizenship. Perhaps the phenomenon of adoptee deportation is a direct consequence of adoptive-family-centered practices or of the increased marketization of adoption. Perhaps adoptive parents were too focused on themselves and what they could get out of the adoption, or they wanted to quickly hop on the “trend,” or they thought adoption was like purchasing an item from a store. But ultimately I do not know the exact reasons why adoptive parents did not complete the process of acquiring citizenship for their adopted child. A 2015 *New York Times* article about a deported adoptee explained that possible reasons include neglect, a lack of knowledge, or just continuously putting it off.³⁵⁵ The blame also lies with adoption agencies who did not educate adoptive parents or ensure they obtained citizenship for their child.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Stuy, “Open Secret,” 415-416.

³⁵⁵ Maggie Jones, “Adam Crapser’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/magazine/adam-crapser-bizarre-deportation-odyssey.html>.

³⁵⁶ Jones, “Adam Crapser’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey.”

Many adoptees without citizenship never know until they try to apply for something related to the state or federal government, such as a drivers license or passport.³⁵⁷ Congress tried to address the problem by passing the Child Citizenship Act in 2000, which granted automatic citizenship to children adopted by U.S. citizens. But the law only applied to adoptees who were under the age of eighteen when it went into effect.³⁵⁸ This left many adult adoptees vulnerable to deportation. According to the 2015 *New York Times* article, no one knows exactly how many adoptees in the U.S. do not have citizenship, but at least three dozen are reported to have faced deportation charges or been deported.³⁵⁹

Because adoptive parents intentionally or unintentionally failed to obtain citizenship for their adopted child, many adoptees live in legal limbo. They are “illegal” immigrants brought to America because of someone else’s desires. Some adoptees without citizenship may be able to avoid detection by government authorities and some may not be immediately deported once detected. But nonetheless, they live uncertain and precarious lives in which they cannot obtain a green card, a drivers license, a passport, loans, social welfare and much more. Especially in today’s political landscape, adoptees are questioning whether they are U.S. citizens and even those who have proof of citizenship are living in fear of being sent back to a country they know nothing about and never called home.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁷ Jones, “Adam Crapser’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey.”

³⁵⁸ Jones, “Adam Crapser’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey.”

³⁵⁹ Jones, “Adam Crapser’s Bizarre Deportation Odyssey.”

³⁶⁰ Elizabeth Williamson, “Born Abroad and Fearful of ICE, Adoptees Try to Prove They Belong,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/23/us/politics/foreign-adoptees-citizenship-immigration-enforcement.html>.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this thesis, mainstream newspaper articles about Chinese and international adoption reflected and promoted adoptive-parent-centered practices and the marketization of adoption. In the late twentieth century, intercountry adoption transitioned from being a humanitarian response centered on the needs of children to being a self-driven desire focused on the needs of adoptive parents. An easy, open, and secure process, a large number of healthy, infant girls, and conceptions of race made China the ideal country from which to adopt. As children were commodified, intercountry adoption became a system controlled by “supply” and “demand” forces. The marketization of adoption has many consequences: the oversimplification and dehumanization of adoption and adoptees; the perpetuation of a complex system that relies on global inequalities; the erasure of adoption as an individual, lifelong process filled with loss and hardship; and the kidnapping, trafficking and purchasing of children.

But what should be made of all this? Does the good that many transnational adoptions provide outweigh the evils? Should international adoption be eliminated?

In 2016, China abolished the One Child Policy.³⁶¹ With an aging population and gender ratio imbalance, China allowed every couple two children.³⁶² In 2021, the limit expanded to three.³⁶³ Then in 2024, China officially closed its doors to intercountry adoption, except for certain cases involving relatives. While the news came as a complete shock to many, China had been gradually limiting the abilities of foreigners to adopt for years. Since its peak in 2005, when nearly 15,000 children were adopted from China to countries worldwide, only 15 were adopted in 2022. The halt on international adoptions from China sparked many reactions. I do not

³⁶¹ Kristen E. Cheney and Karen S. Rotabi-Casares, “So Goes China: The End of Intercountry Adoption as We Know It?” *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 10, (2025): 734, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-025-00421-8>.

³⁶² Cheney and Rotabi-Casares, “So Goes China,” 734.

³⁶³ Cheney and Rotabi-Casares, “So Goes China,” 734.

remember exactly what I thought when I first learned of this change, but thinking about it now, I am relieved that the incentive to kidnap or confiscate babies and sell them to orphanages is gone. I am glad that one of the systems perpetuating the marketization and objectification of Chinese babies has been eliminated. I am happy that Chinese children will hopefully be adopted by loving Chinese parents and will remain in their birth country and culture. But I am also sad for the babies currently in China's orphanages, particularly those with special needs, who may not be as desired for domestic adoption. It feels strange that adoption from China to America—the thing that has most shaped my life and my identity—no longer exists.

Ultimately intercountry adoption is complex and multifaceted. As Dorow has explained, “transnationally adopted children are not bought and sold, but neither are they given and received freely and altruistically; the people and institutions around them enter into social relationships of exchange, meaning, and value that are both caring and consumptive.”³⁶⁴ International adoption is both good and bad. It involves the objectification of children and provides children with stability. Dorow also stated “the uneasy relationship between commodification and care, or market and rescue, a relationship that asks the troublesome question, who is adoption for?”³⁶⁵ I believe adoption is for countries with inadequate welfare resources, children in need of basic necessities and loving homes, birth parents who cannot take care of their children or want to give their children a better life, and adoptive parents who can provide a better life and who wish to fill their hearts by raising a child.

I hope that readers walk away from my thesis having learned that adoption is not a purely altruistic, win-win situation. Adoption can be beautiful, but it is also heartbreaking. In the quest to form a family or save a child from a life of poverty, adoptive parents also contribute to a

³⁶⁴Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 17

³⁶⁵Dorow, “Transnational Adoption,” 17.

“market for babies.” An adoptee’s history may be a complete lie and their birth parents may be out there desperately searching for them. These are hard truths to face, but I believe these reckonings are necessary to breaking the commodification of adoption and combating adoption-related child trafficking.

At the same time, I do not want readers to think adoptive parents are villains. Most adoptive parents are the opposite. On a micro level, I believe international adoptions are mostly good. While there is mistreatment and abuse by some adoptive parents, I believe these are only a minority of cases. Most adoptive parents offer adoptees a life of joy and provide opportunities and experiences otherwise never possible. I am happy with my life and with who I am, and I know that is in large part thanks to my mom. She has kept me connected to my birth culture and has made me proud of my identity as an adoptee. I am grateful for everything intangible and tangible that my mom has given me. I know many other Chinese adoptees who would say the same. As I wrote in a poem about my adoption, “you say we saved each other. Me from an unknown destiny, and you from inevitable tragedies. [...] I healed your lonely heart. You kept my heart beating. Mama, we saved each other.”

Critics of adoption often point out, “if Americans care so much about suffering children, why not donate money to an orphanage or an organization addressing poverty?” Why not work for an organization that offers direct aid to orphans in less developed nations?”³⁶⁶ I would say in response: because a donation does not ensure a lifetime of security and love for a child; because the money could be used for corrupt purposes; because it is unrealistic and infeasible for every American who cares about suffering children to become an international social worker or to fight against larger systems like the One Child Policy; because an American adoptive parent wants a

³⁶⁶ Virgiel, “Adoption and Child Trafficking,” 19; Smolin, “Intercountry Adoption as Child Trafficking,” 283; Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 27.

child of their own. Adoption is selfish, but is it so wrong for a person to want to share their life with another human and give love to a child in need of affection? I do not think so.

As I have discussed in this thesis, the greater issue lies on the macro level. Intercountry adoption perpetuates global inequalities and racist ideas. The marketization of adoption has led to fraud and trafficking. Oftentimes transnational adoption does not address the underlying economic and political factors that cause many children to be placed in orphanages and discourages support that focuses on helping children stay with their birth families or birth communities.³⁶⁷ It can also harm America's foster care system by taking away attention and resources.³⁶⁸ But I do not believe that individual adoptive parents are to blame.

While I am not as positive about intercountry adoption as Bartholet, I do not believe a complete ban on all intercountry adoption is necessary. Like Graff and Kapstein have argued, there should be greater regulations and safeguards in place to protect against trafficking. All nations must join and better adhere to the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. Equal attention should be given to supporting aid work that addresses global inequalities and prioritizes keeping children in their birth countries. Greater resources in the U.S. should be focused on America's foster care system.

As a Chinese adoptee, my biggest personal concern is if I was stolen from my birth parents. Was I taken away by Family Planning officials? Was I snatched by kidnappers or were my birth parents tricked into letting me go? As told to my mom by the orphanage, I was left in front of a post office. A woman found me and called the police who then took me to an orphanage. But is this story true? I have always been content with not knowing the identity of my

³⁶⁷ Virgiel, "Adoption and Child Trafficking," 19; Smolin, "Intercountry Adoption as Child Trafficking," 283; Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 27.

³⁶⁸ Rachel Briner, "U.S. International Adoption Subsidies: Shining Light on the Dark History of the Baby 'Black Market,'" *International Law Review Association Student Forum*, (2024): 26.

birth parents and I have never felt a strong desire to search for them. However, the more I learn about baby-buying in China, the more I feel I should do something. If I was stolen and my birth parents are searching for me, I should help them find me. It may be fanciful thinking, but I hope that if they are still wondering what happened to their daughter, fate will bring us together again. Above all else, I hope that my birth mother, no matter who she is and no matter why I became separated from her, knows that I am happy and I wish her happiness.

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In these *New York Times* articles, reporters discuss various topics related to intercountry and Chinese adoption. These newspaper articles reflect existing beliefs and behaviors about adoption from China that perpetuate adoptive-parent-centered practices and the marketization of adoption. These *New York Times* articles served as one of the most important sets of primary sources for my thesis.

Baker, Shannon. "Eye-opener: Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Says Adopting Helped Him Appreciate Gospel." *Baptist Press*, December 29, 2004. <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/eye-opener-singer-steven-curtis-chapman-says-adopting-helped-him-appreciate-gospel/>.

The *Baptist Press* articles highlight the joys of international adoption and prominent Christian proponents of intercountry adoption. These articles encourage the framing of adoption as God's will, which contributes to the oversimplification of intercountry adoption and perpetuation adoptive-parent-centered practices. These *Baptist Press* articles were an important part of my primary source base because they provided insight into the Christian perspective on transnational adoption.

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