

The One-Child Policy: Adoption and its Effects on Birth Mothers and Adopted Daughters

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The controversial one-child policy was implemented in China in 1979, a year after Deng Xiaoping rose to power. Deng was a strong advocator for population control and saw it as a method of raising the GDP per capita of China¹ and, of course, a way to curb a growing population. Women were having an average of six children in the early 1960s, and after the policy was implemented, the number was supposed to drop down to one child per woman.² With a country deeply rooted in Confucian values, the preference for sons dominated the wanting for a daughter. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, political, economic, and cultural forces further shaped the gender hierarchy in the country, resulting in a continued preference for sons. Females in China throughout time have been seen merely as objects; a vessel to produce a son that would carry on the family line.

The one-child policy has had disastrous and unintended consequences on the population as a whole, including the leftover women, as we learned in class. These leftover women, first-born daughters under the one-child policy, benefited from the attention and investment from their parents, and have gone on to excel in their academic and business careers. But what about women who were the second or third child of a family under the one-child policy; what was their fate? I will be examining how the one-child policy played a role in both domestic and international adoption, and how adoption affected the birth mothers and adopted daughters, both domestically and internationally. I also draw from my own experiences as an adopted daughter from China.

¹ Junsen Zhang, "The Evolution of China's One-Child Policy and Its Effects on Family Outcomes," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (2017), 144.

² Zhang, 142.

History of Domestic Adoption

Domestic adoption was common in the Qing dynasty, and even during the first few years of the one-child policy, especially among rural families. The Qing dynasty had three forms of marriage: major, minor, and uxorilocal³. In major marriage, the son's family pays for the bride and the bride entered in her new household as an adult. In minor marriage, the girl was "adopted" by her future in-laws as an infant and brought up in their household.⁴ Minor marriage was seen as a cheaper alternative to major marriage, and provided "insurance" to families with only sons as a guarantee that family line would continue. This was seen as a more viable option, even for better-off families, as the "little-daughter-in-law" (*tongyangxi*) was groomed at an early age to be more obedient to her in-laws and help with housework. In addition, a son that married his adopted sister would remain loyal to his parents, and the fact that they grew up together ensured that the son would not be attracted to his wife.⁵

Surprisingly, boys were also adopted—but at a much higher rate, since they were more in demand. If the daughter-in-law could not produce a son, a boy born into obscure circumstances could be elevated through adoption. Although this method does not fit into Confucian ideology, parents of adopted *healthy* sons are passed off as own-births, as there was a fear that adopted children would not care for their parents if they found out that they were adopted.

³ Uxorilocal marriage occurs when the son lives with his wife's family after marriage, unlike Major and Minor Marriage where the daughter lives and serves her husband's family. For more information, see: Yuyu Chen, et al. "Girl adoption in China—A less-known side of son preference," *Population Studies* 69, no. 2 (2015): 161-178.

⁴ Chen, et al., 161.

⁵ Chen, et al., 163.

Leading Up to the One-Child Policy

Serious family planning campaigning began in 1971 with the theme: “One child isn’t too few, two are just fine, and three are too many.” In July of 1973, a conference arranged by the Leading Group for Family Planning endorsed the slogan: “Later, Longer, and Fewer.” “Later” meant late marriage requirements of 23 years for women and 25 for men. “Longer” signified a birth planning rule of more than three years between the first and second child. “Fewer” implied that a couple could have two children at most. This campaign was successful, and China’s overall fertility rate declined by half between 1971 and 1978.⁶

Although the family planning campaign was technically voluntary, it had coercive elements. Birth planning enforcers were assigned to villages and kept detailed records on every woman of child-bearing age that included their past births, contraceptive use, and menstrual cycles. In addition to keeping these records, IUD insertions sterilizations, and abortions increased sharply throughout the 70s.⁷ After the one-child policy officially went into effect in 1979, rural families (primarily those with one female child) strongly opposed the policy, who wanted sons to work the fields, care for them in their old age, and carry on the family line. The central government then relaxed the policy in order for rural couples with only one daughter to have a second child, known as the 1.5 Child Policy. So in reality, the one-child policy was implemented in more urbanized areas, while the 1.5 Child Policy created some relaxation in rural areas. But even this new policy was a problem.

⁶ Zhang, 143.

⁷ Zhang, 143.

Domestic Adoption in Modern China

During the first decade of the one-child policy, the idea of domestic adoption was an option for rural families to subvert family planning officials when they had more than one child. Kay Johnson, a scholar and mother of an adopted Chinese daughter, interviewed 2,000 birth families, many of which spoke about the desire for both a son *and* daughter to make their family “complete.” Daughters provided “[increased] happiness” through closeness, love, and companionship to parents.⁸

According to the 1.5 Child-Policy, a couple could have a second child four years after their first with a legal permission certificate. These second-born daughters were out-of-plan (born before the legal four-year waiting period) and were either abandoned or given up to other families through informal adoptions solely to evade the repercussions of birth planning officials in hopes to try for a son. These repercussions consisted of forced sterilization, a hefty fine much greater than the couple’s annual income, or both.⁹ Most of the mothers and fathers that Johnson interviewed wanted to keep their second daughters, but did not want to get into legal trouble and/or felt family pressure to produce a son. Couples who’s third (legal) child turned out to be a girl were kept, as giving up their second child inflicted too much emotional damage to the parents, and even the grandparents in some cases.

Through these informal adoptions, most domestically adopted daughters were not able to obtain a *hukou*—the official government registration record that enables a child to have the legal rights of all Chinese citizens. If they were, it was usually done under a false identity or

⁸ Kay Johnson, *China’s Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One-Child Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 14.

⁹ Johnson 2016, 92.

during times of periodic amnesties when fines were lowered in an effort to get “back children” registered.¹⁰ In 2016, there were an estimated 13 million people without *hukous*.¹¹ In addition to the physical setbacks for “black” children—which included the inability to register for school, lost medical or social welfare benefits, and no entitlement to family land rights, there were heavy psychological consequences. “Black child personality” was the phrase to characterize an unregistered child’s mentality. They are introverted, withdrawn, lack self-confidence, feel excluded from the family, and looked down on by self and others as they learn about their lower status and lack of official existence.¹²

Male adoption in modern China, like in the Qing dynasty, was rare compared to the adoption of girls since the main reasons boys are abandoned is due to a disability or illness. If, for some reason, a healthy baby boy *was* abandoned and placed in an orphanage, he was given special treatment, as he was seen as a “precious commodity” and almost immediately adopted upon his arrival.¹³ As in the Qing dynasty, boys who were adopted were passed off as own-births. The waiting list for domestically adopting a boy is, since the demand far outweighs the number of adoptable boys.

There are many families in China that are willing to adopt domestically. These families could be childless, or already have one or two sons and are longing for a daughter to “complete” their family. But as the one-child policy became more heavily enforced, legal adoption became a more obscure option for domestic families. In a 1992 law, the minimum age

¹⁰ Unregistered children were referred to as *heihaizi*, or “black children” in Chinese. Johnson 2016, 17-18.

¹¹ Mei Fong, *One Child: The Story of China’s Most Radical Experiment* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 80.

¹² Johnson 2016, 92.

¹³ Kay Johnson, “Chinese Orphanages: Saving China’s Abandoned Girls,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 30 (2013), 75.

for a Chinese citizen to adopt domestically was thirty-five and they had to be childless.¹⁴ The law also made it possible for couples with children to adopt, but they were required to adopt a handicapped child. This was done in order to find homes for the children (mostly girls) born “imperfect”, as well as alleviating the numbers of children in orphanages.¹⁵ Children who are abandoned in cities are believed to come from rural areas, as a result of ‘guerilla pregnancies’—where a pregnant woman will leave her home to give birth. If the child is a son, she brings it back to the village and registers it. If it is a girl, and especially if the girl has some type of handicap, she will abandon it and return to the village with another chance to have a son.¹⁶

The cost of caring for orphans ran high, but orphanages, such as the Wuhan orphanage¹⁷, was only given sixty yen (equivalent to a little more than half of a US dollar). From the sixty yen, the orphanage also had to pay for the hospital and medical bills of children who became sick. Many abandoned children arrive in a weakened state and require medical care, which the orphanage can barely afford. Children who came down with pneumonia or other ailments and illnesses were sometimes not taken care of, as there were pressures against ‘wasting’ already-scarce resources on a child who may not survive.¹⁸ One remedy to this financial crisis and overabundance of orphaned children was to turn to international adoption.

When China turned to international adoption in 1992, the minimum age for foreigners to adopt in China was thirty—five years younger than the requirement for domestic adoptive parents.¹⁹ This shows the discrimination that the Chinese adoption law had for local adoptive

¹⁴ Chen, et al., 164.

¹⁵ Johnson 2013, 80.

¹⁶ Johnson 2013, 74.

¹⁷ Wuhan is the capital of Hubei province in China. See Johnson 2013, 61.

¹⁸ Johnson 2013, 82.

¹⁹Fong, 174.

parents, as international adoption brought in more revenue for the state, and created ties to international nongovernmental organization networks and continuing donations from previous adoptive parents.

International Adoption from China

In 1987, an estimated 440,000 girls were domestically adopted in China.²⁰ There was a rapid increase in international adoptions from China since 1992, when the government enacted a law that ratified international adoption. China was seen as the gold standard for international adoption, as the country had “almost everything adoptive parents were seeking: healthy young infants in large quantities, and an adoption process that was government run, streamlined, and relatively expansive.”²¹ The outside world believed that China was the most ethical country in which to adopt from, provided by the discourse that girls were unwanted and voluntarily abandoned; their altruistic deed would save an innocent girl from a life of penury and institutionalization.

However, international adoption was a direct byproduct of the state policies that restricted births and suppressed the possibility of domestic adoption. Another grim reality that perpetuated the continuation of international adoption was child trafficking and kidnapping. International adopters paid high fees to adopt from China, and state orphanages benefitted from the profits. Healthy, Chinese children were in demand for international parents, and orphanages went to great lengths to continue to meet these needs. Family planning officials

²⁰ Yuyu Chen, et al., “Girl Adoption in China—A Less-known Side of Son Preference,” *Population Studies* 69, no. 2 (2015): 161.

²¹ Fong, 170.

kidnapped children that were born in violation of the one-child policy and essentially sold them to orphanages.²² Some state orphanages became involved with organized networks of “finders” that brought abandoned or surreptitiously relinquished children from one area to another to cash in on the “finders fee”, handed out by orphanages.²³ Other’s have made it a “lucrative business” by smuggling babies from different parts of China for international *and* local adopters. Local officials are also incentivized to find and remove “out-of-plan” children and place them in orphanages in order to consolidate their political positions, “earning a high rating for their performance in the crucial area of birth planning work.”²⁴

Even though international adoptions from China have steadily decreased over the years, China is still the world’s leading source of international adoption and provides the most children for adoption in the United States. Many children that are in Chinese orphanages today are older children and/or have some type of disability. Over the past thirty years, about 120,000 children—mostly girls—have been adopted by international parents.²⁵

Birth Mothers and Adopted Daughters

Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Loss and Love is a collection of stories from Chinese birth mothers, ranging from young students and successful businesswomen to poor peasants. These stories show that many birth mothers feel remorse and guilt in having to give up their daughters. Mothers suffer from emotional and physical

²² Fong, 184.

²³ Johnson 2016, 149.

²⁴ Johnson 2016, 130.

²⁵ Fong, 170.

abuse when she is unable to produce a son, and when she must give up her 'unwanted' daughter. It was also common that the child was forcibly taken by the mother or in-law so the mother could have another chance to produce a son. Many of these unwanted girls are either drowned, suffocated, or abandoned. Ironically, though, the ways in which girls are disposed of are performed by women: midwives, the birth mother, or mothers-in-law.²⁶ However, abandoned daughters sometimes lived a good life with the guidance of their adoptive parents.

Johnson's family interviews showed that many mothers who had to give up their children took extra measures to ensure that their daughter got into the safe hands of pre-selected families. This was only palpable for some mothers. Mothers who were lucky enough to watch their daughters grow from a distance felt more at ease, even though they never had a direct relationship with them. Others, who had no other choice but abandoning their daughter in the city (to avoid detection of birth planning officials in their villages) rarely knew the fate of their daughter. "Abandoning a child in a public place in a big city was seen by many as a last resort, a step taken when one could not figure out a better and safer solution for hiding the birth of an out-of-plan child."²⁷ As stated before, mothers, fathers, and even grandparents who encouraged giving up their out-of-plan grand/child to legally try for a grand/son bore emotional scars that remained for a lifetime.

Domestically, daughters who find out that they are adopted, either through learning of their birth parents or being told by their adoptive parents, have grudges against their birth

²⁶ Chen, et. al., 177.

²⁷ Johnson 2016, 59.

parents, as they don't fully understand *why* they were given up. They fell like they shouldn't have been born or they weren't loved enough by their birth parents.

Chinese girls adopted by U.S. parents obviously have questions of their origins and circumstances of how they got to where they are today. Families *do* try to incorporate Chinese elements into their daughters' upbringing through celebrating Chinese holidays and language lessons. Families with Children from China is a group with thousands of chapters across the United States, who's primary goal is to bring elements of Chinese culture into the lives of adoptees from China.²⁸

Interestingly enough, writing this paper has summoned up some personal thoughts and questions for me about adoption. Additionally, the items that I brought in for the China Table are a representation of my beginnings. The photo I brought in was taken when I was around thirteen to fourteen months old. I had a full head of hair in the picture, and my mom says it's because since they knew she was a hair dresser, they let my hair grow as opposed to keeping my head shaved for hygienic reasons. Six weeks later, my mom came to China to adopt me. I was adopted in the baby clothes that I brought in. My mom said that the first thing she did was take the shoes off of my feet, because my toes were curling under because the shoes were obviously way too small. The orphanage staff that dealt with my adoption allowed her to ask a few questions that they would be able to answer. She asked if I had any crib mates, which I did. Since there were so many girls in the orphanage, many had to share cribs. She also asked if I had any known food allergies. The only other information given about me was what was

²⁸ Fong, 181.

presumably left on me when I was found. My birthdate: June 2, 1996 and my Chinese name: *Shen Chunpan*.

I grew up with the notion that because of the one-child policy, I was abandoned in 1996 at a police station in Hefei, and later placed in an orphanage until my mom adopted me in 1997. I believed that daughters in China *were* in fact unwanted—because that is what I always heard and that is what my mother was probably told and believed. But from my research, I no longer believe that. I never really considered that families had to reluctantly give up or abandon their daughters because of the strict birth planning regulations; I just accepted the discourse that I was unwanted and therefore felt blessed to be “saved” and given a better life. This may be true, but we will never really know.

From personal stories told in Kay Ann Johnson’s book, I have reason to believe that the minuscule amount of information I have about the first few years of my life could be completely untrue. I could have come from a rural family or I could have been bought and sold through trafficking. My real birth place could be in a totally different province! I have been so ignorant of these could-be scenarios; not because I did not have an interest to learn about my past, but because I (guess you could say) considered myself more ‘white’ than Chinese, since I was adopted into a Caucasian family and grew up in a predominantly Caucasian community.

I have definitely grown up detached from my Chinese heritage. I *did* grow up celebrating Chinese New Year, but I did not know the history and significance it bears in China. I know Chinese New Year as one day of the year where my mom would organize a group of 100-some adopted Chinese children and their parents, and we would celebrate by eating Chinese food at our local buffet. I did not learn to speak the language or really dive into Chinese history until I

came to UMBC. Only through writing this essay, I have learned about the impact that the one-child policy had on international and domestic adoption and the consequences adoption had on mothers and daughters' physical and emotional wellbeing. I am now left with a stronger sense of wonder about my origins, but I know that I will never be able to find the answers.

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