

Adoption

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Most abandoned or orphaned children in China are adopted by relatives, but an increasing number of orphaned children are being adopted by families in foreign countries, including the United States. The China Center for Adoption Affairs applies strict guidelines in approving adoptive families; the results are well-qualified adoptive parents and successful social and academic adjustment of the children.

Since the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China in 1979, exchange programs have brought together Chinese scholars, students, teachers, policy makers, and business people. These personal contacts have been an important part of developing better relations and new partnerships with other countries. But another type of exchange is having an impact, as a wide range of American couples, affluent and sometimes influential, have adopted Chinese children, most of them daughters. Since 1995, China has been the largest source of foreign-born children adopted in the United States. By the end of 2008, over 70,000 Chinese children had been adopted into American families.

Abandoned Children and Their Care

In 1979 China enacted what is commonly known as the one-child policy to limit most married couples to only one

child (exceptions are made for ethnic minority groups). While the intention of the policy was to reduce population growth, one unexpected consequence of this policy was a drastic increase in the abandonment of female infants. Birth parents of these abandoned babies are mostly married peasants in rural China who have already had two or three daughters. Because child abandonment is against the law, parents usually leave their children with little identifying information, in public places at night or early in the morning to avoid legal trouble. Abandoned children whose parents cannot be located by police are considered legally orphaned.

The motive for abandoning a female infant is usually the parents' inability to pay the fines for violating the one-child policy, often because they have already paid heavy fines for violating the policy once or twice before.

While there are no official statistics, it is estimated that at the end of 2002 there were about 300,000 to 400,000 orphans in rural China who were probably cared for by relatives (Shang Xiaoyuan et al. 2005). About 50,000 children (95 percent of whom were children abandoned by their parents) were cared for in state-run children's welfare institutes or in collectively owned rural welfare institutions. Orphanage children range in age from newborn to late teens; they also range in physical condition from very healthy—the abandoned children's prenatal experience in China has been considered better than that of many abandoned children in Russia and Eastern Europe because drinking, smoking, and teenage pregnancy among rural Chinese women are very rare—to severely disabled with conditions such as cerebral palsy, for example. Most abandoned boys have physical disabilities, some as minor



Yun Shi Yang Harcourt (b. 2004) in Sydney with her mother, Jo Bosben, and her father, Tim Harcourt, chief economist of the Australian Trade Commission (and author of “Australia-China Relations” in this encyclopedia).

as a cleft palate, or mental disabilities. Most girls do not have a physical handicap, but have been abandoned as a result of the one-child policy and Chinese society’s preference for boys.

Orphanages (called Child Welfare Institutes or Social Welfare Institutes), usually located in or near a city, are typically gated and off-limits to locals and visitors. They often have a small clinic on site. The size of the orphanage can range from small (less than fifty children) to quite large (several hundred children). Operating budgets usually come from provincial and central government as part of the civil affairs budget. Most orphanages are inadequately equipped to care for and educate children.

In the orphanages, children are usually divided into different age groups. Older children are required, if capable, to help care for the younger ones. The children’s daily routines include scheduled feedings and/or meals, organized group learning, and other activities. Caregivers are usually women from local communities. The caregivers provide the best care they can, but due to a large caregiver to child ratio, one-on-one care is rare if not impossible. Orphanages have recently started utilizing local families to provide part-time or full-time foster care for some orphans.

As noted, most orphaned and abandoned children do not go to orphanages; some are brought up by relatives, but many may simply be unaccounted for. These children, especially those in rural areas, often live in poverty without

access to social services. Government-funded subsistence allowances are available to orphaned/abandoned urban children and vary from region to region, but even the largest stipends are less than ordinary children’s living costs. Funds to provide the “five guarantees” (i.e., food, clothing, housing, medical care, and burial expenses) to orphaned and/or abandoned children in the countryside come from villages and towns. But the amounts of these funds are decreasing with agricultural taxation, putting more children at risk for inadequate care.

Domestic and International Adoption

Under the leadership of China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs, the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA) in Beijing is the headquarters for domestic and international adoption: it governs policy and regulations. For international adoptions, the CCAA sets the quota, handles the paperwork, and matches children with potential foreign adoptive parents. By law, only an orphan under the age of fourteen is eligible for adoption. The orphanage must publish local newspaper ads regarding a child under its care and allow six months for birth parents to claim the child. The child is legally declared an orphan after that period and is thus allowed to be adopted. Open adoption

from the orphanage is almost never a possibility as the orphanage has no knowledge of the identity of the child's birth parents.

Chinese citizens can adopt either from the orphanages or from other channels (e.g., private adoption, kinship adoption). There are no statistics regarding kinship and private adoption within China. For Chinese citizens to adopt a child from the orphanage, they must first register with the county-level civil affairs office where the child's orphanage is located. In order to qualify for an adoption certificate, the applicants must be at least thirty years of age, infertile (with medical evidence), and medically and physically capable of caring for children. They also need to show proof of residence and marital status. A single male adopting a female child is additionally required to be at least forty years older than the child. Upon receiving the adoption certificate, the applicants are allowed to pick one child from three to four eligible children. Little is known about the development of domestically adopted Chinese children.

China first allowed a small number of children to be adopted by foreign families in 1985, when twenty children were adopted into the United States. (From 1985 to 1989, seventy children were adopted by American families.) In 1991, to relieve the heavy demands of a drastically increased number of abandoned children in the state-run child welfare institutes, China enacted adoption laws to permit a larger number of children to be adopted internationally. The United States adopts the most children. Since 1995 China has been of the largest source of transracial adoption in the United States, accounting for over 35 percent of the children involved in U.S. international adoptions. By the end of 2008, 71,753 Chinese children were adopted into American families (Families with Children from China, 2008). Chinese children have also been adopted into families in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. There are no statistics as to the number of children adopted into many of these countries.

The Good Earth

Pearl S. Buck, an eminent twentieth-century novelist who won both the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes, was an adoptive mother and early proponent of interracial and international adoption. Buck was born in China to missionary parents and spent the first half of her life there. Her best-known book, The Good Earth, contains much about the plight of Chinese girl children and the suffering of parents who sometimes sold them into slavery to avoid starvation.

O-lan had been rinsing the rice bowls with a little water and now she piled them in a corner of the hut and looked up at him from the spot where she squatted.

"There is nothing to sell except the girl," she answered slowly.

Wang Lung's breath caught.

"Now, I would not sell a child," he said loudly.

"I was sold," she answered very slowly. "I was sold to a great house so that my parents could return to their home."

"And would you sell the child, therefore?"

"If it were only I, she would be killed before she was sold . . . the salve of slaves was I! But a dead girl brings nothing. I would sell this girl for you—to take you back to the land."

"Never would I," said Wang Lung stoutly, "not though I spent my life in this wilderness."

But when he had gone out again the thought, which never alone would have come to him, tempted him against his will. He looked at the small girl, staggering persistently at the end of the loop her grandfather held. She had grown greatly on the food given her each day, and although she had as yet said no word at all, still she was plump as a child will be on slight care enough. Her lips that had been like an old woman's were smiling and red, and as of old she grew merry when he looked at her and she smiled.

"I might have done it," he mused, "if she had not lain in my bosom and smiled like that."

Source: Buck, P. S. (1931). *The good earth*. New York: Harper & Row, 101.

Research shows that families in these countries have adopted children from over 530 Chinese orphanages in all twenty-three Chinese provinces (China considers Taiwan the twenty-third province), four of the five autonomous regions (no children have been adopted internationally from Tibet), and four municipalities (Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai, and Tianjin), while the leading sending provinces are Guangdong, Hunan and Guangxi (Tan 2006).

QUALIFICATION AND COST OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION FROM CHINA

Since it first permitted international adoption, the CCAA has modified its regulations several times. In December 2002, the agency reduced the quota of single parent adoption from 33 percent to no more than 5 percent. In May 2007, in response to a decrease in the number of children available for international adoption, the CCAA drastically changed its policy, allowing only married heterosexual couples aged between thirty and fifty-five to adopt from China. The couple must have been married for a minimum of two years if it is the first marriage, five years if it is a second or third marriage, and no more than two previous marriages are allowed for either spouse. There must be no more than four children living in the home. Additionally, in section III of the new CCAA regulations, couples may not adopt if they have one or more of the following conditions:

- 1 AIDS
- 2 Mental handicap
- 3 Infectious disease within infective stage
- 4 Binocular blindness, binocular parallax (problems with depth perception), or monocular blindness; no ocular prosthesis
- 5 Binaural hearing loss or language-function loss (adoption of special needs children who have identical conditions will be exempt from this limitation)
- 6 A function or dysfunction of limbs or trunk caused by impairment, incompleteness, numbness, or deformation; severe facial deformation
- 7 Severe disease that requires long-term treatment and affects life expectancy, such as malignant tumor, lupus erythematosus, nephrosis (kidney disease), epilepsy, etc.

8 Major organ transplant within the previous ten years

9 Schizophrenia

10 Medication for severe mental disorders, such as depression, mania, or anxiety neurosis, within the previous two years

11 Body mass index over forty (BMI = weight in kilograms/height in meters²)

Further CCAA regulations make the following stipulations:

IV. Either the husband or wife must hold a stable occupation. The family annual income reaches \$10,000 for each family member, including the prospective adoptee; family net assets should equal \$80,000. Family annual income does not include welfare income, such as relief fund, pension, unemployment insurance, or government subsidy.

V. Both the husband and wife have an education at or above the level of senior high school, or vocational skills training at the same level.

VI. There must be fewer than five children in the family under the age of eighteen years, and the youngest one should have reached the age of one year. Adoption of special needs children will be exempt from the restriction as to number of children under the age of eighteen.

VII. Neither the husband nor the wife can have a criminal conviction. Both behave honorably, have good moral character, and are law-abiding. Neither the husband nor wife has any of the following:

VII a. A history of domestic violence, sexual abuse, abandonment or abuse of children (even if not arrested or convicted).

VII b. A history of taking narcotics like opium, morphine, marijuana, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, or medication for mental diseases that may cause addiction among human beings.

VII c. A history of alcohol abuse or alcohol overconsumption within the previous ten years.

Adoption applications are given consideration on a case-by-case basis when either the husband

or the wife has less than three criminal records of slight severity with no severe outcomes, the time from correction of the wrong has reached ten years, or has less than five records of traffic law violation with no severe outcomes.

VIII. The adoptive parents are able to understand adoption and expect to provide a warm family for the orphaned children (or children with handicap and disability) via adoption and to meet the needs of the children adopted and ensure their good development. They have a correct understanding of intercountry adoption as well, and are fully mentally prepared for the potential risks within intercountry adoption and for the situations of children adopted, such as potential diseases, developmental delay, post-placement maladjustment, etc.

IX. The adopters, in the adoption application letter, make clear promises of being able to accept post-placement follow-ups and offer post-placement reports as required.

The cost of adopting a Chinese child from an orphanage can range from US\$20,000 to US\$25,000. At the time of receiving the child, the adoptive parents are required to make a cash donation of US\$5,000 to the child's orphanage to help improve the living conditions of the children who remain in the orphanage.

PROCEDURE FOR INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION FROM CHINA

According to Families with Children from China (FCC), adopting a child from China includes three phases: assembling application paperwork, waiting, and the trip to China to adopt the child. The application paperwork, generally known as the dossier, consists of ten or so documents that actually go to China and other documents required by local state, county, and adoption agency rules. After all of the documents are collected and authenticated, the entire package is sent by the adoption agency to the China Center of Adoption Affairs (CCAA) in Beijing. One of the major documents in the application is called a home study. This document, prepared by a licensed social worker employed by an agency with an approved China adoption program, describes the prospective family. A typical home study will involve three visits with the social

worker, one at home and two at the social worker's office. The family must have recommendation letters sent directly to the social worker. The final document, which usually runs to six pages or so, can be thought of as a short biography of the parents and an evaluation of whether they will be acceptable parents. It takes approximately thirty to thirty-six months from receipt of the completed dossier to referral of a child for adoption. Travel to China to pick up the child is normally scheduled three months after referral. Some of the major adoption agencies in the United States include Chinese Children's Adoption International (CCAI), China Adoption With Love, Inc. (CAWL), and Alliance for Children.

The actual adoption usually occurs at a hotel near the orphanage. The adoptive parents first meet with the officials from the civil affairs offices and orphanage directors to complete the paperwork and make the cash donation. Following that, the child is handed to the parents. The transition time is usually brief. Parents are usually not permitted to visit the child's orphanage.

Characteristics of Chinese Children at Adoption

The average age of a child at the time of adoption is about thirteen months. Most of the children have been reared in an orphanage since early infancy. Some have received foster care. Most children are girls, and about half of the children show some degree of developmental delay. While fetal alcohol syndrome, HIV, and prenatal drug exposure have not been reported, lead poisoning is common.

Children who were adopted through the special-needs program (called the Waiting Child Program) are usually older and/or have special needs due to physical conditions that can range from very minor (e.g., birthmarks, missing one finger), to moderately severe (e.g., cleft palate), to severe (e.g., cerebral palsy).

Post-Adoption Development

While initially, it is not uncommon for some Chinese children to show worrisome behavior such as sleep disturbances, eating problems, or attachment issues, research conducted in Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway,

and the United States has provided compelling evidence that Chinese children adjust remarkably well in the adoptive home. Their language acquisition, social and emotional adjustment, and later academic performance have

all been reported as either similar to or more favorable than their non-adopted peers. Such a favorable adoption outcome has not been reported among children adopted from Eastern Europe or Latin America. Many researchers



Historical illustration of “A Baby Tower” from the 1885 book *Child Life in China*, written by Mrs. Bryson, a missionary from the London Mission in Wuchang. The author describes baby towers, infamously reputed to have been a means for disposing unwanted children, most often female, at the time of their birth. Although missionary reports of such methods of infanticide appeared in Western media, especially after the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, the author reviewing Mrs. Bryson’s book in *The China Review*, shortly after the book’s publication, comments on never having seen one during extensive travels in the southern part of the country. Bryson’s account resonates today when considering China’s one-child policy—of which an unexpected outcome was the dramatic increase in the number of abandoned baby girls.

speculate that the Chinese children's favorable adjustment results from a combination of the birth mother's reasonably good prenatal care, a fairly decent orphanage experience, and positive adoptive family environment (e.g., highly educated, high-income-earning parents). Chinese children adopted by single parents show similar adjustment to Chinese children adopted by married couples. Long-term outcomes (e.g., adjustment in later adulthood) are unknown. One aspect of concern in these children's future development lies in their possible desire to search for birth parents. It is unlikely that most children will be able to locate their birth parents due to the complex circumstances surrounding child abandonment in China. So far, there is only one child who was adopted by a Dutch couple who successfully located the birth parents.

Probably due to their favorable adjustment, about 75 percent of the families that have adopted from China adopt additional children from China. Recently some post-adoption disruptions have been reported. This mainly occurs to children who were adopted at an older age. As most of the adopted Chinese children are girls, many scholars and policy makers are becoming increasingly concerned about the gender imbalance in China. In some provinces the ratio is now 114 males for every 100 females for children under the age of four.

To help foster a sense of pride about the adopted children's cultural heritage, many adoptive parents actively involve their children in various Chinese cultural activities: language class, kung fu class, celebrating Chinese festivities. As the children get older, many parents go with their children to China to visit their orphanages and to learn about China. Major travel agencies have also been established to cater to heritage trips; one example is Lotus Travel, Inc.

Support Networks

To support each other, adoptive families have established numerous networks both online and offline. Families with Children from China (FCC), with local chapters worldwide, is the largest online community. The FCC has played an active role in engaging the CCAA in discussions about its policy.

Other online communities are also very active. Some of the organizations, such as Raising China Children, focus on Chinese adoptions in general. Other groups have a more specific focus, including groups for families of children adopted from certain regions of China and groups organized around specific developmental issues and topics, such as attachment, special needs, identity, and general post-adoption adjustment.

Adoptive families have also established charitable organizations to help improve the lives of children in the orphanages. One of the largest organizations is Half the Sky Foundation. Other foundations such as Our Chinese Daughters Foundation and China Care also play very active roles in improving children's lives.

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Further Reading

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