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# One child's happy face: Teaching and learning about adoption from China

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# One Child's Happy Face:

## Learning about Adoption from China



### Chara Haeussler Bohan

China is the country of my adopted daughter's birth. Over the last decade, infant girls have been on the front line of the struggle for human rights in China. For American families that want to adopt a child from overseas, China has become the number one source. There is an interesting story here, and young children are at the center of it. In this article, I provide some background information about adoption from China and then show why I think it is appropriate to share a bit of this story with elementary students.

Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tse Tung, 1949-1976), China's population grew to an estimated 919 million.<sup>1</sup> Mao encouraged population growth to build a huge army and strengthen the nation, even while killing an estimated one million of his countrymen, purported political enemies, in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969).<sup>2</sup> Post-Mao Communist leaders, however, understood that unabated population growth was creating unmanageable problems in food supply, shelter, urban development, employment, and education.

In the early 1980s, the Chinese government instituted a one-child policy to limit population growth. This policy decreed that any married couple would be allowed to have only one child.<sup>3</sup> An exception was made for ethnic minorities, who comprised less than ten percent of the total population, and who would disappear if they did not have a higher rate of growth than that of the ethnic majority. Thus, minority couples were generally allowed to have two children, which created a problematic "double-standard" right

Newly adopted Chloe Bohan with happy mother, Chara Bohan, at the medical examiner's office in Guangzhou, China, 2001.

from the start. Enforcing this law led to all sorts of government interference in family life. For example, there were many reports of human rights violations such as mandatory contraception (insertions of IUDs) and forced sterilizations or abortions.<sup>4</sup>

Another unfortunate consequence of the one-child policy was an increase in female abandonment and infanticide. The reason these tragedies happened is rooted in Chinese culture and history. Despite gains made in women's rights and political participation by women after the Communist victory in 1949, China remained, in many ways, a patriarchal society. Parents wanted to have at least one son to carry on the family name and to take care of them in their old age. Couples reasoned that, if they were only to be allowed one child, they wanted it to be a boy. Soon, orphanages were filling up with unwanted infant girls. Ninety-five percent of the children in the thousand or so state-run orphanages are female. The number of children in China's orphanages ranges from 160,000 (reported by the Chinese government) to as many as one million (according to some human rights groups).<sup>5</sup>

### Scandal and Reform

In 1996 a Chinese doctor and a former Chinese orphan smuggled photos, medical records, and other documents out of the country, showing that death rates from infectious disease and neglect in overcrowded orphanages were shockingly high.<sup>6</sup> An international outcry over the suffering

of these otherwise healthy infant girls pressured the Chinese government to enact several reforms, which included reducing restrictions on foreigners who wished to adopt Chinese orphans. In 1999, United States citizens adopted 4,500 Chinese children, which accounted for 80 percent of foreign adoptions in China. The adoption fee, about \$3,000 per child, helps improve the conditions of the orphanages and thus the welfare of infant girls who remain in China. "The trend is helping China and the U.S. build bridges of understanding despite ideological skirmishes."<sup>7</sup>

China is also experimenting with relaxing its one-child policy. With the help of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), health care workers in more than thirty counties in China are expanding health services for women, providing more information about contraception, and allowing couples to make their own decisions about family size. Many women in these counties are deciding to have fewer children for economic reasons. Although it is still enforced in many other parts of the nation, the draconian one-child policy seems increasingly unnecessary, according to Chinese government officials themselves.<sup>8</sup> The "double standard" of applying the one-child policy in some parts of the country and not others increasingly is seen as unjust, and this perception may create further pressure for reform.

Along with these hopeful signs, however, there is a new problem: "AIDS is creating an explosion of destitute orphans in China's rural heartland and is driving large numbers of families into such dire poverty that they can no longer afford to feed or clothe, much less educate, their young."<sup>9</sup> In many rural villages, adults were infected with AIDS in the 1990s when they sold blood (for later use in hospitals) at collection stations that were using unsterile practices. Now, when both parents die "almost simultaneously" of AIDS, children are left without a family.

The story of China's girl orphans is still being written. When my husband and I traveled to Yangzhou, China, to adopt my daughter, we visited the orphanage in which she had spent the first year of her life. The Yangzhou Social Welfare Institute, near Nanjing, China, was a clean, well-maintained, and fairly large complex of several buildings. Of course, many orphanages in China are not accessible to foreign visitors, and foreign adoption agencies have contact with only about 50 orphanages (out of about one

thousand).<sup>10</sup> One group of parents in our entourage was not permitted to visit their daughters' orphanage, a source of much distress to our local Chinese guide. The Chinese government is sensitive to American media reports of poor conditions in orphanages, so we had to wonder about what we were not allowed to see.

### Hope and Human Rights

When reading articles about China, I sometimes lament that the government seems so often to be in the newspaper due to some human rights violations. In addition to the plight of girl orphans, frequent topics include China's relations with Tibet and Taiwan, the effects of economic development on human rights, and the repression of fledgling democratic movements, dissidents, and prisoners. True, all of these are serious problems in China today, but they should be considered with a view to China's 5,000-year history and its huge

population of 1.3 billion citizens. From this perspective, China has made great material strides. Average national life expectancy has more than doubled, rising from around thirty-two years in 1949 to sixty-nine years in 1985.<sup>11</sup>

"Wellbeing, as measured by literacy and life expectancy, are considerably higher in China than in other countries at comparable stages of development, and in some cases higher than those in much wealthier nations."<sup>12</sup> If one

looks closely at current controversies within China, and listens to the voices of courageous dissidents, one sees forces within Chinese society itself that are constantly struggling toward a better future. Many of China's problems seem to be similar to the ones faced in America, but they are played out on a larger scale: How do you reconcile population growth and economic wellbeing with environmental protection? How do you balance the rights of the individual citizen with the need for security and social stability? How do you develop a global economy without fostering dependence on, or hostility toward, other nations?

### A Human Scale

As an adoptive mother, I want my Chinese-American daughter to understand and appreciate her heritage. I hope that she, and the ever-increasing number of Chinese children in American schools, can learn about China's history and current events in a manner that is both truthful and respectful—but also appropriate for her age. The extensive and well-documented history of China, arguably the oldest



Family planning poster in Beijing, China.

Steven S. Lapham (1992)

continuous record of a civilization, is rich and accomplished, while simultaneously tumultuous and tragic.

Learning about China is not usually part of the elementary social studies curriculum in the United States. Why should social studies teachers, who are not members of a national or local organization, such as Families with Children from China, or who do not have Chinese-American students in their classroom, be concerned about China, or more particularly, Chinese adoptions? As the number of foreign-born adopted children grows, and as the diversity of the American population continues to increase with new immigration, the need increases for teachers to teach about different world cultures at the elementary level.

At the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants could experience their cultural heritage at home, while public schools were viewed as the place to Americanize or acculturate the immigrant children. But today, many immigrants are infants or young children who are adopted by American families. These children have fewer ties to the lands of their birth, and therefore the importance of teaching about their cultural heritage in schools is much greater. An elementary school lesson on China might represent an adopted Chinese child's first encounter with Chinese history and culture.

The number of children adopted from China continues to increase dramatically. For example, in 1989, 201 children were adopted from China, making China the ninth most frequent country from which U.S. citizens adopted children. In 2001, U.S. families adopted almost 5,000 children from China, thereby making

China first as a source of adoptions. In addition, the number of children adopted from around the globe has increased dramatically in recent years, rising from 8,102 in 1989 to 19,237 in 2001.<sup>13</sup> American classrooms, therefore, are becoming increasingly diverse as children from China, Russia, Guatemala, South Korea, Romania, and other countries are adopted by American families.

Finally, our Earth seems to be getting smaller. The drive to develop a "global economy," the connective power of the Internet, and the rise of world-wide problems that require international solutions mean that teachers must try to prepare their students to interact positively and creatively with people from other cultures and other nations. We can begin by feeding some of their natural curiosity about their world.

### My Self and My World

Given China's complex history, how can elementary teachers address such issues in their classroom in a meaningful

and comprehensible manner? How can teachers incorporate Chinese history, adoption from China, and human rights discussions into their classroom curriculum in a manner that is respectful, honest, and age-appropriate?

In the "expanding communities sequence," first expressed by educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell in the 1920s and 1930s, children begin to learn about society and cultures by learning about the immediate world around them through first-hand experiences.<sup>14</sup> As students' intellectual understanding progresses, the curriculum expands from the study of oneself and one's family to the community, state, nation, and world. The principle of expanding communities was considered to be the foundation of a "national curriculum" proposed in 1987.<sup>15</sup> Younger children need concrete

experiences. As they develop cognitively, their understanding of the world can include abstract concepts.

Does this mean that lessons about foreign cultures and nations must wait until high school? Not at all. Teaching about China to elementary students can build upon children's concrete understanding of their immediate social environment. For example, I can introduce China by talking about my family.

### Adoption in China

Discussing the concept of adoption can be an appropriate way to introduce young children to China. At first, the term "adoption" itself may seem a difficult term for elementary students to comprehend. I never take offense when children ask me, as they frequently do, "Who are your daughter's real parents?" I usually respond that my husband and I are my daughter's "real parents," and that her birth parents in China, who we have never met, gave her up for adoption. I also make certain

to tell students how lucky I feel to be able to have my daughter as a part of our family.

Recently, in a kindergarten class, I held up a picture of my adopted daughter. Then I began a discussion of adoption by reading aloud *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* by Rose Lewis. In this warm narrative, illustrated with beautiful scenes of an Anglo mother and Chinese child, Lewis describes her journey to China to adopt her daughter whom she clearly adores. After the reading, the kindergarten students asked many questions, and one girl talked freely about the circumstances surrounding her adoption. Of course, not all adopted children are comfortable talking openly about adoption. Another child, who also had been adopted from overseas, never said a word about adoption. Respecting a child's decision not to share adoption information also is important. In the United States, the great majority of children adopted from China have Anglo parents, so ethnicity makes their adoption story fairly obvious.



Steven S. Lapham, 1992

A little girl poses for a picture in the Forbidden City.

However, many adults are not aware of the growing number of adopted Chinese girls, so I often explain the story of adoptions from China to them.

There are many other books that can help open up a dialogue with young learners about adoption (see Resources for Young Learners, p. 14). Defining the word "adoption" naturally leads to the need to define and use other basic terms, such as orphan, birth parent, biological parent, poverty, and human rights.

### Teaching about Poverty

Poverty is a very real problem in China and in much of the world. When I

taught about China and India in a world geography course at a school where 60 percent of the students qualified for subsidized meals, my students, considered poor by American standards, frequently were amazed at the extreme poverty that exists in these countries.

According to one Chinese government report, approximately 350

million Chinese people live below the poverty line.<sup>16</sup>

Because the idea of abandonment can be frightening to young children, I avoid this term. Rather, I say that there are many reasons that Chinese parents cannot keep their children. I say that there is a law in China that encourages families to have only one child. I also explain that poverty is one of the most common reasons children are given up for adoption in other nations. Birth parents may believe that an infant daughter will enjoy a better life if she is taken care of by people who are more able to provide materially for her. Indeed, in Lewis' story, the adoptive mother expresses the hope that her daughter's Chinese birth mother knows that her daughter is safe and loved.

Not surprisingly, poverty is the greatest challenge for children throughout the world. The World Health Organization reports that 10 million children die each year in the world from disease, malnutrition, and violence.<sup>17</sup> The plight of many of the world's children is a weighty subject for young children. How does a social studies teacher discuss such sensitive issues with students? The age of students is important to consider. Fifth grade students are more aware of the problems facing the world community than kindergartners, who remain largely egocentric in their perceptions. Teachers must be sensitive to the fact that many human rights violations can be frightening to children, and

some topics, such as infanticide, should not be part of an elementary lesson. Adoption, however, describes poverty as a problem that can be solved. It is a story with a happy ending, one that blends nicely with many early childhood social studies curricula that focus on the self, family, and community.

### Introduction to China

Discussing adoptions from China naturally leads to basic questions about Chinese history and geography. Where is China? In a second grade classroom, I locate China on the world map, and then point out the towns to which I traveled



Children enjoying recess activities at Yu Cai School in Guangzhou, China.

in the course of my adoption journey. I bring in a wooden puzzle of China, in which the pieces are in the shape of China's many provinces, and help the students put it together.

What is in China? I show pictures of the Great Wall, the royal Forbidden City, the mausoleum of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, and Chinese students in two kindergartens that I visited in China. What is it

like to live in China? For very young children, the Sesame Street video *Big Bird in China* is an excellent introduction to China's culture. Showing American students pictures of students in China who are of similar age helps build an interest and forge a bond. I also distribute some artwork by Chinese students and construction paper cutouts for my American students to examine.

Field trips are another way to extend hands-on, concrete learning about China. Many local communities have Asian cultural centers of interest, such as Asian markets, or museums that feature Asian artifacts or art. For example, an Asian Cultures Museum and Education Center exists in Corpus Christi, Texas, so a class does not have to be physically near Chinatown in New York City or San Francisco to have access to a learning center about Asian culture.<sup>18</sup>

One way to teach about China is to draw upon the experiences of Chinese American members of the local community or individuals who have traveled to China and are knowledgeable about its culture. Enlisting support from these guest speakers will help "bring China into the classroom." Asian Americans constitute the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Asian Americans will likely comprise almost 11 percent of the U.S. population by the year 2050, so "bringing China into the classroom" may be easier than one might think.<sup>19</sup>

There are many resources on the Internet about Asian Americans. AskAsia ([www.askasia.org](http://www.askasia.org)) is a rich website supported by the Asia Society, a national nonprofit public educational organization dedicated to increasing American understanding of Asia. AskAsia has online resources for K-12 teachers, students, and school leaders, in addition to centers in New York; Houston; Washington, DC; Los Angeles; and San Francisco. In addition, PBS has produced a video series, *Ancestors in the Americas* by Loni Ding, which explores the story and history of Asian American immigration.<sup>20</sup> The companion PBS website contains a wealthy source of information on Asian American history. These last two resources provide useful background for teachers. Elementary teachers should be careful to choose curriculum resources for the appropriate age of their students, as many Internet resources on Asian American history are geared for middle and high school students.

Chara H. Bohan



Student artwork on the walls at the kindergarten attached to Sharnian Primary School.

### An Opportunity to Do Something

Human rights in China can be an extremely controversial subject among adults. Strikingly, young children seem to have a clearer understanding of the subject in some ways, perhaps because their minds are not cluttered with the complicated nuances of world politics. Children seem to be born with a sense of fairness and justice. When I asked second grade students if they ever experienced a time when they thought they were not treated fairly, almost every hand was raised. Extending the discussion to China and human rights, the class examined the Children's Treaty, a statement by the United Nations about the rights of children everywhere.<sup>21</sup> Kofi Annan, secretary-general of the U.N., has written a report "We the Children," in which he describes positive changes affecting the world's children, such as increased access to education and improved living conditions.<sup>22</sup> Annan, however, reminds us that progress has been uneven and that much remains to be done. A short book by his wife, Nane Annan, *The United Nations: Come Along With Me*, introduces children to the humanitarian work of the U.N.

One of my goals in teaching about adoption from China is to demonstrate to students that individuals can take action to make the world a better place to live—a place where all people, including children in China's orphanages, can enjoy universal human rights. To give students an opportunity to express their own ideas, I asked students to write in their

journals what the class might do to help the children who live in China's orphanages. Then I compared their suggestions with needs as described by charitable organizations, a list of which is provided by Families with Children from China ([www.fwcc.org](http://www.fwcc.org)). For example, Homeland Children's Foundation and the Heartland Medical Express are nonprofit groups that provide medical and other assistance to children in Chinese orphanages. Each organization offers suggestions for meaningful service activities.

The class discussed the many possible ways to get involved, then decided on one activity: students compiled a care package (including such items as shampoo, toothpaste,

toothbrushes, mittens, coloring books, and crayons) that would be given to a child in a Chinese orphanage. To conclude the activity, we reviewed what the students had learned about China, adoption, and human rights. We talked about the process of studying a problem, considering what to do, and then taking action. The students felt wonderful about completing a project to help make the world a better place—one happy face at a time.

### Notes

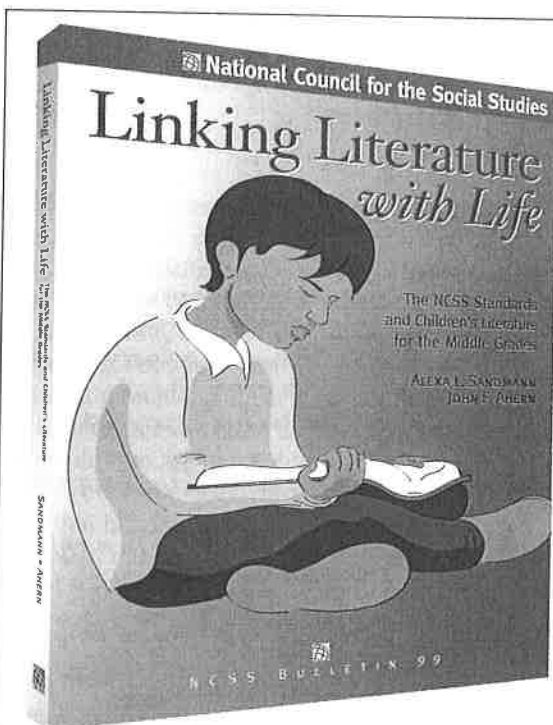
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