



CHINA'S HIDDEN CHILDREN

A Reader's Guide

*Abandonment, Adoption, and the
Human Costs of the One-Child Policy*

By KAY ANN JOHNSON

Reader's Guide created by Jean MacLeod with Kay Johnson, LiLi Johnson, Lily Rau

CHINA'S HIDDEN CHILDREN:

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WHAT does this extraordinary book mean to you?

Readers who are adoptive parents of children from China, or China adoptees, will find a treasure trove of historical, political, social, and economic data in *China's Hidden Children* – all of it wearing the very human faces of mothers, fathers and siblings caught in the net of a wildly inhumane and far-reaching social experiment: China's one-child policy.

Social scientists, sinologists and historians will be intrigued by what Dr. Kay Ann Johnson, working with her late colleague Wang Liyao, finds after investigating Chinese abandonment and adoption over the past 25 years. However, the emotional truth and future impact of Dr. Johnson's findings are far greater than data can possibly reveal on its own...

Johnson lets the voices of Chinese parents tell the *real* story of how 120,000 children became available for international adoption, helping us understand the depth and reach of parental connection and what it means for China's adopted children living half a world away.

WHY should adoptive parents read this book?

The narrative of Chinese adoption that we thought to be true, what many of us repeated to our children adopted from China and wrote in our children's Lifebooks, *distorts what happened in many ways*. The real stories told by many parents are much more troubling and helps us comprehend the invisible politics and politically-based suffering that contributed to filling Chinese orphanages and to the creation of our adoptive families.

WHY should China adoptees read this book?

China's Hidden Children answers more of the questions you've been living with all of your life (How could my birth parents give me up? Does my birth mother think of me? Does my birth country really hate girls?). Dr. Johnson and Wang Liyao's research in China bears witness to your history; it offers you a truthful possibility about your early life and a greater insight to the actions and emotions of your first parents.



Village doorways of prospective local adopters were often favored places to secretly and safely leave a child.

TOUGH DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

As an adoptive parent...

1. What feelings were evoked by the book's personal narratives of birth parents' attempts to place an out-of-plan child with another family or in an orphanage? Does imagining the conflicting emotions experienced by the birth parents under any of the difficult birth/abandonment circumstances described in the book lead to new conclusions for you, personally?
2. How does the existence of Chinese Adoptive Parents change the story of international adoption from China? Were you aware of this wholly invisible group when you adopted?
3. Dr. Johnson strives to correct the prevailing, dominant cultural narrative ("unwanted, abandoned girl") constructed by international adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and the Chinese government, by examining heavy-handed enforcement

China's Hidden Children:

Chapters for Discussion

Chapter 1:

Introduction

Somebody's Children

Chapter 2:

Relinquishing Daughters – from Customary Adoption to Abandonment

Chapter 3:

Adopting Daughters and Hiding Out-of-Plan Children

Chapter 4:

From “Unwanted Abandoned Girls” to “Stolen Children”: The Circulation of Out-of-Plan Children in the 2000s

Chapter 5:

An Emerging “Traffic in Children”

Chapter 6:

Conclusion

The Hidden Human Costs of the One-Child Policy

of the one-child policy and the anguished “coerced choice” of the birth parents. What is our adoptive parent role after inadvertently participating in an adoption that could be deemed legal but unethical? What are our responsibilities to our children? To their birth parents?

4. Do you have feelings of guilt for participating in an adoption that was based in coercive government policy and an imbalance of power and privilege? Or, believing that no parent of any culture willingly abandons their children, is it freeing to have your nagging feeling of narrative disconnect validated through Johnson's birth parent interviews?
5. How would you change or explain the early life narrative that you discuss with your child adopted from China after reading this book?
6. How do you integrate the voices of the book's birth parents with what you thought to be true at the time of your child's adoption? Do the book's narratives and explanations affect your view of Chinese culture and attitudes toward daughters and sons?

7. Knowing what you understand now after reading *China's Hidden Children*, how has your perspective on international adoption changed?

As a China adoptee...

1. How did *China's Hidden Children* make you feel about your adoption? What thoughts and emotions did the birth parent narratives evoke?
2. Compare your beliefs about your **pre-adoptive** life before and after reading the book; have your perspective and feelings changed?"
3. Does a personal understanding of the losses involved in international adoption impact your beliefs or opinion about adoption? Would you adopt?
4. What discrepancies did you find between the life narrative that your adoptive parents believed to be true and told to you, and the facts and primary source voices documented in Johnson's book?
5. What was your reaction to the 2015 change to the one-child policy, legally allowing Chinese families to have more children?

When the cover art for this book was being decided, author Kay Johnson considered the image of the door to symbolize the untold stories of hidden children.



THE ADOPTIVE PARENT CONNECTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH KAY ANN JOHNSON

READ this stunningly powerful insight on the work of Dr. Kay Ann Johnson, and how, why and where it intersects with our own adoptive families.

Reader's Guide (RG): What drives your passion for uncovering the facts about Chinese adoption, and for understanding the Chinese families who have been impacted by China's population policies?

Kay Ann Johnson (KJ): My initial inspiration for researching the causes and consequences of infant abandonment in China was the adoption of my daughter in Wuhan in early 1991. At the time I was involved in an oral history of a North



Aggressive birth planning officials sometimes made leaving a child at a private home difficult and risky, forcing people to resort to more distant public places.



Kay Ann Johnson with daughter LiLi

China village but couldn't imagine anything more important than turning my attention to the issues that led to my daughter's loss of her birth family. She was one of an increasing number of foundlings arriving at the Wuhan orphanage, an infant without any known parents or personal history.

My research began as an effort to answer what I imagined would be her future questions about her origins and what happened to her, to help her deal with and understand her early loss of family, community and country of origin. At the time I also hoped to assuage any bitterness and anger a young child might feel toward her birth parents. I realize years later that her feelings and perspective on what happened to her, as the object of this history, are not the same as mine, the adoptive parent who gained so much and lost nothing.

Indeed a large part of my passion for this work

is rooted in my need to understand my own role in the history of this era as an adoptive parent of a Chinese born daughter. As my research progressed and I had the opportunity to learn directly from and about Chinese parents who relinquished their children I increasingly felt an obligation to tell their stories, stories marked by personal loss and pain, to make their voices and perspectives known.

I also discovered a large group of Chinese adoptive parents of abandoned and relinquished children, wholly invisible to the international adoption community (indeed invisible to many inside China as well). As a fellow adoptive parent, I identified with this group and wanted to tell their stories as well. Unlike international adopters, I found the stories of local Chinese adopters revealed some of the difficulties that birth parents also endured in this era of fierce population control efforts as government authorities actively sought to suppress their numbers.

In so many ways, this research and writing has been personally compelling to me as a parent, a China scholar and a researcher with an obligation to do justice to those who have shared their experiences with us, people whose lives have been caught up in harsh political conditions that led to the creation of our own families.

RG: How did your own feelings about being a China adoptive parent evolve as your research progressed?

KJ: Over the years, the effort to understand the problems faced by Chinese parents through their own eyes and words deepened the empathy I felt for those involved in these struggles. The discovery of so many adoptive parents in the communities we visited also profoundly reshaped my perception of my place as an adoptive parent of an abandoned Chinese child in this era and of my privilege in this role.

We were not alone in wanting to adopt the children who flooded into Chinese orphanages in this era. Many Chinese also wanted to build their families through adoption, even if secretly and against regulations that sought to suppress domestic adoption outside government-regulated channels that sharply limited the legal pool of adopters.

International adoptive parents, upon hearing that their child is “lucky” to have been adopted to the US, plucked from the orphanage by relatively rich foreigners, often insist that they are the “lucky” ones to have this wonderful child in their lives and families. I came to understand my “luck” in a much larger and more literal sense, learning that my daughter might have been found and adopted by a local family rather than being taken to the orphanage where I could adopt her. I also came to understand more clearly that we were “lucky” as the privileged beneficiaries of the harsh politics of population control and domestic adoption regulation that characterized this era.

Emotionally, I could not escape the fact that my “luck” came at the expense of many others in China, not only Chinese birth parents but also other parents who did not share my privileged circumstances. This was brought home to me in my first extended interview with a poor rural adoptive family; they told me of their prolonged struggle in the early 1990s to prevent birth planning officials from taking their adopted daughter from them, a struggle they eventually won due to incredible persistence and their own good luck in finding well-connected local allies to help them.

Today, their good fortune has multiplied as their recently married adopted daughter, the first college graduate in their family, has just given birth to a healthy baby girl bringing the joy of a new grandchild to her parents and her own new

family. Not all adoptive families we met were as lucky; some had children taken from them.

RG: Was there a particular story within *China's Hidden Children* that made a particularly profound impression on you?

KJ: Every story in this book is memorable to me in some way. The story of the Ding-Huang family that I just mentioned stands out as an early eye-opening learning experience and as a family that I have gotten to know well over the years. But unlike some of the other stories, this is one with a happy ending. It was particularly hard to write the stories of emotionally enduring loss that were recounted to us, although these also seemed particularly important stories to tell.

One of these stories is the one I excerpted for a short article on medium.com that I published in April, ***A Nation's Buried Pain***. Wang Xiaolan's story is in many ways typical of those who made an emotionally difficult “coerced choice” to relinquish a second or third or fourth daughter in the heat of fierce birth planning campaigns. Because we were able to stay in touch with her for nearly two decades, I was able to see the long term impact that her loss and her own sense of complicity had on her and her family, made worse by the fact that she has never known for certain what happened to her second daughter after she was left by her in-laws next to a Hefei police station.

The story of a nine month-old daughter being literally torn from her parents' arms by birth planning officials was particularly gut wrenching; the parents recounted the horror of that day, their frantic, ultimately futile struggle to recover their daughter from the orphanage where she was taken, and their continuing struggle to deal with the trauma of their loss.



Wang Liyao and Kay Ann Johnson

My dear colleague Wang Liyao was profoundly shaken and saddened by this story. He kept in close touch with the parents until a few months before he died, lamenting his inability to help them. This story of a brutal government seizure, a virtual kidnapping, coming after many years of research, stoked his fierce desire to see China's birth planning policies ended once and for all. He would have been pleased with the recent change to a two-child policy, a change that has allowed his son to have a second child, a blessing that would certainly have made Lao Wang very happy even though he would likely agree with me that this recent policy change is too little too late.

The many permanently damaged lives we learned about will always hang heavily on my heart, no doubt amplified by my role as an international adoptive mother who benefited from these policies, arriving just at the moment the Chinese government was deciding to allow international adoption to

emerge and grow. I guess this returns me to your first question about what drives my "passion for uncovering the facts about Chinese adoption, and for understanding the Chinese families who have been impacted by China's population policies": *To tell the stories of people whose lives have been invisibly tied to ours and to illuminate a small part of the hidden history of this era.*

RG: What do you hope will be the most important 'take-away' for readers of *China's Hidden Children*?

KJ: Above all, I hope that the book helps to introduce and humanize previously unseen and unheard people whose lives have been caught in the vortex of China's population policies in this era.

For fellow international adoptive parents, I hope to reduce the sense of the Chinese parents of our children as alien, mysterious, or "other" even if they may always remain unknown to us as individuals. In trying to tell their stories with empathy and understanding, I do not want to lionize them but to illuminate their struggles in difficult circumstances and the coerced choices some made, to show how ordinary people sometimes felt forced to compromise what they themselves felt was right and what they would have wanted in normal times, and the consequences they endured as a result.

I also hope to introduce fellow international adoptive parents to the existence of our counterparts in China, the large group of Chinese adoptive parents and families that we met and got to know. This places us as adoptive parents, and our families built through adoption, in a much larger global context than we knew at the time. This is an important part of the larger context that I initially hoped to uncover for the sake of my infant daughter over 25 years ago. The hidden history of this era is part of her history and the history of our family.

MUST-READ RESOURCES

[A Nation's Buried Pain, The Hidden Histories of China's Adopted Children](#)
by Dr. Kay Ann Johnson

[Touching Home in China, In Search of Missing Girlhoods – A Transmedia Project](#)
by Melissa Ludtke

[‘China’s Worst Policy Mistake’?](#) by Nicholas D. Kristof

[The Truth About China’s Missing Daughters](#) by Kathryn Joyce

[Our China Stories: Introduction to the Adoptee Storytelling Site](#) by Jena Heath

ADOPTEE VOICES

[A ‘Lost’ Daughter Speaks, and All of China Listens](#) by Jenna Cook

[China’s Two-Child Policy and My Two Lives](#) by Lily Rau

[Our China Stories](#) Life Narratives by China Adoptees