

INTRODUCTION

International Adoption Nation

“Where did your little girl come from?”

I was finishing my lunch and was about to get my one-year-old daughter ready to visit another part of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, when I was taken off guard. Judging by the woman’s age—early to mid-sixties—I doubted she needed a lesson on the birds and the bees. Thus, I thought I had been asked a variation of the question that has been posed to virtually every Asian in the United States, whether they be newly arrived immigrants or fourth-generation Americans: “Where are you from?” This is a question for which New York City, the place of my birth, is not the right answer. “My family is originally from the Philippines,” I explained. “My daughter is a third-generation Filipino American as well as a fourth-generation Korean and Chinese American on her father’s side.”

When the woman drew a blank look, it struck me that I had completely misinterpreted her question. She wanted to know *from where in Asia I had adopted* my daughter. She explained that her daughter had recently adopted a baby girl from China. It was then that I realized that the paradigm of the adopted Asian child had become so strong that it overrode common sense; even though I’m “Asian looking,” there was still the assumption that my daughter was adopted.

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International adoption from Asia has transformed the racial and ethnic landscape of the heartland of America to the point where—as in the situation I just described—it has become a social norm.¹ According to a 2009 local news story, more than thirteen thousand Korean adoptees live in Minnesota; this is the largest number of Korean adoptees in any

one place in the world.² In the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, the phenomenon of Asian international adoption is especially visible because of its predominantly transracial nature, with primarily white parents adopting Asian children. During one visit with my daughter to our neighborhood playground, I observed that I was the only *nonwhite* parent of an Asian child.

Asian international adoption in America is not solely a regional phenomenon, however. It has contributed to the transformation of the United States into an international adoption nation. The United States is the top recipient of internationally adopted children. According to the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, international adoptions in the United States have more than doubled between 1991 and 2001. In the new millennium, Russia, Guatemala, Romania, and Ukraine are among the top sending countries of adoptive children to the United States. However, Asian children have comprised the majority of children internationally adopted by U.S. citizens. Between 1971 and 2001, U.S. citizens adopted 265,677 children from other countries; 156,491 of those children were from Asian countries.

Since the late 1990s, China has been a major sending nation of adoptive children to the United States. In 2000, it led the list of the top twenty primary sending countries, with 5,095 children from China being adopted by U.S. citizens. South Korea provided 1,794 adoptive children, making it third on the list. Vietnam, India, and Cambodia also placed in the top ten of primary sending nations.³

Asian international adoption has also made a mark on our national culture. It has become a powerful way to imagine contemporary U.S. multiculturalism because it shapes one of the most intimate, emotionally laden, and cherished institutions: the family. The publicity about celebrities adopting internationally has made the American public highly aware of the possibility of families becoming transracial. In the early twenty-first century, for example, the omnipresent publicity of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt's "world's most beautiful" family—formed through the international adoptions of a Cambodian boy, an Ethiopian girl, and a Vietnamese boy in addition to their three biological children—has contributed to a popular perception of international and transracial adoption as a socially acceptable, if not desirable, way to create a family.⁴

International adoptions by celebrities are not solely the product of recent media hype; they have also been shaped by the celebrities' lived experiences. For example, the actress Katherine Heigl named her adopted Korean baby girl after her mother and her sister, who was also adopted from Korea.⁵ The positive portrayal of international and transracial adoption appears onscreen as well as off. The adoption of a Chinese baby girl by Kristin Davis's character Charlotte York is the happy ending to her struggle against infertility in the final episode of the iconic HBO sitcom *Sex and the City*.

Mainstream news media further illuminate how Asian international adoption has become a prominent example of contemporary multicultural family formation. A 2007 *New York Times* photo essay on the Jewish rites of passage of adopted Chinese girls illustrates how international and transracial adoption adds yet another layer of diversity to American cultural pluralism. The photo essay features Fu Qian, renamed Cecelia Nealon-Shapiro, completing bat mitzvah, the rite of passage into Jewish womanhood. A lesbian couple, Mary Nealon and Vivian Shapiro, had adopted "Cece," who was abandoned at an orphanage because of China's one-child rule. Although Nealon was raised as a Roman Catholic, and Shapiro was raised by atheistic Jews, they were drawn to Judaism after they met and decided to give Cece a relatively traditional upbringing.

Six Chinese adoptees from Cece's orphanage flew in from different parts of the United States to attend her bat mitzvah. And the writer Andy Newman reports that while Cece is one of the first Chinese adoptees in the United States to go through the rite of passage, "she will not be the last. Across the country, many Jewish girls like her will be studying their Torah portions, struggling to master the plaintive sing-song of Hebrew liturgy and trying to decide whether to wear Ann Taylor or a traditional Chinese outfit to the after-party."⁶ These stories and images present Asian international adoption as the newest chapter in an increasingly progressive American mosaic.

A darker, more problematic side of international and transracial adoption of Asian children lurks alongside these celebratory narratives. The specter of American racism and nativism toward Asians haunts the joyous imagery of these adoptive families. In *Sex and the City*, Charlotte York's desire to adopt a Chinese baby is met with her mother-in-law's

disapproval of having a Chinese member in their MacDougal clan. “Me no like Mandarin baby,” the mother-in-law succinctly explains. And while this specific example of popular culture might be easily dismissed as a dark, humorous vestige of an American racist past in contrast to its postracial present, since the late 1990s a growing body of memoirs, documentary films, and anthologies by Korean American adoptees who have come of age underscore the theme of their numerous mundane encounters with American racism. In doing so they present a more nuanced, if not ambivalent, picture of Asian international adoption. In the first published anthology by and about Korean adoptees, entitled *Seeds from a Silent Tree*, a Korean adoptee named Mi Ok Song Bruining writes about her American childhood:

Adolescence is traumatic enough without being targeted for being racially different, culturally identified as “alien” & looking like no one else—peer, child, or adult. I was stared at, harassed, bullied, called names, insulted, threatened & verbally abused by other kids—younger & older—on a daily basis—on the school bus, in school, stores, restaurants, & many other public places in Rhode Island.⁷

These works remind us that the historical legacies of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States—codified, for example, in U.S. immigration legislation, which targeted Asians for exclusion during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century; in U.S. naturalization law that rendered Asian immigrants ineligible for citizenship until the 1940s and 1950s; and in antimiscegenation laws in fourteen states that prohibited interracial sex and marriage between Asians and whites until the U.S. Supreme Court made such laws unconstitutional in 1967—persist in more recent times.

The increasing popularity, since the 1960s, of the seemingly positive stereotype of Asian Americans as “model minorities” in relation to negative (“less than model”) stereotypes of African Americans adds an additional layer of complexity regarding how race informs the phenomenon of Asian international adoption. Although positive and negative stereotypes of these communities are dehumanizing and dangerous, they have influenced both international and domestic adoption in the United States. Some scholars, such as the sociologist and adoption

studies expert Sara Dorow, have argued that these stereotypes undergird a racial preference for Asian children over African American children.⁸ In her pioneering book about contemporary transnational adoption between the United States and China, Dorow claims that these attitudes reflect popular images and ideologies of a “flexible Asian difference” that can be successfully integrated in American families and communities in contrast to a “less assimilable” African American difference.

Furthermore, the decreasing supply of white babies in the United States in the late twentieth century—a result of the creation of the birth control pill, the legalization of abortion, and the increasing social legitimacy of single parenting—contributes to the commodification of Asian children for an international adoption market. The process highlights the way in which profit motives as well as a broader context of unequal social, political, and economic relations within and across nations create specific flows of adoptable children from one country to another. In a *Los Angeles Times* article in September 2009, Barbara Demick reported that in some rural areas in China “instead of levying fines for violations of China’s child policies, greedy officials took babies, which would each fetch \$3,000 in adoption fees.”⁹ Several scholars have strongly criticized international adoption by documenting and highlighting a global market that transports babies from poorer to richer nations, likening it to a form of forced migration and human trafficking.¹⁰ Thus, Asian international adoption is simultaneously highly celebrated and deeply controversial.

But these international and transracial sensibilities about family making, and the heated debates that they generate, are not as new as they seem. They have a history.

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This book explores the historical origins of this highly visible and growing phenomenon of international adoption from Asia. Although an emergent scholarly field of American adoption studies combined with in-depth journalistic accounts have forcefully illustrated that the United States is—to use the book title by the journalist, adoption advocate, and adoptive parent Adam Pertman—an “adoption nation,” the history of the international turn in this phenomenon and the formative role that adoption from Asian countries has played in it are not well known.¹¹

My study seeks to move beyond one-dimensional portrayals of Asian international adoption as a progressive form of U.S. multiculturalism on the one hand or as an exploitative form of cultural and economic imperialism on the other. Rather, its major objective is to move toward a nuanced, complex understanding of its history as a history of race, foreign relations, immigration, and labor as well as intimacy.

This study was primarily inspired by the six and a half years I spent living and teaching in Minnesota—first, accompanying my husband, Greg, when he taught at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, and then working as an assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota—in the late 1990s and the first few years of the new millennium. Gustavus Adolphus College and the U of M had hired us primarily on the basis of our professional expertise in Asian American Studies, a relatively young interdisciplinary scholarly field created out of social protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasizes the study of the history, artistic expressions, and contemporary concerns of Asians in the United States. Neither Greg nor I are part of families in which adoption has played a major role. However, we were immediately struck by the presence of Korean American adoptees in our undergraduate classes. They sought to learn more about their personal histories in a larger sociohistorical context through Asian American Studies. However, in the late 1990s, little research had been conducted about Asian international adoption in the context of the field.¹² Most of the scholarly studies on Asian international adoptees in the United States were psychological and medical studies that focused on the adjustment of the adoptees.¹³ These were important, pioneering studies, but they also framed international adoption as a problem to be rectified rather than as a dynamic phenomenon to be studied on its own terms.¹⁴ In addition to the desire to write a groundbreaking work in Asian American Studies, I was also moved to undertake a study of Asian international adoption because of the Asian American Studies commitment to create knowledge that is relevant to the Asian American communities in which we live and serve. While a resident of Minnesota and a professor at the U of M, I recognized that Asian American adoptees were important members of that community.

I am also a trained historian and, upon embarking on a study of Asian international adoption in the United States, I learned that the

University of Minnesota housed the records of the International Social Service-United States of America Branch (ISS-USA) in its Social Welfare History Archives. Organizational records and in-depth oral interviews have been vital resources for recent historical and ethnographic studies of U.S. domestic adoption, adoption in the Americas, and international adoption. *Global Families* complements these works through its close reading of the ISS-USA organizational records. While several scholars have utilized the ISS-USA records alongside those of the Child Welfare League of America, U.S. Children's Bureau, United Nations agencies, and various Korean government agencies among others, their focus on U.S. domestic adoption and Korean international adoption misses the broader trajectory of ISS-USA work over time and in other parts of Asia.

The ISS-USA records were a gold mine in many ways. The scope of the collection was large, including fifty-six linear feet of general administrative correspondence and history files; minutes and reports from annual meetings, board of directors meetings, and administrative committee meetings; financial reports and budgets; and organizational statistics. The ISS-USA records also include five hundred linear feet of case records and case record indexes dating from 1929 to 1995.¹⁵ An especially rich feature of these records was its correspondence about adoption, both that concerning programs and services that the ISS offered and that between the ISS-USA and prospective adoptive parents, independent adoption agencies, state social service agencies, and ISS branches in other countries. Taken together, these records enable us to see the key roles that an international social service agency, local social workers, independent adoption agencies, humanitarian organizations, and individual adoption advocates from many different walks of life have played in this history. These interactions were not always cooperative. Indeed, conflict over how international adoption should be facilitated was a major theme of the correspondence.

Interestingly, the historical origins of the ISS-USA were not rooted in the world of adoption. Rather, the early history of the ISS-USA was linked to the growing social awareness of family problems related to international migration more broadly. Early twentieth-century problems that plagued family members who were separated by national borders and, at times, by vast distances led to the creation of an

international, independent, and nonsectarian organization in 1924 that could coordinate social welfare casework across national boundaries. Initially called the International Migration Service, the organization changed its name in 1946 to the International Social Service to reflect the breadth of its casework. Although such casework was varied—including, but not limited to, the separation of families; desertion and child support; child custody; paternity claims; and legal questions concerning deportation, repatriation, and immigration—by the late 1950s, casework related to international adoption constituted the major activity of the ISS.¹⁶

In contrast to the more well-known singular divine mission of the Oregon farmer Harry Holt and his Holt Adoption Program to save Korean war orphans through adoption by born-again Christians in the United States and the work of the celebrated Nobel Prize-winning writer Pearl S. Buck, who founded the international and interracial adoption agency Welcome House, the records reveal that ISS social workers (in Europe and Asia as well as the United States) expressed ambivalence as well as advocacy regarding the phenomenon of Asian international and transracial adoption. During the formative Cold War period of Asian international adoption, the ISS concluded that international and transracial adoption was a viable, indeed a beneficial, form of making a family. Yet its official publications strongly noted that it could also work against the best interests of the children—even wreaking havoc on their personal development, the lives of their biological and adoptive families, and the effectiveness of social welfare work in Asia and America—if not handled professionally and ethically. As a result of studying these records, I was able to glean the complexity of international and transracial adoption, its radical and progressive possibilities of a world profoundly united across national, cultural, and racial divides through family formation, as well as its strong potential for reifying the very national, cultural, and racial hierarchies it sought to challenge.

A profound lesson I learned from this collection was that, while the mainstream news reports of the time period exalted the efforts of charismatic individuals like Harry Holt and Pearl Buck, a comprehensive and more accurate history of Asian international adoption needed to capture the collective—albeit chaotic on many occasions—effort made

by many different groups and individuals to enable its practice. And although state governments in Asia and the United States played important roles in this history through immigration laws and adoption regulations, many nongovernmental organizations and individual citizens were at the center of the creation of this international phenomenon. This collective effort speaks to the heart of the inspirational intellectual project outlined by a distinguished historian of international relations, Akira Iriye:

If what is at the heart of our historical inquiry is the human condition, then it makes sense to go beyond the nation or the state as the sole framework of analysis and deal with human affairs, human aspirations, human values, and human tragedies. States do play a role, but only a partial role in all of these. The task that challenges historians of international relations is to devise a new transnational perspective that takes into account both states and non-state actors.¹⁷

This study takes up this task by presenting a history of Asian adoption as an international and, above all, human story comprised of the efforts of many seemingly ordinary people.

My premise is that the history of Asian international adoption is best understood as a unique but also increasingly normative type of family formation in our self-consciously global age. It is one important form of what I call “global family making.” I define “global family making” as the process involving the decisions made and actions taken by people who create and sustain a family by consciously crossing national and often racial borders. In contrast to a state-centered or “top-down” approach to such a process—such as the South Korean government’s recent official attempt to incorporate overseas Korean adoptees into the state’s “global family”¹⁸—my concept of global family making calls for more attention to the nonstate actors, such as the international workers, adoptive parents, and adoptees and their birth families who participate in the global family-making process from the bottom up.

The international adoption community has struck me at times to be an insular world with its own membership and outlets of communication and expression by and for the community. This insularity is due in no small part to the marginalization, if not exclusion, of adoptive

families because of the tendency to see racially matched and/or biologically formed families as “normal” or “real.”¹⁹ But the history of international adoption is a significant part of Asian American history, and by extension Asian and U.S. histories, that is important for all of us, not just those directly involved in adoption, to learn. The history of international adoption speaks to the way in which family formation needs to be understood on a global social, political, and economic scale, and not solely a personal or local one.

The concept of global family making connects the seemingly uncommon world of adoption to the broader forces of international migration that bind so many of us. For example, global family making is not solely applicable to international adoption, but it involves the growing phenomenon of international marriage. The sociologist and Asian American Studies scholar Hung Cam Thai’s recent study of Vietnamese international marriages points out that marriage is a major reason why people migrate to the United States.²⁰ And the research of the feminist studies scholar Felicity Amaya Schaeffer on international marriages between American men and Mexican and Colombian women illuminates that these international marriages often cross racial as well as national borders.²¹

Finally, while it is important to acknowledge that global family making can result and has resulted in the breaking down of racial divides, and while some might interpret the increasing popularity of international, transracial adoption as proof of our “postracial” society, my research urges us to take seriously the historical and present-day significance of race in the lives of global families and in the process of global family making. Race, I argue, is fundamental to understanding the demographics, discourses, and institutions of early Asian international adoption history as well as the lived experiences of Asian American adoptees. It is an analytical category that is historically linked but not always inextricably tied to racism. This is a lesson obtained from the ISS-USA records, which demonstrates that ISS workers were sensitive to the difference between race as a socially constructed category and the practice of racism in both Asian countries and the United States. But the lesson is most powerfully felt in the cultural productions—the memoirs, creative writing, visual art, and documentary films—by and about adult Asian adoptees, most of whom are of Korean descent. In

these works we learn that the absence of an acknowledgment about race is not necessarily a socially progressive or liberatory move. Rather, to ignore or to reject any critical engagement with race can be and has been detrimental. Thus, we must not conflate race and racism but must instead recognize that a discussion about race in the history of international and transracial adoption is productive for all of our families, our societies, and our world.

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The book is organized chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1, “Race and Rescue in Early Asian International Adoption History,” challenges the popular notion that international adoption in America is the newest face of U.S. multiculturalism by connecting this phenomenon to the post–World War II and Cold War presence of the United States in Asia through the establishment of military bases and the fathering of mixed-race children (popularly known as Amerasians) overseas by U.S. servicemen with Asian women. The origins of Asian international adoption were inextricably linked to the adoption of mixed-race Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese children by American families in the 1950s through the 1970s. U.S. news media, social welfare agencies, and independent adoption organizations represented the mixed-race children from Japan, Korea, and Vietnam as an Asian social problem due to restrictive Asian traditions and values based on patrilineal bloodlines. While these images racialized Asia as a backwards place in contrast to a progressive United States, social critics also complicated the East-West divide by invoking the moral responsibility of the United States in Asia. The ISS believed that this international problem—a problem of racial mixture, Asian social discrimination, and U.S. accountability abroad—required a transnational solution. It could only be resolved through stronger social service in the Asian countries as well as international adoption by American families.

Chapter 2, “The Hong Kong Project,” presents an earlier history of Chinese international adoption from Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, which has been overshadowed by the more recent phenomenon of Chinese international adoption that began in the 1990s. It also links this earlier history of Asian international adoption to refugee

resettlement. While, at first glance, the pairing of adoptees and refugees may appear odd, the histories of Asian international adoption and Asian refugee resettlement in the United States share several similarities. These include their emergence in the chaotic aftermath of war, the migration of Asian adoptees to the United States under the auspices of refugee policies, and several discursive similarities such as the depiction of Asian adoptees and refugees by scholarly studies and the mainstream media as objects in need of rescue by the United States. As an increasing number of white Americans expressed interest in international *and* transracial adoption, their adoption of “full-blooded” Chinese children presented social workers with another problem of race: assessing racial tolerance among potential adoptive parents and their communities.

Chapter 3, “A World Vision,” explores the central role of international and local social service agencies and independent adoption organizations in facilitating Asian international adoption. It acknowledges the significance of individual efforts in this history—most notably Harry Holt and Pearl S. Buck—but also attempts to broaden our understanding of the increasing popularity of this phenomenon beyond the efforts of charismatic individuals. The participation of many different agencies and organizations illustrates that the history of Asian international adoption is rooted in a collective past. Sadly, competition between social service agencies and individuals dominated the discourses of how international adoption should work. The collaboration between the screen siren Jane Russell and the ISS-USA provides one example of how a famous and religiously motivated individual could work effectively with a nonsectarian organization. Well known for starring in Howard Hughes’s 1943 film *The Outlaw*, Russell should also be remembered for her leadership and dedication to the WAIF (World Adoption International Fund), which became the fund-raising arm of the ISS-USA’s adoption division in the 1950s.

The emotional ups and downs of pioneering American adoptive families are featured in chapter 4, “Global Family Making.” In the 1950s and 1960s, many news stories popularized Asian international adoption to the general public by representing these families’ experiences with wonderful beginnings and happy endings. In doing so, the writers of these stories also obscured the serious challenges that accompanied creating a family through international adoption. Although the ISS-USA

archival records primarily depicted the perspectives of social service workers, some documents illuminated the experiences and viewpoints of American adoptive parents. In contrast to mainstream news stories, they put forward more complex narratives that highlighted spousal disagreements, financial stress, adjustment difficulties, and racial anxieties. When taken together, these challenges as well as joys of global family making present a more accurate portrayal of the history of Asian international adoption in the United States.

A notable absence from the archival records are the voices of adoptees. However, since the 1990s, the emergence of a sizable body of artistic work by and about Asian American adult adoptees has challenged the representation of Asian international adoption as a “quiet migration.”²² The final chapter, “To Make Historical Their Own Stories,” calls attention to the sociohistorical as well as aesthetic contributions by Asian American adult adoptees for adoption studies and for Asian American history. The chapter features close readings of the documentary films *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, which were both written and directed by Deann Borshay Liem, a Korean international and transracial adoptee whose adoption was arranged by the ISS-USA. The memories and contemporary reflections of Borshay Liem, her Korean and American families, and other Korean women and men whose lives transformed and were transformed by international adoption constitute an alternative and much-needed archive for the study of adoption.

The chapter analyzes *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* in relation to two experimental films. Marlon Fuentes’s *Bontoc Eulogy* explores the relationship between U.S.-Philippine colonial history and contemporary Filipino immigrant identity through one Filipino American’s search for the whereabouts of his Bontoc Igorot grandfather who participated in a live display at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory* contemplates the impact of Hollywood’s and the U.S. government’s renditions of World War II on her Japanese American family members’ fading memories of their internment.

Finally, given that the presence of adoptees in my Asian American Studies classes inspired this study, the chapter emphasizes that the artistic work by and about Asian American adoptees is important for Asian

American history and not solely for adoption studies. *Bontoc Eulogy* and *History and Memory* do not address the subject of Asian international adoption, but, when studied alongside *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, the films expose the multilayered difficulties of documenting the histories of Americans of Asian descent. These challenges include bumping up against the presumed authority of social workers, individual adoption advocates, adoptive parents, museum directors, and government officials, and confronting the predominantly sentimental and chauvinistic depictions of Asian international adoption, U.S. colonization of the Philippines, and Japanese American internment. The filmmakers Borshay Liem, Fuentes, and Tajiri subvert popular understandings of these histories by reclaiming their historical agency and the historical agency of their families and specific communities—that is, their ability to tell and to document their own stories with complexity, humanity, and dignity.