From China to Colorado: Stories on Adoption and the Impact of the One-Child Policy

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I've never taken a day growing up in Colorado for granted—I've loved the countless days of sun, mountains and fields near my backyard, and my friends and family who I've formed connections with for life. Despite all the good, I've always had this aching feeling that I was different, or that something was wrong with me.

I was born in 2002 and adopted from China's Hunan province in 2003. Growing up in Greeley, CO, has made me reflect on my own experiences growing up along with the complicated history that preceded my adoption.

The International Adoption Program from China has had long-term and life-long consequences for Chinese adoptees and their families, which was perpetuated by the one-child policy. With the end of the program in September 2024, no one will live their stories again. Through my own reflection and interviews with numerous Chinese adoptees from Colorado, now is the time to share their history and experiences of this group before it's forgotten.

How Did We End Up Here?

China's one-child policy started in 1979 and closed in 2015. China's population had been quickly increasing up to the policy's start—data from the United Nations shows China's population around 540 million in 1950, then grew to more than 800 million in 1970. The Chinese government believed that this initiative would halt population growth.

Grant Miller, an economics professor at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, found through his research that as of 2016, there were now 33.6 million more men than women in China and that "population control strategies have human costs and unforeseen consequences."

These unforeseen consequences come largely in part due to Chinese society favoring men. D Li, an academic scholar for China Popular Daily, discusses in his article, "Preference for Sons: Past and Present," that the preference for sons rooted all the way back to 500 B.C., where men were considered superior to women. He explains that sons were expected to carry on the family lineage and the last name, so a lack of sons was a sign of humiliation for a family.

Introducing the International Adoption Program

Thirteen years after the one-child policy went into effect, China's international adoption program opened in 1992 and closed September 2024. Through this program, the U.S. Department of State reports that over 160,000 thousand children were adopted out of China, with more than 80,000 going to the United States.

In 2000, China signed the 1993 Hague Convention and ratified it in 2005. The convention aimed to prevent the abduction, sale of, or trafficking of children in intercountry adoptions. The signing of this convention provided a lot of promise within China's international adoption program; U.S.

Department of State data shows that nearly half of all adoptions between the United States and China happened between the years 2000-2005.

The program's sudden closure leaves many wondering what happens next. Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, mentions in his article, "A Closed Door for Orphans? Unpacking China's International Adoption Policy," that the Chinese government provided a vague explanation to the program's end, citing alignment with "the spirit of relevant international conventions" without specifying which conventions.

Corruption and Trafficking

The delay in ratifying the Hague Convention led to disastrous consequences within China's international adoption program.

Brian Stuy is the founder of Research-China.org and specializes in research on Chinese adoptions. His decades of research provides evidence of adoption corruption within China's borders, and that some orphanage directors sought opportunities to increase their adoption revenue by various means including baby buying, confiscation of children and deceptive promises made to birth families to coerce them to relinquishing a child. Foreign families also often had to make a large cash donation to receive their child from the orphanage, around $3,000.

In November 2005, news of the Hunan Trafficking Scandal broke, where six orphanages within China's Hunan province were accused of buying trafficked infants from 2002 to 2005. This story expanded to the West after an article was published by the Washington Post titled "Stealing Babies for Adoption" and tarnished the reputation of the international adoption program—there was a steady decline in Chinese adoptions every year after 2005.

A Colorado Lens

Through this large and intimidating subject, I wanted to get a closer look at the adoption situation within Colorado. With a population of nearly six million, only 0.8% of it is Chinese.

I interviewed Josh Zhong, the CEO and Founder of Cherish (previously Chinese) Children Adoption International (CCAI), which is headquartered in Denver. He and his wife, Lily Nie, were inspired to start CCAI in 1992 after taking a trip to China and seeing the conditions of the orphanages. By 1999, they were the world's largest China Adoption Agency and assisted in approximately 3,000 adoptions to Colorado.

With the end of the international adoption program, Zhong said that CCAI was struggling financially. Their focus now is putting more time and investment into post-adoption support, programs that are designed to help a child connect with their Chinese roots through language classes, cultural immersion activities and camps with other Chinese adoptees.

"Every child we help adopt, we consider our family," Zhong said. "We want to continue to support them in any way possible."

The Other Adoptees

I was curious to see how other adoptees felt about their upbringings—I was just one person with one experience; while it had been good, the emotional and mental turmoil of my adoption was particularly difficult for me. Had others felt that way, too, or was I the anomaly in this situation?

I scouted out many Colorado adoptees I knew to learn about their experiences. I asked about how they grew up, what they experienced, and their overall thoughts of being a Colorado adoptee.

Michael K., 21, adopted from Shanxi province

Out of all the Chinese adoptees from my life, Michael, who asked that only his first name be used,

was the only boy I knew. Adopted in 2005, he grew up in Aurora, CO.

"I never thought that I was different from any other kid," he said. His family was already diverse—a white mother, Indian father, a brother biological to his parents 35 years older than him and an older sister, also adopted from China. Through heckles of racism in his school years, he said he grew a thick skin and doesn't let much bother him anymore. He's had some resentment towards China because of how they handled the one-child policy and international adoption program, but was clear that this resentment doesn't have to do with his own adoption.

While everyone else I talked to had attributed their adoption to the one-child policy, Michael believes that he had a different situation. Born with a heart condition that needed immediate surgery, he was glad that he was given up for adoption, since it allowed him to live a better-quality life. Treating his adoption as a blessing, he was involved in Chinese clubs in school and is now taking a Chinese language class to learn more about his culture. He said meeting his biological parents has never been at the top of his bucket list.

Alyssa Bullock, 22, adopted from Fujian province

Among those I interviewed, Alyssa Bullock was the only other adoptee than myself who had grown up "out East," being from La Junta, CO. With a population of just over 7,000, she said that she and her adopted sister were the only Asian people in town. Despite this, she never felt isolated.

"I didn't really see myself as someone who was Asian," she said. "I was just growing up as another white person, which made it less weird."

Bullock was adopted in 2004. While her upbringing was positive, she always had the interest of growing up in a more culturally diverse area—it's what inspired her to study abroad in Tokyo and Singapore but ironically feels like she stands out more than in Colorado. She loved growing up with another adoptee as her sister since they were able to relate and support each other.

As for her resentment towards China or her adoption, she has none: "I know some feel resentment about their adoption, but I've never understood it. What is there to be resentful for if this is the life you get to live?"

Lily Elliot, 21, adopted from Jiangxi province

Growing up outside of Vail, CO, Lily Elliot was adopted in 2003 and said she was one of three Asian kids at her school. Because of this, she was always hit with the "adoption kid starter pack."

"They would always ask me the same questions," she said. "'Do you play an instrument?' 'Do you speak Chinese?' 'Do you want to find your birth parents?'"

Despite these stereotypes, she felt secure in her adoption and was well supported by her family. She grew up as an only child and liked it, though it felt a little lonely sometimes—while she always thought about having another adopted sibling, she was afraid that a sibling biological to her parents would feel like a competition.

With the international adoption program, she's not surprised by its end but disappointed that future families won't get the chance to have a diverse family like hers. She says that everything has worked out for her—she just feels bad for the Chinese adoptees that didn't have the same experience as she did.

Ava T. and Grace T., 21, adopted from Guangdong province

Ava and Grace, who asked that only their first names be used, are twin sisters, adopted together in 2004. Their sentiments growing up are similar: they liked living in Aurora, CO, briefly attended Chinese school before growing uninterested, and constantly leaned on each other for support. But as they aged, so did their interests. In high school, Ava was

involved in different adoptee organizations, learning about the complex emotions that others had about their adoption.

"Ava was always more interested in our adoption," Grace said. "I might've been more interested had she not been there, but she was able to pass on what she'd learned."

Now, both graduated from college and spread across the world (Ava in London, Grace in Kansas City), they never talk about their adoption. It's always been something they've known but haven't felt a need to discuss. Both said that they were grateful to be adopted, especially with each other, since it's a rare situation that twins stick together. As for questions about looking for their biological parents, their thoughts were mixed.

"I was more interested in wanting to find our biological parents when I was younger, but it was never something that Grace wanted to do," Ava said. "Now, as I've grown older, I'm not sure I want to, either."

Anna Rahn, 21, and Mary Rahn, 19, adopted from Jiangxi and Guangxi provinces

Only a few years apart, Anna and Mary Rahn were both adopted from China in 2003 and 2006. Both joked about the odd comments they've received over the years in their hometown of Colorado Springs, CO, from getting called "oriental" at grocery stores or being asked if they were siblings to another Asian girl at school. They both had taken these comments with a grain of salt, however, and reflected on their upbringings positively.

"Colorado Springs isn't that diverse, but I didn't have any problems with it growing up," Anna Rahn said. She and her sister were involved in the May May club for a short time, a club for adopted girls from China. "The club didn't have much of an impact for me, it was more of a place for all the moms to hang out together."

As for their cultural immersion efforts now, they're taking a different path. Anna Rahn says she's connected back to her culture on her own, learning Chinese and taking a school trip back to China this past summer. As for Mary Rahn, she's uninterested in going back to China at all.

"I don't think I want to go back," she said. "It would be awkward. I grew up here with white parents and white friends. I don't think I would feel accepted there."

A Final Reflection

I am grateful I was adopted, but there's a certain grief I've experienced being given up at an early age, where I thought that something was inherently wrong with me—I was genuinely surprised when I was the only adoptee who felt this emotion.

There are many factors that contribute to my feelings: growing up with a sister who was biological to my parents, knowing I was directly involved in the Hunan trafficking scandal and my positive perspective of the international adoption program turning into something more complex after this research. I can be thankful and joyous yet resentful and angry at the same time—that's probably the most important thing I've learned.

With the end of China's international adoption program, it marks the end to a three- decade era of China adoptees. The unintended consequences from the one-child policy have left adoptees with vast feelings about their upbringing, adoption, and future—we should focus on preserving their experiences to remember an important part of history. The adoption community is likely holding on to each other a little bit tighter and reflecting on what our own futures will look like without new Chinese adoptees. One thing is for sure, however—our generation won't see anything like this again.