

Child Valuation in Contemporary China:

Abandonment, Institutional Care, and Transnational Adoption

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Chapter 1

An Overview of Alternative Care of Children in China 1949-Present

“No, no, *Didi*, not like that!” Preeti shook her head in a combination of resignation and disbelief. She hit pause on the remote to stop the music, then demonstrated the correct way to do a body roll. “Like this, *Didi*, follow me.” I watched intently, then tried to emulate her movements. While there was no mirror for me to witness my attempt, the eruption of giggles from the sea of girls around me told me something was definitely not right. My dismal attempt at Bollywood dancing is just one of many memorable moments from my experience interning with Udayan Care, an NGO in New Delhi which provides residential care for orphaned and separated children alongside various other child support services, this past summer. From May to July, I conducted mental health interviews with children, caregivers, care-leavers, and staff affiliated with Udayan Care homes. In my two months in Delhi, I visited a total of seventeen residential care institutions alongside two other Duke undergraduate students and three Hindi translators who were local to the Delhi area. Together, we conducted qualitative and quantitative interviews to evaluate the mental health and well-being of children and their caregivers living in the homes.

Though all seventeen homes were under the same umbrella organization, each home we visited differed greatly. Some homes were small apartments located in the heart of the New Delhi, dimly lit with low ceilings. In these homes, I remember interviewing young children while perched on the edge of a trundle bed in a bedroom half the size of my own back home, seeking privacy in a space in which privacy was a concept as foreign as me. Other homes were larger, with outdoor spaces in which the kids could run around and play. These homes were located in the outskirts of the city and housed more than two dozen children, which made conducting interviews in private a more feasible possibility. Homes also differed in terms of resources available, number of caregivers, and frequency of local and international visitors. Faced with highly disparate care and resources between homes even within the same organization, I began to

question: what does alternative care look like in other settings? What do global frameworks for alternative care for orphaned and separated children look like? In seeking answers, I came upon the UN Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children which was established in 2010 by the UN General Assembly. However, this internationally accepted document specifically addressing alternative care fails to define the term. Instead, it loosely references alternative care as the “best courses of action for children deprived of parental care, or at risk of being so” (UN General Assembly, 2010). Who, then, determines the best course of action for these children, and how does this process occur? How does decision-making take place in institutional care and what are the critical factors which influence outcomes?

As I ruminated on these questions, I found myself returning to the concept of value. Though value can take on a myriad of different meanings depending on the discipline or context in which it is interpreted, it is perhaps this amorphous and subjective quality which leads me to contend that value considerations play a critical role in determining the lives and well-being of children living in institutional care. as they influence both policy formation and direct administration of care. As minors, children have less agency under the law than fully developed adults. Thus, many decisions fall under the jurisdiction of adults, both those in direct proximity, e.g. caregivers, and those more removed, e.g. policy makers, who rely on personal value judgements which rely on both personal and external factors. Despite the relevance of value and its attendant influencers, valuation within the institutional care context has not been critically considered in the literature.

In this thesis, I seek to consider the complex entanglement of economic, moral, and political values in relation to the lives and well-being of orphaned and abandoned children. As these forms of valuation cannot be interpreted without deeper consideration of the greater socio-

political and historic context, interrogation of valuation in institutional care on the global scale would be an enormous undertaking deserving of a book, if not multiple. With these limitations in mind, I look specifically to contemporary China as a case-study for consideration of how values interact with outcomes for children in institutional care. China is particularly interesting in that the socio-historical climate in post-socialist China necessitates deep consideration of state-level influence on individual value decisions even in relation to the family which is in many cases considered an entity distinct from state control, an issue which will resurface throughout this thesis.

Questions of child valuation in institutional care are particularly relevant to China considering the rise in child abandonment and demand for alternative care which occurred in the late twentieth century. This coincided with the passage of the One Child Policy and the escalation of its enforcement following 1986 (Zhang, 2017). As of the National Census of Orphans in China, there were 573,000 children living in alternative care settings (Shang & Fisher, 2014). Moreover, within China's orphan care system, the lives of orphaned and abandoned children vary greatly depending on the locale and available resources. In this thesis, I focus specifically on institutional care settings in urban China because this subset of alternative care illustrates the tension in values which influence interactions between Chinese and Western stakeholders which manifest in funding, direct involvement, and transnational adoption. While my focus is on institutional care, I will also briefly address other forms of alternative care in China to provide context for the lives and experiences of orphaned, separated, and abandoned children living in these alternative settings as well.

As I address the designation of value to orphaned and abandoned children in institutional as it relates to economics, morals, and politics, I primarily focus on how the value of the child is

constructed by adults who come in contact with orphaned and abandoned children and adults who contribute to determining structures of alternative care and adoption structures. In this analysis, I contend that orphaned and abandoned children's ascribed worth in Chinese society reveals a long-standing tension between changing domestic and international policies and popular Western perceptions of China. The abandoned child's value is determined far beyond the reach of the individual, yet this has tangible effects on the child's lived experiences. Key questions I will address in subsequent chapters are as follows: (1) To what extent do adult economic concerns and expectations influence the abandonment and/or adoption of children and their status in alternative care?; (2) What are the moral motivators of care in institutional care environments and how do these influence care received within the homes?; and (3) Is China encouraging transnational adoption as form of soft power to expand the reach and influence of Chinese culture abroad?

Alternative care in China is a critical area of study because the quality of care and living conditions have tangible impact on child mental and physical health. Additionally, alternative care in China is an understudied field. Though informal systems of care for orphaned and abandoned children have undoubtedly been in place for hundreds of years and a formal system since 1949, substantive research in this area only began to emerge in the early 2000s. Moreover, much of the literature around this topic is heavily geared towards in one of two ways: (1) focus on understanding the structural composition and make-up of alternative care and (2) emphasis on the narrative experience of individuals who have interacted with the alternative care system or have participated in transnational adoption from China.

In focusing specifically on the valuation of children living in institutional care in urban China, I will investigate the relationship between population level modernization encouraged by

the Chinese government, traditional Chinese values, and international perceptions which influence economic, moral, and political considerations. I seek to answer the complex question of valuation within institutional care with an interdisciplinary approach informed by my past experiences working within residential care settings in India and analysis of pre-existing literature, historical Chinese records, and personal narratives of individuals who have lived in or worked in institutional care settings in post-socialist China. Children living in institutional care settings experience a higher level of precarity of attachment and due to the lack a stable, primary caregiving figure (Bowlby, 1952), so it is even more critical to better understand to motivations of adult individuals interacting with these children. By better understanding adult motivations and frameworks for attributions of worth, we will be better able to enact positive structural or policy changes which could lead to better outcomes and quality of life of orphaned, separated, and abandoned children in Chinese residential care.

Background

The PRC has undergone many of changes in the contemporary period which have affected both the cultural and physical make-up of the Chinese people. While there is a substantive body of research addressing political and economic changes in China, alternative care for orphaned and abandoned children is underrepresented in the literature. Considering the rise child abandonment and demand for alternative care which occurred in the late twentieth century, coinciding with the One Child Policy, this area merits further study. To understand alternative care in China, it is helpful to first examine the broader socio-cultural landscape which paved the path to increased child abandonment. Then, I will delve into the presence of alternative care in the PRC from 1949 to present day, paying specific attention to institutional care settings.

Family Planning in China after the Chinese Communist Revolution:

In the 20th century, China underwent a series of sweeping political and cultural reforms, many of which were connected to the Chinese Communist Revolution. This began in 1949 which is coincidentally the same year that state-run institutional care for orphaned and abandoned children was first introduced in the PRC. During the first few decades following the Revolution, China experienced a period of rapid population growth. This phenomenon is less than surprising considering that China's supreme leader, Mao Zedong, purportedly held the perspective: "More People, More Power" (Zhang, 2017, p. 142). According to National Census results from 1953 to 1982, China's population almost doubled, rising from 582.6 million to over 1 billion people in the short span of thirty years (Spencer, 2013). This population growth occurred despite consistent state-level efforts to curb population growth. Despite Mao's philosophy on the relationship between population and power, the Chinese government encouraged family planning as a means of population control beginning as early as 1953 with the passage of legislation approving birth control and abortion measures (Spencer, 2013). Deng Xiaoping, who was Vice Premier at the time, was a particularly strong proponent for birth control (Zhang, 2017). Aside from encouraging the use of birth control, the Chinese state also encouraged later marriage as a means of slowing population growth as part of its first national-level population policy, *Wan Li Shao*, meaning "Longer, Later, Fewer" (Babiarz, Ma, Miller, and Song, 2018, p. 1). By restricting the minimum marriage age for women to 23 and for men to 25, the state regulated marriage in order to encourage families to have "fewer" children later in life – "fewer" implying no more than two children per family (Zhang, 2017, p. 143). Based on deviations in the number of female children from the naturally occurring sex-ratio, researchers have found about 210,000

missing girls which can be attributed to female post-natal neglect or, in the worst-case scenario, female infanticide in the 1970s which correlates with the introduction of the widescale national population policies in China (Babiarz, Ma, Miller, and Song, 2018).

Though population policies were already widespread and stringent by the 1970s, the PRC government's efforts to control population growth became increasingly restrictive and, to some extent, coercive. After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping rose to power in 1978 (Zhang, 2017). Deng's leadership brought about many changes in the PRC as China came to embrace the mentality of 改革开放 (*gaige kaifang*), or "reform and opening," and became more involved in the global sphere. Considering his earlier stance in favor of birth control, it is unsurprising that Deng Xiaoping was in favor of implementing an even more stringent national level family planning program. This took form in the One-Child Policy which was first introduced in January 1980 to all members of the Communist Party before being rolled out in the form of an open letter to the National People's Congress in September of the same year (Zhang, 2017). The policy dictated that all families, with the exception of minority ethnic groups, must limit the number of children they bear to one child per family.

In addition to the passage of the One-Child Policy, the Chinese government also continued to encourage the spread of birth control through the State Family Planning Commission. Some actions the State Family Planning Commission undertook contained significant elements of coercion such as compulsory intrauterine device insertion for women who had already given birth to one child and compulsory sterilization of either husband or wife in families with two children (Spencer 2013). Faced with strict regulation and serious consequences for going against the law, families were highly disincentivized from having more than one child

during this period of Chinese history (Spencer, 2013). Despite these restrictions, some families continued to have more than one child which were termed “out-of-plan children.”

Social Consequences of the One-Child Policy

Strict family planning policies in China resulted in significant social change, particularly in rural areas where communities have traditionally relied on family-based work power. Under the family-based work power model, families generally have multiple children due largely to their capacity to contribute back to the family (Zelizer, 1994). Children can contribute to household tasks such as working in the fields, but, more importantly, they care for their parents in old age. In China, the family-based work power model has existed historically, particularly in rural regions, but its existence is superseded by a the more integral Confucian value of *xiao*, or filial piety. Under Confucian teaching, children are expected to honor, respect, and provide for their parents, especially as their parents grow older (Bedford and Yeh, 2019). In passing the One-Child Policy, the Chinese state placed considerable strain on both traditional family structure and wide-spread cultural values by limiting the number of children in a family.

Changes to traditional family structures in China instigated by the One-Child Policy not only affected the number of children families had; it also affected the gender distribution of children in the country. In her article on *Confucianism, Women, and Social Contexts*, Jiang argues that “China was and still is a patriarchal society” (2009). Many traditional Confucian values overtly focus on men and male morality, and later Confucianism proposes that “women are inferior to men as *yin* is inferior to *yang*” (Jiang, 2009). In keeping with these values, it is important to note the presence of a patrilineal and patrilocal culture in China (Johnson, 2016). As many families still adhere to the mentality that a daughter is lost to her new in-laws when she

gets married, there is heavy cultural emphasis on having a male child to serve as an heir and provider for the family. Considering this long-standing value framework in Chinese culture, it is unsurprising that the passage of the One-Child Policy can be linked to an increase in female infanticide. Looking at the Chinese population as a whole, there has been a distinct increase in the sex-at-birth ratio after 1980 (See Figure 1), with a higher number of male children reported than females (Chen and Zhang, 2019). This increase correlates temporally with the passage of the one child policy, though its effects should not be attributed solely to female infanticide as underreporting of female children could also play a role in skewing sex ratios.



Figure 1. National Level Sex-at-Birth Ratio in China from 1953 to 2016 (Chen & Zhang, 2019).

Another consequence of this preference for boys in conjunction with the One-Child Policy is the differential abandonment of girl children to state welfare institutions. Though there have been recorded incidents of families struggling desperately to keep over-quota daughters, records show that about 95% of healthy children in orphanages were female in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Johnson, 2017, p. 95). For the out-of-plan children who were by some means able to remain with their families, they were naturally at a disadvantage as well due to state regulations limiting *hukou*, or residential permits, only to the first child (Johnson, 2017). As such, many out-of-plan daughters experience structural challenges even when they remain with their biological parents.

Identifiable differences in care also manifest in the treatment of children with disabilities. This population is particularly vulnerable and has experienced discrimination since before the Chinese state enacted its national level family planning program. However, the effects of this discrimination have been exacerbated due to family's limitation to having only one child. When confined to only having one child, some families will opt to abandon children with disabilities in the hopes that they will be able to have a strong, able-bodied baby boy in the future (Wang, 2016).

When considering alternative care in China, it is crucial to first understand the complex intersection of traditional Chinese cultural values with family planning initiatives and policy changes in the contemporary period. While there are, of course, many other factors which contribute to the difficult decision to abandon a child such as poverty or inability to care for the child, the collision of Confucian values with the One-Child Policy cannot be ignored as a key contributor to child abandonment and visible changes in the demographic distribution of China's population as well as tens of thousands of individual lives. Undeniably, both parents and children

have been affected by decisions made in keeping with state-level policy changes and local enforcement of said policies. These decisions went on to alter the trajectory of alternative care in China as the rise in child abandonment led to the expansion and mutation of the orphan care system. Institutional care settings were no longer solely homes for *gu'er*, or orphans, but also for abandoned children.

Alternative Care in China 1949-Present:

Alternative care in China was first formally established after 1949, the same year which marked the beginning of the Chinese Communist Revolution. As such, the development of this system of welfare for orphaned and abandoned children coincided with a series of monumental social and political changes in the PRC. At the time on its conception, there were two major strands of alternative care for orphaned and vulnerable children: informal kinship care and state monopolized care (Shang & Fisher, 2017). These fundamental forms of care have remained over the past seventy years, but many internal social and political changes led to structural changes. Alternative care in China has also been shaped by international influences, ranging from the involvement of global humanitarian aid organizations, most of which have emerged from Western powers, to a global push within away from institutionalized care in favor of family care settings.

As China's orphan care system is not clearly defined, alternative care for orphaned and abandoned children takes many diverse forms depending on available resources and personnel. Despite this local variance, there still exist five primary forms of alternative care for orphans in China: foster care, adoption, family care groups, informal kinship care, and residential care (Shang & Fisher, 2014, p. 14).

Though the Chinese government became involved in alternative care from 1949 onwards, one of its primary focuses was to reduce the number of children in institutional care and, in doing so, limit the financial burdens and responsibilities on the state (Shang & Wu, 2003). One way the state accomplished this goal was by encouraging informal kinship care of orphans among local family or community networks. Though the stereotypical image of orphan care draws to mind large, isolated orphanages, informal kinship care is the most common form of alternative care in China, making up 62.3 percent of orphans as recorded in China's 2005 National Census (Shang & Fisher, p. 81). In this form of alternative care, extended family or members of the community network take responsibility for caring for children when their biological parents have passed away or are not capable of providing care (Shang & Fisher, 2014). As the name implies, informal kinship care, or community-based family care, operates outside the realm of state control as children rely on personal family networks for care. Notably, informal kinship care is strongest in rural areas of China and is dominated by the "paternal family principle," likely due in part to the practice of children following their father's surname (Shang and Fisher, 2014, p. 81-82). In this strand of alternative care, traditional Confucian values are visible in both the desire to keep children within the family structure as well as the patriarchal influence of the paternal family principle as the father's family inherits responsibility for the child. However, informal kinship care is less common in cities where we see more often the presence of residential care institutions. Institutional care provided for about 11.8 percent of orphans in China in 2005 (Shang & Fisher, 2014, p. 81) and about 21 percent of reported orphans in 2017 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2018).

Though the Chinese state reduced financial burdens on the child welfare system by encouraging informal kinship care, maintaining institutional care in urban areas still represented a

significant cost for the state. Despite increases in the cost of living in China, state-level funding for alternative care institutions did not rise to meet these costs, resulting in a lack of appropriate resources, food, and staff workers in the 1980s (Shang & Wu, 2003). The tension between the state-monopolized welfare system and its inability to adequately provide for children had dire consequences on the lives and well-being of orphaned and abandoned children living in these facilities. Coupled with rising rates of child abandonment which accompanied more stringent enforcement of the One Child Policy, this lack of resources posed an issue of dire consequence (Schwartz and Shieh, 2011, p. 52). For example, research conducted into one such institutional care facility, the Nanchang Social Welfare Institution, revealed that malnutrition and lack of health services were serious issues for children living in the home, even resulting in increases in the child mortality rate during this period (Shang & Wu, 2003). In the mid-1990s, there were several exposés from Western organizations such as BBC and Human Rights Watch which publicized these problems globally. In response to these accusations, the Chinese state initially tightened control on alternative care systems before eventually giving way to greater collaboration with international NGOs and adoption agencies (Schwartz and Shieh, 2011). Since the 1990s, there has been growth of both domestic and international non-state actor involvement in alternative care for orphaned and abandoned children in China as this system moves closer and closer towards the welfare pluralism model (Schwartz and Shieh, 2011). While this shift has its benefits, the emergence of alternative home care institutions run by non-governmental, organizations, religious organizations, and private, for-profit enterprises presents its own set of issues. Under international law, the state has an obligation to ensure good quality care and education for orphaned, separated, and abandoned children who have no family support (OHCHR | Convention on the Rights of the Child,

1990). However, with alternative care moving outside state jurisdiction, the question arises: does the state monitor quality of care for children living in these institutions, and if so, how?

Though the shift to a more pluralistic welfare model has negated some financial limitations experienced by institutional care centers, many researchers still find that residential care is “the least desirable type of alternative care because... children do not have opportunities for attachment to family and social networks in the community” (Shang and Fisher, 2014, p. 18). This widespread belief is based on several historic studies which found institutional care to have detrimental impact on development in infants and young children (Nelson et al., 2007; van IJzdoorn, Luijk, and Juffer, 2008), though longitudinal study conducted in five low- and middle-income countries attributed differences in outcomes for orphaned and separated children between residential and community care settings to the quality of care provided rather than the setting of care (Huynh et al., 2019). In keeping with international trends moving away from the institutional care model, the Chinese government has also begun to favor forms of alternative care such as foster care or adoption which encourage child development within smaller, more family-like settings (Shang, 2002). As China continues to develop and modernize, we should expect to see even more changes in alternative care structures and systems. Regardless of social changes, there will still be the need for quality provision of care for orphaned and abandoned children. The question remains: what will this care look like and how will motivations of adults interacting most closely with this population affect the health and wellbeing of these vulnerable children?

Conclusion

In comparison with adults, children are particularly vulnerable individuals. One key component of this is that because children do not yet have full autonomy or decision-making

power, significant components of children's lives depend on the authoritative decisions of adult figures in their lives (Archard, 2005). Typically, parents are the individuals who exercise this authority over their children (Archard, 2005). However, children living in institutional care settings do not fit this norm, instead depending on caregivers and staff workers with no direct connection to them to provide both quality care and individualized nurture. While institutional care settings are growing obsolete in many countries due to extensive research findings which show that large-scale institutional care settings are not the healthiest environment for child growth and development, these institutions still exist in many countries, like China, due to continued need. As such, there is a critical need to assess values and decision making which affect child abandonment, quality of life within institutional care settings, and departure from institutions, e.g. in the form of transnational adoption, in China to better evaluate how institutions can provide the best quality care and support possible to their young charges. Targeted exploration of the values caregivers and staff workers in Chinese institutional care settings bring with them into their work are just one example of how deepened understanding of value considerations in alternative care can help inform constructive policy changes on institutional, local, and national levels.

Moreover, the treatment of orphaned and abandoned children extends beyond the doors of the institutions in which they reside. Considering the role of adoption in negotiating transnational politics and, in particular, expanding China's cultural reach to the Western world, we must more deeply consider the implications of the treatment of vulnerable children, both on a national and global scale. Though transnational adoption may at a surface level present as a means of attaining stronger global influence, how is it that policies and practices regarding transnational adoption influence international perceptions and vice versa?

Taking into consideration the background of the situation on alternative and institutional care of orphaned and abandoned children in China, it is clear that policies levied by the Chinese state have played a major role in determining to the number of children living in institutional care, the demographic make-up of this population, the quality of care received, the administrators of care, and the eventual futures of orphaned and abandoned children. However, the implications of value in institutional care in China has been under-researched. This thesis seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge with a specific lens to valuation of children as young members of society without decision-making abilities, but who are, in fact, the voices of tomorrow.

Chapter 2

Economically Irrational:

Financial Considerations of Value in Orphaned and Abandoned Children

“Here, take this.”

The caregiver with the wide smile and hair that curls in a long ponytail down her back hands a few hundred-rupee notes to the oldest girl in the group, then turns back to her task. She’s preparing dinner – tonight’s menu appears to have okra of some sort, seeing as how she has just rinsed them off and is spreading them out across a sheet of newspaper on the kitchen table to dry. The girl smiles gleefully, chirps a quick *dhanyavaad*, the Hindi word for thank you, and scampers off with her posse to pick up a few packets of biscuits from the local street market, just a few minutes’ walk away. If I learned anything from my time in Delhi, it’s that you can’t have chai without biscuits. It’s a classic combination. The sweetness of the tea, complex in its spices and rich from the milk with which it’s made, pairs well with the simple biscuits which are not biscuits in the sense of the biscuits and gravy I grew up eating in the American South but more closely resemble a cookie-cracker hybrid. You can’t find anything quite like it in an American grocery store.

While the need for biscuits is the catalyst in this story, I’d like to focus on the action: the caregiver passing money to the girl who is a resident in the institutional care home. This is a small moment, seemingly insignificant, but provides a launchpad from which we can begin to conceptualize the role of currency and its attendant economic considerations in the operational frameworks and realities of institutional care settings. Again, my personal experiences with institutional care are almost solely restricted to homes in the greater Delhi region of India, but in the remainder of this chapter, I will delve into economic valuation as it relates to the lives of orphaned and abandoned children and institutional care settings in urban China.

Introduction

As China becomes increasingly globalized, there has been a clear evolution in the role of child in Chinese society. In her article published in 2016 titled “The Rise of the “Priceless” Child in China,” Fengshu Liu draws on sociologist Zelizer’s theorization of the “priceless child” in the United States to interrogate gradual societal changes in childhood in China. Life history interviews with three generations of Chinese families can attest to expansive intergenerational shifts. A grandmother who grew up in a rural Chinese village in the 1940s and 50s remembers her childhood this way: *“I started doing housework at age 6 or 7: cooking, housecleaning, washing dishes, and feeding fowl and animals. I would go to the field to pick weeds for the pigs... We were too poor not to toil. Most families were like that”* (Liu, 2016). Children growing up in urban settings in that generation were also expected to find gainful employment at ages as young as 10 years old to provide for themselves and their family (Liu, 2016). However, China has seen massive changes socially, politically, economically, and culturally since the 1940s which have undoubtedly influenced societal perceptions around the value of children to the family. In the middle generation which grew up in the 1970s, both male and female children were expected to contribute to household chores and/or fieldwork, depending on family needs (Liu, 2016). In stark contrast, children of the current generation, born in the era of the One Child Policy, have earned the disreputable label of “little emperors,” or *xiao huangdi*, and are generally perceived as selfish, overly indulged, and difficult to control (Naftali, 2014, p. 12). A more neutral means of addressing this population of only-children born following the passage of the One-Child Policy is “singletons.”

Far from active contributors to household chores or labor, the current generation of children and young people in urban China are highly sheltered and lavished with attention by

their families. This phenomenon results from the collision of traditional Confucian values and modern values impressed by the state. As mentioned in Chapter 1, traditional Confucian values place strong emphasis on *xiao*, or filial piety, which requires that that children provide financially for their elderly parents. With only one child as a potential provider, parents and grandparents exert even more pressure on children to find success and eventually provide for the family. In contemporary China, there is a strong concern with elevating the *suzhi* of the Chinese population which has echoed sweeping economic growth and is formative to conceptualizations of identity and citizenship. *Suzhi*, a term relatively new in its contemporary usage which only entered mainstream discourse in the 1980s, can be understood as “the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct” (Jacka, 2009, p. 524). *Suzhi* should be understood as related to yet distinct from historically significant terms such as *civilization* and *modernity* which have at varying points in history contributed formatively to conceptualizations of value and identity in society (Jacka, 2009). Population-planning experts in China are no longer simply concerned with limiting the number of children families have; the *suzhi* of the population has become a concern of equal if not of greater importance than the actual number of babies born in China.

As a result of these compounding value structures, families invest heavily in singletons spending significant amounts of money to ensure that children have high quality education and healthcare (Naftali, 2014). A study conducted by McNeal and Yeh in 1997 found that Chinese singletons have tremendous sway over their parents spending habits with estimates that these children influence about 68 percent of their parents’ household purchases, considerably higher than the US estimate of around 45 percent (Naftali, 2014, p. 13). Just as the role of children in the United States has shifted from that of a working body to a precious commodity (Zelizer,

1985), children in China have become highly prized members of society. Unlike children in the United States who are often raised to be autonomous and independently minded, Chinese singletons have a strong cultural responsibility to provide for their elders based on traditional Confucian values. For their part, Chinese parents respond by investing ever more heavily in their only-children, paying for lessons and tutors to ensure their children achieve success and are well equipped to contribute valuably to both society and family in the future.

In contemporary China, social expectations for children, particularly in urban areas, have shifted such that children are no longer expected to contribute to the success of the family through physical toil and labor. Rather they are expected to contribute to society and family through intellectual grooming and cultivation into *gao suzhi*, or high quality, individuals. With these societal shifts in mind, it is important to consider how this evolution has impacted factors of economic valuation adults take into consideration when making decisions regarding children in Chinese society. The calculation of a child's so-called "value-added" has changed for many families. While in the initial years of life, children are incapable of providing for themselves and inherently dependent on their adult caregivers for care, attention, and support, children are not without their benefits. Though most children in twenty-first century China do not contribute significant financial benefits, they provide emotional benefits of which value is not easily quantified.

Economic value can be defined as "the maximum amount of money an agent will pay for a good or service" (Banton, 2019). Considering this definition in relation to orphaned and abandoned children living in institutional care settings is uncomfortable. It requires that we equate children with goods or products and adult figures in their lives as purchasing agents. Perhaps the idea of *investment* may sit more comfortably as it is more socially acceptable in modern times to

“invest in” rather than “pay for” or “purchase” a child. Nonetheless, all of these terms are inextricably tied to money, revealing an underlying transactional nature to adult-child relationships which is little vocalized. This transactional quality is a foreign notion in modern society wherein children are not typically perceived as commodities but rather as individuals. It appears callous, inappropriate even, to think of living, breathing, thinking children as products – much less products with an assigned economic value. Despite the unsavory initial perceptions of this claim, I contend that children are assigned economic value by adult figures who have decision making power over them and also, in the case of children in institutional care, by the large, multi-faceted welfare system which provides funding for alternative care organizations. These economically driven value decisions contribute to children’s entry to institutional care, the quality of care they receive while in homes, and transnational adoption to families outside the United States. Finances are simultaneously a necessary condition and necessary limit for institutional care.

In this chapter, I argue that the economic value of children plays a key role in determining both abandonment and adoption of children in China as well as the type and quality of care provided for children in institutional care. While the pertinence of economic valuation of children could be argued in other contexts, institutional care settings in China pose a particularly interesting area of study due to complex economic concerns of individual families combined with expectations constructed by the Chinese government. These combined economic features have historically contributed to differential abandonment of female children and children with disabilities, both into institutional care facilities and into other forms of alternative care. I will also address potential economic implications related to transnational adoption. In this way, economic valuation is enmeshed with changing domestic

and international policies regarding transnational adoption. Western perceptions of China as illustrated in popular news media provide an interesting perspective through which to approach economic valuation of children in the contemporary Chinese context.

To address these questions of inquiry, I will conduct analysis of secondary academic texts addressing economic valuation and how it relates to the family and child abandonment in contemporary China. I will take into consideration economic factors in the recent historical context, many of which are influenced by socio-political changes in China. Some of these changes were addressed in Chapter 1 to situate the importance of considering alternative and institutional care in China in a broader sense, but it is important to consider again the influence of these policies on children and institutions with particular eye to economic valuation. Specific records regarding the number of institutional homes, children in institutional care, and state funding allocated towards institutional care have been identified through exploration of China's Statistical Yearbook Database.

I will synthesize this analysis with consideration of first-person narratives of individuals whose decision-making processes relating to child abandonment or relinquishment were directly tied to questions of economic valuation. Many of these accounts are highly emotional and often reveal heartbreaking personal economic circumstances behind child abandonment which statistical tables of the number of children living in institutional care fail to express and, to an arguable extent, mask from the public eye.

As most discourse around the valuation of children assumes the presence of a normative parent-child relationship, children in institutional care have historically been excluded from these discussions. Beyond simple inclusion, I argue that the financial considerations and economic valuation of children in institutional care demands focused attention due to the increased

vulnerability of their position in society in conjunction with increased complexity of adult-child relationships in this setting.

While differences between institutional care and the traditional family are many, one critical difference is the transactional nature of the relationship between providers of care in institutional care and children living in these settings. While in the traditional family structure, parents are expected to provide and care for their children without compensation, individuals receive financial rewards for their time and energy spent caring for children in institutional care. Returning once again to the definition of economic value, one conceptualization of the valuation of orphaned and separated child can be tied to the allocation of funding for institutional care which ultimately determines the level quality of care and quality of life children in these settings can attain. However, economic valuation plays a formative role in determining the fate of children even prior to their entry into the institutional care system as finances play a critical motivating role in the difficult decision some families in China made to relinquish their children into institutional care.

Financial Motivators for Abandonment

In the past fifty years, China has undergone significant economic changes. In 1978, the country opened its economic doors to the outside world with the initiation of the “reform and opening” process, or *gaige kaifang*, while still maintaining an authoritarian, one-party political system (Wang, 2014). Chinese economic reform spurred rapid economic development, resulting in increased prosperity for many. The World Bank estimates that China’s GDP has grown an average of 10 percent each year and poverty has been alleviated for over 850 million people since 1978 (Overview, 2019). In recent years, economic improvements are especially notable as

the ratio of Chinese people living below the international poverty line has decreased significantly from about 66 percent in 1990 to 0.7 percent in 2015 (see Figure 2) (Poverty & Equity Data Portal: China, 2019). In light of these economic gains, it is important also to note the continued presence of income inequality in China. A study conducted by the International Monetary Fund found that income inequality in China increased from the 1980s to 2008 and has since begun to decline gradually (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018).

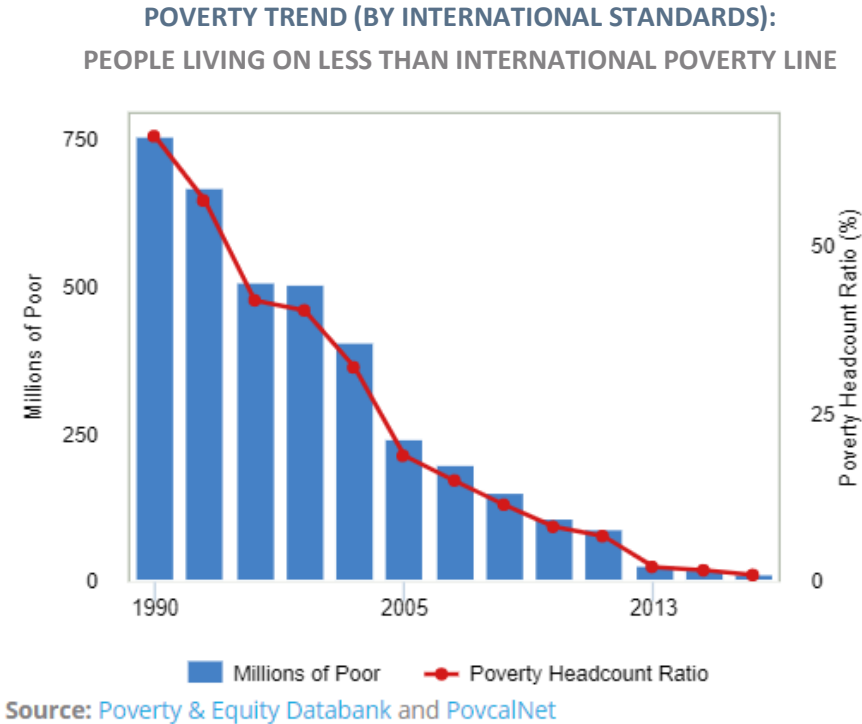


Figure 2. *People living on less than the International Poverty Line (\$1.90/day) in China from 1990 to 2015 (Poverty & Equity Data Portal: China, 2019).*

Moving further back in history, the One-Child Policy also served as a significant influencer in motivating child abandonment in China as a piece of legislation closely tied to a

family's economic status. The One-Child Policy was accompanied by a series of incentives for families with only one child and punishments for families which violated the new policy. Families with only one child were privy to benefits such as a monetary stipend, preferential housing, longer maternity leave, quality education and healthcare, and larger allocations of farmland for those in rural areas (Spencer, 2013). In contrast, families who did not abide by the One-Child Policy and had illegal pregnancies, or "out-of-plan children," were subject to punishment such as job loss, seizure of possessions, and removal of benefits for the first child, though consequences varied by province (Spencer, 2013). As such, strict government enforcement of consequences to violation of the One-Child Policy in the 1980s served as motivator for the relinquishment of children into alternative care (Spencer, 2013).

Despite dramatic reduction in poverty and modest decline in inequality in the 2000s, many Chinese families continue to struggle financially. These financial difficulties affect the lives of children in tangible ways, in some cases more severely than others. While for some children, their parent's financial difficulties may result in less money in their red envelopes, or *hongbao*, at New Year's, for others the consequences are much more dire. Unfortunately, one disadvantaged population which is particularly vulnerable is children with disabilities who need special medicines, services, and care which are at times quite expensive. For families struggling with poverty, parents are sometimes forced to make difficult decisions based off economic factors in order to do what they believe is best for their child. One story shared by CBS recounts the experience of a couple in Guangzhou, a city in southeast China, who abandoned their newborn daughter in a baby hatch because they were economically incapable of caring for her (Doane, 2014). The couple was were excited for the birth of their child and had purchased many toys in preparation, but when their daughter was born with significant disabilities, doctors

estimated treatment would cost around \$1,000/day (Doane, 2014). With a combined income of around \$800/month (Doane, 2014), the couple could not possibly afford to care for their newborn daughter and were left with little choice but to abandon her. Hoping to provide the best care possible for their daughter even then, they decided to drop her off at a government run baby hatch. In 2011, the Chinese government launched its official baby hatch program with the goal of providing a humane method of abandonment for parents who were unable to care for their infants (Sun, Zheng, and Xie, 2016). The conceptualization of baby hatches is that parents have a structured place to leave children with a mechanism in place to alert local medical teams. Medical teams are supposed to arrive at the scene within 10 minutes and bring the child to an appropriate place of care (Sun et al., 2016). The new implementation of the baby hatch system demonstrates the Chinese government's willingness to invest providing structures of care for children whose parents are unable to care for them due to financial limitations, though this desire does not always translate well. Unfortunately, the baby hatch in Guangzhou was no longer in service, but the parents in the local community were not made aware. As a result of the lack transparency around the status of the baby hatch, the couple left their daughter in the no-longer functioning hatch, and she unfortunately died hours later.

The financial burdens the couple in Guangzhou faced are not uncommon. The demographic distribution of children in these facilities has changed in recent decades to encompass largely children with disabilities, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, many institutional care facilities were filled with young, healthy female children. Recent estimates by Chinese authorities report that up to 98 percent of children living in state child welfare institutes are disabled (Wang, 2016). The impressive presence of children with disabilities in institutional care reflects economic burdens families must balance in caring for children with disabilities as they

require additional support and resources. Though China was once known for providing a strong safety net for its people, the days of the “iron rice bowl,” or *tie fanwan*, have passed, and families are responsible for providing quality healthcare and education for their children without extensive state support. For children with disabilities, this results in increased economic motivation for abandonment to institutional care which further exacerbates the social exclusion and barriers children with disabilities already face.

Costs of Institutional Care

In keeping with China’s transition from a strongly communist ideology towards a more capitalistic economy, financial considerations of institutional care in China have evolved significantly since the formal conception of this system in 1949. These changes are closely interconnected with the evolution of the welfare system in China. From 1949 to the 1990s, the Chinese state maintained what some scholars studying alternative care term as the welfare statism model. In essence, under the welfare statism framework, China upheld a state-monopolized welfare system in which the government took control of all alternative care institutions for children, banned any and all NGO funding and involvement, and served as the primary caregiver in urban settings (Shang, 2001*b*; Shang & Wu, 2003). The welfare statism model exists in contrast with the welfare pluralism which supports a framework of mixed welfare regimes (Shang and Fisher, 2014). Under the welfare pluralism model, welfare need not only come from the state, but rather can originate from multiple sources such as “family networks, communities, civil society organizations, and the private market” (Shang & Fisher, 2014, p. 1). In contemporary China, the financial costs associated with institutional care falls on a combination of state funding and NGOs, both domestic and foreign.

The shift from a state-monopolized welfare system to a pluralistic welfare framework for institutional care was preceded by the publication of several exposés in the 1990s which revealed extremely poor conditions in Chinese orphanages. A British documentary titled “The Dying Rooms” filmed in 1995 used hidden cameras to uncover gross neglect of female and disabled children in Chinese state orphanages (Channel 4, 1995). This was followed closely by the 1996 publication of *Death by Default: A Policy of Fatal Neglect in China’s State Orphanages* by the Human Rights Watch/Asia which was designed to shine a beacon of light on Chinese state orphanages as tragic instance of human rights abuse (Lee, 1997).

News of the appalling conditions in China’s institutional care reached the popular press with an article published in *The Atlantic* by Anne F. Thurston in April 1996 titled “In a Chinese Orphanage.” Situated in the post-*perestroika* period, this piece provides a vivid illustration of institutional care for children in China, painting communist-era China as backwards and impoverished to the point that even the smallest, most innocent babies die unnoticed. Thurston recounts her personal experiences in visiting a Chinese welfare institute in southern China which housed between 300 and 350 children (1996). Central to Thurston’s article is an argument supporting potential good which could come about from increased Western business presence in China at the time. Specifically, she argues that increased Western presence could serve to alleviate some of the human rights abuses existing in Chinese society and uses her experiences in the Chinese Welfare Institute to provide a tangible example. To achieve this end, Thurston details a chilling decline in care which occurs within the institution. Newly arrived infants who are more likely to be adopted were housed in a small room with about 2 or 3 caregivers responsibly for 10 children who Thurston describes as “cuddly, cute, and alert” (1996). This exists in stark contrast to the quality of care provided for children with developmental disabilities

and older children who had not been adopted for some period of time who were moved to the “toddler room,” a larger space which held around 48 children but was only staffed by 3 to 4 caregivers (Thurston, 1996). Many children living in this room had serious developmental delays or were very weak, but caregivers did not provide them with concentrated time and attention needed for them to flourish (Thurston, 1996).

It is important to establish that resources for institutional care are limited. Shortages of funding often results in limited care staff, meaning that individuals working in these settings are overworked and stretched thin. Simply put, there is a scarcity of care in institutional care settings. As such, care is a limited commodity which is allocated within the homes to some children over others. This differential allocation of scarce resources reveals the value decisions relating to finances which influence the health and well-being of children living in institutional care. In analysis of Thurston’s article, there are several identifiable divisions in value. Initially, in the division of newly admitted children and children who have been in the home for some time, we see a distinction in level of perceived “adoptability” by adults in the institutions. While it is unclear which party serves as the decision-maker who decides when children are moved from the smaller room with higher caregiver-child ratio to the toddler room with a significantly lower caregiver-child ratio, the higher investment of time and care into children in the smaller room is clear. As caregivers are remunerated for their work, differential allocation of caregivers and their time to children who are “more adoptable” demonstrates how some children are deemed more worthy of economic investment than others within institutional care settings.

In the toddler room of the same orphanage, we see this difference in evaluation on an even more disturbing level as children receive different levels of care on a row-by-row basis (See Image 1). When children were first moved to the toddler room, they were placed in the middle

two rows. Stronger children were moved to the front two rows, while the weakest children were moved to the last two rows in the room (Thurston, 1996). This creates a geographically mapped systematic hierarchy of care with healthier children physically oriented to receive more quality care than weaker children.

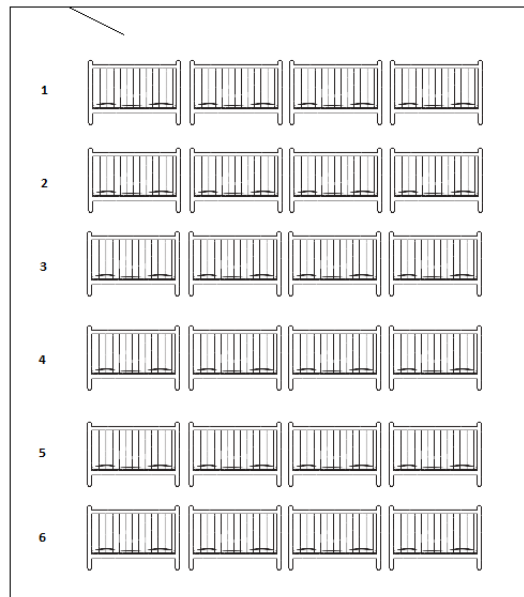


Image 1. *A visual representation of the toddler room from Thurston’s article “In a Chinese Orphanage.” Numerical labels on the left reference the front rows (1 and 2), middle rows (3 and 4), and last rows (5 and 6) of cribs.*

According to Thurston, she never saw the children in the last two rows of the room being fed over the course of the three months she visited that particular orphanage, reporting that many of the children never recovered and eventually disappeared (1996). Of course, while Thurston’s account recounts this tragedy with the intent to encourage foreigners to have lasting positive impact on Chinese institutional care facilities. However, it also stands as a bleak representation of the harsh consequences of scarcity in child welfare institutions when care is a form of economic investment and adults balance which children receive investment and how much they are invested in. While this instance from 1996 reveals economic valuation of the child within the

context of institutional care, it leaves many questions unanswered. Who determines which children should receive higher economic investment within the institutional home? Why is it that children who arguably need more targeted care, such as children who are physically weak or unwell or children with developmental disabilities, are not afforded as much care as their healthier counterparts? While questions of differential economic valuation of some children at the relative neglect of others have no easy answer, it is beneficial to consider also financial motivators for transnational adoption as this could help explain the potential for prioritization of more “adoptable” children in institutional care.

Encouraging Transnational Adoption

Transnational adoption from China to the US was first formally recorded in 1985. The earliest recorded number was 16 children and the number remained below 30 for the first five years. Between 1991 and 1995, transnational adoption rose rapidly from 61 to 2,130 children (See Figure 3). This upwards trajectory continued until 2005 when rates of transnational adoption peaked at 7,903 children. Since then, rates of adoption from China to the US have decreased, first dramatically due to increased stringency in Chinese policies in 2007, then more gradually in recent years.

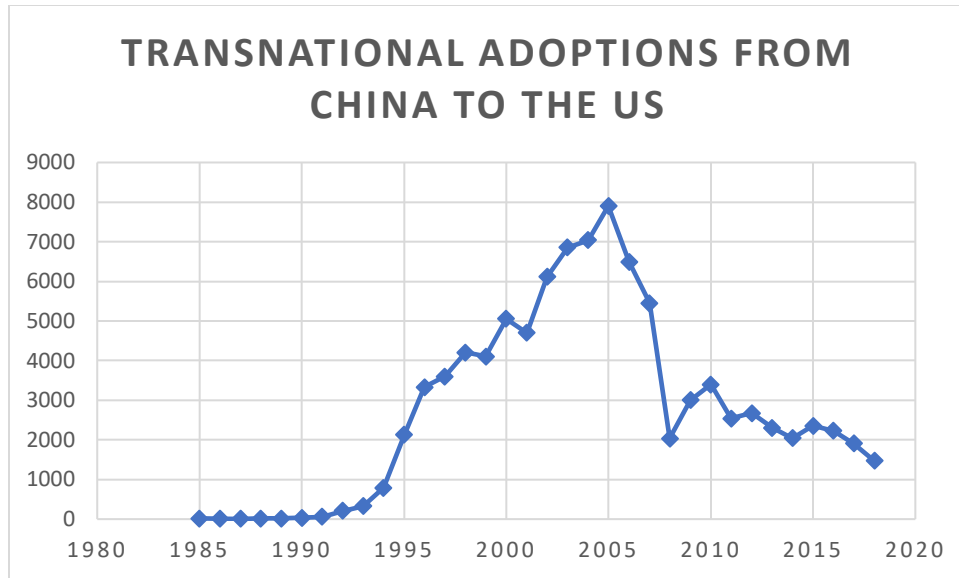


Figure 3. *Transnational adoption from China to the United States from 1985 to 2018. Statistics collected from Johnston Archive and US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs.*

There are several potential motivations for the rapid rate of increase in transnational adoption from China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. One key component was the smoothness and efficiency of adoption from the Chinese child welfare system which gained positive repute in Western countries (Wang, 2016). Another was the relative leniency of Chinese adoption policies at the time which had three primary requirements: (1) childlessness, (2) demonstrated ability to raise and educate the child, and (3) over the age of 35 (Wang, 2016). Notably absent from these qualifications was the requirement that adopting parents be married which opened the door for single parents to adopt from China when they could not do so as easily domestically in the United States (Wang, 2016). However, transnational adoption is a cost-intensive procedure. The estimated total cost to adopt a child from China to the US is between \$12,000 to \$20,000, not including airfare and hotel fees (Andrew, 2007).

There is a valid concern that transnational adoption is tied to increased trafficking in children in China. As defined in the UN’s Palermo Protocol, human trafficking requires three

components: (1) action, (2) means, and (3) purpose. However, children have special protections under the law. When children are involved, trafficking must include “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation,” regardless of means (UN General Assembly, 2000). In the context of institutional care, there is a risk of child trafficking, especially considering potential economic gains from transnational adoption fees. Studies conducted into institutional care in China have found that up to 95 percent of the proceeds from any given standard international adoption goes directly to the child welfare center, with only 5 percent of fees going to the Provincial Administration (Meier and Zhang, 2008). The high margin of profit for the institutions themselves could provide incentive for these centers to partake in human trafficking via transnational adoption which presents a darker front to economic valuation of the orphaned or abandoned child.

Of course, the benefits associated with successful transnational adoption transactions cannot be considered in isolation from the cost of providing for the child while he or lives in the home. The estimated annual cost of care for one child in institutional care in China, including room, board, medical care, and education, is about \$1,600, or 10,000 yuan, (Luo and Bergquist, 2004). This cost is significantly less than 95 percent of even the lowest estimated cost of adoption which amounts to around \$11,400 or 71,250 yuan. Clearly, the potential financial gains these institutions stand to gain from increased transnational adoption are extremely high, with a modest estimate of around \$9800, or 61,250 yuan, assuming the child has resided in the home for one-full year. Taking into consideration that many infants were historically adopted from China before they even turned one year of age, it can be assumed that institutions often did not even pay the full 10,000 yuan yearly cost of supporting each child before he or she was adopted. When these financial benefits are considered in comparison with the inadequate financial

allowance provided to state welfare institutes to provide for each child by the Chinese government (Wang, 2016), there is an economic incentive for state welfare institutions to encourage transnational adoption of children. As the supply from the state does not meet the demands of child welfare institutions, there is a shortage of funding which must be filled, and transnational adoption could present a means through which imbalances in funding can be alleviated.

Conclusion

While it may initially seem distasteful to consider children in terms of their economic value, it is clear that financial factors are closely interconnected with the lives of orphaned and abandoned children in institutional care setting in China. Money has historically been a key determining factor in abandonment, quality of life, and adoption of children in institutional care. Though in the contemporary era, children are perceived as individuals, not property, they are inextricably linked to complex questions of financial cost and gain. Adults answer these questions and balance the highly subjective factors which contribute to these value decisions, but children's lives are ultimately most heavily influenced. In this chapter, we have seen that while entry into institutional care and adoption from these facilities are immediately determined by value judgments of parental figures, children's quality of life while in institutional care is largely determined by adults further removed. The Chinese state has strong influence over the lives and experiences of the country's children, in part because of its economics sway. Individual families and institutional care settings alike depend on policies and funding which come down from the Chinese state government.

In recent history, the Chinese state has failed its children on many accounts. Though China has signed multiple international documents which maintain that the family must be protected and that children should maintain with their parents if at all possible (UN General Assembly, 2010), China fails to provide adequate financial structures and support for parents to support their children, especially those suffering from serious illness or disability. When circumstances make it economically impossible for families to support their children, child abandonment a class issue. Families who are already struggling financially and have less opportunity advancement are disproportionately likely to resort to child abandonment based off financial push factors.

Within institutional care settings themselves, the Chinese government again falls short of providing sufficient economic support to ensure quality care for each individual child. To fill this financial gap, some institutional care facilities have taken matters into their own hands and sought additional funding by other means such as encouraging transnational adoption. While economic value-decisions function most immediately on the individual family level, we cannot to miss the forest for the trees. The Chinese government must be held accountable for its failure to foster a conducive environment for families in poverty and institutional care setting to provide quality care for vulnerable children, as well as its role in contributing to socio-economic disparities which influence even families' structural makeup.

By definition, children living in institutional care settings do not fall into the traditional family structure. Nonetheless, there exists a universal acknowledgement that children inherently deserve care, regardless of whether that care is provided by parents or strangers. What motivates this provision of care? While I have argued in this chapter that institutional care facilities stand to benefit financially from transnational adoption, this alone does not serve to motivate provision of

care for orphaned and abandoned children. Clearly, the Chinese state has a vested interest in providing for this population of children as it provides a based level of funding for institutional care facilities finance provision of care and resources for orphaned and abandoned children. There must be other motivating factors which lead governments and individuals to dedicate time, energy, and finances to caring for this vulnerable population even though it does not always make the most economic sense. In the next chapter, I will address the moral valuation of children in institutional care to consider how moral and ethical frameworks shape the care of orphaned and abandoned children in China.

Chapter 3

Moral Considerations:

Cultural Influences and Deliberations in Institutional Care

Before beginning fieldwork, they always tell you to have a blueprint ready – a secondary plan of action ready to employ in the unfortunate event that things stray from the original plan. It was only the second week into my time in Delhi, and we were already past the blueprint and making decisions on the fly. The dilemma was a simple value decision. Should we, as mental health researchers, prioritize children’s right to privacy or their caregiver’s need to provide informed and appropriate care? One of the psychometric tests we administered to children in the institutional care settings assessed post-traumatic stress symptomology, and two of the questions directly address self-harm and suicidal ideation. With no clear protocol of how to respond in the case of high scores on these two questions, we were left balancing the child’s right to confidentiality and privacy with the responsibility of the caregiving adults to provide informed and appropriate care for the child’s mental well-being.

This is just one isolated incident of an ethical dilemma which I myself experienced while working in an institutional care setting. The reality is that children living in institutional care settings lead a precarious existence in which many decisions which affect their lives and wellbeing are influenced by the moral frameworks of others. From universal policies to domestic regulations to the quality and identity of caregivers, moral valuation factors heavily into the lived experiences of orphaned and abandoned children living in institutional care settings. As I discussed in Chapter 2, finances are a critical condition and critical limit in determining institutional care. In China, economic incentives and disincentives alike shape the distribution of children who end up in institutional care settings as well as the quality of care children receive upon entry to the system. When examining institutional care in contemporary China strictly through an economic lens, it is clear encouraging transnational adoption would be the most

fiscally logical approach for the Chinese state and child welfare institutions, particularly the adoption of children with disabilities. The state has a responsibility to cover the cost of healthcare and therapy for orphaned children with disabilities which presents additional financial strain for the duration of time the children live in institutional care settings (Fisher & Shang, 2013). In stark contrast to this financial drain on state funds, transnational adoption has the capacity to bring large sums of money into the coffers of institutional care settings, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, the Chinese state has not taken this approach; in fact, it has gone the opposite direction. In recent years, the state has increased regulations and implemented stricter regulations on adoption of children to countries outside of China. Clearly while economics are a critical consideration, other value considerations help define the structure of institutional care for orphaned and abandoned children in contemporary China.

Introduction

When considering institutional care for orphaned and abandoned children as a structure which exists because it is morally right, the relative topography of values changes dramatically. Whereas assigning economic value to children's lives generates unease, the facilitation of homes for children without parents seems like an ethical course of action. To not provide food and shelter for these children would be an abomination. Children lack capacity for autonomous self-direction due to their age and developmental status (Archard and Macleod, 2002), so children's rights cannot be assumed as identical to that of adults. As children grow and develop, their agency grows in stages, as does their capacity to retain and advocate for their own rights as human beings (Archard and Macleod, 2002). This sentiment is reflected in both international and domestic Chinese legislative frameworks which provide additional protections for children under

the law. From this fact arises the question: who is responsible for providing additional protections for children? In the traditional family setting, parents typically assume the role of guardian, serving as protectors for children who lack the capacity for autonomous decision making. For orphaned and abandoned children, the question of guardianship is less clear. Under the informal kinship care networks discussed in Chapter 1, guardianship falls under the responsibility of extended family members who agree to take in the orphaned child. In contrast, children in institutional care settings are considered wards of the state. While the state maintains ultimate decision-making power over resources provided in institutional care settings, caregivers and volunteers who work in the homes fulfill a more directly nurturing role in children's lives. As evidenced by policy and legal frameworks and personal accounts, Chinese institutional care settings are a site of conflicting moral frameworks as traditional Chinese values and contemporary Western values collide. This is reflected on a systems level as well as in direct, caregiving interactions.

Considering institutional care through the lens of moral valuation provides a valuable avenue through which to consider decision-making in the lives of orphaned and abandoned children in China. Many decisions are motivated by ethical considerations which defy the pragmatic, and I contend that moral valuation in institutional care in China is the product of a complex intersection of Western and traditional Chinese values which defies definition and necessitates deeper consideration. These conflicting forms of moral valuation manifest on both the structural and practical level as the dissonance between universal human rights assumptions and Chinese state's values mirrors the collision of Western and Chinese caregiver values in the homes. I begin this chapter with a discussion of systems-level laws and policies extending protections to children in China's orphan care system before delving into the intimate and

personal moral values of caregivers and volunteers whose ethical frameworks directly influence the nurture and care administered to children in institutional care settings.

Chinese Interpretations of Human Rights

Conflicting moral values at play in China's institutional care system clearly manifest in interpretations of universal human rights frameworks. Though China has committed itself to upholding global human rights frameworks as a signatory state on a myriad of United Nations documents, the interpretation of human rights in the Chinese context is heavily influenced by Confucian values and Communist ideologies. These ideologies construct a distinct moral framework which values an individual's capacity to contribute to society over self. This collectivist construction which pervades traditional and contemporary Chinese culture has strong influence over the role of children in society. Frederic Wakeman, a Western scholar of Chinese political culture, puts it this way: "[M]ost Chinese citizens appear to conceive of social existence mainly in terms of obligation and interdependence rather than rights and responsibilities" (1993, p. 134). Under this collectivist mentality, a child is more valued for his or her capacity to contribute to society than for his or her status as an autonomous individual.

Chinese conceptions of human rights are oriented around the fundamental belief that the rights of the individual are "embedded in, rather than prior to, society" (High, 2013, p. 144). Critical to conceptualizations of human rights in China are traditional Confucian teachings and Communist ideologies which place emphasis on the collective good and social harmony. Though China has engaged repeatedly with the international human rights systems in past decades (High, 2013), the Chinese state has made clear its stance that human rights, though nominally universal, should fall within the sovereignty of individually countries. In a white paper published in 1991 in

the wake of the Tiananmen Square Protests, China called for “Chinese human rights” which are extensive, equal, and authentic (Human Rights in China). This document emphasizes that Chinese citizens are entitled to human rights only insofar that they do not interfere with interests of the state, other individuals, or society at large (Human Rights in China, 1991). In contrast, the dominant Western discourse proposes that rights have two dominant interpretations: “rectitude and entitlement” (Donnelly, 2013, p. 7). This belief suggests that human rights exist because it is the right thing to do, that people have rights by virtue of their human condition, and that rights should be equal, unalienable, and universal (Donnelly, 2013, p. 10). Compared with Western interpretation of human rights which entirely revolves around the concept of the individual, interpretations of human rights enumerated by the PRC government place value on the greater social entity. This difference reflects a fundamental difference in moral frameworks.

Though human rights are widely accepted globally, there are tensions between how the assumed universality of these rights and should interact with and respect local culture. The cultural relativism argument contends values and morals should only be interpreted in the specific cultural context from where they emerge (Dahre, 2017). The concern is that that early human rights frameworks, though nominally universal, do not sufficiently encompass the divergent cultural values and beliefs of their signatory states. Because universal human rights doctrines first emerged in the wake of World War II, the US and Western European countries largely dominated their formation and imbued in Western humanitarian values into these so-called “universal” documents. Though the establishment of human rights frameworks served to unite nations in support of human dignity, the interpretation of human rights is not consistent across the globe.

Within the already tenuous existence of universal human rights, the rights of children are particularly precarious. Children were largely neglected in early human rights documents; they were referenced only once in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 25 which states: “Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection” (UN General Assembly, 1948). With such general statements, early human rights frameworks presented broad ideals for the well-treatment of children but provided no specifics as to how they could be achieved. Since then, other human rights documents seeking to bolster protections of basic rights for children as human beings deserving of additional protections distinct from their adult guardians have been brought into being, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Children, 2016).

Because many human rights frameworks were established at a time in which the two-parent biological family was an assumption, the presence of parental figures is an assumption in many child’s rights doctrines. However, this assumption fails to account for the precarious position of orphaned and relinquished children who lack parents or guardian figures. To this end, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UNGAAC) (UN General Assembly, 2010). The UNGACC was the first universal document to detail forms of alternative care as well as standards for care to ensure the continued protection and well-being of children living in settings removed from parental care (UN General Assembly, 2010). However, even given these universal standards for institutional care settings, inequities continue to exist throughout China’s orphan care system.

Inequities in Chinese Orphan Care

Systemic injustices in China's orphan care system reveal a disregard for basic human rights which has been attributed to differing interpretations of human rights based on cultural differences in moral frameworks. The government's adherence to prioritization of societal wellbeing over the individual manifests in the history of the One Child Policy, the rural-urban divide in institutional care, and disparities in care for children with disabilities, all of which contribute to inequitable outcomes for vulnerable populations.

China's passage and maintenance of the One Child Policy reflects a fundamental disregard for individual autonomy and dignity. Though the intention of the policy was to curb nation-level population growth, the policy stands out to the Western perspective as a clear violation of individuals' agency over their own reproductive bodies. In addition to economic disincentives discussed in Chapter 2, the government took direct targeted action to enforce its policies as well. Many women, in the 1980s, were sterilized against their will in an effort by state and local governments to control population growth (Spenser, 2013). Moreover, the One Child Policy violated the Western conception of sanctity of the family unit as a state policy which intruded upon realm the nuclear family, at times forcing the separation of parent and child. In 2010, the UN adopted a resolution affirming Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UNGAAC) which clearly establishes that the family is the building block of society and children should remain with their biological parents if at all possible, with additional stipulations emphasizing the state's responsibility to support parents in providing care for their children to prevent their relinquishment into alternative care (UN General Assembly, 2010). Though a signatory state and permanent member of the UN Security Council, China maintained its One Child Policy with its attendant disincentives for an additional six years following the passage of

the UNGACC. Despite its participation in human rights discourse on the global level, China's policy decisions continue to reflect their 1991 interpretation of Chinese Human Rights which emphasize societal wellbeing over the health and wellbeing of individual children and families.

The Chinese state's prioritization of societal wellbeing over the individual further manifests in the rural-urban duality in China's orphan care system. Despite the PRC state government's commitment to equal protection of all children in the Law on the Protection of Minors, inadequate provisions for orphaned and relinquished children in the Chinese countryside reflect China's prioritization of urban development over the wellbeing of its rural citizens. The law states that all children should receive protection and nurturement by society to promote their moral, intellectual, and physical development into "successors to the socialist cause" yet fails to provide mechanisms through which society can best support vulnerable children such as those living in institutional care (Law on the Protection of Minors, 2012). These generalities give way to inequitable distribution of resources and care in China's orphan care system.

Prior to 1949, China's orphanages had been largely run by local governments, churches, charity organizations, and individuals, but after the communist government came to power, these structures of care were gradually closed or converted to state welfare homes as the Chinese state designated themselves the sole providers of care for orphaned children (Shang, 2002). Most of these institutions were located in urban settings, leaving care of children in rural areas up to the jurisdiction of relatives and neighbors. The Chinese state's heightened investment in children in urban areas over rural areas reflects deeply ingrained inequalities in basic human rights which extend beyond the issue of orphan care. The rural-urban disparity in orphan care is not an isolated incidence of these inequalities which are mirrored in poor quality education and lack opportunities for advancement experienced by children of migrant workers in rural China. A

survey conducted by the All-China Women's Federation in 2013 found an estimated 61 million "left behind children" of migrant workers (Gao, 2013). Of these children, the survey found that around 33 percent were living under the care of grandparents and about 10.7 percent raised by other relatives or local villagers (Gao, 2013). While the majority of children left behind in the countryside remain with adult caregivers, Gao (2013) estimates that 2.06 million children are left without any form of adult supervision. This population of children is effectively orphaned by China's economic ambitions, yet the state has failed to provide for these orphans. These disparities reflect an emphasis on short-term economic gain over the more equitable approach of investing state funds across the rural-urban divide which would ensure long-term population health which would in turn result in a healthier, more sustainable workforce in years to come, thereby better supporting the stated intention of promoting societal wellbeing.

Conflicting Approaches to Care

Having seen that China's state-level approach to human rights contributes to social inequalities and disparities in the orphan care system, it is now valuable to consider institutional care settings themselves as sites of conflicting Western and Chinese moral frameworks as native Chinese and foreign-born volunteers serve in these institutions. Differences manifest in approaches to administration of care by care-staff in the homes. Memoirs and reports from institutional care settings reveal divergent socio-economic status' and cultural frameworks between *aiyis* and foreign volunteers which inform provision of care. It is important to note that the accounts analyzed below represent only a subset of caregiver motivations and strategies for administrating care, that they do not reflect the entirety of this population's values, and that a disproportionate number of narratives available are from foreign-born volunteers.

Though foreign volunteers and local caregivers both provide care to children in institutional care settings, there are stark differences in socio-economic status between caregiver populations. Generally speaking, foreign volunteers come from a position of affluence and power. Ethnographic research conducted by Wang (2016) in the Yongping orphanage found that foreign volunteers are generally wealthy ex-patriate wives whereas local *aiyis* are generally low-wage workers. While foreign volunteers dedicated their time at the orphanage to providing maternal nurturance to children, local *aiyis* were tasked with providing for children's basic living requirements. Wang contends that foreign volunteers implement a "emotional logic of care" and local *aiyis* implement a "custodial logic of care" (2016, p. 103). Foreign volunteers and local *aiyis* occupy different social positions which affects the nature of care they provide within institutional settings. As employees, *aiyis* have clearly outlined responsibilities and tasks which they must accomplish during their time in the homes. They do not share the luxury of time and liberty that foreign volunteers grasp for themselves.

Aside from socio-economic differences, differing cultures influence foreign and local providers' approaches to caring for children. Chinese culture endorses collectivism which emphasizes the wellbeing of the greater societal or family network over the individual (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). These values connect to Confucian philosophy which encourages familial harmony and social cohesion (Li, Lam, & Fu, 2000). In contrast, many foreign volunteers come from Western countries which place greater import on the individual. How, then, do these cultural difference manifest in caregiving interactions?

The tension between cultural values manifests repeatedly in *Silent Tears: A Journey of Hope in a Chinese Orphanage*, a memoir which recounts American expatriate Kay Bratt's experiences from four years volunteering in a Chinese orphanage. Bratt's memoir is highly

subjective and at times strongly reminiscent of the white savior complex, but her experiences nonetheless provide a valuable example of cultural tensions within caregiving. Bratt recounts an incident in which a baby boy with a cleft lip was unable to drink milk from his bottle due to his condition. In response, Bratt squirted milk into his mouth while local *aiyis* went about feeding the many other children in the room (2008, p. 40). Though Bratt felt indignant about the *aiyis* response to the boy's inability to feed himself (and made the assumption that the boy would have been left to starve if not for her presence), in truth, this incident should not reflect poorly upon the character of the *aiyis*, but rather the difference in approaches to care. Just as Chinese human rights prioritize the common good over that of the individual, local *aiyis* consider the wellbeing of all children in the orphanage rather than giving special attention to children with higher need. While Bratt's narrative reflects her personal lens and demonstrates an instance of foreign volunteers tending to spend more time nurturing weaker children or children with disabilities, the *aiyi*'s provision of equal care to all children reflects collectivist values. While this incident may have been overstated, it is clear from multiple sources that children with higher needs who appeared least likely eventually become *gao suzhi* members of society received equal but not additional care in some instructional settings.

Another representation of divergent culture values in institutional care appears in a 2007 training program manual produced by Half the Sky Foundation (HTS), an international non-profit which works to advance the health and development of orphaned children in institutional care. Titled *Nurturing Care for China's Orphaned Children*, the manual documents HTS' approach to training local Chinese women to care for children. It specifically states that the women are "comfortable with traditional Chinese forms of childrearing which reinforce interactions in which the child follows the adult" (Cotton, Edwards, Pope, Zhao & Gelabert,

2007, p. 59), but as part of the training, women are instructed to focus on individualizing care for children. Clearly, there is a disconnect in local women's traditional approaches to raising children and the Western approach to caregiving which is impressed upon them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, moral valuation has been seen as a critical influence in institutional care in China. From the level of international policies to state decisions which prioritize certain populations over others to individual caregiver strategies and motivations, China's orphan care system reflects tensions between Western and Chinese value systems and cultural beliefs. Underlying these discrepancies in values is an imbalance of power. Even within China's institutional care homes, many available sources deem Western moral values more correct than traditional Chinese values. Definitions of universal human rights were largely determined by Western powers following the end of the second World War. Local *aiyis* in Western-supported care facilities are taught to raise children individualistically rather than with a collectivist approach. A significant limitation to this discussion derives from the inherent nature of published materials relating to this domain. Western volunteers come from positions of power and write about their experiences in Chinese orphanages. The *aiyis* offering the bulk of care do not. Despite the imbalance within its own orphan care system, China asserts itself on the global scale as an independent entity which need not abide by Western ideals but can co-exist as an equal on its own terms. China's assertion of its own interpretation of human rights is just one example of how Chinese domestic policies also stand as a political statement. In the following chapter, I will further explore political implications of China's orphan care system in the international sphere

by problematizing the efficacy and relevance of soft power and Western perceptions in relation to institutional care.

Chapter 4

Playing Politics:

State Perceptions and Soft Power Considerations in China's Orphan Care System

It was early May, and we had just arrived in Delhi. On the morning of our third day, eyes still weary from jetlag, we met our driver outside our apartment, hopped in his little white Suzuki, and shuttled off to the Udayan Care headquarters, a narrow, unassuming building in GK-II, a largely residential neighborhood in the city. It was our first-time meeting face-to-face with our community partner, a non-profit in the Greater Delhi region who provides care and services for orphaned and separated children. Walking up the stairs in the building, I couldn't help but marvel at the brilliantly colored self-portraits which adorned the stairwell, painted by several children living in Udayan Care's Ghar Programme which provides residential care. Upon reaching the third floor, we were warmly welcomed by the Founder and Managing Trustee of the organization, a warm and clearly very busy woman. As she inquired after whether we cared for tea or coffee, she immediately launched into a description of her organization's institutional care program, particularly how it has been impacted by recent legislative changes.

While Udayan Care has long endeavored to provide small, family-like residential care settings for children, government mandates associated with changes to the 2015 Juvenile Justice Act make regulations increasingly strict. In conversation with social workers working as liaisons between individual residential homes and the Child Welfare Committees, constituted by the state government, it became increasingly clear that organization has essentially no voice in determining which children come to the homes. Each home has the capacity to provide care for 12 children, and if there are available openings, local CWCs can assign children at will. Because of this policy, many Udayan Care residential homes which do not have appropriate training or resources to support children with special needs have no option to provide care to the best of their abilities. Clearly, government policies have tangible impact on the structure of institution and the care received by children living therein, but these experiences have let me to wonder: to

what extent does political valuation affect a country's orphan care system, and how might this manifest in the context of institutional care in China?

Introduction

In earlier chapters of this thesis, I have addressed the socio-political history of contemporary China as it relates to orphaned and separated children as well as various economic and ethical concerns which hold influence over the health and well-being of these young individuals. Much of this discussion has been contained within the bounds of the PRC, with specific focus given to institutional care settings in urban centers though I have also touched upon universal human rights frameworks. The lived experiences of orphaned and abandoned children are most directly affected by their interactions with caregivers, staff, and volunteers who work within the bounds of institutional care settings, but it is also important to consider the implications of institutional care as a politically influenced entity. Under Article 43 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors, first established in 2006 and amended in 2012, orphans and children whose parents cannot be found are placed under the care of welfare institutes or institutional care settings established by the Department of Civil Affairs (Law of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Without parents or legal guardians, these children become wards of the state. Thus, the state has decision making power over the structure and maintenance of institutional care settings.

While everyday parents must also balance economic and moral values in raising children, the state differs in that it is a political entity. While politics rarely factor into parenting decisions in the traditional family structure, the lives and futures of children living in institutional care setting cannot be considered independent of politics. Rather, both domestic and international

politics influence the conditions and workings of institutional care settings as the Chinese state considers not only the health and wellbeing of the children in question, but also international and domestic perceptions which may build or undercut the state's political power. Within the complex interplay between institutional care and politics in China, I am interested in further exploring the political valuation of the orphaned or abandoned child as it relates to transnational adoption to the United States.

Though transnational adoption also exists from China to other countries, I focus on the China-US relationship for multiple reasons. The first is practical; as a native English-speaker born in the United States, I have a preexisting understanding of American perceptions based off my personal experiences and interactions with others in the United States. Based off my background in Asian studies and my American upbringing, I am also better equipped to trace and sift through the various narrative strains of American perception of Chinese institutional care and transnational adoption from China. Secondly, the United States received the majority of over 125,000 children adopted transnationally from China between 1992 and 2010 (Wang, 2016). Thirdly, China and the United States maintain a shared status as global superpowers in their own right. The United States has held this position since the conclusion of WWII, but China has established itself as a global superpower only in recent years, largely due to its rapid economic growth which occurred following the reform and opening up movement, *gaige kaifang*. Even so, there are many scholars who argue that China continues to trail behind the Western world in terms of humanitarian issues and lack of democracy. With this tension in mind, it is particularly valuable to evaluate the extent to which international discourse around China's orphan care system has influenced fluctuations in transnational adoption from China and Chinese domestic policies towards adoption in the post-Socialist era.

Some China scholars who study institutional care argue China has utilized the transnational adoption of its young people to expand China's cultural influence on the Western world. Others have gone even further, suggesting that transnational adoption has become a source of soft power through which the Chinese state can advance its political agenda (Wang, 2016). In this chapter, I will address these claims by considering the transnational adoption of children from Chinese institutional care settings through a political lens. I suggest that the potential for China to utilize transnational adoption as a source of soft power is undercut by dominant narratives around Chinese orphan care which depict the Chinese state as overly restrictive and incapable of caring for vulnerable children. Rather than serving as a source of soft power, transnational adoption posed an infinitesimal contribution to supporting the strain on China's orphan care system which occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I contend transnational adoption served to perpetuate perceptions that China is a developing country that lags behind the Western world, especially in terms of humanitarian assistance and political values. Recent changes to Chinese policies placing stricter regulations on transnational adoption and encouragement of domestic adoption further substantiate the claim that transnational adoption of Chinese children overseas is ultimately an inefficacious source of soft power and detracts from the Chinese state's desire to solidify its position as a global superpower beyond its economic presence.

Adoption from China to the United States: History and Perceptions

Transnational adoption itself is a relatively modern phenomenon. The transnational, often overseas, nature of this process belies its modernity. One hundred years ago, flying overseas was not a norm, but a luxury reserved only for the wealthy on the highest echelons of society. Thirty

years ago, international phone calls billed a hefty price. Moreover, cultural and linguistic barriers made the prospect of transnational adoption both intimidating and foreign. Before the advent and widespread usage of modern technologies such as the airplane, smartphone, and internet, facilitation of adoption of children from one country to another would be no easy task. While transnational travel is still considered a luxury in today's society, it has become far a far more feasible option for the everyday individual. With the development of internet platforms which make international communication simultaneously instant and affordable, facilitation of transnational adoption has become far more convenient. Moreover, the technological era has ushered in a period of cultural exchange in which it is both simple and rewarding for individuals to learn more about other cultures in multimedia formats. No longer is the World Book Encyclopedia the first place to turn to when interested in learning about another country's culture; the internet provides instant access to art, music, literature, and more. Due in part to technological progress, we live in an increasingly globalized and transnational world – a world in which transnational adoption has become a widely accepted concept.

Though China has been one of the biggest sending countries of children for adoption to the US since 1995, transnational adoption between these two countries did not begin until 1985 (Historical international adoption, 2017). Before this time, the majority of transnational adoptions to the US originated from Korea. By 1991, transnational adoption to the US began to grow into a more significant phenomenon, with the adoption of 2,130 children from China (Historical international adoption, 2017). This trend continued to grow until 2005 when transnational adoption from China to the US peaked with the adoption of 7,903 children and has since followed a consistent downward trajectory (See Figure 4 for more detailed trends) (Historical international adoption, 2017). While transnational adoption from China to the US is

substantial in comparison to other incidences of transnational adoption, it is also important to note the scale of transnational adoption within the greater scheme of orphaned and abandoned children in China. In fact, only a very small number of orphaned and relinquished children in China are adopted transnationally each year. In the most recent reporting by the Chinese Bureau of Civil Affairs, 409,840 documented orphans existed in China in 2017. Of those children, only 2,228 were adopted transnationally (China Statistical Yearbook, 2018). The majority of children in China's orphan care system remain unadopted, and the total population of orphaned children may be higher than documented figures due to underreporting. (China Statistical Yearbook, 2018). Though the number of children adopted transnationally from China is quite low, the dominant narrative around transnational adoption of children from China in the United States perpetuates the idea that there is an abundance of neglected baby girls in under-resourced, underfunded orphanages in China in desperate need of a loving family. In the following section, I will address the origins and accuracy of this characterization, as well as how it relates to transnational adoption's efficacy as a soft power resource for the PRC.

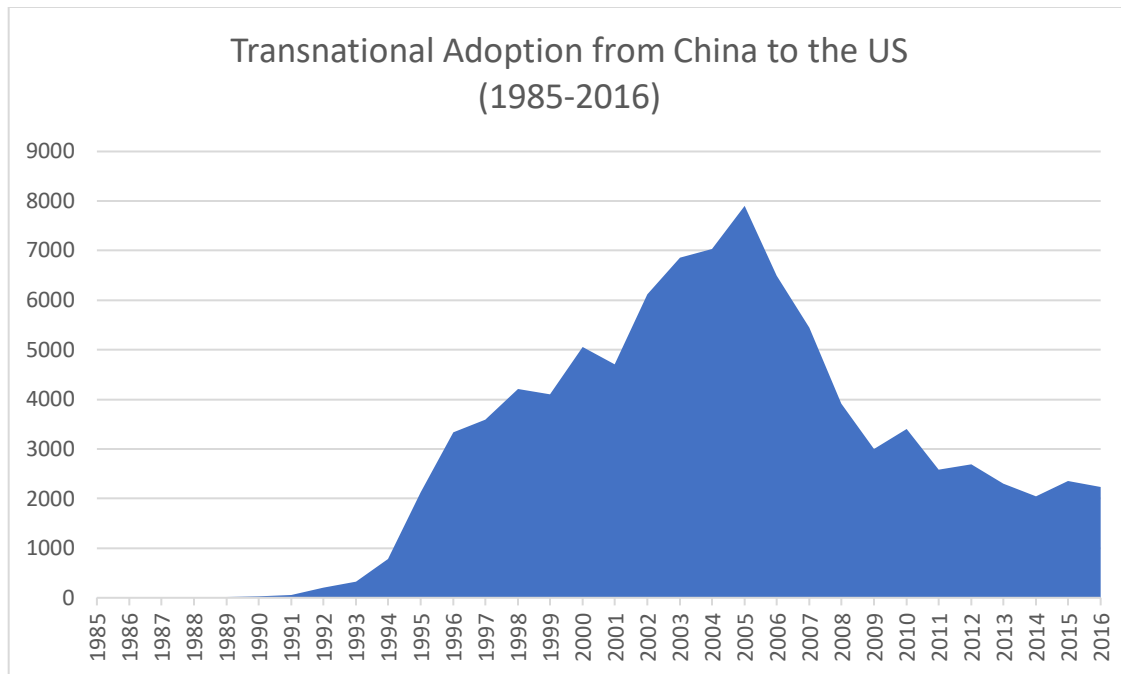


Figure 4. *Transnational Adoption from China to the US from 1985 to 2016. Statistics compiled from Johnson Archive and China Statistical Yearbook,*

The increase in adoption from China to the United States following 1995 closely followed a wave of negative press about the conditions of orphanages in China. In 1995, United Kingdom based directors Kate Blewett and Brian Woods filmed *The Dying Rooms* which helped shape the narrative around Chinese institutional care, painting Chinese orphanages as understaffed and uncaring places. The documentary follows three individuals who went to an orphanage in southeast China under the guise of being orphanage volunteer workers from the United States (Blewett and Woods, 1995). Both the content and construction of the documentary create a covert atmosphere in which the Western filmmakers expose grave injustices experienced by helpless children in Chinese orphanages. The film begins with a shaky and blurred image of a series of grey, concrete steps leading to the orphanage and appears as though filmed with a handheld camcorder. This technique emphasizes the covert nature of the film’s content. Subdued

grey shadows and harsh concrete walls accentuate the lack of life and energy in the orphanage. The film then immediately shifts, zooming in on the faces of several young orphans while serene instrumental music plays in the background.

Images of helpless babies pervade the film, creating a sense of abundance of suffering children. At one point, filmmakers describe the situation of child abandonment in China saying, “babies really are dumped on the street like kittens in a sack” (Blewett and Woods, 1995). Imagery and diction combined with several expert and private interviews addressing the gendered abandonment of babies in China following the passage of the One Child Policy emphasize not only the multitude of children in need of supportive homes, but also the idea that “healthy boys are never abandoned... [and] it really is only girls that are abandoned” (Blewett and Woods, 1995). The notable lack of faces combined with dark shadows and dull, muted tones throughout the film cultivate a secretive, surreptitious atmosphere which makes the documentary feel more like an exposé of inhumane conditions for Chinese baby girls engendered and perpetuated by the Chinese state. This documentary has faced criticism as sensationalized and one-sided (Johnson, 2016, p. 8) but nonetheless resonates with popular Western perceptions of China’s orphan care system.

Similar narratives were perpetuated in other forms of media. In 1996, Human Rights Watch published a report on the dismal conditions of Chinese state welfare institutes titled *Death By Default: A Policy of Fatal Neglect in Chinese State Orphanages*. This report promulgates the Chinese state’s disregard of basic human needs within orphanages and continued presence of inhumane conditions. One particularly astounding statistic lists mortality rates in the late 1980s and early 1990s as high as 90 percent in what was then considered China’s most prestigious and well-known orphanage: the Shanghai Children’s Welfare Institute (Human Rights Watch, 1996).

The report labels the care of orphaned and abandoned children a “nationwide crisis” in which children endure “deliberate starvation, torture, and sexual assault,” despite allegedly sufficient state level funding and high praise from the Chinese government (Human Rights Watch, 1996). The 1996 article published in *The Atlantic* by Anne Thurston discussed in Chapter 2 further reiterates the dominant narrative in the late 1990s that Chinese orphanages were overflowing with baby girls experiencing inhumane conditions and in need of a better life. While motivations for transnational adoption vary for each individual adopting family, the highly negative public discourse around the conditions of orphanages in China served to catalyze some American’s desire to adopt transnationally. This narrative is not unfounded. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Chinese state was not allocating sufficient funds to institutional care while simultaneously enforcing stringent regulations disallowing foreign intervention. Orphaned and abandoned children in the homes suffered the consequences of the state’s neglect, and some scholars argue that the Chinese government “turned to transnational adoption as a solution” to the surplus of abandoned children while still “enforc[ing] strict fertility regulations locally” (Wang, 2016, p.32). However, the number of children who are adopted overseas represents only a small fraction of the total population of orphaned and abandoned children in China that transnational adoption cannot possibly formulate a solution in and of itself.

The rise in transnational adoption in combination with the series of exposés in the 1990s contributed to the formation of highly negative perceptions of orphan care in China overseas. Despite China’s economic growth and rise to power on the global sphere, China failure to provide adequate support and care for its own children undercuts China’s status as a superpower. This is particularly exacerbated by the fact that much of China’s orphan care’s current

predicament resulted as an unintended consequence of government level population policies, which further brings into question China's status as a morally right political entity.

The rise in transnational adoption from China to the US in the late 1990s led to the formation of another dominant narrative: the "face" of transnational adoption from China personified as a chubby cheeked, black-haired baby girl. A simple Google search of "China adoption" will populate with images of adorable female infants as this stereotype continues to pervade popular American perceptions of Chinese orphans (See Image 2).



Image 2. *The "face" of Chinese adoptees. Girl pictured to the left is on the home page to the website for Children of All Nations', a non-profit transnational adoption agency based in Austin, Texas. Two girls on the right are pictured with their adoptive mother and are featured on a blog post for the National Council for Adoption.*

This characterization is rooted in historic truth. In the 1990s, 95 percent of healthy children in China's social welfare institutes were baby girls (Johnson, 2016). This gendered disparity represents the collision of the One Child Policy and traditional Confucian values which emphasize the importance of having a son to carry on the family name and support the family financially in the future. According to the Pew Research Center, 98 percent of children adopted

from China to the US were female in 1999 (Budiman and Lopez, 2017). However, by the 2000s the demographic makeup of transnational adoptees from China began to shift.

While the orphaned Chinese baby girl remains part of the dominant American perception of Chinese orphanages, this image is no longer an accurate characterization. The average age of adoptees has increased, and the gender divide has essentially disappeared. Prior to 2008, the 44 percent of Chinese adoptees to the US were less than 1 year old, whereas between 2015 and 2016, the largest share of children were adopted between age 5 and 12 (35 percent) (Budiman and Lopez, 2017). 2016 also marked the first year in history in which more boys (52 percent) were adopted from China than girls (48 percent) (Budiman and Lopez, 2017). Popular narratives of the Chinese orphan as a healthy, baby girl fail to acknowledge the reality of institutional care: the growing presence of children with disabilities. In an interview with CNN in 2015, Wang Zhenyao, Dean of China Philanthropy Institute, explains the current situation this way: "Abandoned babies happened frequently before, and the situation was far more complicated several years ago [due to] the one-child-policy, the gender issue and poor living conditions in China... Today, serious health problems would be the main reason children are being abandoned by parents" (Ripley, 2015). While in earlier decades, the One Child Policy led to increased abandonment of healthy baby girls, the lightening of this policy has allowed families to raise girl children without the pressure of needing a son to uphold the family name and provide financially. In fact, anecdotal research has found that many Chinese families consider having one boy and one girl child the ideal family structure (Johnson, 2016). As such, the trend has shifted such that many institutional care settings are home primarily to children with severe medical needs. Though having multiple children does not have the same financial consequences as before, healthcare remains costly. This continues to serve as a motivator for the abandonment of

disabled children, as discussed in Chapter 2, which contributes to the changing distribution of children in Chinese orphan care settings. Clearly, there is a disconnect between American characterizations and the reality of orphan care in China as American perceptions are more consistent with situation from the 1990s than present day circumstances. This division between dominant narrative and reality undercuts China's efforts to establish itself as a global superpower by fostering an international image that China cannot provide humanitarian support for its own children.

Soft Power and Transnational Adoption

In her 2016 book *Outsourced Children*, Leslie Wang suggests that “the Chinese government has been able to exert a form of soft power by sending children abroad” (p.50). Soft power refers to the ability to shape the preferences of others to conform to one's desired outcomes (Nye, 2004). Instead of obtaining results through coercion, military force, economic strong-arming, or other means of force, soft power revolves around the idea of co-opting power by “getting others to want the outcomes that you want” (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

While military and economic power often dominate dialogue around international politics, soft power becomes increasingly relevant in current era. Following the development of weapons of mass destruction, countries are increasingly unwilling to utilize the full extent of their military power due to the devastating nature of war and nuclear weaponry. This makes negotiation, attraction, and diplomacy ever more relevant in the current political sphere. The Vietnam War clearly illustrates this shift in power dynamics. Despite the United States' superior military might and possession of nuclear weapons, the United States did not achieve its desired outcome at the conclusion of the conflict. The US, along with several other Western countries

had supported the anti-communist South Vietnamese forces, but ultimately North and South Vietnam were united under the Communist North. How did this happen? There have been entire books dedicated to answering this deceptively simple question, but this example goes to show the complexity and multiplicity of factors of power in the international political realm. As pure military force loses traction in light of the development of weapons of mass destruction, the power of attraction, or soft power, becomes more prominent in international politics.

Scholars supporting the argument that China has leveraged transnational adoption of its children as a form of soft power suggest that transnational adoption cultivates interest in Chinese culture and serves as an attractive quality (Dorow, 2006; Wang, 2016). While some adopting parents are initially motivated by a “preexisting or growing interest in ancient Chinese culture,” transnational adoption can expand the reach of contemporary Chinese culture as well (Dorow, 2006, p.43). The Chinese government actively encourages the spreading of cultural knowledge and interest in adopting families which supports this agenda. The China Center of Adoption has a tradition of asking adopting parents to confirm in writing their intent to educate their adoptive children about Chinese culture (Dorow, 2006, p.43). Moreover, some adoptive families have begun to enroll their children in Chinese heritage camps which are specifically curated to teach children more about Chinese language and culture. As children bring home new information about Chinese culture at the conclusion of the camp, adopted children and their families alike experience heightened exposure to Chinese culture. Wang suggests that it is “no coincidence that the United States, the PRC’s largest trading partner has received the majority of adoptees” (2016, p. 73). While I acknowledge soft power considerations are part of the calculus in determining the PRC government’s approach to transnational adoption, potential benefits of transnational

adoption as a form of soft power are undercut by its continued association with to the One-Child Policy and poor conditions in Chinese orphan care in the 1990s.

One leading factor which makes transnational adoption an ineffective resource for building soft power is that the original surplus of orphaned children in China which contributed to the rise in adoption overseas was a consequence of Chinese state policies. While transnational adoption has the potential to grow Western interest in Chinese culture, its affiliation with the One Child Policy serves as a constant reminder of the controlling, authoritarian nature of the Chinese government which exists in stark contrast to the prevailing global norms which emphasize values of liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy. As such, transnational adoption's close affiliation with the Chinese government reduces its ability to promote Chinese culture in a positive light overseas. In his discussion of soft power, Nye argues there are three primary resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2003). While transnational adoption can spread interest in Chinese culture, it highlights the questionability of the Chinese government's political values in comparison to Western ideals. By calling into question the PRC government's credibility as a moral authority, the legacy of the One Child Policy and poor conditions in Chinese institutional care settings undercut the potential for transnational adoption to grow Chinese soft power in the US.

Policy Changes to Improve China's International Narrative

Since 2005, transnational adoption from China has steadily declined (See Figure 5). From heights of 8,299 in 2005 to 2,228 transnational adoptees in 2017 (Historical international adoption, 2017; Chinese Statistical Yearbook, 2018), the decline in adoption of Chinese children overseas reflects recent structural changes to Chinese population and adoption policies which

reveals China’s desire to strengthen its position as a global superpower beyond pure economic prowess. Critical to actualizing this agenda is China’s demonstrated ability to address domestic issues and provide for its vulnerable populations, which would further develop China’s soft power overseas. This agenda is reflected in the alleviation of strict population policies and the establishment of more stringent policies on transnational adoption.

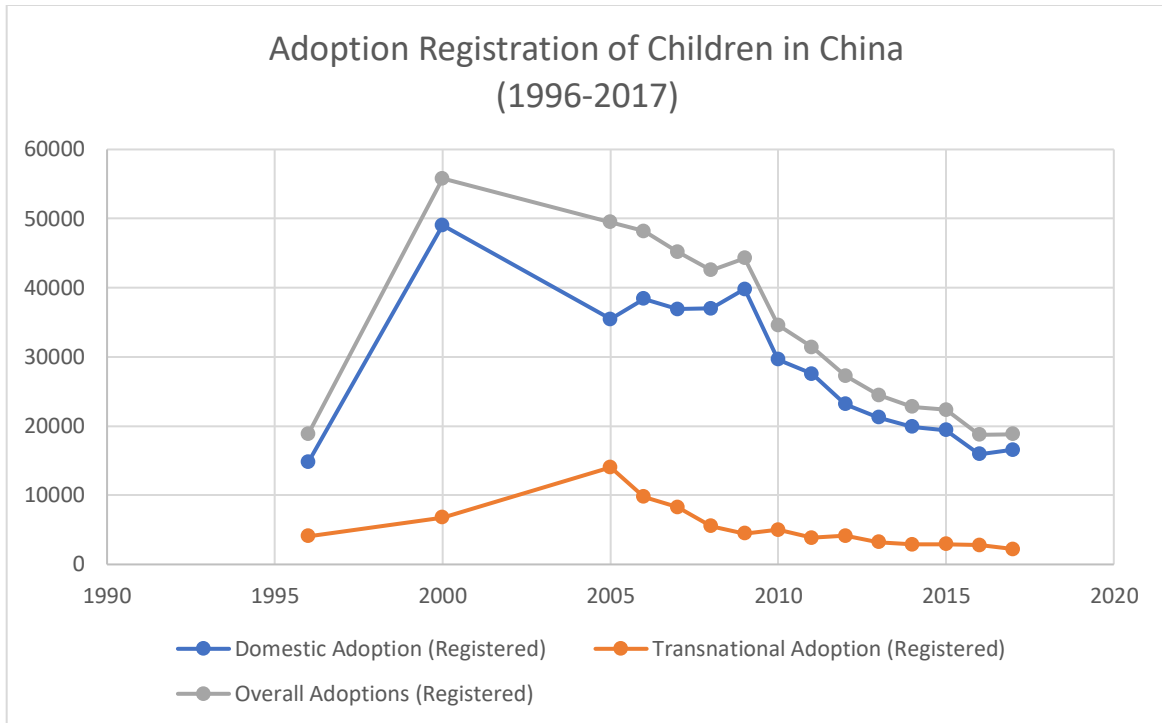


Figure 5. *The Adoption Registration of Children in China from 1996 to 2017; data compiled from Johnston Archive and 2015, 2016, and 2017 Chinese Statistical Yearbooks.*

China abolished its restrictive birth policy in 2015, a sweeping policy change which went into effect January 1, 2016 (Editors, 2019). This was a highly political move which, though fueled by concerns about China’s concerning demographic changes, doubled as a means of increasing China’s soft power. From the Western perspective, the reversal of formerly restrictive population demonstrates a cognizant decision by the Chinese state government to reduce restrictions and increase freedoms for Chinese people within the private sphere of their homes

and family life. As China's population policies now align more closely with popular Western values, China has gained more attraction in the Global North from the abolishment of the One Child Policy than from any number of transnational adoptees.

Another policy change which mirrors China's desire to improve its characterization in the broader international narrative manifests in the strengthening of regulation around transnational adoption. China first opened its doors to transnational adoption in 1988, allowing foreigners of Chinese descent or close ties to China to adopt orphaned children (Ryznar, 2016). In 1991, the Adoption Law of the People's Republic of China eased restrictions such that foreigners could adopt children regardless of prior connection to China, though they were still required to be over the age of thirty-five, childless and deemed medically capable of providing for the child (Adoption Law, 1991). China's adoption laws were further relaxed in 1998 such that the minimum age for adoption eligibility was thirty years old and potential adopting couples could already have children, given that they were seeking to adopt a child with special medical needs (Ryznar, 2016). Policy changes affecting transnational adoption up to 1998 generally relaxed restrictions, making it easier for foreigners to adopt Chinese children (Ryznar, 2016). However, beginning in 2007, regulations on transnational adoption became more stringent. The Chinese Center for Adoption Affairs issued new restrictions mandating that adopting couples must have been married for a minimum of two years, graduated from high school, and retain a minimum of \$80,000 in combined assets (Bureau of Consular Affairs, n.d.). Guidelines have grown more stringent over the years since, with regular updates from the China Center for Children's Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA) conveying enhanced limitations and regulations on foreign adoption. Most recently, a law was enacted in 2017 restricting the activity of foreign NGOs on Chinese soil, including Adoption Service Providers (ASPs) which complicates the transnational adoption

process (China Adoption Notice, 2018). Adopting parents are also required to send regular post-placement reports back to the CCCWA (China Adoption Notice, 2018). While policies addressing transnational adoption from China were initially relaxed, they have followed a continuous trend of increasingly stringent requirements since 2007. These policy changes reflect China's enhanced competency and desire to address its population concerns without foreign aid and reiterate the inefficacy of transnational adoption as a soft power resource. By strengthening adoption requirements for foreigners, the Chinese government asserts high standards for the care of Chinese children, rewriting the narrative of Chinese adoption from one of desperation to one of exclusivity. Though the narrative around transnational adoption from China in the 1990s invoked images of poverty, long-suffering, and dire need for Western aid, China's policy changes attest to the government's commitment to care for its vulnerable children without external interference, thus reiterating its position as a global power who can address domestic concerns and serve as a morally credible political entity.

Conclusion

While children living in China's orphan care system are not often considered political entities, their lives and futures are intimately entwined with the construction of foreign characterizations of China. In the 1990s, institutional care settings in urban China lacked funding, resources, and manpower which, in conjunction with heightened abandonment of children due to the One-Child Policy, resulted in gross violations of institutionalized children's right to health and quality care from the state. At the time, Chinese orphanages were largely populated with infant girls due to deeply engrained Confucian values which prioritized having a male heir. Western media publicized these conditions through a series of exposés of various

media which contributed to the development of a dominant narrative in the US that China could not adequately address its orphan crisis, despite the fact that it was caused by state-levied population policies. This encouraged American perceptions that China's institutional care settings are, to this day, filled with helpless, baby girls in need of a loving home. Though rooted in historic truth, these characterizations are no longer accurate depictions of the state of China's institutional care settings today. Nonetheless, international perceptions influence the political influence and implications of transnational adoption on the global scale.

Though some scholars have argued that the adoption of children overseas composes a source of soft power for China in the US, this perspective focuses overly much on the potential for transnational adoption to spread Chinese culture and fails to take into consideration the full extent of negative connotations which accompany transnational adoption. The dominant narrative in the United States around China's orphan care continues to bring to mind the poor conditions of orphanages from the 1990s and emphasize the PRC government's failure to provide for its citizens. Moreover, the availability of Chinese children for adoption connects directly with the One-Child Policy which serves as a reminder of the authoritarian power of the Chinese state which directly opposes mainstream Western political values. As such, the potential for transnational adoption to build soft power is dramatically undercut by its connection to Chinese political actions and values which conflict with popular Western political values. Rather than a source of soft power, transnational adoption has served as a small-scale, temporary approach to addressing the unprecedented strain on China's institutional care system which occurred in the end of the 20th century. As China has developed into a global economic giant, policy changes reflect the state's desire and ability to assert itself as a global superpower. The reversal of the One-Child Policy builds attraction to China as the relaxing of restrictions on

individual citizens aligns well with Western political values, while the strengthening of requirements of foreign adoption of Chinese children reinforces the ability of the Chinese state to care for its own people.

The relationship between institutional care, transnational adoption, and international politics is complex and deeply connected to Western characterizations which are, in some cases accurate but, in others, severely outdated. In this chapter, I call for a historically informed approach to American narrativization of Chinese institutional care in order to better understand the implications of transnational adoption of Chinese children in the sphere of US-China politics. I address the validity and efficacy of earlier claims by China scholars that transnational adoption formulates a resource of soft power for China overseas, ultimately contending that it was more a small, temporary contribution to the PRC's attempted solution to its strained institutional care system than a source of soft power. Policy changes in China over the past two decades support this argument while simultaneously presenting more potent sources for developing Chinese soft power overseas.

Chapter 5

How much is an orphaned child worth?

Reflections on Value and Thoughts for the Future

1949 is the year most known for the Chinese Communist Revolution, but it also marked the establishment of China's first formalized orphan care system. Since 1949, China's orphan care has undergone significant transformations which must be considered within the broader historical and socio-political context. In just seventy years, China has undergone extreme cultural and societal changes which operate in tandem with its rapid economic growth and development. As new buildings populate China's rapidly growing cities, the Chinese state government has demonstrated a concerted effort to establish a high quality, or *gao suzhi*, population of individuals to help propel China's future advancement as a global superpower. Just as the physical landscape has been undeniably altered by rapid development, China's demographic landscape has undergone significant changes which have in turn influenced structures of alternative care in the country. While changes occur at societal and policy levels, orphaned and abandoned children living in these structures experience the consequences directly. These individuals have little voice and lack power to advocate for their own lives and wellbeing. As such their experiences are heavily dependent on the decision-making processes of others. In this thesis, I seek to uncover value decisions which contribute to changes in the systems and structures of care at play in institutional care facilities in China through economic, moral, and political lenses. Through consideration of these value constructs as well as the social, historical, and political contexts which influence care for orphaned and vulnerable children in China, I foreground the complex interchange of Chinese and Western influences in this site of value conflict. The Chinese state government has power to control the lives and futures of children in institutional care, but its power shaped by global perceptions and values.

Chapter 1 serves as an introductory chapter whose purpose is to provide historical context and background of China after 1949. Primarily, I highlight the socio-cultural impact of the

Chinese Communist Revolution on China's population growth, social consequences of the One-Child Policy, and evolution of structures of alternative care from their initial formation in 1949 to present. Acknowledging the vulnerable positionality of orphaned and abandoned children as voiceless minors lacking biological guardians to advocate for their health and wellbeing, this backgrounding provides a historical framework for further analysis of the various factors which contribute to the construction of China's institutional care settings.

In Chapter 2, I contend that finances pose as motivators for abandonment, determiners for quality of care, and encouragers of transnational adoption. Though some value decisions are made by individual parents and caregivers, each of these factors is directly connected to the Chinese state. Parents are motivated to abandon their children by harsh financial consequences to violation of the One Child Policy, quality of care within institutional care is closely connected to allocations of funding and resources by the state, and high payback from facilitation of transnational adoption was integral, particularly in the 1990s when institutions were severely underfunded. I argue that consideration of economic valuation within orphan care reveals the Chinese state's continual failure to prioritize the lives and wellbeing of these vulnerable children. Instead, the state has actively set policies which prevent unity from being a financially feasible option for lower-income families in pursuit of cultivating a high *suzhi* population and advancing economic progress.

Considering China's orphan care system from a moral lens in Chapter 3, tensions between traditional Chinese and Western values manifest on theoretical, structural, and practical levels. Institutional care settings are constructed to align with Chinese state policies which determine how and by whom care should be allocated to orphaned and abandoned children, yet this is complicated by contradictions with universal human rights doctrines to which China is

also a signatory state. Moral tensions are further reflected in differing approaches to care by Chinese *aiyis* and western volunteers. *Aiyis* working in the homes are more likely to prioritize administration of basic care for the children most likely to survive, whereas memoirs of western volunteers recount a starkly contrasting approach which instead prioritizes administration of care to the weakest children most in need. In both instances, moral tensions in Chinese institutional care reveal a fundamental difference in valuation of the individual in relation to societal wellbeing. In Chinese society, there is a strong pressure to cultivate the individual such that they can contribute to society, whereas in Western thought, there is a greater influence on cultivating autonomous individuals who are worthy for their individuality, not their contribution to the collective. As Chinese institutional care remains a site of both local and international caregiving, conflicting moral value structures create a morally divided environment for orphaned and abandoned children living in the homes.

Lastly, Chapter 4 focuses on the potential political valuation of children in institutional care settings in China by evaluating the claim other scholars of Chinese alternative care have made that orphaned and abandoned children serve as a source of soft power for China overseas through transnational adoption. Though I agree that transnational adoption of Chinese children has the capacity to increase interest in Chinese culture, history, and language in other countries, any potential increase in soft power that this interest could generate is undercut by negative global perceptions which accompany high rates of transnational adoption from China which counteract the Chinese state's mission to further advance its position on the global landscape.

Considerations of value in China's orphan care system foreground the complex and intercultural issues at hand in providing care for this vulnerable population. Though orphan care has existed for thousands of years in China's long history, it was not until recent years that a

formal system was established, and in the seventy years since its formal conception, China's institutional care settings have undergone significant change, often aligning with broader socio-political changes in the country. For example, the One Child Policy, which originated as an attempt by the Chinese state government to limit population growth, had tremendous impact on the valuation of children in institutional care. Economically, the One Child Policy served as a financial motivator for child abandonment as parents were faced with significant financial barriers to retaining guardianship of additional children. This led to an increase in child relinquishment and fundamentally altered the compositional makeup of child welfare institutions which experienced high strain and shortage of resources. The One Child Policy also reflected moral valuation within institutional care as the concept of a unique "Chinese human rights" allowed for the violation of the individual agency within the family unit in favor of greater population health. Politically, the One Child Policy contributed to negative global perceptions of China by enforcing the image of the Chinese state as a ruthless authoritarian regime without regard for freedom of choice even within the nuclear family setting. These negative perceptions contributed to the increase in transnational adoption of Chinese children in the mid-1990s to mid-2000s while simultaneously undercutting any potential soft power advantage transnational adoption could pose overseas.

China's orphan care system lies entirely within China's physical landscape, yet its structure and composition has been heavily influenced by factors beyond its borders, principal among which is popular Western perceptions. A series of exposes published in the mid 1990s contributed to a dominant Western discourse that healthy baby girls were dying from neglect in Chinese orphanages, fueling an increase in adoption by and donations from westerners who were eager to alleviate this unjust and abominable suffering. It is true; the condition of Chinese

institutional care settings was dismal in the 1990s as the effects of the One Child Policy collided with the Chinese state government's failure to provide resources for child welfare. Yet, while western perceptions have remained largely the same, the current status of China's orphan care has shifted greatly over the past three decades, resulting in a disconnect between Western characterizations and Chinese reality. The demographic of children in China's institutional care settings has shifted away from infant baby girls to a more diverse population in both gender and age, with a stronger presence of children with disabilities. With the lightening of the One Child Policy, families are now able to have more children, resulting in less infant abandonment. International adoption from China peaked in 2005 but has been following a downwards trajectory ever since. Western involvement in Chinese orphanages has also decreased in keeping with more stringent policies implemented by the Chinese state government which restrict involvement by international NGOs.

Based off consideration of differing forms of value which I have elucidated earlier, it is clear that China's orphan care system is a continually evolving entity that reflects societal values, transnational narratives, and state decisions. As China seeks to solidify its power on the global scale beyond simply its economic and manufacturing abilities, the Chinese state government continues to control the lives and futures of its children and families to push its political agenda. The history and status of China's orphan care system makes clear that the Chinese state government is exercising power not only at social and political levels, but at the level of life itself.

Looking to the future, it is likely that recent trends of increased restriction on international influence on and adoption from China's orphan care system will continue. Moreover, there has been a global movement away from large-scale institutional care settings.

Already in China, the large-scale orphanages of the 1990s are becoming obsolete as orphan care becomes increasingly smaller and more intimate, though there have been no formal policies enforcing this shift. India, the only other country which can compare to China in terms of population size, passed the Juvenile Justice Act in 2015 which strictly emphasized the need for a family-like structure of care for orphaned and separated children. In coming years, the very structure of institutional care in China will likely shift in the same direction with the existence of fewer and fewer large-scale orphanages, more smaller institutions, and more foster care.

As China continues to develop, there are still two key areas of concern. Firstly, there is a need for more structure around care of children in rural China. As factories and manufacturing jobs in urban areas continue to attract migrant workers from villages in rural China, financial constraints oftentimes prevent parents from bringing their children with them. These children are left to grow up in the countryside. Sometimes these children are left under the care of grandparents or relatives, but others are left orphaned, forced to fend for themselves. To date, most institutional care settings are located in urban China. As such, most orphan care in rural areas continues to fall under informal kinship care networks. While there are merits to informal kinship care, there is a need for more structured provision of care for children who do not have these networks available or whose existing networks are not a safe and constructive space for them to mature.

The second primary need for China's orphan care system moving forward is improved provisions for children with disabilities. Currently, the Chinese government has failed to provide sufficient support for families, particularly those of lower socio-economic status, to care for children with disabilities. Medication and healthcare costs associated with providing necessary care for children with disabilities or special needs pose a considerable burden to parents, to the

point where some parents believe they have no better option than to relinquish their children to state welfare institutes. Once children with disabilities are abandoned into institutional care, the state is responsible for providing all medical needs. If the state were to provide structured financial and medical support to families with children with special needs, parents would be more inclined to retain guardianship of these children. Either way, the Chinese state government would ultimately shoulder the costs of medical care for this population, but in case of the later, children would have the opportunity to grow up in a traditional family structure. Though logically quite simple, this change will require formal commitment by the Chinese state to provide for these individuals who do not fulfill social ideals necessary to the cultivation of a *gao suzhi* population.

So, in the final analysis, the question comes down to this: how much is an orphan child worth? While there are a myriad of value considerations at play, the ultimate answer is that they are worth nothing until those who have decision making power make concerted efforts to put the needs of the individual child at the forefront. In China, the state government has repeatedly placed overall societal advancement above the orphan child, and will continue to do so until it becomes clear that the continued injustices experienced by this population are garnering unwanted international attention which tarnish the global reputation China so desperately seeks to polish.

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