

Found Facts, Hard Facts:

Dr. Kay Johnson's Research on China Abandonment in China

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Reprint from Adoption Today Magazine November 2002

The facts about adoption keep changing. Changes occur not just in regulations and laws but even in the basics, such as how to talk with kids about adoption. Only eight short years ago there were a mere handful of adoption books. As of Fall 2002, there were 1,450 adoption-related books listed on Amazon.com.

I am an adoption social worker. My career led me to write about how to create life history books for adopted children. I am always on the lookout for new resources and stories, and the Internet has become a great place to look. There, people can educate themselves at the speed of light. Listservs and online groups are examples: You can type in whatever subject moves you, and instantly 'talk' with a group of people all interested in the same thing. My passion is adoption Lifebooks, the subject I write about. I'll share a little: I was adopted at age 5 months, in the 1960s. Growing up in a closed adoption meant I had no information: no best guesses, no discussion, no "I'll bet that..." Lifebook work comes naturally.

On one listserv, raisingchinachildren@yahoogroups.com, I heard about Dr. Kay Johnson. Dr. Johnson is an expert on Chinese infant abandonment and adoption. In 1998 she and co-researchers Huang Banghan and Wang Liyao published the results of their research in a paper entitled "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," in the journal Population and Development Review.

In spring 2002, Dr. Johnson's research zipped all over the Internet. Due to copyright issues the study wasn't posted on mainstream adoption websites. I did however get a copy of the 25-page report. Others may do so by going to www.popcouncil.org It was slow reading, but I realized the implications at once. I needed to know more. And I knew that adopted Chinese children would want to know more in years to come. It was their story.

Thanks to the 'red thread' forces near me, I heard Dr. Johnson speak just two weeks after I finished reading her study. She appeared at Wide Horizons for Children, a Massachusetts adoption agency only a short drive from my home. Dr. Johnson was willing to travel for hours in the rain on a Sunday to make this appearance because of her special connection to Wide Horizons. Shortly after adopting her daughter in Wuhan, Dr. Johnson then approached Vicki Peterson, Director of Wide Horizons for Children, about starting a China Adoption program. The rest is history.

A professor at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, Dr. Johnson says her motivation for the research was to help her daughter. "I needed to find answers,"

she said. The most difficult and challenging question was “Why was I abandoned?”

Dr. Johnson is a scholar and knows more about China abandonment policy than anyone in this country. She confided to the packed auditorium that, when her daughter was small, she “stuttered and stammered a lot” when trying to explain about adoption and abandonment. She disclosed that she used words like possible, maybe, as far as we know, and the truth as I know it, with lots of don’t know’s. Now that her daughter is older, Dr. Johnson is grateful that she “always shared the truth.”

In her fieldwork, she and her colleagues were able to obtain information from 237 families who abandoned their children in the 1980s and 1990s. A short questionnaire and a small number of in-depth interviews were used in the study. The following are the major findings:

- ◆ Females represent 90 percent of the children abandoned.
- ◆ Birth order and the presence/absence of a brother were “crucial in determining which girls were abandoned.”
- ◆ Fully 82 percent of these children have sisters.
- ◆ Of children who were abandoned, 88 percent were from rural areas.
- ◆ All the birth parents in the study were married excepting three cases.
- ◆ In half the cases, the birth father made the decision; both parents made the decision in 40 percent of the cases.

According to Dr. Johnson’s report, “some birth mothers said they felt the loss of the child for many years, although most claimed to have gotten over it.” One birth mother insisted that “time healed her wounds,” but by the end of the interview she was overcome by tears and said that she never wanted to talk about this again.

The interviews revealed deep emotional suffering and heartache among many Chinese birth mothers. After reading the report, I felt suddenly that those nameless, faceless birth mothers became real people, still struggling with past decisions. So many of these babies were indeed ‘wanted’—and deeply mourned.

There is an American stereotype that the Chinese don’t value girls. Dr. Johnson challenges this notion, stating that “the Chinese love their girls....Girls are not readily abandoned. This is not the first step for families.” She learned that families often go to great lengths by ‘hiding’ their daughters or paying huge fines before turning to abandonment. It is seldom the first or even second oldest girl who is abandoned.

She is also firm on the point that babies are abandoned in China for a very clear reason. In a quiet voice at Wide Horizon’s Chinese Culture Day, she said that

birthparents “abandoned their daughter[s] not because they were poor or [because] the child would have a better life. The Chinese were afraid of their future[s] without the support of a son.” Dr. Johnson asserts that Chinese birthparents are not “brave” and do not have “no choice”, as American adoptive parents sometimes surmise, but they do have great pressures placed on them. They are forced to make difficult decisions that cause themselves and others great pain. Decisions they would not make if the Chinese government had different rules.

What does this mean for Chinese girls adopted in the U.S.? According to Dr. Johnson’s study, it is likely that they have at least sisters alive in China.

When the facts are known, it is nonetheless difficult for many adoptive parents to share sibling information. The slightest possibility of having a brother or sister is critical information for the adopted person, however. And now we are learning from Dr. Johnson that siblings are more than just a slim possibility. Remember, in her study, 82 percent of abandoned children have sisters in China.

The adoption story thus significantly changes for children adopted from China, from one about a faceless birth mother leaving a baby in a park for reasons unknown, to the likelihood of a two-parent rural family who were fearful for their own survival in old age. It is now a story of birth mothers still grieving and crying over the loss of their daughters, of birth parents pressured by the policies and rules of their country. And now add older sisters into the picture, living at home with their birth mothers and fathers.

Corinne Rayburn, a widely respected adoption therapist of 25 years’ standing, says that the sibling piece is important information: “The child’s truth needs to be held by the parents and told to the child.” She adds, however, that for a young child, “telling a child that s/he might have a sibling could be more confusing than helpful.”

This information must be shared with the child, but presented when s/he is a little older, perhaps 9 or 10—but before the turbulence of adolescence. Ms. Rayburn believes that to tell a child aged 5 or 6 that s/he might have a sister translates into “I have a sister” in the child’s mind. Instead, the child needs to be old enough to understand words like maybe and good possibility.

It is vital that this information be shared by the parent(s) once it will be understood, and not received ‘by accident’ when the child is older. Ms. Rayburn cautions that “you, the parent, do not want to be viewed by your child as a person who avoids, omits, or disguises their truth.”

Each child’s adoption story is a personal, unique tale. Adoption talk and Lifebooks are ways in which parents help their children understand their pasts. The weaving of this new knowledge with the truths that are known sets the foundation for trust, identity, and feeling good about oneself in years to come.

Dr. Johnson supports Lifebooks and says that a “lifebook is invaluable...It helps you think through the issues and carefully word them beforehand...once they are on paper then the hard part is done...”

Dr. Johnson’s journey has transformed the ‘facts as we know them’ for thousands of adopted people. She has discovered another piece of the story, a found fact that will eventually be common knowledge to Chinese Adoptees and to all of us.

This information is not going to be easy to share or easy to live with. But when it is your story, what matters is that it is the truth.

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