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Letting Her Go: Western Adoptive Families' Search and Reunion With Chinese Birth Parents

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Letting Her Go: Western Adoptive Families' Search and Reunion With Chinese Birth Parents

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This is the first study to investigate the trend of adopted individuals from China who search for and reunite with their birth parents. The authors suggest that the closed nature of China's international adoption program and growing ethical concerns about children's true origins impact the desire to search. Due to the generally younger ages of Chinese adoptees, adoptive parents have taken an unprecedentedly proactive role in this process. This article relies on in-depth interviews with adopted children and adoptive parents from seven Western families who reunited with Chinese birth parents. Interviews focused on the decision to search and methods used; the initial reunion; the development of bonds between adoptive and birth families; and post-reunion views of searching.

KEYWORDS *transnational adoption, adoptive families, China, search, reunion*

For an adoptive family to truly accept their child, I think it is important for the family to help their child create this culture of their own. Parents have to realize that this child comes with a history and background that cannot be erased. (Jamie, 16-year-old Chinese adoptee who reunited with her birth parents 2 years earlier)

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Over the past 2 decades more than 130,000 children from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been adopted by foreign parents. Moreover, since 2000 the PRC has been the top "sending country" of adoptable children in the world (Selman, 2012). Chinese adoptees are growing up in first-world societies where open adoption, or, "varying levels of ongoing connections between adoptive families and their children's families of origin" (Siegel & Smith, 2012, p. 5), has become the norm. This increased openness reflects a major cultural shift toward more transparency in Western adoption practices (Carp, 2002). In comparison, all adoptions from China are "closed" placements in which birth and adoptive families do not have contact or access to one another's information, a situation that has resulted from children having been illegally abandoned (Johnson, 2004).

Within Western countries, this climate of openness has motivated many domestically adopted adults to search for and reunite with their birth parents, a trend that has been documented by a growing body of scholarly research. Many studies suggest that locating birth parents is a normal part of personal identity development that may lead to a variety of positive emotional outcomes for adoptees (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Howe & Feast, 2000; Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002; Müller & Perry, 2001a, 2001b; Sachdev, 1989). In the case of China, however, the obscurity of children's origins has long led to the assumption that locating birth parents was impossible. As a result, no published research has documented the experiences of adoptees who search for and reunite with birth parents in the PRC.

Nevertheless, interest in learning about children's pre-adoption histories is on the rise. Over the past decade thousands of Chinese adoptees and their adoptive parents have initiated preliminary forms of searching by returning to the PRC on "homeland" trips, visiting orphanages and sites where children were abandoned in order to garner information about their early lives (Jacobs, Ponte, & Wang, 2010; Powers, 2011). Research suggests that these trips may help children resolve a range of emotional issues and strengthen adoptive family bonds, while at the same time raising further questions and inciting more specific forms of longing (Ponte, Wang, & Fan, 2010). Some of the families that have participated in homeland trips have furthered their searching efforts by attempting to locate children's birth parents. Several high-profile reunions in China featured in the mainstream media have also stoked awareness among adoptive families. Although no official statistics exist, one online adoptive parent Listserv devoted solely to Chinese birth parent search has over 500 subscribed members (personal communication, B. Stuy, June 12, 2012).

At present, questions regarding children's origins and the politically sensitive nature of the PRC's foreign adoption program have created a lack of consensus. Holt International Children's Services—one of the world's most highly regarded and influential foreign adoption agencies—has even taken

a firm stand against birth parent search in China, warning against a range of negative consequences that may result from searching:

At this point Holt recommends that you do not search for your birth parents in China. It is illegal to relinquish children in China. As a result, there is also no legal means to search for birth parents. Searching at this time could put your birth parents, if found, at risk for legal penalties. Searching might also jeopardize the possibility for other children to find adoptive families. (Holt Adoption Agency, n.d.)

The controversy surrounding this topic has had a silencing effect, with few individuals being willing to openly discuss their experiences. Therefore, this study, which is based on in-depth interviews with children and adoptive parents from seven Western families who located and reunited with Chinese birth parents, represents the first empirical analysis of its kind. Furthermore, unlike most research on birth parent search, the current inquiry attempts to give equal weight to the voices of young adoptees and their adoptive parents. Our interviews explored four main themes: First, why did participants choose to search, and which methods did they use? Second, what was the initial meeting like? Third, how did post-reunion relationships develop? And last, how do individuals now regard searching? Due to the small sample size and wide variation in individual narratives, we do not intend to generalize our findings across all China adoptive families. Rather, because so little is known about the challenges and outcomes of this process, the patterns that emerge from these qualitative case studies can provide a foundation for future research.

We begin by placing these issues within the context of changing Western perceptions of adoption and recurring ethical questions about China's international adoption program. Next, we describe our research methods and participants. The final section provides summary findings from the interviews and concludes with a discussion of the emotional outcomes, challenges, and implications of search and reunion in the PRC.

BIRTH PARENT SEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF OPENNESS AND LOSS

In Western countries, an estimated 40% to 50% of domestic adoptees attempt to locate their birth parents at some point (Müller & Perry, 2001a). These numbers are remarkably high since merely decades ago an individual's desire to search was seen as symbolic of larger problems with one's adoption (Affleck & Steed, 2001). Until relatively recently, searching was not even possible in the United States due to the closed, confidential nature of adoption and sealed birth records; this secretive climate surrounding adop-

tion reflected dominant cultural and legal interpretations of kinship that were based solely on genealogy and blood ties (Modell, 1994; Carp, 2002). During the 1970s and 1980s, however, a vocal movement of domestic adoptee activists and birth mothers successfully advocated for the unsealing of birth records, increased transparency, and more open adoptions (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). The changes have been significant: Based on a recent survey of 100 American adoption agencies, 95% of domestic adoptions now include some form of contact between birth parents and adoptive families (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Despite increasingly liberal attitudes toward adoption and a major upsurge in transnational and transracial placements in Western societies, bloodline continues to be the primary determinant of kinship and family bonds (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000; Leon, 2002; Kim, 2007). Privileging heredity has caused adoption to be equated with feelings of emotional loss that are experienced by each part of the adoption triad, including the child's early loss of her "real" parents and origins, the birth mother's loss of her child, and the adoptive parents' loss over their (presumed) inability to bear biological offspring (Leon, 2002). Furthermore, internationally adopted children experience an even wider range of painful losses, not only of their birth families but also of their "cultural 'authenticity,' of psychic wholeness, of personal history and memory, and of legitimate citizenship" in their countries of origin (Kim, 2003, p. 62).

This atmosphere has motivated certain adopted individuals to search for birth parents. Influential adoptee/scholar Betty Jean Lifton argues that lacking biological knowledge can cause emotional distress and a sense of alienation that may be resolved through reuniting with birth family (1988, 1994). Indeed, research suggests that maintaining contact between birth parents and adoptive families noticeably lessens feelings of loss (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, 1997; Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996). Connecting with birth parents may also improve adoptees' self-esteem and even strengthen relationships with adoptive parents (Campbell, Silverman & Patti, 1991; Kohler et al., 2002; Sachdev, 1989).

Taken together, the perception that adoption entails severe emotional loss that must be resolved has is now so prevalent that adoptees are often *expected* to try to find their birth parents. Adoptees who do lack information about their personal backgrounds are considered to be missing a piece of themselves, a circumstance that has been compared to "living without a vital internal organ" (Pertman, 2000, p. 93). Rather than feeling a sense of shame or guilt over searching, many adoptees today are actually burdened with an "obligation to find, know, and grasp material origins" (Homans, 2007, p. 59). As our interviews reveal, this larger backdrop of openness and the desire to resolve loss has motivated certain Western adoptive families to search for children's Chinese birth parents.

International Birth Parent Searches

Few studies have addressed the topics of search and reunion for international adoptees. This likely reflects the difficulty of locating birth parents abroad, typically within developing countries. Indeed, a large-scale longitudinal survey of adult foreign adoptees in the Netherlands found that international searchers face a larger variety of challenges than their domestic counterparts, including language and cultural differences, geographic distance, obtaining information from foreign authorities, and possibly discovering unethical adoption practices in their countries of origin (Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008). These challenges notwithstanding, international adoptees may also use searching to cope with feelings of adoption loss.

Issues of loss also dominate the few existing scholarly examinations of birth parent search in South Korea, the largest-ever wave of international adoption from Asia. Surveys of adult Korean adoptees demonstrate a high level of interest in searching, yet only a small portion have been able to find their birth families (Nelson, 2013). Docan-Morgan (2014) systematically examined key conversation themes that appeared during initial reunions between adult Korean adoptees and their birth families. She found that adoptees attempted to absolve their birth parents of guilt and were also interested in discovering shared physical similarities and in learning the story of their birth and relinquishment. Correspondingly, birth parents felt deeply guilty for not having been able to raise them, apologizing to adoptees while also expressing love and conveying gratitude to the adoptive families.

Despite this useful empirical foundation, to date no research has investigated this topic in China. This preliminary study seeks to fill this gap. While searching includes a broad range of behaviors, including intent as well as action, this article uses Müller and Perry's (2001a, p. 9) more narrow definition of: "(a) any type of formal request for background information . . . and (b) concrete efforts at seeking contact with a member of their birth family." We also consider reunions as an ongoing relationship that continues over time rather than solely a one-time event (Modell, 1997). The next section explores the unique circumstances surrounding Chinese adoptions that have complicated the terrain of search and reunion in the PRC.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION AND SEARCH IN CHINA

As noted earlier, all international adoptions from the PRC are closed. This lack of transparency results from Chinese government policies that not only regulate adoption but have also inadvertently contributed to the illegal relinquishment of certain children (Johnson, 2004; Smolin, 2011; Wang, 2010). We

suggest that the ambiguity of children's origins may exacerbate feelings of loss and stimulate the desire to verify the exact circumstances by which they became available for adoption. In brief, China's international adoption program is intertwined with a range of government policies meant to regulate its economy and population. As the PRC began transitioning to a market economy in the late 1970s, central authorities also instituted the world's strictest family planning regulations, limiting couples to one, or sometimes two, children. In combination with long-standing cultural preferences for sons and a newly competitive economy, these changes led many rural parents to illegally abandon daughters and special needs offspring in order to ensure the birth of a healthy male heir (Wang, 2010). After sweeping family planning campaigns triggered the abandonment of overwhelming numbers of children to state orphanages, China began its international adoption program in 1992 (Johnson, Banghan, & Liyao, 1998).

Because orphanages that participate in international adoption receive compulsory donations of US\$5,000 per child, foreign adoption has provided immense financial resources to China's child welfare system as well as incentivized corruption, issues that further complicate birth parent search. Although the nation was once considered to have one of the world's cleanest, most efficient, and dependable programs, its reputation has since been tarnished by proven instances of baby trafficking and confirmed cases of forced removal of children from their birth families by government officials "with the specific motivation to sell them to orphanages participating in intercountry adoption" (Smolin, 2011, p. 60). In the most highly publicized case, officials from six child welfare institutes in Hunan Province were found guilty of having purchased up to 1,000 healthy baby girls who were subsequently sent abroad (Meier & Zhang, 2008).

Widely publicized reports of baby trafficking has heightened the concerns of many adoptive parents, some of whom are choosing to conduct birth parent searches in China on behalf of their young children. Thus, adoptive parents are serving as instigators, facilitators, and funders of search and reunion—a unique dynamic that influences each stage of the process.

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This study examines the experiences of seven families with adopted Chinese children who searched for and reunited with their birth parents. After obtaining institutional review board approval, we used purposive sampling techniques to recruit families through Chinese adoption-related Listservs. Four of the families were American, two were from the United Kingdom, and one was from the Netherlands. It was not possible to create a random sample of this population because very few families are open about their experiences of Chinese birth parent search. We interviewed a total of 6 chil-

TABLE 1 Summary of Participant Characteristics

Parent(s) Name(s)	Child Name	Child Age at Interview	Child Age at Reunion	Search Length	Search Methods	Reason for Relinquish- ment	Number of Birth Siblings
Lauren Chan	Emma	5	4	4 years	Paid searcher	Fertility reg- ulations	1 older sister 1 younger brother
Jeff Chan Marie Clark	Natalie	19	17	<1 year	Website	Fertility reg- ulations	1 older brother
Patti Harris	Mei	19	8	<1 year	Family friend	Fertility reg- ulations	1 older brother
Katie Lewis	^a Claire	6	6	5 years	Paid searcher	Out of wedlock birth	Unknown
Anne Peters Brian Peters	Sarah	14	10	4 years	Family friend	Fertility reg- ulations	2 older sisters 1 younger sister 1 younger brother
^a Faith Ross	Jamie	16	14	Immediately	Put up posters in- person	Fertility reg- ulations	3 older sisters 1 younger brother
Beth Thomas	Abby	11	10	4 years	Paid searcher	Fertility reg- ulations	1 older sister 1 younger sister

^aNot interviewed.

dren (5 girls and 1 boy) and 8 parents (6 mothers and 2 fathers). In order to protect the privacy of those involved, all names are pseudonyms and no specific locations are given. Following Affleck and Steed (2001), even though there was one male child participant, this article uses the feminine pronoun when referring to all adoptees to further prevent identification.

Except for one Chinese American father, all of the parent participants were White, middle-class college graduates. Children were between the ages of 5 and 19 at the time of interview (See Table 1 for summary statistics). Two other than 19-year-old participants are included because they were both children at the time of reunion. We recognize that children's ages and levels of emotional and cognitive development affect their perception of events. Accordingly, this study relies primarily on the responses of the 4 teenage participants (their ages at the time of interview are listed next to their responses).

Qualitative data were derived from semi-structured interviews conducted separately with children and parents. These were conducted by two trained child development professionals either in person or via the Internet

through Skype. Parental consent and child assent were obtained orally at the beginning of each interview. Parental interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes while children's interviews were 45 to 60 minutes long. Parents and children did not hear one another's responses. (The only exception was an interview with a 5-year-old child whose mother was present and actively engaged during the entire session. However, the child did not hear her parents' interview.) All interviews were audio-recorded.

The interviews were transcribed using the online software InqScribe. Afterward, the researchers used the qualitative data software Atlas.ti to examine the interview transcripts by employing grounded theory, a technique that allows themes and theories to emerge from the data itself (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After developing a detailed coding system, two trained researchers coded all of the interviews to obtain inter-rater reliability. They received 93% correspondence across all interviews, an acceptable value for inter-rater reliability in social science research (Witte & Witte, 2001). The two coders conferred multiple times to eliminate any variations in interpretation, after which the transcripts were recoded in Atlas.ti and reexamined.

FINDINGS

Motivations for Searching and the Methods Used

This section turns to a discussion of our findings, which are organized thematically. In-depth interviews revealed two major overlapping factors that motivated adoptive families to search for Chinese birth parents: wanting to find out the "truth" about a child's relinquishment and wanting to resolve a child's sense of emotional loss. Parents initiated five of the searches, while children initiated the other two. Using individual narratives, this section presents the diverse array of approaches that adoptive families used to locate Chinese birth parents.

PARENT-INITIATED SEARCHES: WANTING TO FIND OUT THE "TRUTH"

Two sets of adoptive parents decided to search immediately upon or even before adopting their children. These parents shared in common two major characteristics: extensive experience with China and a strong desire to discover the circumstances that led to their daughters' relinquishments. The Chans began their search during their initial trip to adopt their daughter Emma. Lauren described her sense of urgency:

I'm familiar enough with China to know how quickly things are changing there . . . I don't think that I thought her birth family would be findable at that point, but it was important to me to find as much information as

we could get right away because I knew there was a good chance that it wouldn't be available later.

Husband Jeff also noted that he felt searching early was important due to the connection between one's history and the formation of personal identity. He stated:

If a kid understands their story from a young age, it doesn't become some kind of "thing" they have to process later on. It just is integrated into their identity when their identity is forming. And I always thought that would be a preferable way to deal with those issues.

When Emma was 4 years old the couple hired a local Chinese searcher who was able to locate her birth parents. The couple was perplexed to have been contacted and immediately assumed that something was terribly wrong with the child. According to Lauren, "The only way they could fathom that [the reunion] would happen is if we wanted something from them. And they said, 'Is she sick? Does she need an organ? Does she need something? We'll give her whatever she needs.'"

In the second case, Katie Lewis also had significant experience with Chinese culture. She and her husband decided to begin searching soon after adopting their 15-month-old daughter Claire, wanting to act quickly before information disappeared. Katie was aware of child trafficking for adoption and had heard rumors of aggressive family planning campaigns in her daughter's region of origin. Because of this, the couple sought to verify the "real" reasons for her relinquishment. She explained:

I guess the driving force . . . behind the search was not so much that we wanted to find the birth family [or] that we wanted our daughter to have a relationship with a birth family, it was really just to find out the truth. I wanted to make sure she hadn't been removed from her birth family.

Several years later they hired a local searcher to go back to Claire's village and put up posters with her photo and information. Within weeks the searcher received a text message from her birth father explaining that the child was the result of an extramarital affair. The man inquired about his daughter's life, confirmed her actual birthday, provided the birth mother's name, and apologized for his actions. In total, the Lewises exchanged messages with the man on four separate occasions. Although they have not yet experienced a face-to-face reunion, Katie noted that she felt "quite relieved and extremely pleased" to have confirmed that her child had not been trafficked.

PARENT-INITIATED DUE TO CHILD'S SENSE OF LOSS

Children's expressed sense of emotional loss was the impetus for three sets of adoptive parents to initiate searches in China. According to Beth Thomas:

We decided to search when [daughter Abby] started to really grieve for [her birth parents] and to be very upset at times wondering where they were and why they left her and thinking that they may not even be alive. She used to get so upset that I . . . wanted to be able to say when she grew up that we've done everything we could to try and find them.

The Thomases first returned to China on a homeland trip when Abby was 6 years old to visit her orphanage and finding location. When Abby was 10, Beth hired a local searcher and the adoptive family returned for another visit to her village. On their arrival day a family came forward claiming that Abby was their child.

Second, Anne and Brian Peters' daughter Sarah also experienced intense grief and longing for her birth family from a young age. Sarah (age 14) articulated:

I had many questions about whether [my birth parents] would still be alive, what they looked like, and whether I had brothers or sisters. Because of all these questions I often could not sleep and it made me really sad. My parents thought it was very important [to search] because they could see that it was difficult for me.

Unlike other parents, the Peters did not explicitly intend to search. However, a Chinese acquaintance from the same region as Sarah offered to help find her birth family, traveling to the girl's finding place and putting up posters. A local newspaper reporter published a story about the search and within 1 week, the child's birth parents were located.

Last, Patti Harris—a single mother who adopted her daughter Mei at age 7—began seeking information after the girl mentioned having parents. When Patti contacted the orphanage, the officials refused to provide any details. Instead they responded, “No need to worry about that now, she's going to America!” She reflected on her feelings at the time: “It was heartbreaking . . . I felt that we should have that information. I knew it wasn't right that she was talking about this family and nobody talked about it.”

Unlike other participants who conducted lengthy, expensive searches, the Harrises underwent a relatively quick and inexpensive process. Because Mei had been with her family until age 6, she remembered key details about her parents and different places. Patti provided this information to a Chinese student from Mei's city who was returning home. She described the simplicity of his search: “He just went and found them. I think he even looked them up in the phonebook or something. It was that easy.”

CHILD-INITIATED SEARCHES

While in the United States adoptees generally do not actively begin searching until they reach adulthood, the closed nature of Chinese adoptions eliminates those restrictions. Thus, with the financial and emotional support of their adoptive parents, two teenage participants made the decision to search prior to the age of 18.

Natalie Clark initiated her search to resolve emotional loss. Like Mei Harris, the girl had been adopted at an older age by a single mother and also remembered details about her former life. For years adoptive mother Marie kept detailed notes about her child's recollections but did not actively search, believing it was her child's choice. She explained, "I knew she had a history before the orphanage . . . I just wrote everything down with the intent that probably someday she would want to search." Natalie struggled emotionally throughout adolescence and asked her adoptive mother to make a serious effort to find her birth family upon turning 17. Marie e-mailed a Chinese volunteer organization that helps lost and missing children. Using her notes, the group was able to locate Natalie's birth family soon after.

Conversely, Jamie Ross (age 16) was the only participant whose decision to search did not emerge from a sense of loss or the need to answer questions about her past. Rather, her decision to search was one of convenience because her adoptive family was already planning a trip back to her home province. Jamie explained:

I was like, I'm going to China, why not? [My birth parents] are probably there [and I thought] I'll find them at some point. It wasn't any like longing. Because it would be nice to find them, I thought, but it wasn't something I really needed.

During their trip, Jamie and her adoptive mother put up a poster at her stated finding site. Later the same day, a man claiming to be her birth father showed up at their hotel with one of her older sisters.

The Lived Experience of Reunion

This section focuses on the initial meetings between adoptive and birth families. Regardless of where they take place, reunions are extremely emotional, unpredictable events. However, those that occur in China are even further complicated by cultural and language differences, the young age of many adoptees, and the presence of adoptive parents. The recurrent theme that emerged from all of the interviews was that of individuals not feeling emotionally prepared for the reality of reuniting with Chinese birth parents. Unlike most media representations that portray such occasions as exclu-

sively joyful and happy, most participants claimed that their initial meetings produced a perplexing mixture of positive and negative feelings.

THE INITIAL MEETING

All of the reunions occurred in public places—usually hotels—and typically involved other parties besides family members, such as translators, guides, and even journalists. Sarah Peters met her Chinese parents in a hotel lobby. Although she couldn't understand what her birth parents were saying, Sarah (age 14) recalled her excitement: "I felt very happy when I saw them and it made me really nervous." Instead of experiencing delight, both sets of Sarah's parents reportedly had a more difficult time during the reunion. According to adoptive mother Anne, the girl's birth parents apologized repeatedly and were "very emotional. They felt so guilty because they had to give away their child . . . they were so afraid that Sarah would hate them and would not forgive them." For her part, at the reunion Anne also realized that she was now going to have to forfeit a certain amount of control over her daughter. She stated poignantly, "When [Sarah] was going to her parents, I thought, 'this is the moment I have to let my child go.'"

Natalie Clark's (age 19) initial meeting was also tremendously emotional. At the reunion, her father wept uncontrollably and asked for forgiveness. Unexpectedly for Natalie, seeing her Chinese family again unleashed a wave of anger and repressed memories. She recalled her reaction: "I walked in the room and [saw] my parents . . . and then they all ran up and started giving me a hug and started crying. And I . . . just stood there, and kind of didn't have any expression on my face."

In Abby Thomas' case, the reunion lasted merely half an hour and was primarily limited to a discussion of whether she was the right child—an issue that was later resolved by a DNA test. Ten-year-old Abby reportedly had difficulty reconciling the real couple in front of her with the romanticized mental image that she had developed over the years. Adoptive mother Beth recounted:

[Abby] leaned into me at one point and she whispered, "these aren't my birth parents." Because I think she kind of liked the fantasy of a beautiful, tragic Chinese woman, and this was two quite careworn people—honest, hardworking, careworn people.

For her part, Beth admitted to grappling with unanticipated feelings of doubt and worry that arose in her immediately after the reunion—even though she was the one who had taken the lead in searching. Beth expressed feeling emotionally insecure:

It seemed like . . . I'd lost her to them and that she wasn't mine anymore [and] at the very least I've got to share her. I fear that she'll want them more than me, you know, all those very natural feelings. Even though I know it's the right thing . . . I won't deny that there were feelings that I had just never expected to feel.

Jamie Ross (age 16) also stated that she was unprepared for the reunion because she had assumed the likelihood of finding her birth family was extremely low. She described her state of mind at that time: "I don't think I had gotten to the point emotionally to be worried about anything. I thought it was like a fun adventure and such. I didn't really realize the gravity of what was going on." At her initial meeting with her birth father and sister Jamie recalled going into a mild state of shock and feeling "pretty much numb," an experience that was influenced by the lack of certainty about their biological kinship. She recalled the moment she saw her birth father: "I was thinking, 'this is really great. This guy looks like he could be my dad!' But I was also thinking I need to kind of keep myself in check because he could possibly not be."

Children's ages and level of cognitive development also compounded the emotional nature of reunions as adoptive parents needed to serve as mediators for young children. Lauren Chan described facilitating an intimate discussion between 4-year-old Emma and her birth mother. When the child inquired as to why the woman wanted to hold her, Lauren explained, "She is your Chinese mama. You were a baby in her tummy and she misses you." Emma then asked, "Does she miss me?" Her birth mother replied in Chinese, "I miss you every day . . . I love you so much!"

Perhaps due to the low awareness of international adoption in the PRC, birth parents were often shocked to learn that their child had been sent abroad. However, many of the Chinese birth parents in this study expressed gratitude to adoptive parents. Emma's birth mother told Lauren, "I'm so glad you adopted Emma . . . if it was anybody else, we would never know her, so thank you." It's important to note that despite widely held fears, none of the birth families sought to reclaim custody of their children, although all were eager to maintain contact in the future.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY REUNIONS

Reunions were an opportunity for individuals to gain an understanding of children's lives prior to adoption. As stated earlier, most individuals wanted to find out the real circumstances behind children's relinquishments. In all seven cases, participants learned that strict family planning regulations had played a key role in children being internationally adopted. For example, because Claire Lewis' parents had not been married to one another, her

birth was rendered illegal. Two other children were the second offspring of urbanites in strictly enforced one-child policy areas.

Johnson (2004) argues that due to son preference, most international adoptees are the second, or sometimes third, daughter in a family seeking to bear a son. Based on her findings, many adoptive parents in our study reported expecting their children to have one older sister and one younger brother. However, only Emma Chan's birth family actually matched this profile, pointing to a much wider range of family configurations in China than commonly assumed. For instance, Sarah Peters was the third daughter of parents who went on to have another daughter and a son. Jamie Ross was the fourth daughter out of five children. Abby Thomas was the second of three children, all of whom were girls.

Many participants gained information regarding heredity, including details about their medical history and real birthdays. Akin to other studies of reunion, both the children and adoptive parents scrutinized birth relatives for similar physical and personality characteristics. Jamie was gratified that she strongly resembled her birth parents and noticed obvious physical similarities between herself and her birth sisters, mother, and grandmother. She said: "They all share common facial characteristics and we *all* have the same smile. Thank you, DNA!"

Likewise, Sarah expressed pleasure in discovering "that I look a lot like my sisters." The obvious family resemblance also had a positive side effect for Sarah's adoptive parents. According to adoptive mother Anne, knowing the birth family limits her from thinking that all of her daughter's issues relate to adoption. She explained:

If I didn't know them . . . if there were problems when she is growing up, maybe I would say "oh, she did something [because] she is adopted." . . . Now I don't think, "This has something to do with adoption, or problems with adoption, or she isn't accepting that she is adopted." No! She just is who she is, and she looks just like her [biological] mother and just like her sisters.

The Development of Relationships Between Adoptive and Chinese Birth Families

As Modell (1997, p. 49) has noted, the greatest challenge after the initial meeting "lies in establishing intimacy when neither daily interactions nor conventional generational distances control the expression of that intimacy." Previous research on birth parent search has tended to focus on short-term, rather than longer-term, outcomes of reunions. For China adoptive families, establishing familiarity and emotional closeness with birth parents was especially challenging because of cultural and language divides, geographic

distance, and the need for some adoptive parents to maintain contact on behalf of their children.

The major theme that emerged from interviews was that of disconnection between participants' expectations of reunion and the reality of managing long-distance ties with birth families. Because of the intense focus on the search itself, no one felt adequately prepared for what might happen after the initial meeting. While some adoptive families struggled to communicate, others were able to develop comfortable, close relationships. Temporality appears to be key, as the families reunited longest described having achieved more intimacy with birth relatives.

All of the participants reported that they had kept in touch with birth parents to varying degrees since the initial meeting, using both in-person visits and virtual methods such as e-mail, Skype, and QQ, a Chinese instant messaging system. Five out of seven families reported that they spoke with children's Chinese relatives on the phone every 1 to 2 months and used instant messaging somewhat more frequently. Moreover, six families had returned for at least one additional visit with birth relatives.

Two of the families found it especially challenging to develop a relationship with birth parents. In both cases, the adoptive mothers described having become the main intermediary between children and birth parents. For Natalie Clark (age 19), the reunion triggered difficult memories that caused her to discontinue contact with her birth family. A year after the initial meeting she expressed mixed emotions:

I thought [the reunion] was just going to be a greet-and-meet and leave, instead of having a relationship with them now . . . I don't know if I am supposed to feel bad that I am not living with them now or I'm not going to see them every couple of years. I am not sure what to do with that, but I am figuring it out.

Adoptive mother Marie continued to speak regularly with her daughter's Chinese relatives in the hopes that she will eventually reestablish communication with them, a situation that she described as "emotionally hard." Marie elaborated, "Every time I call, they beg to speak to her. They want to just hear her voice . . . [but] I can't make her get on the phone, on the computer and talk to them if she is not ready to."

Lauren Chan also expressed reservations about maintaining a relationship with her young daughter's birth parents. Soon after their initial meeting, the two families experienced a serious cultural misunderstanding. Although it was ultimately resolved, the situation left Lauren feeling wary of making a decision that might adversely impact her 5-year-old child. She wondered, "What if . . . a cultural misstep means we never talk to them again? You

know, to me it would be devastating if I screwed up this relationship that I've carried for her until she is old enough to carry it for herself."

In comparison, three families described having developed quite intimate relationships with birth relatives. Returning to China for extended periods—an effort that requires substantial time, planning, and financial resources—has been integral to creating closer bonds. For example, within the space of 2 years Jamie Ross (age 16) made three more trips to China to spend time with her birth family. She described maintaining regular online contact with one of her English-speaking sisters, chatting frequently about their shared life experiences.

During the 4 years since Sarah Peters' reunion, the two families have reunited again on several occasions. Although extremely happy to be reacquainted, Sarah (age 14) described the challenges of a transnational relationship: "It's difficult that I can't be with them that often and that, once I've been there, I have to say goodbye again." The two families have even incorporated one another into their kinship circles. As Brian explained, "We feel a little bit like we are also their parents, too. So we have this kind of strange family where there are two sets of parents and . . . six children." Adoptive mother Anne emphasized that their choice to locate Sarah's Chinese family obligated them to maintain contact:

Given [that] I had decided to search for the birth parents, now that we found them it is also our responsibility to keep in touch with them. . . . We can't say, okay now we found them, now we know who you are, and go.

Similarly, Mei Harris (age 19) characterized her relationship to her Chinese family as "extremely close." She described herself as having two sets of parents and, in the decade since their initial meeting, has spent each summer in China with her birth relatives. Mei articulated, "I think the best thing families can say is something like, 'There is no competing. We all love you and want you to be happy.'"

Post-Reunion Views of Searching

In addition to investigating search processes, the initial meeting, and post-reunion relationships, we sought to discover how participants now regard birth parent search. The central theme that emerged from interviews was that of encouragement tempered by caution; while all individuals agreed that searching could potentially bring about many positive outcomes, they also held serious reservations. Specifically, adoptive parents mentioned the following factors: the unpredictability of what might be discovered, the need to consider the birth family's perspectives, and the suggestion that adoptive

parents search early but only reveal information to children if (and when) they are ready for it. For their part, adoptees were conflicted over who should have the power to decide whether or not to search.

Due to the closed nature of Chinese adoptions, each of the families in this study confronted troubling facts concerning children's origins. Nonetheless, all of the adoptive parents felt that knowing the truth outweighed any uneasiness. Lauren Chan explained:

I always felt like knowing was better than not knowing. Because my theory on it was, we don't have a story, we have a big blank. And [Emma] could fill that in with every terrible story: "I was thrown out with the garbage, my parents hated me, they threw me away, I was kidnapped." I mean, she had a hundred stories, and each was worse than the next. And right now, we only deal with one story, and that story is the truth.

Even so, Katie Lewis advised adoptive parent searchers to be prepared for the possibility of discovering unethical practices:

There was probably quite a bit of illicit activity going on in terms of orphanages procuring children . . . if you start to search there is a possibility that that is what you may find. And whether or not you want to, you and your child have got to [be capable] of handling that kind of information.

Second, all of the adoptive parents reinforced the notion that finding birth parents does not only mark the end of search but in fact constitutes the *beginning* of a new and complex process of communicating with a real family. Anne Peters encouraged adoptive parents to consider the emotional needs of their child's Chinese relatives:

If you are starting the birth parent search, what will you do with the birth family? Because there are still three parties involved: You have the adoptive family, the child, and the birth family. So [searching should] not only be because . . . "I think my child needs this."

Marie Clark similarly cautioned, "Don't start searching unless you are prepared to follow through with it." Despite facing emotional challenges post-reunion, Marie was thankful that her daughter had obtained answers about her past that will eventually allow her to move forward. She reflected, "No matter how bad the story is, you can always heal in time from it. But without knowing what it is, you can't. You are still just in limbo."

A third theme involved the importance of timing due to China's rapidly changing political and social context. All of the adoptive parents and the four older children underscored the importance of searching before information disappears. Patti Harris stated: "I will always say to find out whatever you can,

as soon as you can. . . . Once it's too late, it's too late." However, participants also advised adoptive parents to conduct DNA tests before revealing results to children and to take extreme care because not all children have the capacity—or the desire—to understand their past. Brian Peters conveyed, "Whatever information you get, whatever goes to your child, you have to control it. And make sure that the child can handle it and really, really wants it."

Last, the teenagers in this study each expressed mixed feelings regarding who should make the decision to search. Natalie Clark was thankful that her adoptive mother had left the choice to her. While the children generally felt that the choice should be left to adoptees, both Mei and Sarah also acknowledged how grateful they were that their adoptive parents had made the decision to search early on. Mei's comment underscored this sense of ambivalence:

I don't think everyone should search because you should not have to if you don't want to—only if you want to. I did not search. My [Chinese] family and I found each other again because of my [adoptive] mom. It was not my decision. If she didn't though, I would have lost them forever.

DISCUSSION

This preliminary study has explored the complex experiences of adoptive families that have searched for and reunited with children's Chinese birth parents. We have argued that this growing trend has been influenced by larger cultural shifts in Western receiving countries—particularly increased openness and the view that adoption entails deep emotional loss that may be resolved through locating birth family. Due to the dearth of research on this topic, this investigation contributes an important new layer of understanding to the scholarly literature on adoption and family processes in an increasingly transnational era.

Searching in China entails a wide range of logistical and ethical considerations due to the politically sensitive nature of the nation's international adoption program. The overlap between national family planning regulations, child abandonment, and confirmed instances of baby trafficking for foreign adoption have caused wide speculation regarding children's origins. Moreover, China's rapid modernization has shifted traditional decision-making processes of birth parent search with adoptive parents proactively taking the lead (often without first consulting their young children) to garner information before the window of opportunity closes. The majority of searches (5 out of 7) were parent-initiated, while adoptees initiated the other two.

We found that searchers were motivated by two primary factors: (a) the desire to verify children's origins and (b) the desire to help children resolve feelings of loss for birth parents. Most searches unfolded in stages spread over several years, involving many false starts and stops. Searching could also be quite expensive depending on the circumstances, such as whether parents decided to hire local searchers or make repeated visits to China to gather information.

This study has also explored the implications of establishing contact with Chinese birth families, both during the initial meeting and longer-term. While media representations tend to highlight only their most positive aspects, initial meetings are emotionally charged, highly unpredictable events that challenge dominant perceptions of kinship. Interviews revealed that the first meeting brought myriad unforeseen emotional challenges as both children and adoptive parents tried to reconcile their expectations with reality. Due to their fixation on the search itself, most participants reported that they did not feel adequately emotionally prepared to meet actual birth families. Nevertheless, no one expressed regret over locating children's Chinese relatives (none of whom, incidentally, have faced any of the legal troubles that Western adoption agencies warn about), and participants were eager to share their experiences to help smooth the way for future searchers.

Emotional challenges notwithstanding, the respondents in this study report largely positive outcomes of their reunions. Participants were gratified to observe physical similarities between adoptees and their birth relatives and to have clarified aspects of children's histories. Sarah Peters reported that her ability to sleep had improved immensely because she no longer grieved the loss of her birth family. By the same token, despite some feelings of displacement soon after the initial meeting, adoptive parents expressed that they were relieved to "know the truth" about their children's early lives. However, many questions still remain for participants, even years after establishing contact. Birth family reunions thus "reveal how compelling the myth of the return can be. But they also unsettle the idea that such journeys of self-realization are likely to produce completion for the adoptee" (Yngvesson, 2003, p. 27).

Interviews suggest that the adoptee's life stage at the time of reunion is an integral factor in the development of ties between adoptive and birth families. Unlike domestically adopted searchers who locate birth parents as adults, a number of adoptees in our study were young enough to create genuine parent-child relationships with their Chinese mothers and fathers. Thus, establishing contact with birth parents at a relatively young age appears to allow children to make an easier post-reunion transition, a situation would be impossible without the assistance of adoptive parents. Furthermore, this study supports previous research showing that search and reunion may strengthen the adoptive parent-child bond—a finding that was

true for the two families that had maintained the longest period of contact with children's Chinese relatives.

Despite this study's contributions, it also has certain limitations. Due to challenges of recruitment, there were a small total number of participants, high variability in children's ages, and possible cultural differences as adoptive families resided in three different countries that may have influenced the findings. Therefore, we cannot generalize the themes presented in this article across all China adoptive families, and additional research is necessary to create a more comprehensive account. Future studies should consider the perspectives of Chinese birth parents; of individuals who have searched and not found; and of those who may have located the birth family but decided not to reunite.

Because Chinese birth parent search is likely to become more prevalent in coming years, counseling services offered prior to searching might help both young adoptees and adoptive parents prepare for the emotional and material ramifications of the process. Such counseling may identify strategies for managing expectations and help family members to thoroughly think through the initial reunion and beyond—especially the chance that, once contacted, Chinese birth parents may want to establish a long-term relationship with the child. Thus, counseling could fulfill an important role in opening lines of communication between adoptive parents and children (if they are engaged in the search) regarding feelings, responsibilities, as well as shorter and longer-term logistics.

In conclusion, search and reunion in China is an emotionally complex journey that does not end at the initial meeting with birth parents. As this trend continues to unfold, it remains to be seen how experiences of reunion impact children's relationships and personal identities. However, even for those adoptees who have reunited with birth families, resolving loss and making sense of one's history is clearly a continual process that involves both ups and downs. Natalie reflected on this reality, "It is good to search, but don't let that impact your whole life . . . and don't let that affect you being happy."

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