

# BLURRING BORDERS:

## A BREAKDOWN OF CHINA'S ONE-CHILD POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

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*Since 1992, China has opened its doors to international adoption. In just 32 years, over 160,000 children have been adopted by families from countries worldwide. Yet, in September 2024, the country announced that it would be halting foreign adoption work, the only exception being “[...] the adoption of a child or stepchild of blood relatives of the same generation who are within three generations of foreigners coming to China to adopt [...]].”*

*According to records from the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. has been the largest receiving country of Chinese adoptees. This paper will first explore the history of Chinese domestic policy, which has resulted in a consistently high number of adoptions from China to the U.S., including the role of Malthusian theories, family planning campaigns in the 1970s, and the one-child policy. Then, the focus will shift towards the implications of China’s recent decision to stop foreign adoption work on U.S.-China relations. Specifically, the second section will explore how the process of intercountry adoption has produced an unforeseen connection between the U.S. and China, and the consequences of terminating that connection. It will demonstrate how the connection between these countries began with individuals and gradually trickled up to leaders at the national level, ultimately softening the reputations of the U.S. and China to each other’s citizens.*

## I. Introduction

The inspiration for this paper stems from personal experience. In September 2007, my twin sister and I were adopted from an orphanage in Guangzhou, China at 13 months old. Growing up listening to stories of our adoption and the role the one-child policy played in our journey to the U.S. sparked an interest in learning more about the over 82,000 Chinese children adopted into American families.<sup>1</sup> It was these stories that gave me a first glimpse into how adoption, on an individual level, connects people across cultures. Whether it was the mandatory three-week stay in China to bring us home or the incorporation of Chinese traditions into our daily lives, our family has undoubtedly formed a connection with China. The connection that many adoptive families form with the country of adoption can be applied on a larger scale, one where intercountry adoption connects the two disparate countries of the U.S. and China. The relationship begins with people (adoptive parents who research China's adoption process and children who become "ambassadors"<sup>2</sup> for their country of origin) and slowly incorporates larger forces of international laws and individual governments.

Before elaborating on the impact of international adoption on U.S.-China relations, this paper will focus on China's domestic politics that produced the country's high rate of adoption. Many sources credit the one-child policy for the rapid increase of adoptable Chinese children, particularly girls, but that policy is just one layer. Factors such as a deep-rooted fear of overpopulation from the espousal of Malthusian theories and a strict family planning campaign in the 1970s,<sup>3</sup> all contributed to the creation of the one-child policy and high rates of adoption. The abundance of adoptable children coupled with American families' desires to adopt

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News, *China Ends Foreign Adoptions*, YouTube, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mywE8aXzvI>.

<sup>2</sup> Sara K. Dorow, "Client, Ambassador, Gift: Managing Adoption Exchange," in *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York University Press, 2006), 113–152.

<sup>3</sup> James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, "Malthusian Myths," in *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700-2000* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 18–21.

internationally laid the groundwork for a budding relationship between the U.S. and China, which lasted over three decades. This paper will examine the ways in which intercountry adoption connected the U.S. and China, and the consequences of severing that connection now that China has halted foreign adoption work.

## **II. Chinese Politics and the Development of China's One-Child Policy**

### *A. An Overview of China's One-Child Policy*

The one-child policy was a form of family planning created by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to address the rapidly rising population in China. The restrictions were meant to be temporary (the policy was relaxed in January of 2016 when couples were legally able to have two children) based on the belief that a curbed population would lead to economic growth.<sup>4</sup> While the one-child policy was officially implemented in 1979, the Chinese government had been suggesting one child per couple as early as the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> This family planning program was communicated to the public via an Open Letter by the CCP in September 1980. The goal of the Open Letter was to colloquially explain the reasoning behind such a restrictive family planning program and address possible reservations. It was crucial that the letter be concise and not overly scientific in tone, as the efficacy of the one-child policy would depend on how well it was received and internalized by the people. Multiple drafts were written by the renowned scientist Song Jian. However, Jian was replaced by demographer Liu Zheng, who with government propagandists, created a document that appealed to the masses.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most interesting facts about the one-child policy was that it was never uniformly enforced; the government always had exceptions written into the legislation that

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Feng, Baochang Gu, and Yong Cai, "The End of China's One-Child Policy," *Studies in Family Planning* 47, no. 1 (March 2016): 83, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24720399>.

<sup>5</sup> Hanibal Goitom, "Formulation of the One-Child Policy in China," Library of Congress Blogs, November 19, 2013, <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2013/11/formulation-of-the-one-child-policy-in-china/>.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, "Scientific Policymaking in Zhongnanhai," in *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (University of California Press, 2008), 295–297.

allowed certain couples to have more than one child. Groups who qualified for the exceptions included minority populations and rural families.<sup>7</sup> Rural families had a softer version of the policy because they often required more labor to maintain their livelihoods. For them, an exception known as the “1.5 Child Policy” was created, which allowed couples to try for a son if their first child was a girl.<sup>8</sup> The 1.5 Child Policy reflects the demand for boys, partly due to the patrilineal nature of Chinese society. While there are exceptional cases of families placing a higher value on girls, the 1.5 child policy disproportionately left girls abandoned.<sup>9</sup> The consequences of male preference became magnified once the one-child policy was put into effect, and China continues to struggle with the ramifications today. To form a more comprehensive understanding of the one-child policy, it is crucial to unpack the role Malthusian ideologies and the 1970s birth-planning campaigns had in its creation.

#### B. *Malthusian Ideology and the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth Publication*

The roots of the birth-planning campaigns in the 1970s and the one-child policy can be traced back to Thomas Malthus’ theories on population. Malthus was an English economist in the 18th and 19th centuries who theorized that the trend of population growth would lead to shortages in natural resources.<sup>10</sup> Malthus recognized that trends in expanding populations could be curbed via a “preventative check”<sup>11</sup> (restricting nuptiality) or a “positive check”<sup>12</sup> (rising mortality). He associated the former with the Western world and the latter with the non-Western world.<sup>13</sup> Although Malthusian ideologies predated the beginning of China’s family planning

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<sup>7</sup> Erika Platte, “China’s Fertility Transition: The One-Child Campaign,” *Pacific Affairs* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1984–1985): 651, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2758713>.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie K. Wang, “Survival of the Fittest,” in *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Lee and Feng, “System,” in *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700-2000* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 107.

<sup>10</sup> “Thomas Malthus,” History, 2014, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/malthus\\_thomas.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/malthus_thomas.shtml).

<sup>11</sup> Lee and Feng, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Lee and Feng, “Introduction,” 4.

campaigns by nearly a century, his theories had a resurgence around the mid-20th century as populations across the globe began growing at an unprecedented rate. Economist and demographer Ma Yinchu was an early advocate of Neo-Malthusian ideology, calling for population restrictions in China as early as 1953. The fear of overpopulation gained more traction after a national census in China revealed a population of around 600 million. Yet, formal plans for population regulation would not be implemented until the political situation in China subsided following Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.<sup>14</sup>

Two reasons for the resurgence of Malthus' ideas in the 20th century come from Mao's Great Leap Forward and a shift in focus towards economic growth. Broadly, the goal of the Great Leap Forward was to quickly transform China from an agrarian society to an industrialized one. Lasting from 1958 to 1962, this period was a time of political unrest, flawed agricultural practices, and natural disasters. The combination of these events led to a nationwide famine the memory of which was fresh in people's minds.<sup>15</sup> Although the Great Chinese Famine was not necessarily caused by overpopulation, the principle that populations could be regulated by increasing mortality rates (as a result of events like famines) is reflected in Malthus' theories. The 1970s were also a period in which the government focused on improving the country's economic situation. When publications such as the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* began gaining popularity, the government turned to population reduction as a mechanism for economic growth. Written by a group of international scientists, this report called for a reduction in population, among other solutions, to sustain natural resources. The report also asserted that China's optimal population circa 2080 was 700 million or less.<sup>16</sup> The validity of the report has

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<sup>14</sup> Platte, "China's Fertility Transition," 649.

<sup>15</sup> Clayton D. Brown, "China's Great Leap Forward," *Education About Asia*, Winter 2012, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/chinas-great-leap-forward/>.

<sup>16</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy," *The China Journal* 74, no. 74 (July 2015): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681664>.

since been called into question. Still, the popularity of the report contributed to the formulation of the draconian one-child policy even after the 1970s birth planning campaign. In summary, both Malthus' ideas and the *Limits to Growth* publication spread fear of naturally occurring population growth, and provided support for population limitation to achieve economic growth.

### C. Birth Planning in the 1970s

Across publications in both China and the U.S., the one-child policy is often credited as the policy that led to a significant decrease in population and subsequent increase in the number of adoptable children. While the latter statement may hold true, the former is not quite accurate. A commonly cited statistic suggests that the one-child policy prevented around 400 million Chinese births, but many aspects of the study are questionable. The authors of the study took the declining birth rate between 1950 and 1970 and predicted what the crude birth rate would have been in 1998. Noticing that the observed birth rate after 1970 fell below their predicted rate, "the authors calculated the number of births attributed to the difference between the predicted and the observed birth rates as the number of births 'averted'".<sup>17</sup> While the study found that 338 million births were averted, the number reported was changed to 400 million. Yet, the larger issue at hand is that the predicted 338 million births reflects the period since 1970, rather than 1980 when the one-child policy was put into effect.<sup>18</sup> These errors demonstrate the significant impact that birth planning in the 1970s had on China's efforts to reduce population growth.

The main movement during the 1970s was the "later, longer, and fewer"<sup>19</sup> campaign. The "later" portion was reflected in a push for women to get married later (at least 25 for women and 27–28 for men). The "longer" portion pushed couples to wait at least four years between each

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<sup>17</sup> Wang Feng, Yong Cai, and Baochang Gu, "Population, Policy, and Politics: How Will History Judge China's One-Child Policy?," *Population and Development Review* 38 (2012): 120–121, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23655290>.

<sup>18</sup> Feng, Cai, and Gu, "Population, Policy, and Politics," 121.

<sup>19</sup> Wang, "Survival of the Fittest," 32.

birth. The “fewer” portion advocated that couples limit the number of children they planned to have (two for urban families and three for rural families).<sup>20</sup> Although this birth planning program set a limit of two or three children per family rather than one, it was nevertheless strictly enforced. In fact, the methods of persuasion and coercion during the one-child policy had their origins in this “later, longer, fewer” campaign.<sup>21</sup> Victims of coercion have testified in front of Congress that Family Planning agencies in China were responsible for forced contraception, forced abortions, group punishment (punishing family members for unapproved pregnancies), and mandatory checkups in places of employment to ensure that women were not pregnant.<sup>22</sup> These invasive methods speak to the government’s method of implementing birth planning policies. Ultimately, it was local governments and officials that were tasked with ensuring birth quotas were met within their region.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not such quotas were met could determine if an official would receive a promotion or get fired. Thus, officials resorted to these drastic measures to ensure that people were following government-issued policies.

#### D. *Transition to the One-Child Policy and High Adoption Rates*

Despite achieving a significant decrease in population with the 1970s birth planning campaigns, China continued their efforts with the creation of the one-child policy. The Open Letter may have called on the masses to restrict birth planning, but it was local governments once again that were responsible for implementing the one-child policy. For example, following the announcement of a new one-child policy in June 1979, individual regions (Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Sichuan, Shandong, Hunan, Anhui, Gansu, and Guangdong) began to create rules and

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<sup>20</sup> Whyte, Feng, and Cai, “Challenging Myths About China’s One-Child Policy,” 149.

<sup>21</sup> Whyte, Feng, and Cai, “Challenging Myths About China’s One-Child Policy,” 150.

<sup>22</sup> *China’s One-Child Policy: The Government’s Massive Crime Against Women and Unborn Babies: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, First Session, September 22, 2011* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O. : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O, 2011), 8, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Mara Hvistendahl, “Has China Outgrown the One-Child Policy?,” *Science*, September 17, 2010, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.329.5998.1458>.

incentives for residents to obey.<sup>24</sup> In subsequent years, the government continued to revise legislation that supported this new birth planning policy. It naturally followed that the longer the policy was in effect, the faster the rate of adoptable children in China grew. In order to deal with this situation, China developed a network of Social Welfare Institutes (SWI) across the different provinces where children, predominantly girls, were placed. This unique system began around 1949 when China transitioned from public orphanages to state-run SWI. State-run orphanages prioritized the collective well-being of the children in their care, and were often found in the major cities of the province/region. As China transitioned to a market economy under Deng Xiaoping, SWI fell under the control of local governments rather than the national government.<sup>25</sup> This shift caused larger disparities in resources between the SWI, and an increase of migrant workers at the orphanages.

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China saw massive economic growth as demonstrated by the country's 1980 GDP quadrupling by 1995.<sup>26</sup> The contradiction between a booming economy and high rates of adoptable children can be explained in part by China's demographic situation. Two prominent demographic features rooted in Chinese history are patrilineal ancestor worship and bureaucratic state autocracy.<sup>27</sup> A full explanation of these features is outside of the scope of this paper, but Chinese society (in general) places a higher value on boys than girls. Men can bring in additional family members (via their spouse) and are responsible for caring for their parents. So, when the one-child policy was instituted, many couples abandoned daughters in hopes of trying for a son. The expectation that children are responsible for caring for their parents also contributed to the higher abandonment of girls, rather

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<sup>24</sup> Platte, "China's Fertility Transition," 650-651.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, "Introduction," 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Feng, Cai, and Gu, "Population, Policy, and Politics," 125.

<sup>27</sup> Lee and Feng, "Introduction," 9

than boys, because sons were seen as better financial providers for parents. While some abandoned children were left at SWI, the majority were not for fear of being punished by local authorities. A solution was created where parents would be able to legally leave their children in “baby hatches” and ensure their child would be taken to the SWI. The legalization of these “baby hatches” had a positive correlation on the number of children abandoned. A hatch in Guangdong Province had to suspend its services in January 2014 after it had received 262 babies in less than two months.<sup>28</sup>

#### *E. Implications of the One-Child Policy on China's Society*

Retrospective analysis demonstrates that the one-child policy may have been more detrimental than helpful, as the country now faces demographic issues that are difficult to solve, including an aging population and a skewed sex ratio at birth. As previously mentioned, China started discussing regulations and informally implementing policies for family planning as early as the 1950s, but regulations increased drastically around the 1970s. Consequently, a disparity exists in the number of people between generations. The current working-age population is smaller than the generation before them.<sup>29</sup> This has a twofold effect where the economy has a smaller workforce, and the generation of only-children (as a result of family planning policies) bear a larger responsibility. Economic principles can explain the negative consequences of a smaller workforce on economic growth, but the weight of responsibility to care for family is tied more closely to Chinese culture. Because children are expected to support parents and grandparents financially, these only-children are stuck with the so-called “4-2-1 problem”—where an only-child is tasked with providing for two parents and four grandparents.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wang, “Survival of the Fittest,” 39–40.

<sup>29</sup> Feng, Gu, and Cai, “The End of China’s One-Child Policy,” 84.

<sup>30</sup> Jing-Bao Nie, “China’s One-Child Policy, a Policy Without a Future,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 23, no. 3 (July 2014): 281–282, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180113000881>.

The one-child policy was relaxed in 2016 to allow couples to have two children. Despite these efforts, studies show that couples are now choosing to have fewer children than they did before the policy. The driving force behind this trend seems to be economic rather than government-instituted policy.<sup>31</sup>

The second issue that China faces is a gender imbalance, demonstrated by a skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB). For most countries, infant SRB falls around 103-107 boys per 100 girls. However, China's 2010 census showed an SRB of 118 boys per 100 girls, and ratios have risen to 130 boys per 100 girls.<sup>32</sup> As these children have grown older their generation has suffered from lower marriage rates due to the uneven ratio of women and men. Interestingly, the architects of the one-child policy had foreseen China's current issues of aging populations, labor shortages, and a skewed SRB; these exact concerns were addressed in the CCP's Open Letter. So, why did the Chinese government decide to go through with the one-child policy even after birth rates decreased during the 1970s campaign? They believed that the benefits of a reduced population would outweigh any "secondary" concerns of population aging, labor shortages, or distorted sex ratios.<sup>33</sup> Looking back, these "secondary" concerns have proved to be more burdensome to deal with and slow to reverse.

### **III. Intercountry Adoption's Impact on U.S.-China Relations**

#### *A. Adoption as a Method of Connection*

The process for intercountry adoption varies between countries, but a common thread is the connection between the receiving state and the providing state. Intercountry adoption creates families from people across countries drawing in numerous political systems, international

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<sup>31</sup> Zheng Zhenzhen et al., "Below-Replacement Fertility and Childbearing Intention in Jiangsu Province, China," *Asian Population Studies* 5, no. 3 (December 21, 2009): 329–347, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730903351701>.

<sup>32</sup> Wang, "Survival of the Fittest," 36.

<sup>33</sup> Greenhalgh, "Scientific Policymaking in Zhongnanhai," 300.

norms, and actors that would not necessarily cooperate otherwise. The U.S. and China have vastly different political systems and ideologies, yet they have collaborated on micro and macro levels through their international adoption program. The U.S. has been a leader in receiving Chinese adoptees since the country first opened its doors in the early 1990s. Since 1992, more than 82,000 Chinese children have been adopted by American families, with many having to wait years to finally meet their child.<sup>34</sup> Whether it was American foreign service officers in consular offices approving adoptions,<sup>35</sup> officers from the China Center for Children’s Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA) sifting through thousands of American adoption applications, tour guides leading families through China, or legislators participating in subcommittee meetings to improve the adoption process, each adoption depended on cooperation from people at all levels of government across both countries. This section of the paper will first dive deeper into the process of adoption and its implications on U.S-China relations. Then, it will take a step back to examine the national-level processes that contributed to successful adoptions and a dynamic relationship between the two countries.

### B. *The U.S.-China Adoption Process*

The process of adoption, especially from China, was complex and lengthy. Walking through the steps that adoptive parents went through, from researching different countries to travelling to China to meet their children, reveals layers of connection that parents inevitably formed with the country. The first step in the adoption process is deciding whether to adopt domestically or internationally. International adoption became more prevalent than domestic adoption during the 1970s because of the increased demand for infants, a greater number of

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<sup>34</sup> Amy Qin and Vivian Wang, “An Era of Chinese Adoption Ends, and Families Are Torn Over Its Legacy,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/15/world/asia/chinese-american-adoption-program.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Sameer Sheth, U.S. State Department

adoptable children abroad, and the higher maximum age for adoptive parents in foreign countries.<sup>36</sup> There are many reasons why couples decided to adopt from China. Some prospective parents were connected to the culture as second or third generation Asian Americans, while others had family that had visited China. Regardless of the specific reason, people who chose to adopt from China took steps to deepen their understanding of the country. For example, parents often reached out to Asian-American families and community members to learn more about Chinese culture before formally starting the application process.<sup>37</sup> Individuals might not have the power to truly shape global relationships between the U.S. and China, but they can serve as advocates and educators in their communities.<sup>38</sup> An angle that will be discussed later is the role of the adoptees in bridging the divide between these disparate cultures.

The next step in the adoption process is the application, which involves a host of administrative paperwork that is sent to the CCCWA. Officials in China review the paperwork to ensure that parents meet the country's standards and that the home environment will be safe. Factors that contribute to a lengthy application and approval process include determining the availability of children, status of parties, consents, identification of post-adoption rights, and suitability of parents.<sup>39</sup> This phase of adoption arguably demonstrates the importance of cooperation in the adoption process most clearly, because these approvals are dependent on Chinese agencies and officials. First, the Chinese government works with SWI across the country to identify adoptable children, with the number of adoptable children depending on the number of orphanages that are chosen to participate in international adoption.<sup>40</sup> Then, the suitability of parents is assessed by evaluating whether they meet the list of requirements

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<sup>36</sup> Dorow, "Why China? Identifying Histories," 50-53.

<sup>37</sup> Dorow, "Why China? Identifying Histories," 42.

<sup>38</sup> *Somewhere Between*, film (United States, 2011), <https://tubitv.com/movies/312542/somewhere-between>.

<sup>39</sup> Kerry O'Halloran, "The Adoption Process, Human Rights and the ECtHR," in *Adoption Law and Human Rights | International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2018), 93.

<sup>40</sup> Dorow, "Matches Made on Earth: Making Parents and Children for Each Other," 73.

outlined by the Chinese government. Initially, China had a more relaxed policy regarding the acceptability of single women, homosexual couples, and older individuals. As demand for children abroad increased, the country became more restrictive; one example was the lowering of the maximum age of adoptive parents from 35 to 30 in April 1999.<sup>41</sup> These changes ultimately made it more difficult for international families to adopt from China and aligned with international norms that began favoring domestic placements over international placements. American families and adoption agencies emphasized the importance of following China's rules not only because they hoped to be approved but also because there was a risk that China could shut down their program if they found out applicants had violated their rules.<sup>42</sup>

Once approved, families began preparing for their trip to China. These trips were long, as parents were given time to adjust to the new setting and were tasked with completing adoption paperwork and acquiring a visa for their child. Interestingly, there are also many cases of families signing paperwork promising to expose their children to Chinese culture as they grow up.<sup>43</sup> Realistically, there was no way to ensure that adoptive parents would keep this promise, but it does demonstrate how China attempted to promote its values through its adoption process. During the three-week period, the Chinese government subsidized heritage tours for adoptive families to explore famous tourist destinations (e.g., the Great Wall, Forbidden City, and Terracotta Warriors). Many families were also allowed to visit the CCCWA headquarters and orphanages. As Leslie K. Wang notes in her book *Outsourced Children*, all of this built stronger relationships between the PRC and Western adoptive families.<sup>44</sup> The effort tour guides put into

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<sup>41</sup> Wang, "From 'Missing Girls' to America's Sweethearts," 67.

<sup>42</sup> *Hague Convention on International Adoptions: Status and Framework for Implementation: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, November 14, 2006* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O. : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O, 2006), <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.cbhear/fdsysafkw0001&collection=congreg>, 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> *Somewhere Between*

<sup>44</sup> Wang, "From 'Missing Girls' to America's Sweethearts," 73-75.

exposing families to their child's culture and providing the option to tour the orphanage sites presented China as "a country of origins with clear, uniform procedures that are transparent to adoptive parents and their representatives."<sup>45</sup> Although adoption is just one aspect of China's international activities, the country was garnering a reputation for organization and transparency at the national level in the U.S..

In summary, these reflections speak to the concept of soft power within the field of political science. Coined by Joseph Nye in the 1980s, soft power is "a country's ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure. In practice, that process entails countries projecting their values, ideals, and culture across borders to foster goodwill and strengthen partnerships."<sup>46</sup> On a micro level, families begin to process Chinese values through their extensive engagement with the country during the application process. Consequently, individuals begin to paint a picture of China that is separate from the one portrayed in American news. On a macro level, the program's popularity among American adoptive families had forced legislators to take a vested interest in cooperation with China. The connection between adoption and soft power is further shown through China's ability to benefit from the U.S. without resorting to force or coercion. One previously mentioned example is the promise adoptive families made to promote Chinese culture in their homes.

Another example is that adoption allowed Chinese officials to enhance the nation's image abroad while also funding the local welfare system.<sup>47</sup> Naturally, the role of money in adoption has often been a taboo subject. At the same time, international adoption began to grow in China due to the substantial income it generated from fees and generous donations. Even though the

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<sup>45</sup> *Asian Adoptions in the United States: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, June 8, 2006.* (Washington : U.S. G.P.O.; For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 2007), <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.cbhear/cbhearings92285&collection=immigration>, 8.

<sup>46</sup> "What Is Soft Power?," CFR Education, May 16, 2023, <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/what-soft-power>.

<sup>47</sup> Wang, "Introduction," 14.

money often went to orphanages and SWI to improve conditions for the children, orphanage directors and other actors were undoubtedly benefiting from the increased flow of funds.<sup>48</sup>

### C. *Adoptees as “Ambassadors” of China*

So far, cross-cultural exchange has occurred for future adoptive parents, functioning as a bridge between two global powers. Yet, underlying this strong relationship are the adoptees themselves, who are central to the system. Sara Dorow is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta who has written extensively on the subject of Chinese adoption. In her book, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*, she explains the role of adoptees as client, ambassador, and gift.<sup>49</sup> Dorow describes how “adoption is read as creating positive relations between nations and cultures that might otherwise be rightly suspected of reproducing a global order of nations.”<sup>50</sup> At its core, adoption is the desire to help children, a goal that transcends any ideological differences that may exist between China and the U.S.. In other words, Chinese adoptees inadvertently act as ambassadors between the U.S. and China, fostering cooperation and strong relations despite fundamental differences between the two nations. This language of “ambassador” is also seen in U.S. congressional roundtable discussions. Mary Landrieu (U.S. senator from Louisiana) notes, “[...] these children become the most effective ambassadors for these countries when they come to the U.S. without saying or doing anything. The children's presence softens and opens up America’s eyes to China [...]”<sup>51</sup>

These examples demonstrate how intercountry adoption has often worked in China’s favor, but adoption also reveals the strength of the U.S.’ image in China. In the first announcement from China’s Foreign Ministry on the decision to halt adoption, spokesperson

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<sup>48</sup> Wang, “From ‘Missing Girls’ to America’s Sweethearts,” 65.

<sup>49</sup> Dorow, “Client, Ambassador, Gift: Managing Adoption Exchange,” 113.

<sup>50</sup> Dorow, “Client, Ambassador, Gift: Managing Adoption Exchange,” 127.

<sup>51</sup> *Asian Adoptions in the United States*, 24.

Mao Ning told the press, “We are grateful for the desire and love of the governments and adoptive families of relevant countries to adopt Chinese children.”<sup>52</sup> Her language paints the U.S. in a favorable light as a nation that has cared for China’s children. Adoption has a twofold reputation, with advocates praising the ability to create families from across the world and critics comparing it to past colonial iniquities. Still, people who facilitated international adoptions (orphanage workers, volunteer nannies, and ordinary citizens) often viewed adoptees as incredibly lucky because of their chance to live in America.<sup>53</sup> Sentiments of nationalism remain among Chinese citizens, contributing to the decline in popularity and eventual end of intercountry adoption. At the same time, during the height of U.S.-Chinese adoptions, there existed a general feeling that life in the U.S. was something to be envied.

#### D. *National Cooperation on International Adoption: The Hague Conventions*

Stepping away from the individual level, intercountry adoption has impacted U.S.-China relations on a national scale, incorporating government officials from both countries to create international norms. The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Convention) is a document that loosely “governs” intercountry adoptions globally. At the time this paper is written, 127 countries have signed their name to the Convention.<sup>54</sup> At its core, the Convention’s purpose is to ensure that “intercountry adoptions are made in the best interest of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights and to prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children.”<sup>55</sup> To achieve this goal, the document consists of 48 articles that protect the rights of the child, the birth parents, and the

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<sup>52</sup> Nectar Gan, “China Is Ending Foreign Adoptions of Its Children. That Leaves Hundreds of American Families in Limbo,” CNN, September 6, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/06/china/china-ends-foreign-adoptions-children-intl-hnk>.

<sup>53</sup> Dorow, “Client, Ambassador, Gift: Managing Adoption Exchange,” 128.

<sup>54</sup> “Apostille Countries – What Countries Have Signed the Hague Apostille Convention?,” International Documents Canada, December 11, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> *Hague Convention on International Adoptions: Status and Framework for Implementation*, 1.

prospective parents to ensure that each adoption is legal. The Convention outlines that birth parents must not be bribed or compensated, and that transfer of legal parental status must be given freely. The Convention provides prospective parents with the peace of mind that their child has not been abducted, sold, or trafficked. Birth parents are also assured that adoptive parents are eligible and suited to adopt. Suitability is determined by the sending country, which makes its preferences on marital status, age, and financial status known.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, a natural cooperative relationship is created between China and the U.S., whereby the U.S. is forced to abide by China's suitability requirements. Testimony from Christopher H. Smith (Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations, Committee on International Relations) notes, "There are people who play the system and lie and deceive about their homosexuality that do so to adopt in China. I can conceive of the Chinese Government shutting down in whole or in part their adoption mechanisms if they think people have improperly exploited their local requirements."<sup>57</sup> While China's requirements may not align with social norms in the U.S., the goals of creating families and helping children are causes that are shared between the two nations. These roundtables demonstrate that legislators were primarily concerned with keeping the program alive, rather than trying to force China to adopt Western norms.

As a leading country in international adoption, especially to the U.S., China's signing of the Hague Conventions is one bridge between countries that are otherwise vastly different. While China and the U.S. have at times cooperated on matters such as mutually beneficial trade, contentions between the two nations arise in areas such as human rights. In the past, the U.S. has leveraged its power to coerce China into addressing and amending human rights violations. A

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<sup>56</sup> *Hague Convention on International Adoptions: Status and Framework for Implementation*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Hague Convention on International Adoptions: Status and Framework for Implementation*, 18–19.

prime example of this was China's potential accession to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. China's signing of the Hague Conventions can be viewed as a step in the right direction in terms of improving its image and reputation surrounding human rights. The goal of intercountry adoption to place needy children first ties the U.S. and China together rather than one that creates division. In a way, China's cooperation in the Hague Conventions is a result of its use of soft power, as China has ultimately been persuaded into working on a human rights issue. The U.S. projected its values onto China and was successful in getting China to adopt this issue. With China's decision to halt foreign adoption work, that common goal no longer holds the countries together. Although adoption is only one small subsection of foreign relations, severing this connection can only hurt ties that have been incredibly strained in the past few years.

E. *National Cooperation on Intercountry Adoption: Aid & NGOs in the One-Child Policy*

One final point of connection created by foreign adoption on the national level is the impact of aid and investment resulting from the one-child policy. Financial gain during adoption was a topic that was touched on earlier in this paper, especially the individualized gains of orphanage directors and specific SWI. However, the one-child policy has impacted U.S.-China relations on a macro level via the flow of aid from the work of nongovernmental organizations into China. The introduction of NGOs into China coincided with the start of the country's international adoption program in the early 1990s.<sup>58</sup> These organizations have provided both physical resources and human capital. Yet, aid during the one-child policy often “embodied a wide range of meanings and thus had to be seen as religious, economic, political, and social all at once, both creating and transforming social relations.”<sup>59</sup> One example of this is the role of

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<sup>58</sup> Wang, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>59</sup> R. L. Stirrat and Heiko Henkel, “The Development Gift: The Problem of Reciprocity in the NGO World,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 554 (November 1997): 71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1049567>.

international volunteers working with NGOs. Often expats who had moved with their spouses, these volunteers regularly came into conflict with Chinese nannies who had different methods of child-care from the Western, intensive style that the expats were familiar with.<sup>60</sup> As the adoption program grew, more parents of adoptees became champions of philanthropy. These advocates were able to generate a large volume of donations, while also operating with the goal to spread certain religious ideas to their international partners.<sup>61</sup> Thus, on a macro level, NGOs were able to shape a nuanced relationship between the two countries through the aid they provided. On one hand, physical resources and volunteers were critical to maintaining proper orphanage standards, and subsequently served to strengthen relations. Even so, tensions on the micro-level surrounding standards of care and religious ideas reflected the larger unpredictability of U.S.-China relations.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In closing, the one-child policy was not created in a vacuum. Birth planning advocacy was first advertised in the 1950s, around the time that China's post-war population boom began. The one-child policy was the fourth in a line of birth planning efforts in China that succeeded because of fear created by the rise of Neo-Malthusian ideology and improvements made from the antecedent "later, longer, fewer" birth planning campaign of the 1970s. Without these two factors, the one-child policy might not have resonated as strongly in the minds of China's citizens or been as strictly enforced. In the end, both the 1970s program and the one-child policy contributed to the rise of international adoption. Furthermore, cultural and demographic characteristics of a patrilineal society and the responsibility to care for elders resulted in the disproportionate abandonment of girls and children with special needs.

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<sup>60</sup> Wang, "The Limits of Outsourced Intimacy," 122.

<sup>61</sup> *Somewhere Between*.

To address the growing number of adoptable children, the government opened its doors to international adoption in 1992. Generally, intercountry adoption gained popularity due to an increase in demand for infants, a greater number of adoptable children abroad, and a higher maximum age for parents in other countries. Still, China's program gained distinction among American families for its reputation for organization and transparency. Prospective parents engaged with China and Chinese culture throughout every stage of the adoption process, and continued to stay tied to their child's country of origin long after the process was completed. China was able to benefit from the increased flow of foreign aid into the country, and Western ideas of proper childcare and religion were introduced to orphanages across China. Cooperation eventually trickled up to the highest officials in both China and the U.S., with the drafting of international norms, such as the Hague Conventions.

From people to larger institutions, international adoption between China and the U.S. brought two countries that often hold antithetical beliefs together. Their common cause to help children superseded firmly held biases, making Chinese adoptees into unwitting ambassadors between the two superpowers. International adoption softened the reputation of each country among its citizens, and often allowed the countries to project their values without force. China's image began to change first in the minds of prospective parents. This softer reputation was ultimately passed on to the adoptees, who formed a natural curiosity for their homeland. As these children grow up, many are exposed to their culture through their parents, who have made a conscious effort to instill Chinese values in the home. The U.S.' reputation was also strengthened through intercountry adoption because of its role as a caregiver of China's children. Adoptees were often envied by orphanage nannies and locals alike for the quality of life they would be

afforded. Finally, the U.S. was able to subtly project its values through the involvement of NGOs and partnering volunteers.

With China's halt on foreign adoption, there no longer exists a connection at the micro and macro levels between the U.S. and China. American citizens no longer have the opportunity to be exposed to Chinese culture, and thus China's image is largely dictated by what is said in the news. In China, orphanage directors and volunteers are no longer cooperating on work with American volunteers, meaning values are not being shared between these representatives. Perhaps of larger consequence is the lack of discussion between higher officials in the U.S. and the Chinese governments. In the U.S., roundtables on the topic of international adoption and human rights have taken a backseat, as more pressing issues have taken precedence. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has no reason to cooperate with American adoption agencies and governments on international adoption. In summary, without international adoption, there are fewer paths to understanding between the two countries, and both governments have less incentive to work together. In a time when relations are strained between countries worldwide, a lack of understanding will only serve to hinder any future U.S.-China relations.