

**CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE
COMMISSION ON CHINA**

Issues Roundtable

on

"China's Children: Adoption, Orphanages and Children with Disabilities"

Monday, October 21, 2002

**Statement of Susan Soon-keum Cox, Vice President
Holt International Children's Services**

My name is Susan Soon-keum Cox. I am Vice President of Public Policy and External Affairs for Holt International Children's Services in Eugene, OR. Holt is an international adoption and child welfare agency that pioneered adoption from Korea in 1956. Holt has placed children for adoption from more than 20 countries and has had adoption and child welfare programs in China since 1993.

I have worked in adoption since 1976 and visited child welfare programs in several countries in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Since 1983 I have worked with hundreds of international adoptees as director of Heritage Camps and Motherland and Family Tours to Korea and, in 1993 and 1999, I participated at the Hague Convention on Private International Law in Respect to Intercountry Adoption. My involvement at The Hague was primarily as an adoption advocate and professional, however I also bring the perspective of my life experience as a Korean adoptee.

In the last 25 years I have witnessed enormous changes and transitions to the institution of intercountry adoption. I am pleased for the opportunity to be here today and express my observations of the impact of child welfare and international adoption on China.

Approximately 20,000 children are adopted from abroad each year by U.S. families. Since the early 1990's adoptions from China represent an increasing percentage of the children adopted internationally. In 2002, more than 4,000 children were adopted from China. These children also demonstrate a changing demographic profile of adoptive families, of attitudes about intercountry adoption, and adoption practice and culture. Most significantly, these adoptions represent a unique profile of international adoptees and the impact they will have upon the institution of intercountry adoption, and the broader cultural context of their birth and adopted countries.

As China emerges into the global consciousness, there are lessons to be learned from the Korean experience. Both countries share an impressive record of achievement in positioning themselves in the world market place, and a shadowy history and reputation regarding to a variety of human rights issues. China and Korea also share a common history of international adoption as a governmentally sanctioned practice that is viable, effective and humane as a means for a child to have a family. It is a social practice that is also highly visible and sometimes controversial on both sides of the ocean.

Nearly thirty thousand Chinese children (primarily girls) have been adopted abroad. Compared to the overall population of China, that might seem an inconsequential demographic. However, it would be misguided and the loss of an important opportunity to minimize the impact of that population on the social and cultural future of China, as well as the social and cultural context of the families in the U.S. who adopt them.

Adoptions from China began at the same time that the virtual community was becoming a part of the daily life of many Americans. This directly and dramatically impacted the adoption process. It influenced the connection of adoptive families to the agency facilitating the adoption, the children they were adopting, and most of all, the connection of adoptive parents to each other. While families adopting from China certainly did not invent international adoption, they did to a large degree pioneer virtual communities for themselves. They replaced the earlier practice of parent support groups in one another's living rooms with more accessible opportunities for support and education not limited by boundaries of geography or time zones.

China contributed to the 'new profile' of adoptive families by establishing policies that permitted older and single parent adoptions. While most countries limited the age of parents adopting infants to 40 or 45, the early adoptions from China required a minimum age of 40 with no upper age limit. Single parents were not restricted and were able to adopt young infants. Immediately adoptions from China became the most appealing opportunity for hopeful adoptive parents, particularly those over age forty and single women. China also established a firm requirement that families travel to China to bring home their adopted children. From the beginning this was considered by adoptive parents to be a positive and treasured opportunity rather than a barrier or challenge to be overcome.

Predictably, going to China to bring their children home has had a compelling and lasting impact upon adoptive families. Touched not only by the children they adopt, but also for the thousands of children left behind, adopted families stay connected to one another, not only for themselves, but also for the children they are parenting and the children they remember in China.

Adoption from Korea began in 1956 and more than 100,000 children from Korea have been adopted by families in the United States. However, it was not until the late 1970's that the issues of race, culture and identity of these adoptees were considered a priority by the adoption community. This was the beginning of heritage and culture camps and motherland trips back to Korea. It took longer for the Korean American community to become involved. Mostly uncomfortable with both the public and private implications of intercountry adoption, Korean Americans avoided participating. In the 1980s that began to change as Korean adoptees grew up and immersed themselves in their birth culture including becoming part of Asian groups in schools across the country. Korean American students began to reach out to and include Korean adoptees in their activities and it paved the way for the more established adult Korean American community to come forward as well.

In contrast, from the beginning, adoptions from China included outreach to local Chinese American communities throughout the country. Adoptive parents sought out cultural resources, established relationships and formalized programs and opportunities for their children. Many of these programs included the children of the Chinese American families and together with Chinese adoptees they learned to embrace the culture and heritage of their birth countries.

In the 1980's there was a GAO report on international adoption. In addition to highlighting varying aspects of the adoption process, the report illuminated the passionate response of adoptive families regarding their adoption experience and their deep commitment to ensuring that international adoption continued as a viable option. When the Hague Convention was first introduced at the end of the 1980's, those outside of the adoption community were startled at the degree of interest and emotional response of adoptive families. Throughout the next decade adoptive families have not faltered in their monitoring and questioning of the Hague process.

From the beginning, China instituted an international adoption process that is similar to the successful process that has endured in Korea for more than 40 years. By establishing a centralized procedure for adoption with oversight by the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA), there is a system of checks and balances that ensures a consistent measure of accountability and equity. This has not been the foundation of

international adoption in many other countries with newly developed adoption programs, and is largely responsible for the success of adoptions from China. This careful, thoughtful system has allowed impressive numbers of children to be adopted with few disruptions.

On numerous occasions, government officials and staff from the CCAA have come to the U.S. to visit adoption agencies, medical programs, state adoption and foster care programs, and local child welfare officials. They have also visited adoptive families around the country and observed the parent group supported programs, celebrations and projects for Chinese adoptees. It is clear that CCAA officials and others in China have been reassured by how well the adopted children are thriving in their adopted families and communities.

When adoptions first began from China, there were firm, rigid restrictions on access by outsiders to orphanages and institutions. There is still reluctance to allow outsiders unlimited access to many institutions, but increasingly China has welcomed child welfare and medical experts, as well as humanitarian and development specialists to assist in improving social welfare conditions in China.

China has understandably been cautious and at times reticent regarding their international adoption program. Like other sending countries, including the United States, China is sensitive to how this social practice on behalf of their homeless children is seen by the rest of the world. Media interest in Chinese adoptions has been consistent and varied. While many of the stories are positive commentaries about a particular adoptive family, other stories have critically exposed the complexities of the one child policy, child abandonment, and inadequate care in orphanages.

No country willingly accepts criticism of how they care for their children, nor do they easily allow children to leave the country of their birth to be adopted by families of another. Intercountry adoption should never be considered the first line of defense, or the answer to the social safety net provided by solid child welfare programs. However, it is an immediate and often the single solution to abandoned children in orphanages with no other option in their future. China has shown an understanding and acceptance of this reality.

When China established and allowed intercountry adoption for thousands of children in the past decade, it has also used the resources created by adoption to elevate the lives of children remaining in China. This is uneasy and uncomfortable for China, or any sending country to acknowledge. However, the evidence of the quality of care in institutions in China clearly demonstrates that resources have been re-invested to improve care for children in China. Foster care, early childhood development and education, programs for children with disabilities, child care training, medical services and numerous other programs to benefit children are increasing in China's child welfare system.

Worldwide, children in orphanages are not given high priority and considered of little value to their society. Resources for their care are inadequate and advocacy on their behalf rare. Often they simply do not survive desperate childhoods. The children who do survive are seldom educated or prepared to care for themselves or a family.

As China continues to seek prominence in a global context, they cannot avoid increasing scrutiny. Circumstances that seem far removed from adoption or child welfare will still have implications on adoption. As China positions itself in the world market place and prepares to host the Olympics, it is predictable that the media and others will continue to focus on social issues, including adoption and the role it has in China. This will likely make China uneasy. But China should remember that they are not alone in explaining or defending the practice of international adoption. The thousands of families who have adopted children from China are outspoken and passionate advocates. It does not mean that they look aside at all that still remains to be done to improve social welfare programs in China, but they see it through the lens of compassion and determination to help them succeed.

Like Korea, the cultural and social context of China will be affected by the impact of international adoption. Because white families adopting Asian children are clearly obvious and visible, they cannot be hidden. Policy makers in China or the United States also cannot ignore them. An example of the ability and determination of adoptive families to mobilize was evidenced when the U.S. increased vaccination and immunization requirements for individuals immigrating to the United States. While it was sound public policy for adults, the requirements for infants and children was disaster. The unintended consequences of this legislation was immediately clear to the adoption community and agencies came together to urge needed changes. However, it was the organized and strategic call to action of adoptive families who had adopted, or hoped to adopt, from China that was pivotal in securing the required alteration in policy for children.

In addition to the adoptive families, the collective influence of other individuals and organizations deeply invested in what happens in China is impressive. Organizations that are not considered part of the traditional adoption community have become involved, such as university researchers, the medical and education community, and the news media. An industry dedicated to the Chinese adoption experience has developed and flourishes. Resources on Chinese culture, history, language and contemporary China are considerable. Books for children at all ages of development and for adoptive parents are published constantly, many by adoptive families themselves. Culture camps, holiday festivals and local events are bountiful and updated directories of local and regional organizations and available in communities around the country.

Chinese adoptions have become a part of the normal cultural mainstream in the United States. International adoptive families have had minor exposure in public service announcements and some commercial advertising in the past (Eastman Kodak produced a commercial about a Korean adoptee in the 1970's). However, increasingly international adoption, and primarily Chinese adoption, is featured in commercial advertising, not about adoption or Asia, but ads for J.C. Penney, Nordstrom, Morgan Stanley, and others. These marketing promotions demonstrate the clout and viability of international adoption as mainstream culture.

At the heart of all this activity and attention are the adoptees themselves. Their life experience as Chinese adoptees will be greatly influenced by the collective energy and attention that has been a part of how adoption from China developed and emerged. By the time China hosts the Olympic Games, many adoptees will be old enough to have, and voice, their own opinions about their birth country and their adoption. It is not possible to predict precisely what those thoughts will be, but if the Korean experience is any indication, they will be a voice the world should be prepared to hear.