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Catherine Ceniza Choy. *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America.* Nation of Newcomers: Immigrant History as American History Series. New York: New York University Press, 2013. xv + 229 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1722-6; $23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4798-9217-4.

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Learning from the Lesser-Known Histories of Transnational Adoption

Transnational adoption has received considerable attention from social scientists and cultural studies scholars over the past decade, a marked shift from an earlier period in which studies of adoption were primarily the purview of social work scholars and child psychologists who spoke more directly to adoption practitioners and focused narrowly on questions of individual adjustment and outcomes. For this reason, when historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural studies scholars began looking critically at the decades-old phenomenon as a transnational process embedded in global power relations–through adoption agency archives, ethnographies of adoptive families, adoptees, and the cultural production of members of the adoption triad (birth mothers, adoptive parents, and adoptees)–Richard Weilâs 1984 characterization of transnational adoption as the âquiet migrationâ became widely cited, even as it became increasingly anachronistic.[1]

By the late 1990s, adoptions from China were on a meteoric rise and mainstream media coverage of elite urban âmulticultural familiesâ frequently featured profiles of Chinese daughters who studied Mandarin while taking up Irish step dancing or who had bat mitzvahs with dumpling and moon cake hors dâoeuvres. These children displayed the most hopeful aspects of globalization and multiculturalism, and exemplified middle-class, white Americaâs liberal and postracial embrace of alternative family forms. Yet long before the highly âvisible and vocalâ adoptions from China at the turn of the millennium were other adoptions from Asia, starting with mixed-race children from Japan and South Korea, followed by refugee children from Hong Kong, and economic orphans from South Korea.[2] A major shift in the new millennium was the fact that adoptees from overseas were encouraged to embrace their heritage in ways associated with being deeply *American*, no longer subject to the assimilationist principles of the previous generations, when newspaper reporters more often than not touted the âall-Americanâ qualities of children whose rapid assimilation and adaptability entailed the forgetting of their foreign origins.

Journalistic and scholarly accounts mostly down-

played the racial difference of Asian adoptees in favor of celebrating nuclear family kinship and the rescue of children from abandonment or destitution. The turn of the millennium celebration of soft multiculturalism highlighted the cultural origins of adopted children yet failed to acknowledge the ongoing salience of racialized difference and the power relations it encodes in U.S. social life. In response, Asian American adult adoptees began inserting their voices and stories into the various public spheres, asserting that the colorblind love that many of them received left them ill-equipped to face entrenched racializations and racisms in their everyday lives, especially as they entered adulthood. Recent scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has accordingly centered on the racial politics of Asian adoptions, and Catherine Ceniza Choyâs book, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America,* contributes to this literature by offering a historical perspective that argues that race âis fundamental to understanding ... early Asian international adoption history as well as the lived experiences of Asian American adopteesâ (p. 10).

Adoption of children from overseas has mirrored shifts in U.S. cultural politics of race and immigration, from assimilation to multiculturalism, and also that of U.S. Empire during and after the Cold War. The first waves of children came from Germany, Greece, Italy, and Japan after World War II. Then the hot wars and proxy wars in Asia and Latin America led to adoption of children from South Korea, Vietnam, Guatemala, and other Latin American nations. Socialist reproductive policies and welfare shortfalls in postsocialist nations led to large waves of children from China and the former Soviet Union. Chinese adopted daughters were victims of the Peopleâs Republic of Chinaâs infamous âone-child policy,â which led to the mass abandonment of girls (usually second daughters) from state-run orphanages. Children from Russia and the former Soviet republics also entered into adoption flows due to the collapse of state-welfare programs following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Romania presaged some of these developments in 1990, when the horrific images of children crammed into state-run orphanages were broadcast on *20/20*, fueling widespread moral outrage that led many Americans to the country to save these children, the tragic outcome of Nicolae CeauÅescuâs brutal pronatalist policies.

Although children are adopted internationally to nations across Western Europe, the United States has long been the country that receives the most number of children in the world. And although children from Africa and Latin America are also adopted by Americans, it is safe to say that international adoption in the United States and elsewhere has been nearly equated with adoptions of East Asian children, with significant and dramatic waves of children from South Korea, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and China arriving ever since the mid-1950s.[3] Especially as numbers of white babies available for domestic adoption have declined since the 1970s, and as open adoptions have empowered birth mothers to make the final decision in the adoptive placements of their children, prospective adoptive parents have looked to other countries, being more willing to adopt Asian children who are, as sociologist Sara Dorow discovered, considered to be racially flexible and more redeemable than black children in the U.S. foster care system.[4]

All of these flows, whether from Asia or elsewhere, have required the cooperation and coordination of multiple parties and individuals. This is the history that Choyâs book offers. Her main archive is that of the U.S. arm of the International Social Service (ISS-USA), the administrative body that oversaw adoption placements to the United States since World War II, and that served other social work functions, such as assisting in international marriages, divorces, and custody battles. ISS embodied a liberal and secular philosophy in its approach to adoption, in contrast to more religiously motivated actors like Harry Holt, with whom ISS had an antagonistic relationship. (Holt was an evangelical Christian whose work in postwar South Korea helped to make it known as the âland of orphans,â and whose international adoption agency has placed more children from overseas than any other in the world.) The social workers and administrators at ISS continually questioned their role in other nations, whether adoption was truly in the best needs of children, and how to encourage indigenous social welfare programs to mitigate dependency on adoption overseas. Choy finds these conversations and self-critical musings in the ISS archive, and this evidence suggests that liberal views of adoption, which might be associated with our contemporary moment, were in fact being actively discussed in the first decades of international adoption, in the 1950s and 60s.

ISS was at the vanguard of what later became known as âtransracial adoption,â which is more commonly associated with adoptions of black children by white parents. Yet the first âtransracialâ adoptions in the United States were those of internationally adopted children from Asia, at first âmixed-raceâ children born to women in Japan and Korea and fathered by U.S. or UN soldiers. They were the object of considerable consternation in

Japan and Korea, where they were outcasts with little hope of being socially accepted. This ostracism, however, was used to highlight American largesse and also to paper over a major liability during the Cold War, namely, Americaâs virulent racism and segregationist policies in the pre-civil rights era. Mixed-race children were portrayed as tragic victims of Asian-style racism (depicted as worse than that of the United States) who deserved to be rescued because adoption was equally an expression of American antiracist values and an embodiment of Americansâ moral responsibility to containing Communism in Asia.[5] Yet these children cannot be understood apart from the historical circumstances that produced them– a racially stratified U.S. society and military, whose soldiers reproduced those inequalities and prejudices in the nations where they served. As Choy rightly emphasizes, the abjection of mixed-race children was not attributable to the backwardness and inhumanity of Japan and Korea, but to the fact that âJapanese, Korean, *and* American prejudices contributed to the social ostracism of mixed-race children in Japan and Koreaâ (p. 22, emphasis in original).

The story of mixed-race children during the Cold War is by now well documented, but the adoption of non-mixed-race children is often thought to have begun with South Korea, after the first wave of âGI babiesâ from South Korea began to ebb in the mid-1960s.[6] A lesser-known history is that of the adoptions of Chinese refugee children from Hong Kong, which reached its peak between 1958 and 1963, when Chinese children outnumbered placements from Japan and Korea. Escaping from the Chinese Communist revolution, families from the mainland barely survived in refugee slums in Hong Kong, where starvation and overcrowding were severe. Children were abandoned or orphaned, and also actively relinquished by parents unable to feed or educate them.

As Choy describes in chapter 2, although ISS sought to place these children with Chinese American families, racial matching was not their primary concern. Some were orphans, and many others were sent for adoption by their birth parents to âknownâ families, either extended kin or acquaintances. A strong belief in economic opportunity motivated parents to relinquish their children in ways that would be echoed by Korean birth parents in the subsequent decades, yet these arrangements resemble strategic forms of transnational fosterage rather than adoption. Modern adoption practice in the United States advocated nuclear family arrangements in which birth kin was replaced with adoptive kin and exclusive, as-if genealogical relations were created in the best interests of the child, yet in these instances, as Choy shows, ISS social workers were highly sensitive to the needs of older children to maintain connections with birth family in order to better adjust to their new lives.[7] Indeed, these examples suggest that at the height of âclosed adoptionâ practices in domestic adoption, during the mid-century postwar period, some transnational adoptions were much more similar to the âopen adoptionsâ of today, which respect the childâs need to know about their origins and the childâs rights to maintaining connections to existing birth families.

Choyâs analysis of the ISS-USA archive is organized around a notion of âglobal family making,â which she defines as âa process involving the decisions made and actions taken by people who create and sustain a family by consciously crossing national and often racial borders.â She contrasts this âbottom upâ approach which focuses on ânonstate actorsâ to a state-centered, or âtop-down,â approach (p. 9). Indeed, with the materials at hand, Choy is able to draw out how social workers and ISS officials worked through different cases and issues related to adoptions from Asia. Given the presentist notions that often accompany public discourses about adoption, Choyâs book in some ways attempts to show that an earlier history of adoptions rehearsed many of the same questions that are familiar to observers today: whether racial difference between children and parents is detrimental to a childâs wellbeing; how to encourage indigenous solutions to child welfare and to discourage dependency on foreign adoptions by sending nations; and whether American exceptionalism is also a form of racist imperialism that depicts other nations as barbaric in their treatment of children. The individuals who worked for the ISS in New York City and at the branch offices in Asia were particularly sensitive to these questions, negotiating on a daily basis the needs of individual children and broader political and policy contexts in ways that were compassionate and well considered. Choy implicitly suggests that these voices from the archive can offer perspective on contemporary adoptions, particularly given the highly polarized debates that transnational adoption often provokes, between advocates and critics, those who view it as altruistic humanitarianism beyond reproach and those who view it as the ultimate expression of egocentric white privilege and Western cultural imperialism.

Part of the problem with creating a binary between state/top-down and nonstate/bottom-up, however, becomes apparent when thinking about ISSâs function in international adoptions from Asia or other nations. For one thing, ISSâs very role was to mediate with adoption

systems in other countries, which are usually state-run. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of transnational adoption is the ways that it brings together state-level geopolitics with the intimate scales of self, family, and kinship. There seems to be little reason to reinforce a false binary between state/nonstate when what adoption does is precisely to bring the âhuman story comprised of the efforts of many seemingly ordinary peopleâ with processes of state-making and state institutions (p. 9). It is not so much that only one side of the story has been told to the negligence of the other, but that the relations and interpenetration of âstateâ and ânonstateâ is at the heart of transnational adoption.[8] Perhaps it is because Choy focuses exclusively on the U.S. side, where independent organizations like ISS and other private agencies were the main drivers of adoption, but it is not just the sending side for which the âstateâ is salient, but in the United States as well, given that adoption placements were subject to individual state welfare bureaus, and at the federal level, ISS played a pivotal role in writing the special immigration legislation that first permitted âeligible orphansâ to enter the country as âimmediate relativesâ of adopting American citizens.

Overall, Choyâs book is a welcome contribution to understandings of race during the Cold War, the shape of humanitarian adoptions, and the racialized aspects of adoptive kinship, and adoptee experience, all topics covered in five substantive chapters. Throughout the book, the author is adept at using the archive to historically relativize contemporary views of adoption, in terms of race and humanitarianism. Choy examines the responsibilities of social workers and ISS as mediators of family values and cultural norms, as gatekeepers to children, and as producers and bearers of proper social work protocols. This attention to particularity offers some interesting and important points, but the book as a whole does more to fill in the existing historical record than it does to offer a strong argument or theoretical approach.

Choy carefully carves out a space of historical particularity that does not attempt to make broad theoretical claims or to weigh in on what has become highly polarized discourse about adoption. In this respect, Choy departs from the most recent scholarly work, which has cast a very critical eye on the history and practices of transnational adoption, using it as a lens onto Cold War geopolitics, racialized inequality, and humanitarian imperialism, among others.[9] Choy acknowledges these works, but focuses on fine-grained complexity in the archive, revealing underreported stories, such as the adoptions of refugee children from Hong Kong, and stories of Jane Russell, Hollywood celebrity, adoptive parent, and adoption advocate, as well as Major League Baseball player Jim Bouton, who adopted a boy from Korea in the 1960s. Aside from these celebrities, the majority of voices in the book are from social workers on the ground, in homes, consulting with adoptive parents and seeking to negotiate the slippery definitions of childrenâs best interests across national borders, and economic, cultural, linguistic, and racial differences.

The book is written for a general audience and will be of interest for scholars of adoption history and politics, and American social work history, as well as historians and scholars of Asian migration to the United States, American studies, and Asian American history. For readers of H-Diplo network, the focus on nonstate actors in this book offers a worthy counterpoint that may fill in the historical details missing from more policy-oriented studies.

Notes

[1]. Richard Weil, âInternational Adoptions: The Quiet Migration,â *International Migration Review* 18 (1984): 276-293.

[2]. Toby Alice Volkman, âEmbodying Chinese Culture: Transnational Adoption in North America,â in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Volkman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 81-116.

[3]. One popular culture reference to adoption suggests how close this association had become by the early 2000s. In the television series *The Sopranos*, when Christopher Moltisantiâs long-time girlfriend, Adriana, tells him that she may not be able to have children of her own, Christopher despairs of having the âMoltisanti nameâ end with him. Adriana implores, âWe could adopt,â to which he cries, âYeah, thatâs great–some kid with chinky eyes called Moltisanti! Heâd get his ass kicked every day!â

[4]. Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), chap. 1.

[5]. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[6]. For an in-depth history of mixed-race children from South Korea, see Arissa Oh, âInto the Arms of America: The Korean Roots of International Adoptionâ (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008).

[7]. See also Judith S. Modell, *Kinship with Strangers: Adoption and Interpretations of Kinship in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[8]. Some of these studies include Tobias HÃ¼binette, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006); Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*; Dorow, *Transnational Adoption*; and Barbara Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[9]. In addition to the sources previously mentioned, see Laura Briggs, *Somebodyâs Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Claudia CastaÃ±eda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Karen Dubinsky, *Babies without Borders: Adoption and Migration across the Americas* (New York: New York University Press).

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