

International Adoption: A History and Explanation

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the origins of international adoption, why it became popular, and why it still exists. There are many children in the United States that are in foster care but many people still chose to adopt a child from other countries. My hypothesis was that international adoption is seen as exotic and there is less opportunity for the birthparents to interfere with the new family's life.

Methods to test my hypothesis included research of international adoption including reports on local adoption statistics, trends in international adoption in the past five years, a list of celebrities whom have adopted children from other countries, influences on the public to adopt internationally, and when international adoption started in the United States.

Results show that international adoption has been popular since WWI within countries the United States believed were the enemy. Through American exceptionalism, citizens believe that children in these countries need to be adopted more than native children in foster care because they are American citizens. There is some truth to international adoption being exotic as celebrities adopt children from various countries as a trend. Although international adoption became more popular when *Slumdog Millionaire* came out, international adoption has been declining in the past five years.

Therefore, as long as the United States public has known about the horrors of war and the impact it has on other countries, along with American exceptionalism and media propaganda, there has been international adoption. Some people see it as a "hip" humanitarian effort. However, adoptive families are turning their efforts to local children who need homes and bettering the communities in which they live.

Homelessness plagues every country in the world and children are not the exception. Many of these children find themselves in foster care or orphanages until their family comes back for them, they are adopted, or they age out of the system. Families in many developed countries have the option to adopt children from underdeveloped countries. By researching the history and trends of international adoption versus domestic adoption, the reason behind choosing to adopt internationally will become more clear. The theory is that citizens of developed countries believe adopting children from impoverished countries is one way they can make the world a better place. However, there are children that need adopting in the United States also. I believe international adoption will continue to be a part of American life as long as we as citizens witness the cruelties in other countries and believe that our country is better than theirs, a belief called American exceptionalism. I also believe that due to several celebrities adopting children from overseas, international adoption is considered a trendy way to be a philanthropist.

The idea of international adoption in the United States started shortly after WWII. It was prominent in Asian countries with which the country was at war and servicemen had fathered children. Since many of these servicemen had families at home and the children would become outcasts in their native country (considering them half of the enemy), they opted to adopt the children and take them back to America (Choy, 2013). Some children became orphans because of the war. Their father may have died in battle and their mother may have been a civilian casualty (Mason, 2010). WWII was also the first time that photographs and video came back from the battlefield and were shown to the public. Citizens back home had a glance at the violence and death that war creates. From then on, war had more of an emotional impact on citizens and more people spoke out against the cruelties of its

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aftermath. The same rang true for the Vietnam and Korean Wars but there was also the element of American exceptionalism and the government and media labeling the opposing countries as dirty, poor, and all around terrible places to live. Citizens of the United States thought of their country as the greatest place in the world and it was their American duty to save these children from the horrors of their home country. During the Cold War, Chinese families adopted out their children abroad for a better life while American families were happy to take them in based on the horrors they had heard about in Asia. Russian families did the same or there were several children in orphanages who needed homes. Since then, first world families from across the globe have adopted children in poorer nations to help the humanitarian cause (Choy, 2013). For instance, more people adopted children from Haiti after the earthquake there (Mason, 2010).

It is possible that international adoption has always been considered not only the more humane option but the one that is in style. Dancer Josephine Baker adopted 12 children internationally during her life. The public were known to call them her "collection" rather than her family (Choy, 2013). Actress Angelina Jolie and actor Brad Pitt have adopted four out of their seven children from different countries. Other celebrities such as Julie Andrews, Ewan McGregor, Cate Blanchett, Sandra Bullock, and Meg Ryan have also adopted children outside of the United States (Duck, 2015). Yet, according to Miriam Jordan, Angelina Jolie's adoption of her daughter was when international adoption started to decrease. The United States government discovered baby selling tactics in multiple countries (Jordan 2015). Since celebrities are in the public's eye and often rich, they may choose to adopt internationally so the parents of their adopted child cannot take advantage of their fame and wealth and hurt their publicity.

Although there are still poor conditions in some of these countries, there are a large number of children in the United States that need adopting as well. Every year, 20,000 children come of age in the foster program and are on their own. Over 180,000 children of all ages need adopting as it stands (AFCARS, 2015). The United States has more freedoms and better quality of life than over half of the world's countries but there is a legitimate argument against it being the "freest country in the world". In fact, with the increase in political corruption, rise of social injustice, the dissolve of the middle class, and less aid for the less fortunate, studies show it is the trend of a superpower in the beginning of its downfall. According to authors Hershey H. Friedman, Miriam Gerstein, and Paul Fenster,

"America is in distress. We have been going from one crisis to another. Here are just a few: the savings and loan debacle which began in the 1980s; accounting fraud and financial irregularities scandals that involved such firms as Enron, Adelphia, Tyco International, Global Crossings, and led to the Sarbanes Oxley Act; the Great Recession of 2008 which led to the bankruptcy of such major firms as Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers... the Madoff Ponzi scheme and the BP oil spill... Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy which made us realize how unprepared we are for any crisis, and so on" (Friedman, Gerstein, & Fenster).

The present America is not the land of opportunity for those who were born into poverty. It is possible for them to beat the odds and break the cycle of poverty but there are hundreds of children in need of homes here in the United States. "The answer to the question as to whether America is in permanent decline can be found in their writings. These prophets prophesied that several empires would eventually disappear and gave the reasons. The primary causes had to do with social injustices, corruption of leaders, greed, and oppression of the poor. Countries that have compassion for the helpless members of society and do everything to provide respectable jobs for those seeking them are assured of growth and prosperity (Friedman, Gerstein, & Fenster).

In 2008, a movie called Slumdog Millionaire came to theaters about a teenage boy who had

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come from the slums of India and ended up on a surreal game show like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. It ended up winning an Oscar and one of the reasons was how it displayed the terrible conditions in Indian slums. Children lived in fecal matter, were abused and maimed, homeless, and starving. Citizens of first world countries witnessed the reality of child poverty and wanted to help. International adoption was seen as one of the better options. A child living in poverty in India could be swept away from those harsh conditions and has a better life in the adoptive parents' country. Unfortunately, several organizations claiming to be legitimate adoption agencies traffick children and take advantage of the family who want to help which is why the Hague Convention was created. The Hague Convention protects all parties involved in the adoption in over seventy countries. Critics say adopting the child is saving only one person and not helping their native country where thousands or millions are suffering. The move to a new country and new culture may not be good for the child. Children who are adopted out of their country of origin tend to have trouble adjusting to their new life. Their home country is part of their identity and not being a part of it at a young age hinder the creation of that identity (Choy, 2013). They also criticize the Hague Convention for having too much red tape. Several countries that want to join and have many children needing home cannot adopt them out. Countries who were not prepared for the Hague Convention's requirements signed anyway. According to Bethany Christian Services Bill Blacquiere, "The State Department focuses too much on making sure children aren't trafficked without seeing all the excellent things intercountry adoption can provide." Adoption chief of the State Department Trish Maskew stated that many families who wanted to adopt an orphan discover that the child had parents (Jordan, 2015).

Children adopted from other countries often have more mental and behavioral problems than children born and adopted in the United States. A mother of an internationally adopted four year old girl from the Ukraine had to dissolve, or rehome, her child because she could not give her the enormous amount of care the child needed to function in everyday life. This was despite having experience raising a child with special needs and the resources to fix some of the problems the girl had including crossed eyes and dental afflictions. Her adopted daughter was so badly damaged she needed intense professional help and around the clock care. The adoption nearly tore apart her family and it was not healthy for her daughter either (Ballback, 2013). Health problems like these are not uncommon with children who have been in orphanages overseas where there is little to no care taken to prevent abuse and neglect in such institutions. Most children who come from other countries have a great amount of skills the need to work on to be on level with their peers. They could be physically unhealthy, have stunted social skills, emotional or mental issues, or simply need to adjust to life in another country. Age plays a big role in how much the child needs to catch up. The older the child, the more development has been hindered and the more time they have had to experience life in an inadequate institution. Therefore, older children, 18 months or older to be exact, are more likely to have more problems. Where a child has spent their life before they were adopted also has a significant impact on their adjustment. Children who were in an institution rather than being adopted straight from a family had more behavioral, emotional, social, and attachment issues. These issues could haunt them for the rest of their lives.(Schwarzwald, Collins, Gillespie, & Spinks-Franklin, 2015). In the United States, foster care is more prominent than orphanages because it gives children a better family atmosphere and tends to reduce the amount of problems the child has. Countries that are less well off do not have the luxury of putting so many children in foster care and must rely on institutions with little to no resources to house them. Sometimes it is simply to get them off the streets.

International adoptions are much less common than they were 30 years ago. In 2004, an estimated 23,000 children were adopted from different countries were adopted to American families. In

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2014, there were only 6,400 international adoptions. The numbers have not been that low since 1982. China is where most of the international adoptions occur followed by Ethiopia, Ukraine, and Haiti. Russian officials do not allow children to be adopted out anymore. Although many more children in other countries need homes and American families want to adopt them, the decline of international adoption is hypothesized to be because governments and humanitarian efforts rally toward families adopting children in the United States and improving conditions in impoverished countries. With some countries, the US does not want citizens adopting from them and vice versa. The conditions in China and South Korea are on the rise so there is less push to adopt their children. When less children abroad were available, adoptions went down altogether but a few families considered adopting within the United States and the number is steadily going back up (Jordan, 2015).

Dr. Patrick Mason founded the Inova Fairfax Hospital for Children International Adoption clinic. He believes Americans adopt internationally is because they want a diverse family and they want to help children in need from countries devastated by war, famine, natural disasters, and poverty. Their heritage and peers who have adopted influence their decision. Others perceive international adoption to be easier, quicker, and have less restrictions on who can adopt (Mason, 2010).

Although international adoption exists for several reasons, it has deep roots in American exceptionalism which is an old belief used during wartime to keep nationalism alive. Bringing children in need to the United States has many advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately, it is up to the adoptive parents on how they want to go about the adoption process.

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Works Cited

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System. The AFCARS Report. No 22. September 18, 2015. PDF.

There are so many children in foster care in the United States that need adoption. 20,000 kids age out of the foster care system every year. Around 108,000 need a home at present.

With the amount of children and teens who need a home and are United States citizens, why is there a demand to adopt children internationally? Do people believe that the children of this nation have it better off despite needing a home, guidance, and a family?

Ballback, Jane. *Adoptive Parent's Worst Nightmare: Interview with an Anonymous Mother who Rehomed Her Adopted Child*. Adoption Voices Magazine. October 2013.

This article is an interview of a mother who adopted a girl from the Ukraine. The girl ended up having so many problems that the mother had to dissolve the adoption. This is not uncommon with children who come from institutions and impoverished countries.

Adoptions are not always happy. Children in other countries in need of adoption can come with problems from being in an institution and from being born in poverty. It puts into question why someone would choose international adoption.

Choy, Catherine Ceniza Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America. New York University Press. January 2013. Pgs 15-30; 47-53

International adoption from Asian countries started after the Vietnam and Korean Wars, but international adoption itself can be traced back to WWII and the Cold War. The book also talks about children having trouble creating an identity outside of their country of origin. This is one reason to adopt locally. Finally, the book talks about dancer Josephine Baker adopting 12 children from all over the world and people calling them her "collection." International adoption might be the posh thing to do.

This source ties several other sources together and makes several points in the paper about the history of adoption, celebrity adoption, and the effect of international adoption on the child. It explains how the United States started taking in children and the beliefs behind taking children away from the "bad" countries.

Duck, Charlotte. *Celebrity Adoptions*. Glamour Magazine. March 9, 2015. Web.

Several celebrities have adopted children from overseas, mostly women who are unmarried or no longer married. Adopting a child from an impoverished country is seen as something humane to do and it may help with the celebrity's reputation. However, it might also have an exotic flair to it that celebrities find unique.

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If celebrities want to be a philanthropist for other countries, would it not be more helpful to volunteer over there or donate money? Does the adoption of a child have to do with them not wanting to have a child to damage their figure. Do they not want to have to copulate with another human being therefore spread rumors of a new celebrity couple. Perhaps they adopt internationally so they do not have to share the child with someone else including the birthparents of the child?

Friedman, Hershey H., Gerstein, Miriam, & Fenster, Paul. American Exceptionalism or Declinism: Lessons in Leadership and Ethics from the Twelve 'Minor' Prophets. Social Science Research Network. July 2014.

These researchers believe the Bible and several prophets foreshadow cultural downfalls. Although the US has the concept of exceptionalism, there are many flaws in the country. It is not a perfect place to live.

Exceptionalism in the US might be fading and with so many children needing homes locally, more people are choosing to adopt inside the country. It is still at war with other countries but we no longer always see the children as victims needing to be saved from their home country through adoption.

Jordan, Miriam. *Foreign Adoptions by Americans Drop to Lowest Level Since 1982.* Wall Street Journal. April 2015. Web. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/foreign-adoptions-by-americans-drop-to-lowest-level-since-1982-1427837631>

International adoptions have dramatically decreased in the last ten years. Several potential adopters talk about how hard it is to adopt from another country because of the modern rules. The United States has strict rules pertaining to it.

It is possible that foreign adoption is becoming a rare occurrence. Is American exceptionalism becoming a thing of the past? Since the Hague Convention puts so many restrictions on adopting, it may no longer be worth it to adopt internationally.

Mason, Patrick W., *You Asked: Why Do Americans Adopt Children From Abroad?* You Asked. October 2010. Reprinted in USEmbassy.gov. Web. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2010/10/20101004181832aynos8.245486e-02.html#axzz3sEO2gNEK>

Dr. Mason believes families adopt internationally for several reasons. They might have ties to a certain country, feel bad for the children, or want the unique perks of international adoption.

This article explains some of the reasons people choose international adoption over local adoption. It depends on the family. Some people just want a personal experience with adopting.

Schwarzwald, Heidi, Collins, Elizabeth Montgomery, Gillespie, Susan, & Spinks-Franklin, Ahiaha I.A. *Long-term Outcomes for Children and Adolescents After International Adoption.* International Adoption and Clinical Practice. Springer International Publishing. 2015. Switzerland. Pp 41-48.

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A study of children from other countries adopted in the United States and Australia shows that several factors impact an international adoption's success. The older the child is, the more problems they are likely to have. The child is more likely to suffer problems if they lived in an institution as opposed to living in a foster home.

There are more foster homes in the United States because they are more readily available. The US also has strict regulations on institutions, unlike countries trying to adopt their children to families in other countries. This is another reason why someone would adopt locally as opposed to internationally.