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Review of *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*

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Comments

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Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China, by Leslie K. Wang. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016. 208 pp. From \$24.95. Cloth ISBN: 9780804799010. Paper ISBN: 9781503600119. Digital ISBN: 9781503600126.

As a leading source of international adoptees, China has drastically shaped the social, political, and cultural landscape of many countries for more than two decades. According to the U.S. Department of State, since 1999 families in the United States alone have adopted over eighty thousand children from China. In *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*, sociologist Leslie K. Wang unpacks the complex sociopolitical and economic dynamics at play in the seemingly simple process of adopting a child. Through in-depth ethnographic observations coupled with historical and policy analysis, Wang deftly analyzes a myriad of issues underlying fluctuations in Chinese adoption and examines China's international adoption system as a means of globalization through "outsourced intimacy." Coined by Wang, "outsourced intimacy" refers to "the process by which the Chinese state has outsourced the care of locally devalued children to Westerners who, using their own resources, remake them into global citizens" (4). Wang illustrates how this global exchange involves complicated power dynamics between the United States and China, within China itself, and among Chinese state-run orphanages and Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In the first three chapters, Wang discusses how the outsourced intimacy of abandoned children came to be an incremental part of China's globalization efforts and an exercise of soft power. Wang applies a social Darwinist ideology to describe the desire for "high quality," or *suzhi gao*, citizens to represent the country's global image. Limited resources are invested in those who are the "fittest" in body, mind, and skills to carry the economic and political ambitions

of the country, as evidenced by the one-child policy. Driven by desire for labor power, strength, and prestige, China's goals of modernization and economic prosperity have resulted in the discrimination of females and youth with special needs due to socially constructed norms of worthiness and utility. By outsourcing the care of these vulnerable populations, China's adoption policies have ensured that orphans are adopted into select families who will rear "high quality" citizens. Through this transnational exchange, China uses adoptees as a means to secure the country's future, enhance China's image abroad, and fund the local child welfare system.

In chapter 4 Wang recounts her experiences with Tomorrow's Children, an evangelical Christian organization located in the Haifeng Children's Welfare Institute (CWI). In this facility, infants are transformed into desirable adoptees through Western care practices of personalized quality care. Wang focuses on the conflicts that emerged between low-paid Chinese caretakers, or *ayis*, and Western volunteers due to their differences in childcare practices. Despite the well-meaning intentions of Western NGOs, their approaches have, at times, resulted in the inadvertent neglect of youth with special needs. In chapter 5 Wang details her experience at Helping Hands, a local grassroots organization composed of expatriate wives located in Yongping Social Welfare Institute. Wang discusses the shared intentions of short-term volunteer tourists and expatriate wives who seek to fulfill their own lives through "temporary, sometimes self-indulgent" work (116). Both organizations highlight struggles with cultural misunderstandings between the *ayis* and Western volunteers.

Chapter 6 centers on the political, social, and economic factors contributing to the increased adoption of youth with special needs in China through the Waiting Child Program. China's changing supply of available female adoptees and America's evangelical church-based adoption movement indicate the expansion and overlap of each country's transnational influence.

At the same time, Wang suggests that the privatization of childcare by Chinese state authorities and the religious and moral motivations of American evangelicals “ignore pervasive economic disparities and cultural stigmas against disability in China” (135). While China’s overall economic conditions have improved, the percentage of special needs youth put up for adoption has increased as Chinese families still find caring for children with disabilities exceedingly challenging, both economically and socially.

In challenging the “myth of the red thread” (13)—a traditional Chinese folktale adapted to portray the connection of Chinese adoptees with Western parents as predestined—Wang unearths a number of issues with which scholars in the field of Asian American Studies currently are wrestling, as well as understudied topics that warrant further attention. Through the distinct cultural narratives of the Chinese adoptees, Wang’s study expands notions of the diverse identities represented in the collective “Asian American” racial identity. As many Asian Americans continue to experience uncertainty regarding their positionality in American society, how might the experiences of Chinese adoptees and the global conditions under which they were adopted impact perceptions and inform understandings of a complex and changing Asian American racial category? Further research could examine how transnational dynamics, particularly China’s political and economic conditions that shift children’s social value, may play a role in reshaping the demographics of the United States, adding a new dimension to Asian America.

Wang’s study highlights the cultural stigmas around individuals with special needs. Interdisciplinary research at the intersection of disability studies and Asian American studies could provide much-needed insight into marginalized populations. Wang’s work raises some questions for further investigation, including the following: How might the increase in the

adoption of Chinese children with disabilities impact Asian American and mainstream societal views of diversity and inclusion? Could adoptions bring greater awareness to the needs of Chinese children with disabilities? And how might increased awareness change traditional attitudes toward individuals with disabilities?

Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China offers rich insight into global power dynamics at political and personal levels and serves as a catalyst for further inquiries into international relations, experiences of marginalized populations, and the shifting salience of transnational, racial, and ethnic identities.

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