
Book Review

Leslie K. Wang (2016) *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 208 pages.

Chinese American sociologist Leslie K. Wang from the University of Massachusetts Boston works on a very delicate topic, leading her readers into the world of state-run childcare institutions in China and their interaction with the Western world. *Outsourced Children* scrutinizes the unfamiliar world of the practices, values and underlying assumptions related to the institutional care regimes of abandoned or orphaned children in the People's Republic of China in recent years.

It is widely known that China, along with Korea (see Kim, 2010) and Russia, has been among the top providers of internationally adoptable children for several decades. A Google search for the joint words of 'adoption' and 'China' floods us with an ocean of information from adoption agencies' websites through technical details of adoption possibilities from China to adoptive families' personal stories. We learn that a magnitude of 140 thousand orphaned or, referred to by the nearly synonymously used term, abandoned children were adopted internationally from China during the last nearly two decades. 90 per cent of the adopted children were girls, and the proportion of children with special needs among the adoptees has increased. In fact the adoption of children with special needs has become the typical case in recent years.

Leslie K. Wang assesses the complex, controversial and fateful situation of abandoned and orphaned Chinese children and how different forms of Western aid influence their life trajectories. Her line of thought is driven by the seeming controversy of why 'in a time of unprecedented growth and prosperity in the PRC [People's Republic of China], certain daughters and sons have been cast out of their families in large numbers' (p. 28). The PRC's tough practice of social engineering through the now abandoned one-child policy partly accounted for this. On the other hand, free hospital care for all from socialist times ceased to be available in the 1990s, placing a heavy burden on parents of infants with special needs. Leslie Wang did not spare time and effort to provide a dynamic view and a profound analysis of orphanage care and international adoption of Chinese children, and to make us understand how the transnational adoption process reflected China's changing relationship with the 'industrialized' world.

Outsourced Children is structured into seven chapters, plus 20 pages of endnotes and an index. The introductory chapter familiarizes readers with the complex and controversial phenomena the author studied, and with some of the basic notions she worked with. We learn about the unexpected social setup that created the space for the empirical research of the author: 'Since the 1990s, intensive Western investment into certain highly marginalized youth living in the PRC' has been occurring 'that would have been unimaginable only a few decades earlier when the

nation was inaccessible to the outside world' (p. 3). This transnational exchange led to the exportation of tens of thousands of mostly healthy girls to Western homes through adoption, and to the importation of first-world actors, resources and practices into orphanages to care for children with special needs. Several factors added up to the massive abandonment of children. On the macro level it was the light speed rate modernisation of Chinese society, the one-child policy of the state, and China's attempt to produce intensively reared 'high-quality' citizen-workers out of healthy children. On the micro level these were complemented by the stigmatization of orphans and disabled children lacking an ancestral lineage, and by the conviction that only male children could take adequate care for their elderly parents. Neglect and doom in Chinese state orphanages, called Children's Welfare Institutes, were first publicized internationally by a British documentary of undercover footage titled *The Dying Rooms: China's Deepest Secret*, aired in the UK in 1995. Wang emphasizes that the heated international exchange that followed between China and the 'West' demonstrated 'how children are deeply interwoven with notions of national autonomy, identity, and global status' (p. 12). It also led Chinese state authorities to quietly accept and make use of international NGOs' involvement in the care of orphans and gave way to the international adoption of children.

In an attempt to understand why certain children were abandoned while others cherished and nurtured even by the same family, Chapter 2 traces the modernisation project of the Chinese state and how economic reforms, punitive fertility regulations, 'population quality' governing policies and even healthcare-related practices in public hospitals contributed to its realization. Wang contrasts Chinese and first-world views of and expectations from children. While Western middle-class parents consider their children 'emotionally priceless', to use Viviana Zelizer's term on American childbearing, Chinese children have been valued according to their perceived future economic productivity by their parents. Wang also points out that 'child abandonment has historically served as a socially acceptable survival strategy for poor rural families' (p. 30), and this strategy was corroborated by government policies defining the social value of children. This chapter has a substantial part on debates about *suzhi*, or human quality, a core yet somewhat vague notion underlying Chinese social engineering and attempts of modernisation. It is used referring to the aim to creating a 'high quality' population, a quality that is seen as continually improvable through external intervention. The author notes that the quest to improve demographic quality in the PRC has profoundly alarming eugenic overtones (p. 33).

There is an intriguing discussion of the peculiarities of the sex ratio at birth (SRB) that, other than being abnormal with much higher rates of males in the PRC, also shows substantial regional variation there. Wang's account of the so-called '1.5 child policy' (one-son-or-two-child-policy) implemented in rural areas after the mid-1980s shows how it led to the official legitimization of daughter discrimination.

Chapter 3 tackles the process of international adoption from the PRC. It analyses how abandoned girls were transformed into 'high quality' offspring through the outsourced intimacy of international adoption. Wang argues that Western investment in the adopted children in fact promotes the PRC's population project; she claims it to be a conscious strategy on behalf of the Chinese government to use these children as a form of 'soft power' to increase interest in and awareness of the PRC as

an international superpower. Paradoxical as it may seem at first sight, this governmental attempt to gain 'soft power' through children sent overseas may evoke that the PRC considered the transnational migration of its entrepreneur population a patriotic act (see Nyíri, 2001). Wang discusses the many factors that make female Chinese infants extremely popular with potential US adoptive families. Racial and gender stereotypes, religious drives, as well as the idea of saving a child from political repression and gender discrimination all contributed to this popularity. Surprisingly, the informal domestic adoption of girls also became a massive phenomenon in China for parents who, for example, already filled their son-quota and longed for a daughter, or who wanted a daughter for emotional support. As Wang explains, girls are more easily adopted by Chinese families as they are seen less directly related to their birth families than boys who carry on the family name. The last thematic section of Chapter 3 reveals how the rise of China as a world power is reflected in restrictive changes in its adoption law.

The next two chapters (4 and 5) provide first-hand ethnography from two pseudonymized Children's Welfare Institutes that receive Western aid in different forms. Wang emphasizes throughout her book that it was the international adoption of abandoned Chinese daughters that paved the way to the acceptance of Western assistance for youths with special needs in Chinese state institutions. Chapter 4 presents the Tomorrow's Children unit within the Haifeng Children's Welfare Institute that offers palliative and medical care for severely ill or disabled infants. It is managed and financed by Western evangelical Christians driven by principles of self-sacrifice and the intention to help those in need. As the author describes in vivid detail, the Tomorrow's Children unit occupies an entire floor of the Haifeng Children's Welfare Institute, and it hires its own staff of working-class Chinese carers complemented by Western volunteers who serve shorter time periods working with the children. Altogether different child-related notions, norms, values and practices apply on the floor managed by the Western evangelical NGO. Wang's intriguing comparison and contrast between the special needs children's treatment at Tomorrow's Children Unit and the rest of the Haifeng Children's Welfare Institute offers a fundamental contribution to our thinking of childcare as related to culture and social class. She discusses in detail the pragmatic logics of care underlying the attitudes of Chinese carers and the intensive logics of care manifest in the operating rules of the palliative unit as well as in the Western volunteers' behaviour with children. These opposing logics generated conflicts between carers and volunteers on a daily basis.

Yongping Orphanage, the other Children's Welfare Institute that served as a fieldwork site discussed in Chapter 5, housed about 40 special needs and disabled children. It received financial support through a local grassroots organisation of affluent Western expatriate wives that also provided sporadic shifts of volunteer work with the children at the orphanage.

The author explains that Haifeng Children's Welfare institute was registered as part of the international adoption program. The NGO's attempt to transform severely ill and abandoned children into internationally adoptable global citizens through medical assistance and personalized childcare was accepted by local Chinese authorities, and it was presented as an example in national media. Yongping Orphanage, however, was not connected to the international adoptions programme,

and Western volunteers' occasional attempts of intensive and transformative care were confronted more rigidly by Chinese carers' custodial approach of care. These confrontations, as Wang evaluates, increased uncertainty in the lives of these children with special needs.

The number of internationally adoptable healthy Chinese female infants decreased dramatically by the early 2010s. The author argues that China's rise as a global power was paralleled symbolically by serious restrictions in its adoption law, giving way to the international adoption of disabled or special needs children. Chapter 6 presents this shift in the transnational adoptive process and discusses the role the values, aims and ambitions of American evangelical Christian families played in it. This chapter also demonstrates that the legal market of internationally adoptable 'children involves a constellation of constantly shifting local and global social, political, and economic factors' (p. 148).

Leslie K. Wang's fascinating book is the outcome of nearly two decades of research. The bulk of her empirical material was produced during extensive fieldwork she conducted in China. Starting in November 2006, she spent 14 months doing research and working as a full time Chinese-speaking Western volunteer at the Tomorrow's Children Unit and at Yongping Orphanage, followed by five subsequent shorter field trips until 2014. Empirical richness and thick descriptions characterize her book, which reflects a profound engagement with the field. The author demonstrates a sharp eye to notice and analyse micro-interactions among children, local staff, and Western volunteers she witnessed as a participant observer. Leslie K. Wang went intimately close to her field and to the people she studied. Her institutional ethnographies are alive with the personalities, life stories and experiences of children with special needs. The author also spent shorter study periods at six other institutions, made 60 interviews with volunteers, Chinese carers, NGO staff, adoptive parents, and adoptees, and conducted archival research.

Connecting macro and micro levels, global and local actors, private and public spheres, *Outsourced Children* tackles a delicate issue. It provides a fundamental background to our understanding of child-related aspects of Chinese families and Chinese society in the midst of skyrocketing capitalist transformation, contextualizing how Chinese birth control and heavily restricted childbearing aimed to accelerate modernisation.

Leslie K. Wang's analysis is highly informative for scholars working on the values and cultural assumptions underlying the outsourced childcare regimes observed among Chinese migrant entrepreneur families in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as for an audience interested in international adoption, China, childcare in China, and Chinese presence in the Western world.

It is an excellent and considerate, yet passionate text that gives voice to all the social groups involved. It may add an extra dimension to the book that the author, also a life coach, is a collaborator of the Family Development Project that intends to improve health and wellbeing in Chinese American families through research and education (<https://www.familydevelopmentproject.com>). It is a book that wants to make a difference, and not only in the academic sense. The concluding chapter reveals Wang's commitment to the lives and fate of abandoned and particularly

special needs children, and her hope for a time when Chinese authorities and society stand up jointly against the stigmatization of special needs children.

NÓRA KOVÁCS (kovacs.nora@tk.mta.hu)

Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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