

Babies without Borders

Representations of Transracial Chinese Adoption in Picture Books

Lina Sun

Introduction

Today, the familial landscape in the U.S. is constantly changing, with the prevalence of a growing number of non-traditional families. Currently less than 50% of children in schools across North America are represented by a traditional nuclear family headed by two biological, heterosexual parents, with the mother fulfilling the role of primary caregiver and nurturer (Chick, 2008).

Interracial and multi-ethnic families formed through intermarriage and transracial adoption are on the rise in the context of globalization, transforming our familiar assumptions about what a family should be. The trend of diversity in family composition is increasing and will continue to evolve.

Accordingly, schools are becoming more sensitive to issues that affect children raised in families encompassing different races. A significant number of organizations and foundations have formed in recent years to respond to the new challenges brought about by the increased number of families adopting children from overseas.

In spite of the increase in the number of children who are transnationally and transracially adopted in the U.S. school system, most teachers are not knowledgeable about this issue, and may need assistance in understanding the special needs of adopted children. These changes in familial formation remain largely unacknowledged, and these new families are underrepresented to a large extent (Satz, 2008).

Failure to acknowledge the existence of transnationally and transracially adopted children in schools can be harmful to those children. Their needs are often ignored in curriculum and student services. As a result, these children might feel devalued, alienated, or even denied.

Moreover, since most children were adopted as infants or toddlers, they may have little understanding about their adoption at a young age (Rettig & Rettig, 2006). They are often unaware of the loss of their birth parents and everything associated with their birth country. Sometimes, even though they realize the loss, they might not be able to explicitly articulate their feelings and thoughts.

As they enter elementary school years, these children will become more curious, analytical, and reflective with a more complex view of their adoptive history (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). Thus, all teachers are faced with the task of selecting and using appropriate curricular materials as well as activities that represent diverse families.

What can be done to help young children develop an awareness of and appreciation for diverse family structures in today's society? Children's literature featuring diverse family structure—in particular, books featuring international adoption—represents a pioneering effort to expand the definition of family. The texts that children read or interact with can influence how adopted children see themselves reflected in the larger world.

In the same vein, these books may also influence society in general as well as non-adopted children's understandings about adoption, adoptees, and families that are different from their own. Strategic use of children's books reflecting international and/or transracial adoption can stimulate children to look at families from a different perspective, recognize the legitimacy of alternative families, and express feeling about families.

Teachers should not only be able to select and create curricular materials, but also know strategies about how to support young children who are trying to understand and adjust to their status of being racially different and adopted (Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2012).

So far, China has been the largest

country of origin for children adopted internationally by American parents. Chinese adoptees constitute the largest percentage of children adopted from the other countries in the U. S. About 95% of children adopted from China are girls (Tan, 2011). Transracial adoption from China is uniquely situated in the contemporary phenomenon of international adoption.

Unfortunately, there is but a scant few articles discussing adoption-related children's books for educators. Teachers, parents, and librarians may be unaware of the specific history and experiences of internationally adopted children and uninformed about issues regarding their unique experiences and representations in children's literature. This points to the pressing need to understand both the content and context of stories about adopted children in general, and transracially adopted Chinese children in particular.

This article attempts to compile a set of useful guidelines on how to select adoption-related children's literature with accurate and positive representations, present bibliographies of picture books featuring transracial Chinese adoption, and put forward some pedagogical suggestions for teachers to incorporate these reading materials into classroom instruction.

Identifying Quality Literature on Adoption

The best way to identify quality literature on adoption is for teachers to read a wide variety of adult books to develop their own background knowledge and then to read the materials that are written specifically for children. Unfortunately, few individuals have the time to devote to such a massive project. Thankfully, educators can rely on a variety of other sources such as professional journals and book awards to help them select quality literature. Finally, they can apply recognized selection criteria to help them make

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their final decision. Table 1 identifies a few of these sources that provide information on their websites. Other selected journals that provide information in print format or only on the Internet include *Booklist*, *Horn Book Magazine*, *Kirkus*, and *Multicultural Review*.

Applying Selection Criteria

Relying on reviews and awards is an excellent way for educators to select materials on unfamiliar subjects. However, when there are conflicting reviews or no reviews at all, educators must rely on

their own judgment. Based on Bergquist's (2007) bibliotherapeutic and multicultural children's literature evaluation criteria as well as additional criteria for evaluating authentic multicultural literature identified by Sims Bishop (2007), I present a set of useful guidelines for evaluating authentic literature on adoption in Table 2.

This list can help teachers know what to look for (e.g., the elements the stories address and the degree to which the stories address the elements with complexity) as they select books to introduce this topic in a classroom setting, and it can help students engage in meaningful dialogue around this topic.

Before selecting books for instruction, teachers need to gather a wide assortment of books of different genres obtained from various sources. The text sets should be balanced to provide a wide range of perspectives and representations. Without diversity of the reading materials, readers may develop misconceptions about this topic. Students should also have freedom to choose books they are interested in reading and comfortable talking about.

Using these principles, I have identified a number of books on transracial Chinese adoption for children (See Table 3).

TABLE 1
Web Resources for Book Awards, Lists, and Journals

Resources	URL
International Board on Books for Young People (Search terms: China, adoption)	www.ibby.com
Asian Pacific American Literature Award	www.apalaweb.org/awards/literature/
Association for Library Service to Children (Includes Growing Up Around the World and Children's Notable lists)	www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/booklists/booklists.cfm
International Reading Association, (Includes Children's, Teachers' and Young Adult's Choices)	www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html
Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association: Notable Books for a Global Society, K-12	www.csulb.edu/org/children-lit/proj/nbgs/intro-nbgs.html
Children's Book Council	www.cbcbooks.org/
<i>Book Links</i> (Search terms: China, adoption)	www.ala.org/ala/productsandpublications/periodicals/booklinks/booklinks.htm
<i>School Library Journal</i> (Search: China, adoption)	www.schoollibraryjournal.com
Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)	www.voya.com

TABLE 2
Guidelines for Evaluating and Selecting High-Quality Adoption Literature for Children

Criteria	Examples
High Literary Quality Examples: <i>Mommy Far</i> , <i>Mommy Near</i> ; <i>An Adoption Story</i> ; <i>The White Swan Express</i> ; <i>My Mei Mei</i>	Originality of text, illustration, design and format; appealing and realistic plot; authentic setting and fully developed characters; accessibility and sensitivity of language and distinction of style; interesting and valuable subject matter to children; appropriate content considering the child's age, interest, developmental level and reading ability (Bishop, 2007).
Accuracy in Historical Facts and Sociopolitical Contexts Examples: <i>Mei Li and the Wise Laoshi</i> ; <i>Mommy, Why Do We Look Different?</i>	Accurate historical facts; complexity of sociopolitical context of adoption; avoidance of rescue narratives.
Author's Perspective Examples: <i>Three Names of Me</i> ; <i>We See the Moon</i> ; <i>At Home in This World: A China Adoption Story</i>	Unbiased and neutral perspective; emotionally detached in presentation; providing multiple perspectives for a holistic picture of the event portrayed; avoidance of any suggestion that there is a single cause or simple answer to the socio-historical dilemmas of the characters being represented (Bergquist, 2007)
Affirms the Child's Feelings Examples: <i>Letter of Love from China</i> ; <i>Star of the Week: A Story of Love, Adoption, and Brownies with Sprinkles</i>	Normalize adoptees' experiences and help them make connections; avoidance of offensive expressions, negative attitudes and patronizing tones.
Diversity of Themes Examples: <i>Made in China</i> ; <i>Orange Peel's Pocket</i>	The content covers a variety of life situations and challenges faced by families formed through transnational adoption; addressing tough issues with complexity and nuances such as identities, racism, and other adoption-related issues.
Authentic Visual Images Examples: <i>I Love You Like Crazy Cakes</i> ; <i>Every Year on Your Birthday</i>	The visual representations are authentic, with cultural details, and free from stereotypes, include essentializing, minimization and distortions (Bishop, 2007).
Offers an Opportunity for Opening up Discussion and Cultural Identification Examples: <i>At Home in This World</i> ; <i>Every Year on Your Birthday</i>	Encourages readers to engage critically in a discussion wherein personal understandings and insights may be gained; validates the adoptees' positive identification with Asian-Americans and adoptive culture.

Teaching with Books on Transracial Chinese Adoption

As an increasing number of adopted children from China and other countries enter U.S. elementary schools, adoption should be incorporated as a part of the curriculum. Adoption stories are a good resource for literacy instruction. Teachers can use a variety of texts featuring transnational and transracial adoption, regardless of genre and format.

On the one hand, adoptees can identify with the characters and see their experiences represented in the texts; on the other hand, mainstream students can develop empathetic understandings and perspective-taking skills while engaging with these stories.

Teachers have to choose books that contain believable characters and realistic life situations in alignment with the child's interest and reading level. Teachers are also cautioned to read and reflect carefully on the text to be used in advance to determine its appropriateness and also give serious consideration to what kind of insight they think might be gained by young readers.

Once teachers have decided on the titles to be used, thinking of essential questions that encourage critical thinking becomes important. In fact, teachers have to consider whether the book has a variety of points of view represented and how the story can influence readers' thinking. Teachers can model critical questions, get students involved in creating and answering their own questions, and encourage important thinking and communicative behaviors.

Some useful teaching activities include Socratic discussion, role-playing, fishbowls, literature circles, and reciprocal teaching sessions. As outgrowths of these discussions and to demonstrate change in their own perspectives, students can engage in writing essays or multigenre projects to express their ideas.

Consider Rose A Lewis's *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* for example. This book won many awards including *Child's Magazine's* Best Books of the Year 2000, a children's Crown Gallery Award, and was a *New York Times* bestseller. At the beginning of class, write the word adoption on the board or on a sheet of chart paper and have the class brainstorm what they know about adoption, what they think it means or what it means to them.

Design a set of mind-stretching questions and help student log on the website childwelfare.gov to find answers. How many families or individuals do you think

are planning on adopting? How does this affect the number of children in orphanages and foster care? What countries do U.S. citizens adopt from most often? Help students locate China and the United States on a globe and recall how the mother in the story made that long journey because she wanted the baby so much.

What are the challenges do the adopted children face in the U.S.? Students can make predictions about what they think will happen next through the reading of the book. Do children adopted from other countries bring their own traditions and cultures with them? What do you think will families do when a new culture is brought into the household?

Go through the book and talk while looking at the pictures to find things that are different from American culture such as clothing, decorations, and people's physical appearance. Based on things portrayed in the book, compare and contrast American culture with Chinese culture. Tell students people are all the same despite differences and everyone should be treated equally. Encourage them to talk about some of their experiences with diversity of culture. Find pictures of families of all kinds and discuss how families are alike and different.

Teachers can also support and guide students in working with these books through discussion, blogging, thematic units, or some other meaningful activities, to facilitate deeper understanding and critical thinking. Table 4 presents a list of books on international adoption from other countries. Teachers can use these books to design a thematic unit and ask students to compare international adoption from different countries.

Conclusion

As the phenomenon of transracial Chinese adoption is relatively new, more progress will be made over time in the level of literary quality, relevance, and authenticity of this body of literature as the circumstances surrounding this practice continue to change. The complexity of Chinese adoptees' experiences will be accurately reflected and validated as long as writers and publishers make conscious and concerted efforts.

Classrooms are a miniature representation of today's multicultural and global society with a multitude of races, ethnicities, religions, languages, cultures, and family configurations embodied in them. Introducing international-adoption-related children's literature into elementary classrooms is a first step toward eliminating

misconceptions and prejudice and helping students develop adoption literacy.

As students encounter a rich array of characters, experience a variety of life situations, and explore diverse settings in the literature that they read, they begin to develop empathetic understandings and gain insights into their lives and culture as well as lives and the cultures of other students.

It is hoped that teachers will pause, reflect, and act to incorporate a wide variety of multicultural literature representing the mosaic nature of America, including transnational and transracial adoption. By using high-quality children's literature and engaging teaching ideas, teachers can help students begin to develop broadened horizons and respect toward people from "non-traditional" families.

It is enriching to U.S. society that young children adopted across borders have healthy self-esteem and are proud of their cultural heritage and that others learn to appreciate the richness of the American mixed-race families.

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TABLE 3

Books on Transracial Chinese Adoption for Children

A China Adoption Story: Mommy, Why Do We Look Different? By Frances M. Koh. Illus. Anne Sibley O'Brien. 2000. 24p. EastWest Press (9780960609093). A four-year-old Chinese girl wonders why she looks different from her mom. Her mom tells her how she was adopted and family is bound by love despite differences. Age range: 4 years and up.

At Home in This World: A China Adoption Story. By Jean MacLeod. 2003. 32p. EMK Press (9780972624411). This honest and lyrical reflection addresses the underlying feelings and emotions of a pre-adolescent Chinese girl who has bittersweet experiences of being adopted from China. Age range: 8 years and up.

A Sister for Matthew. By Pamela Kennedy. 2006. 28p. Ideals Publications (9780824955277). This story is about Matthew who is getting a baby sister from China. He learns that his parents will always love him and a child need not look like her family to be a part of the family. Age range: 4 years and up.

Every Year on Your Birthday. By Rose A. Lewis. Illus. Jane Dyer. 2007. 32p. Little Brown Books for Young Readers (9780316525529). Capturing the richness of both Chinese and American cultures, this poignant prose brings to life the unforgettable moments between a mother and her little girl from China, in portraits of birthday celebrations and multicultural heritage activities. Age range: 1-6 years.

Finding Joy. By Marion Coste. Illus. Yong Chen. 2006. 32p. Boyds Mills Press (9781590781920). This story tells about how Shu-li, a Chinese girl infant who has to be sent away by her family in China, is adopted by an American family and renamed Joy. Age range: 6-8 years

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes. By Rose A. Lewis. Illus. Jane Dyer. 2000. 32p. Little Brown Books for Young Readers (9780316525381). Based on the author's own experiences, this story describes how a woman travels to China to adopt a baby girl and their life together in the U.S. Age range: 3-6 years.

Just Add One Chinese Sister: An Adoption Story. By Patricia McMahon. Illus. Conor Clarke McCarthy. 2005. 32p. Boyds Mills Press (9781563979897). This is a story of an American family's adoption of a Chinese toddler--Claire, told in two voices of the older American brother and adoptive mother. It is honest about portraying Claire and Conor's emotional changes in multidimensional portraits as they make mutual adjustments in new roles. Age range: 5-8 years.

Letter of Love from China. By Bonnie Cuzzolino. Illus. Jax Bennett. 2006. 32p. Plum Blossom Books (9781424302369). Written from the birth mother's perspective, this letter explains why the birth mother could not keep her daughter, her love for her, her hopes for her adoption by a family from a foreign land, and how to use the moon as a mirror to imagine each other. Age range: 5-8 years.

Made in China: A Story of Adoption. By Vanita Oelschlager. Illus. Kristin Blackwood. 2008. 30p. Vanita Books (9780980016239). Teased by her older, blonder sister as being "made in China" like toys and clothes, a Chinese girl is assured by her adoptive father that she is loved despite differences. Age range: 4 years and up.

Mei Li and the Wise Laoshi. By Kay Bratt. Illus. Monika Vass. 2011. 38p. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (9781468003079). A wise Laoshi takes Mei Li on an adventure to China and back to the day she was born to show how her story began. Laoshi shows Mei Li beautiful landscapes and teaches her that a family can be created through the amazing gift of love. Age range: 5 years and up.

Mommy Far, Mommy Near: An Adoption Story. By Carol Antoinette Peacock. Illus. Shawn Costello Brownell. 2000. 32p. Albert Whitman & Co, (9780807552346). This engaging story tells how a Chinese girl's misgivings about her adoption were assured by her adoptive mother's tender support and thoughtful response that the girl is loved by two mothers—one is near as adoptive mother, the other is far away as birth mother. Age range: 3-7 years.

My Mei Mei. By Ed Young. Illus. Ed Young. 2006. 40p. Philomel (9780399243394). Based on the author's personal experiences, this charming story follows a little girl as she learns what being a big sister is all about, and discovers the real meaning of family. Age range: 6 years and up.

Orange Peel's Pocket. By Rose A. Lewis. Illus. Grace Zong. 2010. 32p. Harry N. Abrams (9780810983946). A Chinese-American adopted child nicknamed Orange Peel learns about Chinese heritage with her mother in their neighborhood and uses her trinkets to tell her class about her homeland. Age range: 4-8 years.

Star of the Week: A Story of Love, Adoption, and Brownies with Sprinkles. By Darlene Friedman. Illus. Roger Roth. 2009. 32p. HarperCollins (9780061141362). Cassidy-Li's does not have a photograph of her birth family when it is her turn to make her kindergarten class "star of the week" poster. She finally draws a picture with questions and longings. Age range: 5-8 years.

Sweet Moon Baby: An Adoption Tale. By Karen Henry Clarke. Illus. Patrice Barton. 2010. 32p. Knopf Books for Young Readers, (9780375857096). This lyrical fantasy in the form of a beautiful fairy tale tells about one baby's miraculous journey from her parents in China to her adoptive parents on the other side of the world. Age range: 3-7 years.

The Adventures of Lily. By Keri Campbell. Illus. Bonnie Lemaire. 2009. 32p. BookSurge Publishing (9781439213247). The book is the story of Lily's adoption experience and that of her new family who travel to China all the way from America to adopt her. Lily's red thread is linked to not only her new family but also to her Chinese sisters who are adopted at the same time as Lily. Age range: 4 years and up.

TABLE 3 (CONTINUED)**Books on Transracial Chinese Adoption for Children**

The Red Blanket. By Eliza Thomas. Illus. Joe Cepeda. 2004. 32p. Scholastic Press (9780439322539). Based on the author's experiences, this touching story reveals the challenges and joys experienced by a single woman who goes to China to adopt a baby. Age range: 3 years and up.

The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale. By Grace Lin. Illus. Grace Lin. 2007. 32p. Albert Whitman & Company (9780807569221). This contemporary fairy tale tells how a royal couple finds a cure for the mysterious pain in their chests by following a red thread that binds their hearts tightly with a sweet baby in a foreign land. Age range: 3-8 years.

Three Names of Me. By Mary Cummings. Illus. Lin Wang. 2006. 40p. Albert Whitman & Company (9780807579039). Told through the eyes of a Chinese-American girl, this tender and sensitive story of international adoption explains how this girl came to have three different names—the first was from her birth mother, another she received at the orphanage, and the third came from her American parents. Age range: 8-13 years.

The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption. By Elaine M. Aoki. Illus. Jean Davies Okimoto. 2000. 32p. Clarion Books (9780618164530). This ebullient story describes a group of four prospective parents in North America who travel to China to adopt their daughters. Age range: Preschool to 3 years.

Waiting for May. By Janet Morgan Stoeke. 2007. 32p. Puffin (9780142408537). Based on the author's personal experiences, this story portrays a family's long wait to travel to China to meet their new baby girl. A loving older-brother-to-be describes his anticipation and impatience as he years for his sister. Age range: 5 years and up.

We See the Moon. By Carrie A. Kitze. Illus. Jinshan Peasant Painting Academy. 2003. 32p. EMK Press (9780972624404). This elegant and evocative book is written from the child's perspective, asking the questions that dwell in his/her heart about birth parents. Age range: 4 years and up.

TABLE 4**Books on Transnational Adoption from Other Countries**

Allison. By Allen Say. Illus. Allison Say. 2004. 32p. HMK Books for Young Readers (9780618495375). A preschool girl learns she is adopted and struggles to come to terms with why she was given up and what this means for her family. Age range: 4-8 years.

Bringing Asha Home. By Uma Krishnaswami. Illus. Jamel Akib. 2006. 32p. Lee & Low Books (9781584302599). A young boy prepares for the arrival of her young little sister, Asha, from India. Age range: 4-9 years.

Families Are Different. By Nina Pellegrini. 1991. 32p. Holiday House (9780823408870). Nico, who was adopted from Korea, struggles with her identity until she begins to realize that families are formed through different ways. Age range: 4 years and up.

Journey Home (Avenues). By Lawrence McKay Jr. Illus. Dorn Lee. 1998. 32p. Lee & Low Books (9781584300052). Mai travels with her mother who was adopted from Vietnam in search of her mother's birth family. Age range: 6-10 years.

Kimchi & Calamari. By Rose Kent. 2010. 240p. HarperCollins (9780060837716). Joseph Calderaro is confused about a social studies assignment—an essay about ancestors. As an adoptee from Korea, he knows nothing about his birth family and embarks on a journey of self-discovery. Age range: 8-12 years.

Lucy's Family Tree. By Karen Halvorsen Schrek. Illus. Stephen Gassler. 2006. 40p. Tilbury House Publishers (9780884482925). Lucy, who was adopted from Mexico, comes up with a creative solution to recognize and celebrate her birth family and her adoptive family. Age range: 4 years and up.

Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale. By Karen Katz. Illus. Karen Katz. 1997. 28p. Henry Holt & Co. (9780805050134). Based on Katz's experience of adopting a Central American infant, this book is about a man and woman dreaming of their soon-to-be-born adopted baby and flying to the faraway place. Age range: 4-8 years.

Rebecca's Journey Home. By Brynn Olenberg Sugarman. Illus. Michelle Shapiro. 2006. 32p. Kar-Ben Publishing (9781580131575). This is a story about a baby girl who was adopted from Vietnam by a Jewish family and how the family incorporates both cultures. Age range: 5 years and up.

We Adopted You, Benjamin Koo. By Linda Walvoord Girard. Illus. Linda Shute. 1989. 32p. Albert Whitman & Company (9780807586952). Nine-year-old Benjamin was adopted from Korea and has questions about adoption. Age range: 7-11 years.