"I'm More Than Just Adopted": Stories of Genealogy in Intercountry Adoptive Families

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Abstract: In contrast to the historical 'blank slate' approach to adoption, current policy places significant emphasis on providing children with knowledge; family history; biological connections; stories, a genealogy upon which to establish an authentic identity. The imperative for this complex, and often incomplete, genealogy is also explicit within the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption established in 1993 to ensure that intercountry adopted children will be provided with a genealogical 'heritage'. Yet, despite the recurring dominance of this approach, 'heritage' remains an ambiguous dictum which holds the expectation that adopted children should have access to any available birth/first family information and acquire cultural competence about an often distant and removed birth country. Providing such heritage becomes the responsibility of intercountry adoptive parents. It is therefore unsurprising that this role has become part of how intercountry adoptive parents perform and display their parenting and family practices before and after adoption (Richards 2014a; 2018). Such family work is explicit in the stories that parents and children coconstruct about birth family, abandonment, China, and the rights of adopted children to belong first and foremost to a birth country. Using qualitative data provided by a social worker, eleven girls aged between five and twelve, and their parents, this article explores the role and changing significance of narratives as familial strategies for delivering such heritage obligations. Outlined in this discussion is the compulsion to provide a genealogical heritage by adoptive parents which can ultimately be resisted by their daughters as they seek alternative and changing narratives through which to construct their belongings and identities.

Keywords: Belonging; Intercountry adoption; China; Narratives; Genealogy

1. Introduction

Despite the contentious and controversial practices which take place under the name of intercountry adoption, it continues to be a welfare option available for a few children internationally. As a practice, intercountry adoption extends our understanding of adoption and is defined as being the legal process by which a child habitually resident in one country or state (origin/sending) is moved to another country or state (receiving) as a result of permanent adoption by a person or persons habitually resident in the receiving state (ArcAdoption 2013; Department for Education 2011). An added and frequently provocative aspect to intercountry adoption is a transracial element. This term is clarified as being an adoption 'of a child of one race by parents of another' (Triseliotis et al. 1997, p. 160, see also Barn 2013; Barn and Kirton 2012).

Intercountry adoption (ICA) is commonly (but not exclusively) regulated through the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption established in 1993. It usually (but, again not exclusively) involves the transfer of children from Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, to North America and Western Europe (Leifsen 2008). In 2011 Rotabi and Bunkers (Rotabi and Bunkers 2011) claimed that approximately one million children have been adopted internationally since the Second World War. Recent statistics however, show a significant decline in

ICA since 2004 with numbers dropping by half (Selman 2017). In England the number of intercountry adoptions has always been, and remains, very low with just 58 application received by the Department for Education in 2017 and 60 adoptions. Less than 5 of these adoptions were from China. Despite this small number, China has previously been one of the most popular sending countries for the UK and the focus of a number of previous studies such as the British Chinese Adoption Study (Feast et al. 2013; Rushton et al. 2012).

Significant research exists concerning the potential impact of taking a child from one country and incorporating them into another through adoption (Juffer 2006; Smolin 2004). Less is known about the ways that intercountry adoptive families actually manage the undoubted challenges that this represents (Jacobson 2008; Juffer and Tieman 2012). Allen (2007, p. 125) argues that a 'lack of knowledge and insight into racial and cultural issues' portrayed by intercountry adopters is a valid cause of concern. Yet, Selwyn and Wijedasa (2008) argue that in England little research has taken place with adoptive families to identify how ethnicity, culture and belonging are facilitated. Given the critical discourse and polarised debates which surround this practice (see for example Bartholet and Smolin 2012), it is perhaps unsurprising that the voices of those most affected by intercountry adoption are seldom heard (Gibbons and Rotabi 2012). My research explores how the complexities of belonging are managed, displayed, and performed by adoptive families (Richards 2014a; 2018). This qualitative research focused on the stories of nine families and ten girls aged between five and twelve years and one social worker who specialised in ICA and was involved in the application process of some of the families who took part in this PhD study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with parents and a creative journal activity with the girls where they were able to tell stories, draw pictures, add photos and other small artefacts to illustrate their narratives. These methods sit within a child focused methodological approach and were supported overall by a feminist ethic of care (Cockburn 2005). The families live in England and have adopted children from China. It was not my intention to focus only on girls in the study but the families who came forward to participate all had daughters. Explanations about the prevalence of girls available for adoption from China are complex and under researched, though it is often assumed to be a response to the implementation of China's one child policy (now abolished). It is the stories of these very young adoptees that I sought to highlight in response to their lack of voice elsewhere in the field.

There are a number of relevant studies about intercountry adoption which include discussions on identity. Volkman (2005, p. 32) research with transracial adoptees in Sweden illustrates the 'complex transformations in identity' within the adoption process. Dorow (2006, p. 4) conducted research with adoptive parents and argues that identity narratives for children are both complex and 'relational'. Howell's (Howell 2006) research, set in Norway, includes the voices of adult intercountry adoptees who claim an over emphasis is placed socially on their adoptive status. Feast et al. (2013) study provided accounts from adult Chinese adoptees living in the UK where, like previous research, fluidity in identity is suggested (see also Malhotra 2013). Furthermore, Howell (2006) argues that differing aspects of identity can be emphasised in certain social contexts. Echoing Howell's findings, Moinian (2009) study on identity, though not about adoption, also illustrates that certain identity traits can be more salient in specific contexts.

Such research reminds us that our identity narratives are not fixed, can be contested, relate to the past, and also, to a potential 'myth of origin'. These narratives help explain the present and hold a plan for the future too (Yuval-Davis 2011, p. 14). Nevertheless, it is commonly a fixed, essentialised, and naturalised understanding of identity and belonging that is prevalent in adoption literature and practice (Richards 2012; 2014a). These natural belongings are regarded as primordial ties and position ethnic and biological ties as pre-social and pre-cultural (Shils 1957). Such fixed biological, familial connections facilitate a sense of continuity, where identity is assembled through narratives of generational succession (Warner 1991). These blood-based connections are associated with belonging to a nation state, a birth place, and they create prescribed bonds between biological and familial belonging which have come to be essentialised as integral to identity (Bartholet 1999). These

'primordial components' (Yuval-Davis 2011, p. 409) of identity dominate adoption discussion, policy, and practice (Richards 2012). 'The naturalised biological family, with its privileged status (both socially and politically) as a location for authentic belonging is a powerful discourse which creates a particular truth about how we should belong, and to whom' (Richards 2018, p. 55). Geertz (1963, p. 108) describes these 'congruities of blood' as 'overpowering' and coercive where obligation in one form or another to these ties is a universal experience.

Without 'blooded belongings', adopted children and adults are socially constructed as lacking complete identity narratives and thus risk the development of an authentic identity (Richards 2012). Such 'genealogical bewilderment' (Sants cited in Volkman 2005, p. 26) must be compensated for (Richards 2018). In intercountry adoption this compensation begins with genealogical stories; narratives of belonging both to birth families and adoptive families, to birth country and adopted country. These narratives must also attempt to move beyond ethnic and racial boundaries. Such genealogical narratives are threaded together from known and assumed personal history. For girls adopted from China concepts such as abandonment and orphanage care become focal points of their early narratives. These components structure the genealogies constructed for, with, and about adoptees and 'script' their belonging stories (Richards 2018, p. 56).

Adoption policy in England makes the necessity of heritage explicit. Under the dictum of best interests, English law allow those who are adopted to research their background and birth families and gain access to records of their adoption (Mignot 2017). Life books are an accepted and expected activity which utilises the knowledge held about birth families and adoptive families (Watson et al. 2015). Social work practice therefore reproduces this primordial heritage imperative through providing genealogical life stories and access to a birth culture, in the name of children's best interests (Richards 2014b). In consequence, adoptive families, seeking to support their children's identity development and belonging, develop stories, strategies, and family practices to facilitate their children's complex genealogical belonging through birth, blood, country, and adoption.

This article sets out the significance of heritage as an adoptive birthright before outlining its emphasis in relevant legislation. The centrality of this focus is then explored by using data from parents and their children which highlights the ways in which genealogical knowledge is facilitated in these intercountry adoptive families.

2. The Imperative of Genealogy as a Birthright in Adoption

The shift from a previously dominant blank slate approach in adoption, to a stance where familial knowledge, adoption circumstances, and cultural heritage are expected to be available for adopted children, occurred in part as a result of changing ideas about childhood and the best interests of children. The principle of the best interests is now central in all legislation surrounding children and underpins adoption discourse (Aldridge 1994). Increasing emphasis on rights discourses also continue to inform welfare provision for children and adoption policy in England. However, Roby (2007) succinctly contextualises the associated ambiguity of a rights based discourse in intercountry adoption by differentiating three stages in the adoption process which rely upon rights to justify policy and practice. Before adoption: rights to a family, birth culture, and access to adequate health care, along with the right to survive, are emphasised. During adoption: the child has a right to be adopted, to be provided for by a family which has been suitably prepared and assessed, and to be able to consent. Post adoption: access to a birth culture and adoption records, social acceptance, and full family membership within adopted country are required. This last set of rights makes explicit the role of genealogy as being both a right and in the best interests of the child (Richards 2014b) and speaks to the complexity of the belonging narratives.

The genealogical aspect of identity formation is particularly challenging in intercountry adoption as often little, if any, knowledge is available about the biological family. In China, it is generally assumed that a number of infants become available to adopt as a result of abandonment. For children adopted transracially and intercountry, this severance of genealogical ties has commonly induced silence, making

discussion about birth family and origins very difficult to broach (Volkman 2005). A blank slate therefore contradicts both the best interests of the child dictum, kinship ideology, and rights discourses as enshrined in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC). It is these rights that are used to shape The Hague Convention (1993) through which adoptions between China and England are organised, articulated most succinctly in the Subsidiarity Principle. In accord with this principle, UNCRC place intercountry adoption as a suitable option only when all domestic options including fostering and suitable institutional care have been exhausted.

Children's right to access their heritage holds a recurring emphasis in adoption policy and practice. I argue that heritage in this context refers to a continued acknowledgment of primordial, essentialised identities attributed and fixed through birth and a biological family. In this prevailing discourse children's successful identity formation thus becomes inextricably linked to an ethnic, cultural birthplace in adoption policy and practice, which seeks to protect this identity.

3. The Presence of Heritage in Policy

Hollingsworth (1998) has previously highlighted five broad professional principles in adoption policy and practice. These include the significance of ethnic heritage; the primacy of the biological parents and relatives in raising children; that children should not lose their biological families through economic hardship alone; and that effort and preference for same race adoption should be pursued, with alternative arrangements (such as transracial and intercountry adoption) only acceptable if a child is otherwise deprived of a permanent family and home. 'These fundamental principles have become key narratives (Bruner 2004) of adoption and have informed national and international policy development' (Richards 2018, p. 56). The role of adoption policy has been to enable children to be re-incorporated into a family structure and to provide the most appropriate care for the wellbeing of children (Keating 2009). Such reconstitution embeds children into the institution of family but, as the principles above indicate, through inferior or subordinate attachments which lack genealogical roots. These are the belongings of paper rather than blood, of choice rather than fate. As a result, adoptive families, described by Gailey (2000, p. 296; see also Schneider 1968) are suggested to hold a 'diluted' 'sense of belonging'. From a primordial perspective nature or blood will always be privileged over nurture (Hawkins 2016).

The Hague Convention (1993) evokes these key belonging narratives. Through the Subsidiarity Principle, it identifies the importance of birth family preservation, and the importance of programmes working towards the reunification of children with birth families in sending countries. The Convention also stipulates that in the majority of cases children's best interests are best served by keeping them within this birth family unit. In this, the legislation reflects the prevailing privileging of the biological family as being the natural and most appropriate place for children to be:

> ... the philosophy of the body must be that its work is child-focused and the body [accredited agency] respects the priority given in the State of origin to family preservation and reunification of children and their birth families. (Hague Conference on Private Law 2012, Chapter 6, Sec. 6.1, p. 47)

The rarefied status of the biological family is explicit. Identity essentialised through birth and origin is protected and prioritised. Intercountry adoption is implicated not only in risking the authentic identity of individual children, but also risking the preservation of 'families of origin, language, culture, and religion' (Ja Sook Bergquist 2012, p. 46).

The task of the professional as identified in the legislation includes formal assessment of applicants ensuring that adopters are sufficiently prepared (Hoffman 2013), suitably matched and can offer ongoing support to children severed from family and heritage. Such preparation includes an emphasis on the possible impact of the loss of family, culture, and country for a child and how to facilitate reconnecting these ties. This is where the 'obligation' of primordial connections (Geertz 1963, p. 108) is transferred to adoptive parents. Jacobson (2008, p. 2) argues that an emphasis on 'culture keeping'

features extensively in adoption legislation and professional advice which instructs parents to educate adopted children about their birth country and culture in order to assist the development of a 'solid ethnic identity'. Such expectation and emphasis is explicit in the early stages of the application process as highlighted by the social worker in my data below:

> Anne. Beginning the process with a couple who do not know the country or perhaps have not even visited the country, is more difficult. I have always tried hard to encourage people to go and visit, I use the example of going to China where it is a difficult thing; it's in your face, busy, the smells, the dirt, and the friendliness of people, the huge things there. If you have not been there it would be foolhardy to go out to collect a child and see all these aspects of the country and culture for the first time at that point.
>
> I do lengthy interviews and as many as are needed. I try not to stay with people too long but I am certainly willing to because I talk, I ask questions to draw people out, because unless you actually get under the skin of people you cannot really know them. I have to get some feeling about how this person is going to cope with the practicalities and emotions of bringing up a child who comes from a different culture and maybe has a different skin colour, or a totally different ethnicity. Obviously there are some straightforward questions that one has to ask but I think that you have got to know more and delve deeper than that and find out how people tick. I think I am pretty intrusive, not in delving into people's personal thoughts necessarily but I need to feel that I have got to know these people.

Throughout the intensive application process, adopting parents are made aware of the complex weaving of biological and adoptive belongings that they must construct for their children's wellbeing. One adoptive father (below) speaks about trying to establish this belonging. Harry begins by describing letter writing to a daughter not yet adopted. These letters are used to establish a connecting link with daughters but also to facilitate a sense of family 'history' as he describes it.

> Sarah. Angela has described how you both wrote pre-adoption letters to your daughters prior to their adoption, can you tell me about your motivation for doing this?
>
> Harry. We had written letters to them because it was part of us doing something in the wait. Also, writing a diary we just called her 'my Darling'; but there was a level of engagement and attachment from that which was reinforcing and it focused on her.
>
> Sarah. Had you been told that letter writing was something that was good to do, or did you just feel motivated to do this?
>
> Harry. I don't remember being told to do this; it came out of who we are as people and out of our lived experiences. We are not trying to compensate for their massive personal loss, to lose absolutely everything, but how we might give them something to, not replace what they had lost but a sense of belonging to a family I suppose. We had wanted to be parents for so long that once you had the child you were on a high really, that's what I felt, a high that lasted quite some time, I felt quite invincible. Once you had your child you feel that you've climbed Everest and were coming down to a welcome committee. People who had shared the journey with us, friends who were on the adoption video and shared the story with us are important to have.
>
> Sarah. Do you often watch the video?
>
> Harry. Yeah, well the girls really like to watch it, we put on the video, which highlights the journey while we were there. They love watching it themselves and seeing really significant events.
>
> I guess we are sowing the seeds for the future really, doing this now so that we can give them a history, helping them now but also giving them something in the years to come. I have a

box that belonged to my grandfather and it is important to me, I want them to feel the same connection to him as I feel, that he is their great grandfather and that they feel connected to him through the box and me.

Overall (1997) demonstrates the privileging of the biological, genetic connection through identification of similarities with one's children that enables a sense of continuity and history to be felt; an identity to be constructed through a 'narrative of generational succession' (Warner 1991). Individual identity is constructed as being embedded within familial identity (Lawler 2008) and here the relationship between a 'natural' biological identity and a 'cultural or social' belonging of adoption are both articulated by Harry. He actively constructs a social belonging for his daughters whilst simultaneously declaring aspirations that his own biological belongings will also be significant to them. His obligation to primordial ties and adoptive ones are explicit.

The importance of preserving information relating to children's origins, background, and family history is highlighted throughout the Hague Convention, though in practice this information can be quite limited and leave many gaps in the knowledge that children, and the adults they become, might seek. Adult adoptees speak of the importance of having this knowledge described as being, 'big information' but also, 'little and seemingly insignificant' details about their past (Richards 2014b, p. 9). The Convention states (2013) that this historical knowledge about origins, identity, and culture help to establish or maintain connections to a birth country and culture. Adoptive parents are both tasked, and personally motivated to support their children's wellbeing in attempting to provide such connections. With very young children this belonging is developed and initially performed through storytelling.

4. The Performance and Display of Heritage in Families

Adoption stories are powerful narratives which not only connect the adoptive parent to the child and child to place and race, but play a role in maintaining the moral and social order (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). In biological families, narratives play a key role in perpetuating family lineage and reinforcing the role of blood and biology in the normative family structure. In adoptive families, they emphasise the social importance of the biological family by situating the child in this family before any adoption narrative can be told.

4.1. Birth and Biological Stories

Birth stories seek to anchor children to a biological family, birth country, and culture; a starting point from which identity and alternative belongings can emerge. These stories also serve to retain the primacy and privilege of the biological, blood belongings so dominant in familial ideology. Lawler (2008) reminds us that blood ties are not ties in themselves but socially constructed and therefore symbolic of connection. Yet, as Shils (1957) contends, a primordial discourse is given a status of natural and therefore more powerful than social. Such symbols of connection are created in these adoptive families through relations which begin in an orphanage (known or assumed), birth province, birth country, and adoption date. The social context makes such stories compulsive telling and the wellbeing of adoptees is assumed to be based upon such origin stories. These are the stories articulated in the adoption process, that 'good' adoptive parents must perform in their children's 'best interest' (Richards 2018). They form part of the culture making activities that these families engage with, and through which these families recognise and understand their belongings.

Part of the adopted parent role is to establish a biological familial link, to facilitate a kinship with a biological mother and family, whose absence in the girl's lives is described by Dorow (2006, p. 164) as 'loud'. The biological family is commonly symbolised by an idealised maternal figure. In this kinship work (Traver 2009), the adoptive mother becomes the means by which the biological mother as a symbolic figure is maintained. In the picture below, the affective labour of the adoptive mother has provided a daughter with a birth mother narrative that she can use to build an imagined biological

family and so assist her to become familiar with this biological link and her relationship to it. The birth mother has the largest of the heads and is the starting point from which the rest of the narrative flows: See Figure 1.
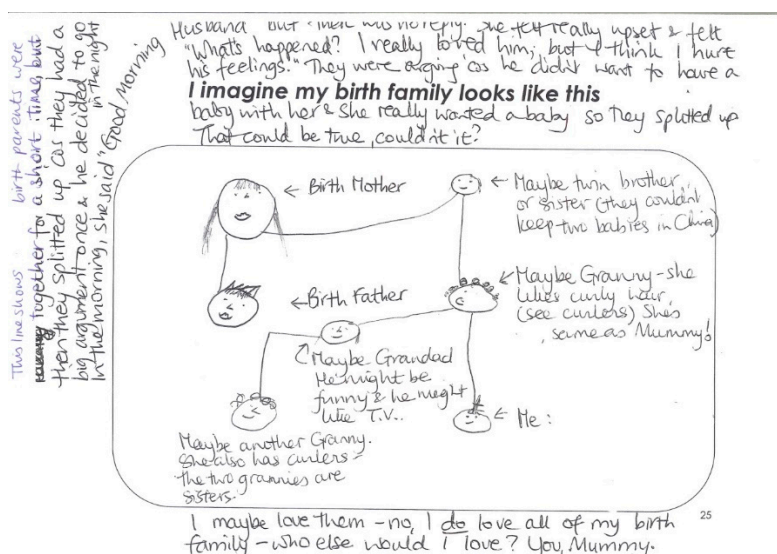

Figure 1. Amy's imagined birth family.

The story told with this picture explains Amy's absence from this imagined birth family and provides a key role for the birth mother. Amy's adoptive mother wrote the story on the picture at Amy's request:

> Amy (aged 7yrs) My birth parents were together for a short time before they splitted up because they had a big argument once and he decided to go. In the morning she said "good morning husband" but there was no reply. She felt really upset and felt "what has happened? I really loved him but I think I hurt his feelings." They were arguing because he didn't want to have a baby with her and she really wanted a baby so they splitted up. That could be true, couldn't it? [she asks her adoptive mother]

The story above provides a birth family and sets the scene for an abandonment narrative which attempts to explain the separation of child from biological family. Kinship making requires another key activity commonly ascribed to the mothering role in adoption discourse, attempting to fill the gaps that the absence of a biological family can incur. Dorow indicates the significance afforded this role:

> The affective labor of creating an originary identity for the child tells us how blood and culture speak to each other, through gendered kinship, racialised fantasies, and national imaginaries. (Dorow 2006, p. 165)

Rosenblum et al. (2006) identify this role as both complex and unique to adoptive families. However, within adoptive families this task is construed as normative and facilitated through the telling of stories. Genealogical gaps are said to undermine the adoptees' authentic identity and adoptive parents are tasked with teaching their children to manage this loss and offer what they can to fill the gaps (Lacher et al. 2005). Below an adoptive mother highlights the recurring relevance of her daughter's connections with her birth family that her affective labour helps to support;

> Angela. We created a page in her life book that became a conversation about genetics and how she would always be connected to her birth family through her genes.

Angela's daughter Lisa (aged 8 yrs) confirms this influence of her genes in her picture of her birth family where the figures wore glasses. As she drew she explained that this is where her own short sightedness comes from. See Figure 2.
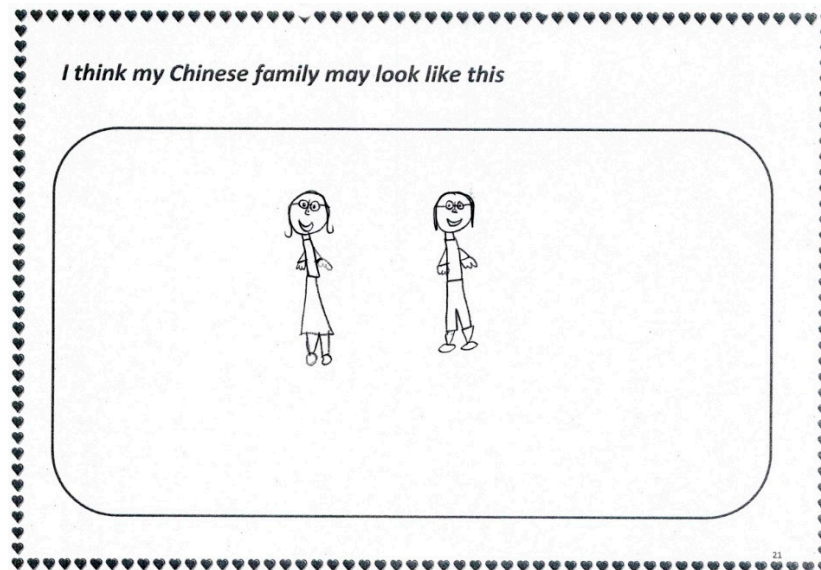

Figure 2. Lisa's birth family drawing.

4.2. Abandonment Stories

It is commonly assumed that many of the girls adopted from China have been abandoned before coming under the care of local orphanages. Such details are frequently given to adopting parents at the time of the adoption. How, and when, to share this information with daughters is something each family has to individually decide. Below, Angela speaks of her anxiety about telling her daughter Lisa that she was found at the orphanage gate in a cardboard box:

> Angela. I just didn't know how I was going to be able to tell her. Then one day when she was about three she said 'let's play Mummies and Babies'. I said 'okay' and she said 'I'll be the baby and you can be my Chinese Mummy'. I was a bit nervous about this but we began this play acting and before I knew it I was acting out her abandonment. I was holding her in my arms on the floor, hugging her and saying 'I love you so much but I cannot look after you, what can I do? I have to put you somewhere safe so others can take care of you'. Tears were streaming down my face as I acted out putting her in a box, saying 'this will keep the wind and the rain off you, it will keep you safe'. The amazing thing was that as I was playing this part, the box really did become a source of refuge for her rather than something to be thrown away as I had always thought. I was sobbing buckets by now. Lisa put her hand against my cheek and said 'Don't worry Mummy, my English Mummy is coming soon and she will look after me'.

Others choose to follow guidance about how to explore this topic with their children as Ruth highlights:

> Ruth. We have some terminology that we decided as a family: Birth mother and birth father, the conventional British, suggested adopted term. We never use the term abandoned; we always use the term found. We tell her no lies but simply the truth as we know it in language that she understands. We lean on the positives rather than the negatives so we say, -'you were in a safe place to be found and put there by your birth mother'. The facts only; and if we don't know the answer than we say we don't know. That is what I have been advised by others and this is what we are going to do.

Though approached in alternative and individualised ways each family has an abandonment story which is told in order for the adoption story which follows to make sense as part of these children's heritage narratives. See Figure 3.
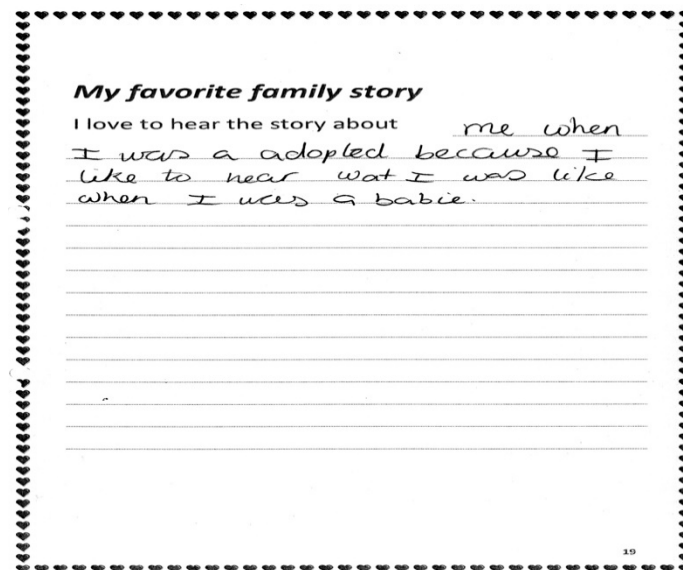

Figure 3. Louise (9yrs) depicts the significance of family stories for her.

4.3. Adoption Stories

How children came to be in their adopted families is vital belonging story which often begins with a first meeting. This first meeting in China is also when the baby is first placed in the care of the adopters. It is understandably traumatic. Sally tells her story below:

Sally. We arrived and were told we were going to meet her the following day and then there was a knock at the hotel door and the guide was there and he said, 'baby coming in half an hour', so it was a bit of a shock and we were jet lagged and hungry. And half an hour later she was at the door screaming. They handed her to me and she went very quiet and was looking around to see where the orphanage director and carer was but she was not crying. But after they had gone she just latched onto my husband and decided to only go to him. The rest of the week that we were in China she would not come to me.

'First meeting' stories are told to the girls to help them begin to comprehend where and to whom they belong as a result of adoption. The girls themselves speak of the same events and similar key figures, but with alternative explanations. Whilst mothers such as Sally speak of strangeness, and rationalise rejection (a common experience), the girls position themselves as babies to explain their initial rejection of their adoptive parents. Wim (Sally's daughter) tells her version of the same story:

Wim (9yrs). When I was in China, I was a baby so I don't really know what happened. I didn't like Mummy so Daddy had to carry me when we were in China. But when we got back home, Mummy gave me a chocolate biscuit and I liked her then [she laughs] Mummy thinks it was because Daddy had darker eyes and Mummy has light blue eyes and I might have been used to Daddy's colour eyes.

Lisa (7yrs) also recounts a story of initial rejection and again food is used to make a first connection. Lisa's younger sister Jane (5yrs) interjects to explain her elder sister's behaviour:

Lisa. I cried. I remember when I kept stealing the biscuits. Well Mummy and Daddy gave me a biscuit and I ate it and then they gave [orphanage director] a biscuit and I took it because she was right next to me. They were pink ones.

Jane. You didn't understand. You were just a baby

Lisa. My Mummy calls me Peaches because when she got me I had a hole in my bottom [split in trousers traditionally used in China] and when she held me for the first time she said it was as smooth as a peach

Being 'a baby' explains the inexplicable, the rejection of the parents they now love and trust. Both girls laugh about this response to their parents and use humour in telling how the eldest also got her family nickname. Lisa claims these accounts as her memories. This perhaps is not surprising as she has been told these stories over the six years since her adoption, and has seen the video of it taking place frequently. She has participated in the telling of the story with her family members (as does her younger sibling despite being absent, and not even born when the event took place).

It is common for parents to use archived material such as video clips. Archive materials were variously used in the interviews to show me something, or provide information.

Rosie (7yrs). We watch the video about our adoptions. We took our video recorder and my Mummy and Daddy filmed it. I was sad when Mummy and Daddy adopted me

China as an imagined home space and England as home seem to be fluid in these narratives. Wim speaks of getting 'back home' after her adoption. Rosie reveals in the extract above, the collective ownership of the video recorder by the term 'we took'. The phrase also demonstrates a plurality 'we' and that she too travelled from England to China. Rosie situates herself as belonging with her family even as she talks about her adoption from her birth country and her emotions at the time. The girls know these stories because they have been told them repeatedly and as they tell them the stories shift and are restoryed (Cresswell 2008).

One father speaks of the imperative to begin telling these stories:

Frank. One of the things we got from all the application process in both domestic and intercountry adoption is that you talk about adoption before they can talk about it, you talk about it to them, and it has never been a topic that we don't talk about.

Frank's wife then adds a story which corroborates Frank's claim by telling me about the first time her daughter said 'adoption':

Thelma. She was about two years old sitting in her high chair and she said 'dopted' for the first time with a big smile on her face and this went on to become 'dopted, China'

Birth, abandonment, and adoptive narratives are used by adoptive parents to connect their children to birth families and countries as well as adopted ones. Gathering 'big information' and, 'little and seemingly insignificant' details about their past (Richards 2014b, p. 9) is part of how primordial and adoptive belonging is performed and genealogies created in these families.

4.4. Building a Genealogy

Creating a coherent and informed life narrative is a necessity if one is to be a good adoptive parent (Richards 2018). Archives, in particular, can articulate people and places from the past, they also identify our connection to these people and places, and so help us to understand who and how, we belong in the present (Meinhof and Galasinski 2005). When outlined in these terms it is unsurprising about the extent to which the families in my study engaged with archiving. The transcript below describes Tina's extensive archiving work and also her display of this ascribed role:

Tina. We are still in close contact with the manager of the hotel where we stayed [in China] for the adoption. He had breakfast with us each morning; he'd sit and tell us about his family, his children, and his wife. We still send and get emails from him. We have made it very clear that they are part of this history and that we want him to stay close to us.

Sarah. Why is this so important to you?

Tina. Because I want to maintain as much of [daughter's name,] history with us in a tangible way. I have kept the laundry receipt from the hotel; I don't know what it says as it is in Mandarin but if I can keep these things and keep these relationships then maybe instead of just me telling the story to her, maybe there can be somebody else who will say 'what my perspective was'. It's all in boxes, the jewellery that was given to her, and every card that was sent to her, even Christmas gift tags. I am in the recording business! We are going to have to buy a bigger house. I haven't parted with anything that crossed our path from the time we walked out of this house to go and get her to today. I am not quite sure yet how to compile it because if I sit down and put together a narrative it would be just that, it will be me speaking through my lens and I don't want that. I want her to see the evidence.

Tina as the archivist identifies key roles for casual strangers who happened to be at the scene of this adoption. She describes her retention of minute details and artefacts as part of the adoption story of her daughter. Such details articulate the story of the formation of her family. Anagnost (2000, p. 409) argues that the 'sentimentalization of certain objects', such as the laundry tickets and gift cards mentioned above are, constructed in anticipation of a subject who will need a record of a past and a point of origin, readily retrievable in a form 'already made up' for him or her.

The parents, particularly the mothers in my research, demonstrate explicit knowledge of this archiving role. However, anxiety about whether it is sufficient is also evident in their discussions as Janet describes:

Janet. I hope we do enough, we keep articles and keep life books and story books and read lots of books. We go to CACH [Children Adopted from China organisation] and Chinese summer school each year and we really try to keep on top of it; but it is never too late to learn. We go out on the significant dates and watch movies about adoption and read books about it and China. So we watch stuff like that and we encourage them to go to where the stuff is all kept, and read them or watch the videos whenever they want. We do not put it in their rooms because we think it is all too precious. So I try to keep it all where I can keep an eye on them because so much of it is very sentimental and irreplaceable. We also look at their Chinese adoption files with the stuff in sometimes.

Riggs (2012) argues that too little is done by adopters to comprehend the loss of a child's biological family and birth culture. Trying to balance the loss represented by this absent family for their child is one of a number of challenges for adopters in a social context which already reifies this absent yet mythical biological family. Some mothers speak either remorsefully of not yet completing the archiving (if this is actually something that is ever completed) or lapsing in some way. There is an evident feeling of compulsion or 'obligation' (Shils 1957, p. 108) on the part of adoptive parents to construct a cultural identity and archiving accords with this. Anagnost (2000) claims that this activity stems from an anxiety on the part of these parents to facilitate a secure ethnicity that they cannot provide through biology. However, I argue that it speaks of a starting point, an origin, a place where the known story can begin. It can and does (perhaps inevitably) develop into a cultural identity story in these families but it is also simply telling the story of the birth of any family. It becomes keyed (Goffman 1974) into the wider frame of adoption discourse through its formalisation into what good adoptive parents should do, even in the face of criticism for its inadequacies. Yet, the origins of this activity lie in the normative display of what families 'do'. The imminent arrival of a baby in a family can generate the archiving of artefacts that are emblematic of this event: the ultrasound image, the photos on the bookshelf, the video recording of the birth, and the retention of congratulatory cards. As Frank (2010) argues:

Stories accompany us through life from birth to death. They do not merely entertain, inform or distress us, they show us what counts as right or wrong and teach us who we are.

All families archive and tell stories using artefacts which relate to family identities. Such stories are multiple, plural in the telling and contingent, but there are always family stories as part of the way that families are constructed and displayed: the narratives of and for family life in all its diversity.

5. Narratives of Belonging

5.1. The Girl's Stories

As Frank (2010, p. 5) argues, stories remind us that we have to live with complicated truths. When asked to draw birth families, many of the girls placed themselves in these pictures. Identities which these pictures illustrate are shaped by stories told to the girls and reshaped by them as they tell them to others. It can make for a complex and conflictual space in which to determine who one is and to whom and where one belongs. See Figure 4.
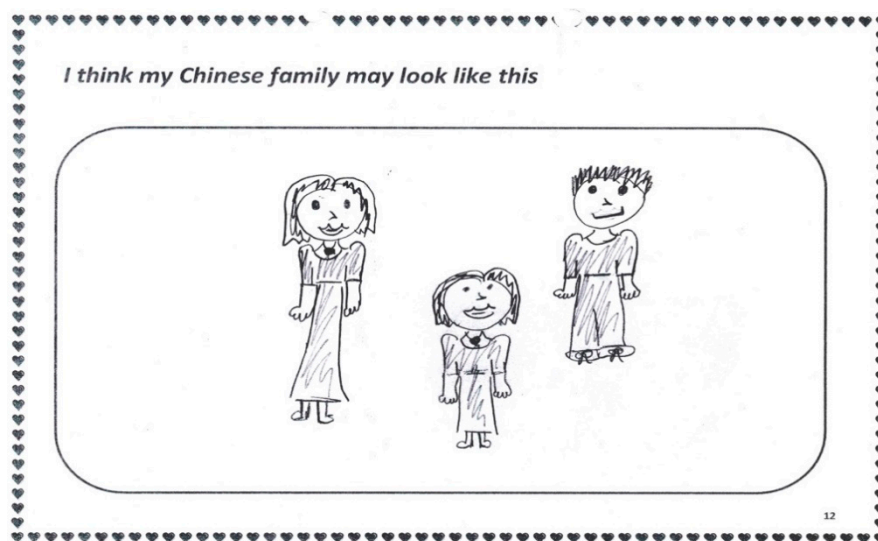

I think my Chinese family may look like this

Figure 4. Louise (9 yrs).

Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000, p. 80) argue that 'proper stories need proper beginnings; [children] must be placed (in a mother's womb/on a native soil)'. This beginning is notable in many of the younger children's stories. As seen earlier, the younger girls create detailed family accounts which weave together imagined family and adoptive family belongings. Their responses also include key narrative structures, such as the orphanage, and key figures such as the police. Davies and Harre (1990) argue that individuals hold multiple social identities which are variously prominent. However, whilst some aspects of these identities can be negotiated, other attributes are imposed by dominant groups (Geertz 1963). Whilst the younger girls in my study accept and reconstruct origin narratives, some of the older participants are more resistant to creative narration and reduce the story they have been told by parents to a temporal progression to adoption and their life now.

Most participants remain willing to repeat it but not always willing to embellish or create imaginative detail:

> Louise (aged 9). I was found on a doorstep and somebody took me to the local police station. The police sent me to the children's home. The children's home arranged fostering for me and so I was fostered for about a year. A month before I was adopted, I was taken back to the children's home. I was then adopted and taken back to England

Yngvesson and Mahoney (2000, p. 78) describe adoption stories as 'broken' with attempts to fill the gaps being a way to 'generate order from disorder'. Failure to do so they claim, induces anxiety when a 'fixed point of origin cannot be supplied'. Some participants left the pages blank in my research

where the origin stories/drawings might be told and these silences are powerful narratives in their own right (Richards 2012; Richards et al. 2015; Richards and Clark). Some girls provided questions such as the one below:

> May. (8yrs) where was I found? Who was I found by? Where was I taken? And who took care of me in the orphanage?

> Louise (9yrs) I would like to know what happened to my birth Mum and birth Dad and why they could not keep me. See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Memories of visits to China.

These quotations eloquently depict the inadequacy of the earlier 'created' origin stories for some of the girls. Asking poignant questions is evident in the data along with the occasional challenge to the way the origin narratives have been told (see Richards 2012). The fluidity of these narratives is realised as the girls themselves tell their stories. The activities such as those described here, inevitably place significant emphasis on an ascribed heritage and genealogical narratives. Yet my research with these young girls suggests that, as they grow older they seek alternative narratives through which to situate their identity. Such findings are supported by previous research. Howell (2006) provides accounts of adoptees challenging essential identity traits. Gray (2009) study with young adult Asian adoptees in Australia also indicates that adoptees seek a broader identity narrative than 'transracial adoptee'.

5.2. Alternative Belonging Narratives

Some girls in my study indicate that essentialised stories of identity which always emphasise or reinvest in an origin narrative are no longer sufficient to identify who they are. Some of the stories indicate a desire by the tellers to move beyond these ascriptions (Richards 2012). A desire to be seen as a more rounded individual than the ascribed 'Chinese Adoptee' is evident for example, in Mel's (10yrs) statement made in response to me explaining the research to her again as part of her ongoing consent;

> I am more than just adopted; I don't feel like I am different to everyone else just because I was adopted.

Interesting to note here is the past tense which Mel uses to describe her adoption. This is in contrast with the present tense used in much social work adoption literature. Adoptees seem to be burdened not only with ascribed identities which mark them as different from normative family kinship but also the enduring presence of adopted status. As Frank (2010) argues, stories can become more fate than choice. Mel eloquently placed the act of adoption in her past and puts her current self in the present 'I am more'. Such adoption stories can reveal the dis-ease of being forced to a hard game of identity difference in the context of powerful narratives that compel us to situate ourselves in one place or another '(Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000, p. 78).

Other activities such as football, swimming, and interacting with boys, if only to annoy them, are also evident in the quotations below and used to inform me of their identities:

> Jess. (9yrs) I like to hang out with my friends and go shopping. I like to go swimming club and football club. I like to do sporty things. I like to put on mini shows. I like going to my gang show rehearsals.

> Louise (9 yrs) My special friend is Sasha because she is my best friend and very nice. We like hanging out and chasing and annoying the boys.

> Friendships become important belonging narratives too:

> Mel. (10 yrs) I love school! I like my friends and my teachers and I don't really like half terms because you don't see you friends every minute of the day like you would on a regular school day.

> Jenny. (12yrs) School is fun because all of us, my friends, all go round in a big group talking, playing, and laughing.

> Jess. (9 yrs) School is okay because you get lots of work but it is fun too because you have most of your friends there.

6. Have We Got the Genealogical Emphasis Right?

Genealogical narratives in intercountry adoption are complex, commonly ascribed, and seem to present an element of compulsion or obligation (Shils 1957) to construct on the part of these parents. As they grow older, the girls in this study look for opportunities to resist these origin narratives and seek instead to create other stories about the ways in which they belong. Allowing these children to decide how and when genealogical narratives are important seems to contradict both policy imperatives, family practices, and primordial assumptions. But I argue that an over emphasis on genealogical narrative risks ongoing belongings and identity formation. The necessity to comply with current policy informed by rights discourses and the children's best interest ensures that the emphasis on such origin narratives dominates the lives of these young adoptees. To secure their children's identity formation and wellbeing parents will tell and retell these stories to situate and anchor their children's belonging. Indeed, tension occurs in families as children begin to refuse or resist these stories as I have highlighted elsewhere (See Richards 2012; 2018). Gilbert (2005, p. 65) reminds us that:

> Identity cannot be described, explained, or categorised . . . what should be understood is that identity may be strategic, uneven, unstable, fragmented, heterogeneous, always in a process of change, never static, always in a state of 'becoming'. Indeed any attempt to resolve the question of identity is a fallacy.

The following account is provided by Sue, a mother who professes a desire for genealogical identity in adoption to be more pragmatic and for adoptees to have the capacity be more agentic in identity formation:

> Sue. The adoptions today are on the back of those earlier transracial adoptions when the children were told nothing, which was so, so bad, so they [social work profession] rewrote

the book and ensured that children are now told everything. But where does that leave them about where they actually belong? Maybe it is time to rewrite the book again. My father was Australian, my mother American; I regard myself as Spanish because that is where I grew up and the language I spoke. We should be the generation of adopters that say, "well actually we are going to allow our children to ebb and flow, between one and the other so that it is okay if they don't talk about their birth mother every day, that they know what they need to know when they want to know it".

The normative categories of belonging through biology, ethnicity, and country are dominant categories of the cultural space occupied by these girls, and their status, when defined through such traditional categories becomes ambiguous and difficult to classify. The uneasy fit of the girls' belongings is evident at times in their stories. Undoubtedly their adoption marks these girls as different, and on occasion, as they grow up, this difference can conflict with their desire to be the same as their peers (Friedlander 2003). Parents can feel compelled to reduce this othered nature of adoptive belongings for their daughters through stories which connect children to normative, essentialised belongings of birth, biology, and country. But I argue that these genealogical stories eventually become the narratives which exemplify difference rather than reduce it and some of the girls have become less willing to perform these identity narratives. The expectation to tell such stories and situate adoptees in the 'social order' is explicit in adoption literature (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). The liminality of adoption is one that wider society imposes on these adoptees and then a role that it expects them to perform. Be adopted if you wish to belong, this then is the social and political belonging of adoption that is imposed on adoptees and their families. However, these girls are not only produced by social context, they are also productive and need not be constrained by the limitations of these narratives or the absence of normative belonging that they reveal. These stories can be perceived as a starting point to move beyond, not a constant presence as adoption is commonly perceived. 'I was adopted' should perhaps be the linguistic term that we allow these girls and others to claim. Belonging can also be viewed as a threshold state where new identities and culture is formed and new social structures emerge, a boundary from which something can begin rather than end (Bhabha 1994).

Our belonging narratives need not be fixed nor should they constrain our identities, rather we should perceive them as ever-evolving carrying not only the legacies of our birth, biology, and culture but also our choices and experiences which shape who we are, who we wish to be and where we belong. As Wim (9yrs) eloquently, powerfully, yet softly stated:

'I'm more than just adopted'

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