

The Narrative of International Adoption

By Bert [Ballard](#), OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2009 [CONDUCTIVE](#)

The story that has come before

It is 1945. Atomic bombs have wreaked destruction in Japan and the Axis powers have surrendered. Six years of the deadliest war in human history has come to an end. The world turns to healing and rebuilding. Cities and societies need to be reconstructed, alliances across nations need to be re-established, and healing needs to be found. Part of this involves finding families for children who now have none because of the war. Between 1948 and 1962, just over 10,000 European orphans are adopted to western nations after being displaced by the war.

Today's story of international adoption is a controversial, broad, expansive one, without clear moral clarity. And without that clarity, we have many voices, many viewpoints, and many stories clamoring to be the one that defines international adoption.

Soon after in 1950, the Korean War breaks out and western countries come to the aid of South Korea in the fight against communism. Once again war ravages cities, communities, countrysides, and children. Once again, western countries find families for orphaned children, adopting them and migrating them away from their cultures of birth. This time over 4,000 are adopted in the 1950s and early 1960s from South Korea to the United States setting the stage for nearly 15,000 South Koreans to be adopted internationally between 1960 and 1975. This is one of the most prominent events in international adoption, as many of these orphans would grow up and speak and write about their transracial, international adoption experience, not always with fairy tale endings.

In the late 1960s, another war breaks out in another Asian country, this one in Vietnam. Like the Korean War, the west becomes involved again. Just before the conflict ends, a woman in Georgia sees war orphans on television and rushes to tell her husband she wants to adopt one. She is moved by the graphic images of suffering. She can build a family and save a child. That child would become me, a child of Operation Babylift, the evacuation of nearly 3,000 children out of Vietnam in 1975 amidst much media fanfare and political maneuvering.

The 1970s brings lower birth rates in the United States and important changes in domestic adoption, notably the move toward open adoptions. Between the lower birth rates and families wanting to avoid open adoption, many families adopt internationally. Latin America becomes a primary source of adopted children. From 1976 to 1981, over 9,000 children are adopted to the United States from Central and South American countries while Asian countries, mostly Korea, hold strong with over 25,000 adopted to the United States during the same time period. Instead of finding families for children, it

is now a time of finding children for families.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall falls and with it comes a symbolic end to the Cold War. In Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu's overthrow leads to the discovery of over 100,000 children living in orphanages amidst terrible conditions. Abused, developmentally delayed, disabled, and suffering they become another means by which families are formed in western countries. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, 7,000 Romanian children are adopted, with over 2,000 of them going to families in the United States. Following this, Russia becomes an important country of origin for adopted children, with nearly 30,000 children adopted to families in the United States during the 1990s.

In the mid-1990s, a mother dreams she will have a family. In the dream, she sees herself traveling to an Asian country and picking up her new daughter. In a year, that dream becomes a reality, as the mother travels to China to pick up her infant girl. Although in place since 1979, China's "one-child policy" attracted western attention in the 1990s when overseas adoption from China became legal. The floodgates were opened. The story of this dream is not unique to one adoptive parent, but represents the over 18,000 orphans (mostly girls) adopted from China to the United States in the 1990s. This is a story I have heard in various forms from friends and others who have adopted from China. Since the 1990s, over 50,000 Chinese children have been adopted to the United States.

In March 2002, Angelina Jolie adopts the first of 3 children internationally, this one from Cambodia (her other two are from Ethiopia and Vietnam, respectively). With this celebrity adoption, which is by no means the first but draws the most attention, international adoption is thrust into public discourse. But instead of images of children as victims needing homes and love, there is a heated debate about the morality of the act. Less about finding families for children or children for families, it is now a complicated event, with some condemning it and others extolling it. International adoption raises emotions and there is no longer a clear theme. Is it right? Is it only for the rich? What about children needing homes in our own countries?

In the 1990s, the "cute, little China dolls" are growing up and a common presence in schools, malls, parks, and other places typical of the American family. Because mostly white parents (over 90%) have adopted these Chinese girls, these "visibly dissimilar" families are numerous enough that others stop and ask questions – "how much did she cost?" – or comment on how lucky they are – "China sure is a terrible country to throw away those cute little girls!" Researchers and the media flock to learn more. Inside the community, concerns over whether or not the child will learn the Chinese language, how the child will maintain connections to birth culture, how to put together a Lifebook (a document designed to preserve the story of one's birth and adoption), whether or not to attend a [summer culture camp](#), when to go on [homeland tours](#), and the importance of listening to scores of professionals, educators, and adult adoptees who tell parents the "right" way to raise their adopted children are constant worries. These

aren't the international adoptions of the past; now the focus is on avoiding the pain and struggles faced by the previous generation of adoptees with attention to what happens after a child is in a home. As for numbers, from 2003-2007, over 33,000 Chinese children were adopted to the United States, which was 58% of the 58,000 plus total of Chinese children adopted worldwide.

Last month, I held my wife as she cried over pictures of two boys, one of which might be ours. A family who adopted sent the pictures to us. It has been over two years in our own adoption process for a son from Vietnam, one begun in the United States - until the United States uncovered evidence of adoption violations by Vietnam and refused to renew their agreement. We moved to Canada, started the process again, and are now waiting, told every month for the past nine months that our referral will come. But it never does. Meanwhile, our lives are planned with contingency, our non-adopted children grow, and we constantly question our motivations as to why we are doing this. But as I hold my wife as she cries, I see that this is no longer about "saving" a child or about building our family, but about seeking to understand a bigger picture of adoption, of navigating the "rightness" of our desire with the "wrongness" of the inherited and continuing legacy of international adoption. What is the story of adoption now? And how can that help us struggle through our very real tears?

What the stories mean – A story of a story

These vignettes are part of the larger story of international adoption in the modern age. They are not all-inclusive, but highlight turning points and watershed events in international adoption – World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Latin American adoptions, Eastern European adoptions, Chinese adoptions, and celebrity adoptions. When we think about international adoption, these stories remain with us and define our consciousness of international adoption as it has grown, evolved, and morphed. They include my own personal episodes, demonstrating that even the largest stories have the most personal of impact.

The stories portray different epochs or "waves" and illustrate how international adoption has changed. The first wave followed World War II and lasted until the mid-1970s. Characterized as a humanitarian response to countries ravaged by war, its story is of "saving the children" where the young, innocent victims of violence and devastation could find safe, loving homes in developed, "civilized" countries. This was an unquestioned narrative, one that provided clear and certain moral grounding shared by most in the United States and other western countries like Canada and Australia. To adopt a child was to save and rescue a child; it was the right and noble thing to do.

This understanding will go far in addressing the problems that plague international adoption without abandoning its good. It can also find moral grounds to help make sense of the personal experiences that comprise the essence of international adoption.

The second wave began in the mid-1970s, but rather than military or political conflict, the predominant narrative was finding children for families who could not have children or chose not to through non-adoptive means. Without a geo-political influence, the driving force of international adoption was parents who wanted to adopt. Still, remnants of “save the children” remained dominant as children from “less developed” regions could find a family in “better,” more developed countries. Central and South America, Eastern Europe, and China were primary countries of origin for adopted children. Finding “good homes” for abandoned children in those “poorer” countries where “human rights” were not respected (i.e., China’s “one child policy”) became a vaunted social status, one where a family could be formed and a person could also do something good.

The Third Wave

The third wave began in the early 2000s. I believe it began in March 2002, when Jolie’s case was thrust into the public sphere, as celebrity adoptions became more known to the general public. Coinciding with the visibility of Chinese adoptions, the media and society raised questions about the appropriateness of international adoption. The adoptees from the first wave were now grown and speaking about the racism, oppression, and identity struggles of being adopted. Whereas cost was always an issue, the attention generated by celebrity adoptions and by adoptees linked the economic issues with the migration of the child more directly. The justification of “saving” a child or of forming a family became conflated with adoption as a capitalistic transaction and entitlement of the affluent.

Even still, the third wave saw the peak of international adoptions in 2004, with over 45,000 children adopted internationally that year (the United States was involved in 50% of them). It became an industry, with billions of dollars – some legal, some not so much – at play at any given moment. Furthermore, the [Hague Convention](#), created in 1993 as a non-binding agreement for countries involved in international adoption, still remained a confusing, inconsistently applied, uncertain treatise that lacked enforcement or oversight. While it set important standards and allowed for the articulation of formal measures, it remained (and still is) essentially a voluntary document.

In contrast to the first two waves, there is no clear theme in the third wave. It is a story with multiple starting points and multiple endings. It is a story with carryovers from the wartime era of rescuing children and a story that fights for the legitimate right of families to be created through adoption. It is a story with highly critical voices, of adoptees and scholars who tell personal experiences and document instances of human trafficking. It is a story of large numbers, both economically and demographically. It is a story filled with tears and longing, unfulfilled desires and happy reunions, gratitude and fortune, and of living a better life than in other countries where poverty, death, starvation, abuse, and pain are constant companions.

It is a multi-layered, complex, paradoxical, intergenerational narrative, no longer possessing either a clear narrative theme or moral certainty. Yet it is still one that empowers, offers hope, and continues to emerge.

Even with international adoption decreasing (down 17% or nearly 8,000 adoptions between 2004 and 2007), it remains a controversial topic, both in society and in families. Within these trends, and amidst all of these competing voices, a narrative that seeks to redefine and complexify the grounds upon which we make sense of international adoption, empowers us to address its inequities, and fosters international adoption as the best choice for a child and all members of the adoption triad is emerging.

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Today's story of international adoption is a controversial, broad, expansive one, without clear moral clarity. And without that clarity, we have many voices, many viewpoints, and many stories clamoring to be *the* one that defines international adoption. Yet, I do not think that in today's highly pluralized, sophisticated, instant communication world that one story will ever dominate. Instead, I think we must understand more fully the current narrative in its diversity, complexity, and reality. This understanding will go far in addressing the problems that plague international adoption without abandoning its good. It can also find moral grounds to help make sense of the personal experiences that comprise the essence of international adoption.

What the emerging narrative says

I believe there are eight important characteristics that can be identified in today's emerging narrative of international adoption. It is inclusive, allows for multiple paths, explicates economics, is critical, offers complex solutions, values the adoptee voice, considers all members of the adoption triad, and fosters a lifelong perspective.

The story is inclusive because it allows for multiple experiences. There is a range of experiences in international adoption: some birth parents abandoned their children because they did not want them; some birth parents had their children kidnapped. The best interests of some children is to pull them out of their country and place them in loving homes, even if it is diametrically opposite both culturally and racially; the best interests of other children is to leave them where they are and support them through humanitarian aid and improved social systems even if they are in war torn, impoverished countries. Some adoptive parents can make a good, legitimate choice to build their family through international adoption because they have the means and the methods; some adoptive parents should never be parents at all as they are underprepared to raise a child, adopted or not. In today's international adoption story,

all of these situations co-exist, as there is no longer the clear moral compass or broad geo-political conflict from which to judge or justify.

The story allows for multiple paths in that not all actions lead to clear outcomes. While the humanitarian justification of saving a child in war times obfuscated the racial and cultural struggles of the children, this is not the same today. Then, it was assimilation, the goal to raise a child that reflects the adoptive culture so that adoption is backgrounded and the child is “normal.” In the mid-90s, it was about immersion, the maintenance of a child’s connection to birth culture through language classes, homeland tours, culture camps, and reunions. Today, a middle-path is being navigated, one of integration, of trying to help a child fit into his or her adoptive culture while maintaining connection to birth culture. Integration means diversity as no family and no child will live similar lives or merge cultures together. There are no clear paths today for the child or the family; each individual and family must find their own unique path.

Today’s story of international adoption recognizes the dominant role of economics and money. International adoption involves the relationship of supply and demand – a parent(s) wants to adopt a child so a child must be made available somehow, someway. In the midst of this, money changes hands – a lot of money. While costs vary per country of origin (\$7,500 to \$50,000, depending on the country and agency), adoption is not an inexpensive endeavor. At best, the role of economics is the means by which adoptive parents pay for paperwork, travel, and other formal processes. At worse, the fees are used for bribes, pocketed by any number of corrupt individuals along the way, or even used to payoff birth mothers. Most situations fall somewhere in between these extremes. Indeed, it is hard to track where adoption dollars go. Regardless, the role of money is an economic reality in international adoption – it cannot be ignored or written off and holds a prominent place in today’s international adoption story.

Today’s story is critical of international adoption. International adoption is not a puritanical event. Because of the large amounts of money involved there is also corruption. There are documented instances of baby stealing, bribery, lying and deceit, human trafficking, blatant disregard for human life, genocide, ignoring race, forced assimilation, use of adopted children for public relations and policy justification, and so on. In short, there are very morally reprehensible aspects of international adoption. Today’s story moves beyond the simplicity of patriotism or the right of any parent who wants to adopt; it exposes the bad and criticizes it. It empowers those who are victims to speak out against it and petitions decision makers to take measures to stop it.

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Today's story also suggests improvements to the system. But these improvements are not simple, straightforward proposals. International adoption is a complex event and experience involving orphans, birth parents and families, adoptive parents and families, cultures, politics, transportation, medical care, bureaucracies, investigations, money, legislation, policies, politicians, the media, and more. To suggest that one agency, one organization, one government, or even one sector can provide the widespread changes necessary to both end corruption and determine the best interests of any child vastly underestimates the vastness of the problem. The challenges of international adoption came to be over several decades involving wars, reactive policies and legislation, and the rapid growth of associated individuals, organizations, and institutions. To address these challenges, solutions must offer complicated, multi-pronged approaches that recognize the complexity and immensity of international adoption while balancing a child's best interest (which changes depending on the child) and the experiences of the birth families and adoptive families alike. Make no mistake, international adoption is good, children should be in families, but it is a good that in many ways has gone bad. Today's story is one that strives to keep the good, but minimize the bad. Today's story is learning to encompass the voices of the adoptees, no matter their age. Adoptees are simultaneously objects and persons in international adoption. They are objects whose "best interest" needs to be defined; they are persons loved by many. Yet, for most of modern history, they are missing from the decision-making and conversation. Indeed, that is how our life began – with decisions being made for us. Being silenced only reinforces what we feel deep down – that our choice and voice do not matter. They did not matter when we were adopted, and when we are our silenced as adults we feel as though we do not matter now. But we do, for does not the whole process of international adoption revolve around the child – what's in a child's best interest? Is the child legitimately adoptable? Is the family a good fit for the child? Listening to these voices is an important part of today's narrative of international adoption. Sometimes it is a fairy tale, other times it is full of pain and struggle, other times it is healing, and other times it is critical of adoption. No matter the outcome, in today's story of international adoption the adoptee voice is finding the place it deserves. (Visit <http://www.emkpress.com/teenbook.html> for a new book featuring voices of the younger generation of adopted persons.)

Today's emerging story of international adoption aims to include all members of the adoption triad – the adopted, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents. This does not necessarily mean open adoption, but rather it means valuing of the story of the birth parents. Adoptee voices and adoptive parent voices are easy to find; birth parents, not as easy. Yet, with the emergence of Lifebooks, homeland tours, requirements for adoptive parents to travel to the country of origin, reunion trips in many countries, and investigative journalism, the voices of birth parents are finding light. They need to be told. For each adopted child who does not know his or her origin story, there is an equally important birth parent story about how the child came to be available for adoption. Sometimes these stories are of birth mothers who made the ultimate sacrifice out of love. Other times, these stories indicate a broader social system that

takes advantage of the poor and destitute or devalues and discriminates against women or dupes them into giving up their child for adoption, like in some instances in Ethiopia today.

Finally, today's story of international adoption takes a lifelong perspective. There is the realization that international adoption cannot be solely about finding families for children or children for families. Indeed, after the placement is complete, a child still needs to be raised and come to his or her own terms with what it means to be adopted. In short, there is a growing emphasis on post-adoption. Children grow up, and for the internationally adopted child that can mean a host of identity, cultural, racial, and personal challenges. Today's story recognizes these experiences, realizing that the work of international adoption is never complete.

The hope of today's narrative

The new narrative of adoption is multilayered and complex, without a central focal point. Instead, it holds many things in tension – dreams and hopes with economic and material realities; the experiences of the adoption triad with immoral corruption, greed and trafficking; multiple and contradictory motivations and desires with the need for honest criticism and harsh words.

To address these challenges, solutions must offer complicated, multi-pronged approaches that recognize the complexity and immensity of international adoption while balancing a child's best interest (which changes depending on the child) and the experiences of the birth families and adoptive families alike.

Let us return to my wife and I as we struggle through waiting and wondering if our desires will come to fruition. As my wife sheds tears of anger and frustration, I tell her of my dreams of our son when he finally comes to live with us. I tell of how he will get along with his sisters (our current non-adoptive children), how he will struggle in school, how he will be angry about being adopted, how he will hoard toys and food, how he will relate to a father who is adopted, how he will learn about sports and television, how he will want to go back to the land of his birth, how he might not see adoption as important as his parents do, how he will experience racism, and how he will become a contributing member of society. I also tell her that I am willing to have a relationship with our son's birth parents or even give up on our adoption process if we find out that living in our home, in our country, and in our family is not in his best interests, no matter how strong our emotional connection or economic investment. I tell her how I will be jealous yet encouraging if we can have a relationship with his birth parents if adopting him is the best thing. I tell her how I hate that the system is set up to be inefficient for all involved and is wide open to corruption and yet even knowing this, I cannot let go of the good I can possibly do for him and our family. I tell her I do not want to give up right now, even though part of me knows we would be providing the best interests of a child from our own country if we decided to change direction.

The emerging narrative matters here. It tells me which questions I should ask and never lets me justify my decisions on something or someone else. It compels me to reflect on my choices and live up to them. It broadens my perspective and recognizes that while many others share similar experiences, my experience is unique. It reminds me that there is a child, a living, breathing human being that, even though I have never met him, I still love him and owe him something. It forces me to consider the political and economic implications of my decision.

But there is something else in today's story – hope. Hope that in spite of all the troubles and ills of international adoption, there is the belief that it can be good. There is hope that children will find their forever families, whether in their own countries or in another. There is hope that someday governments will realize that politics should serve children, not the other way around. There is hope that someday international adoption will be a choice of last resort because there is the care, support, and social system families need before, during, and after the birth of a child.

I have hope in today's narrative. It is unclear, paradoxical and full of tension. It lacks the moral certitude of the past, but recognizes the realities of what is happening now. In today's emerging narrative, it is important that we do not give up believing in what can be possible. Good is possible.

Yet as we strive for good, we must recognize that until we realize that in order to pose any successful or even minimally acceptable solution to the problems of international adoption, we must see all of its complexity. Without an understanding of the current complex and tension filled story, proposed solutions will be full of overgeneralizations, overestimations, and simplicity that misses the point. Instead, we need to realize that real change will be socially innovative. It will bring together all the voices that are woven together to create the story of international adoption. Countries, governments, policies, economics, agencies, adoptees, adoptive parents, birth families, media and so on. All have contributed to the problems at hand and all must contribute to the solution.

I cannot presume to propose an all encompassing, innovative change. I am only one voice and real change will take the voices of many. But I do believe that we must do more than we are doing now and we must not be so quick to throw out the good with all of the bad. I believe that the solutions we craft and implement must be part of an emerging narrative that simultaneously demands and comforts the tears of those very real parents, families, and children involved in international adoption.

I believe it is possible that one day the individual who I call my son will know security, love, and the joy of life, whether it is in my family or with another, maybe even his biological one. I owe him that much. Today's story of international adoption, in all its emergence and complexity, demands that of me. What does it demand of you?

October 16, 2009. Our adoption agency tells us the two boys, one of whom could have

been our son, were reunited with their families. I am a paradox of emotions. I am sad because I had connected with and hoped for him. I am happy, because the system worked; because of our application an investigation located their birth families. I am despondent because I do not know if my dreams will come true. I am relieved because I will never need wonder if they will know their birth family. I am uncertain because I do not know if I will ever have a son. Do I let go? Do I continue on?

My story mirrors the story of international adoption – emergent, paradoxical, complex, full of emotion, built on real relationships and desires, driven by a need for ethics and care, wrapped up in hope and longing, experiencing feelings at the depth of who I am. It is not an easy story. As much as I want to, I know I should not make it one – not for me, not for my son, not for any of us. The story demands that we let it be what it is and let it emerge as we all play our parts as it writes itself.

Bert Ballard, a Vietnamese adoptee and adoption advocate, writes about some of his struggles with adopting a son from Vietnam. As an advocate, he has formed organizations to help adoptees tell their stories. First-person adoptee narratives have played a significant role in domestic and international adoptee communities. These communities have relied heavily on personal testimony as evidence to make the case for changing adoption policy and practice.

Ballard calls post-2002 -- after Angelina Jolie's adopted her first of three children internationally -- part of the "new wave" of international adoption discussions. Instead of images of children as waifs needing homes and love and opportunities, today's story of international adoption is a controversial and without clear moral clarity. A deeper understanding of the idea of saved children can shed light on current debates about international adoption. Ballard sees eight important characteristics that can be identified in today's emerging narrative of international adoption: it is inclusive, allows for multiple paths, explicates economics, is critical, offers complex solutions, values the adoptee voice, considers all members of the adoption triad, and fosters a lifelong perspective.

Bert Ballard, Ph.D., is a Vietnamese adoptee of Operation Babylift, evacuated when he was 3 weeks old. He grew up mostly in Colorado, but now resides in Waterloo, Ontario (Canada) where he is an Assistant Professor in Communication, Leadership and Social Innovation at the University of Waterloo. He researches international adoption related to family communication and adoptee identity along with communication ethics. In November 2009, his edited book entitled Pieces of Me: [Who Do I Want to Be](#) will be released. The book presents the authentic and honest stories, art, poems, and music of over 100 different individuals, most of them teen or young adult adoptees. He is also planning a major international adoption conference involving a variety of countries and scholars from around the world for 2010. He is married with two daughters and awaits a referral for an adopted son from Vietnam.