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## Intercountry Adoption in Ireland: Experiences, Supports, Challenges : Country Briefings : Report 4: China

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ÚDARÁS UCHTÁLA na hÉIREANN  
THE ADOPTION AUTHORITY of IRELAND

***Intercountry Adoption in Ireland:  
Experiences, Supports, Challenges  
Country Briefings***

**Report 4: China**

This is the fourth in a series of five planned country-specific briefings. It looks at intercountry adoptions from China into Ireland between 1994 and 2019.

*To ensure the provision of the highest possible standards of adoption related services, throughout the lifelong adoption process, with the best interests of children as the first and paramount objective.*



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## ***Executive Summary***

### ***i. Overview***

Between 1994 and 2019, 431 children were adopted from China by parents habitually resident in Ireland. Adoptions from China accounted for the fourth largest proportion of all intercountry adoptions (ICA) into Ireland between 1991 and 2019, representing almost 9% of Ireland's total current ICA population.

### ***ii. Profile of individuals adopted from China into Ireland***

Prior to the Adoption Act (2010), the average age of a child adopted from China into Ireland was 1 year, 3 months at the time of the adoption order. After the introduction of the Adoption Act (2010), the average age of a child adopted from China was 2 years, 5 months. In terms of gender, 89% of the children were female, and 11% were male. As of 2020, China suspended international adoption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has yet to reopen as of the writing of this report.

### ***iii. Health and development***

Children adopted from China into Ireland typically come from a background of institutional or residential care. These children are classified in China as "orphans", although one or both of their parents may still be alive. Currently, most orphans who are available for adoption in China have moderate to severe disabilities, and an increasing percentage are presenting with physical and mental issues identified at birth, including (but not limited to) congenital heart defects, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and spina bifida. Many health problems experienced by children adopted from China require specialised treatment that is difficult to access in Ireland. Access to suitable, affordable and timely intervention is a cause of concern for parents adopting a child from China who is in need of surgery upon arrival in Ireland (Boyle, Walsh, & Grace, 2012). Children adopted from China into Ireland also tend to experience developmental delay to some extent (Greene, et al., 2008). Despite this, intercountry adoption tends to result in outcomes that are more positive for children, in comparison to their peers who remained in China (Younes & Klein, 2014).



## ***Intercountry Adoption in Ireland: Experiences, Supports, Challenges***

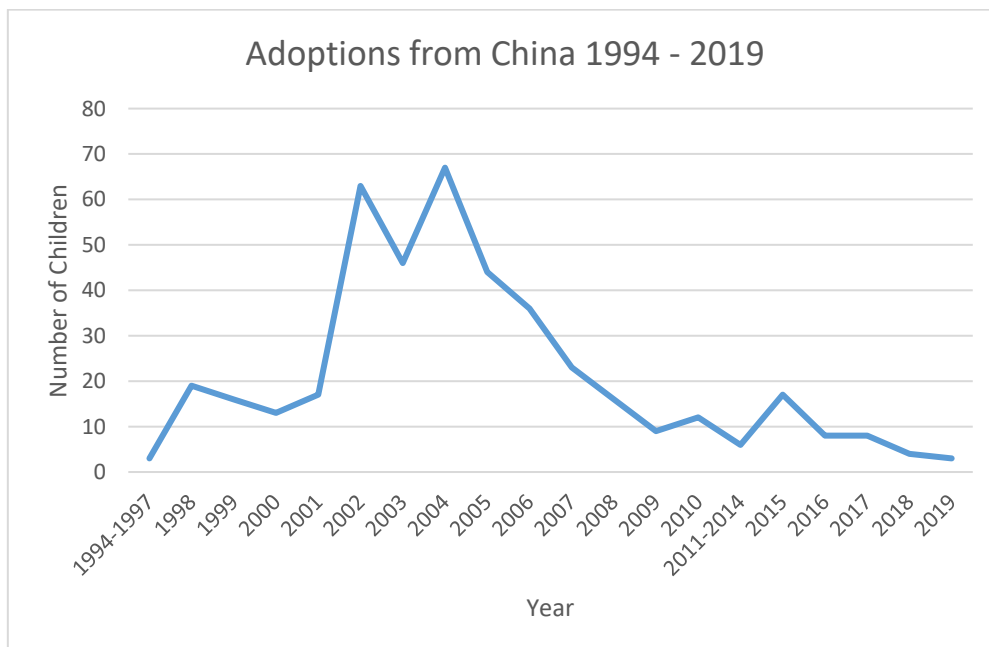
### ***Country Briefings***

#### **Report 4: China**

##### **1. Profile of Children Adopted from China into Ireland**

###### **a. Overview**

Between 1994 and 2019, 431<sup>1</sup> children were adopted from China by parents habitually resident in Ireland. Adoptions from China accounted for the fourth largest proportion of all intercountry adoptions (ICA) into Ireland between 1991 and 2019, representing almost 9% of Ireland's total current ICA population. Alongside the Adoption Act 2010, the ratification of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption brought a number of changes into how adoption was regulated and managed in Ireland from 2010 onwards. This strongly influenced the ICA figures from all countries going forward. 381 children were adopted from China into Ireland between 1994 and October 2010, while a further 50 were adopted between November 2010 and December 2019, after the introduction of the new legislation.



**Figure 1: Adoptions from China into Ireland by year, 1994 – 2019**

<sup>1</sup> A review of the AAI's historical statistics and the implementation of a new database has allowed for more accurate reporting of figures. As such, there may be a small variance in published figures from previous years.



Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the adoptions from China by year, from the first adoption of a Chinese child into Ireland in 1994, to the most recent in 2019. More than half of all adoptions from China into Ireland took place between 2002 and 2005. The numbers peaked with 67 adoptions in 2004, and slowly declined over the following years. There was a small, brief spike in 2015 resulting from the opening of the Helping Hands Adoption Mediation Agency China programme, which provided the opportunity for adoptive parents to consider adoption under the China Special Needs programme. The numbers of children adopted from China continued to decline thereafter. The same figures are broken down by year in Table 1 below. As of 2020, China had suspended international adoption globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1: Adoptions from China into Ireland by year, 1994 - 2019**

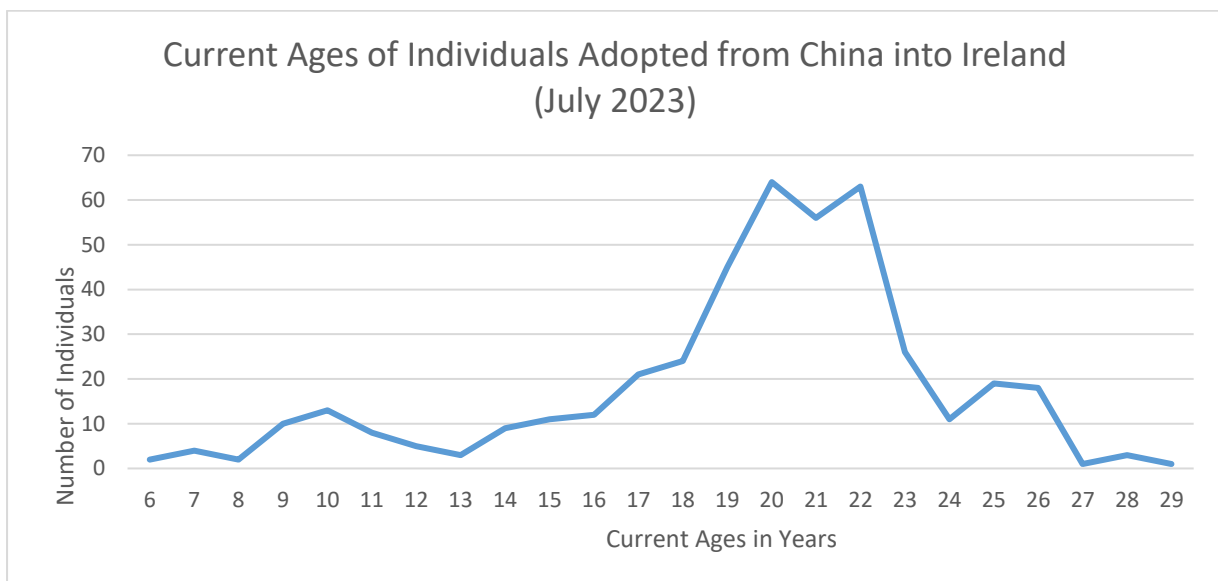
Date of Adoption Order	Number of children adopted from China
<b>1994-1997*</b>	*
<b>1998</b>	19
<b>1999</b>	16
<b>2000</b>	13
<b>2001</b>	17
<b>2002</b>	63
<b>2003</b>	46
<b>2004</b>	67
<b>2005</b>	44
<b>2006</b>	36
<b>2007</b>	23
<b>2008</b>	16
<b>2009</b>	9
<b>2010</b>	12
<b>2011-2014*</b>	6
<b>2015</b>	17
<b>2016</b>	8
<b>2017</b>	8
<b>2018</b>	*
<b>2019</b>	*
<b>Total</b>	<b>431</b>

*In cases marked with ‘\*’, the years have been grouped. This is because the number of children adopted from China in these years are too small to be individually reported for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality.*



**b. Current age profile of individuals adopted into Ireland from China – July 2023**

The range of current ages of individuals adopted into Ireland from China is illustrated in Figure 2. The mean current age of a child adopted from China into Ireland is 19 years old, as of July 2023. While the ages range from 6-29 years old, roughly three quarters (72%) are currently aged between 16 and 23, with 19-22 year olds accounting for over half (53%) of the total figure. The average age at adoption was 1 year, 3 months at the time of the adoption order prior to the Adoption Act 2010, and 2 years, 5 months after the Act. In terms of gender, 89% of the children were female, and 11% were male.



**Figure 2: Current ages of individuals adopted from China into Ireland (as of July 2023)**

**c. Geographical location of children adopted from China**

Table 2 illustrates the geographical location of the adoptive parents at the signing of the adoption order. It is presented in descending order from Dublin (the county with the highest population of children adopted from China) to Leitrim, (the county with the lowest population of children adopted from China). For example, 82 children were adopted from China by parents who lived in Cork at the time of the adoption. Just over a quarter of all children adopted from China went to families living in Dublin at the time of the adoption.



**Table 2: County level breakdown of families who adopted children from China**

County	No. of Children
Dublin	115
Cork	83
Meath	26
Kildare	23
Waterford	22
Limerick	20
Tipperary	18
Wexford	16
Galway	14
Kerry	13
Wicklow	11
Westmeath	10
Carlow	*
Clare	*
Laois	*
Donegal	*
Mayo	*
Louth	*
Kilkenny	*
Cavan	*
Sligo	*
Offaly	*
Roscommon	*
Monaghan	*
Longford	*
Leitrim	*
<b>Total (including numbers from countries with * above):</b>	<b>431</b>

*In cases marked with ‘\*’, the total number of adoptions have been withheld. This is because the number of children adopted from China by families living in these counties were too small to be individually reported for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality.*

#### **d. Requirements for Adopting Children from China**

Intercountry adoption between Ireland and China first became possible in 1992, when China enacted a new law enabling people from outside of China to adopt children from state-run childcare centres. This law was enacted to help with the overwhelming numbers of orphans in the state.



Following China signing the Hague Convention in 2005, the Chinese authorities made changes to adoption rules and regulations, resulting in several restrictions for adopting children from China. Among these restrictions, China does not allow gay or lesbian candidates to adopt children from the country, regardless of whether they are couples or individuals, and prospective adoptive parents must sign an affidavit to attest that they are heterosexual. In addition, there are several regulations regarding maximum body mass index (BMI), minimum annual income, physical and mental health, number of years married, and amount of divorces (for more information about the Chinese adoption programme requirements, please visit <https://aai.gov.ie/en/china.html>).

## **2. China: Understanding the Context**

In order to understand the experiences of those who have been adopted through ICA from China to Ireland, it is important to be aware of their unique cultural and political background. China is the world's most populous country, and this combined with very specific policies around family planning, changing child welfare measures, and a clear socio-economic divide, has affected how and why children become available for adoption.

### **a. Overview**

The People's Republic of China is located in East Asia, and has been solely governed by the Chinese Communist Party since its establishment in 1949. Over the past half-century, China has experienced strong economic growth, particularly in terms of its industrial output and exportation of goods. China is also the world's most populous country, with approximately 1.4 billion citizens as of 2021. According to UNICEF, China had an estimated 234 million children between the ages of 0 and 14 in 2019, representing 16.8% of China's total population and approximately 12.4% of the world's children. China is currently facing issues with its ageing population, with 41.5% of its population belonging to the dependency ratio. While children make up the majority of the current dependency ratio at 23.8%, the proportion of elderly people has steadily increased year on year since 2005, and is expected to put a significant strain on government resources in the years to come.

### **b. Family Planning Policies**

The long-term population trend of China is partly related to the implementation of strict family planning policies by the Chinese government. The 'one-child policy' was introduced in China in 1979. Although initiated as a voluntary programme the previous year, the policy became mandatory in an effort to curb the rapid population growth rate, which was quickly approaching one billion at the time. From a cultural standpoint, it was traditional for the role of males to be given more



emphasis and importance in the family dynamic. Based on the Confucian ideology (which is centered on the main teachings and beliefs of Confucius (551-479BC) and is widely popular in Chinese ethics), boys were typically seen as the more capable sex, and were able to carry on the bloodline and name of the family, in addition to representing the family from a political and social standpoint (O'Halloran, 2015). In comparison, girls were seen as having a more 'transitional' or temporary role in the family. With the introduction of the 'one-child policy', there was societal pressure on expectant parents to produce a male heir. As such, infant abandonment increased in China due to fear of reprimanding by the government (via fees, forced sterilization etc.) or due to the desire for a boy, with abandonment disproportionately affecting girls (Johnson, Banghan, & Liyao, 1998). Generally, relinquished children could lose all contact with their natural parents, potentially because of Chinese law criminalising abandonment and the desire for birth parents to avoid persecution. Rural regions reported significantly higher numbers of abandoned children when compared to urban areas, with rural villages accounting for 88% of abandonments (O'Halloran, 2015). In the 1980s, the policy was revised in rural areas to incorporate a 'one-son-two-child-policy', which permitted a second child if the first-born was a girl. This rule was further relaxed as of August 2021 with a 'three-child-policy', which removed the requirement for only one boy per family. The policy sought to rectify the decreasing birth rates and tackle the steadily aging population.

### **c. Socio-economic Issues**

#### *The Hukou System*

Children living in rural areas of China have less access to the key supports readily available to their urban counterparts, including education, sanitation, healthcare, and social benefits. The differences between the two regions come from both a cultural and an economic divide, exacerbated by policies enacted by the Communist Party. For example, the Hukou System, introduced in 1958, was originally designed as a means of population registration. In its current version, its three main functions are to 1) control internal migration between rural and urban areas of China, 2) manage social protection, and 3) preserve social stability. This household registry contains an individual's demographic information, including status (urban or rural), address, sector of employment, religion, and physical description (e.g. eye colour, height). While concerned with geographic location, the system shares some similarities with the Chinese social credit system: a moral ranking system based on actions that the Chinese government deems trustworthy or untrustworthy. Owning a Hukou can grant the owner benefits that depend on the region in which the Hukou is obtained, as it outlines that the holder is a permanent resident of the city for which the Hukou was obtained in. For instance, people with a rural Hukou may obtain arable land for farming



but can also be restricted in terms of migrating to urban cities. On the other hand, urban Hukou holders could be granted access to education, healthcare and subsidised housing schemes. Chinese citizens wishing to obtain a Hukou are required to submit an application to the government of the city they wish to obtain the Hukou in, with a verdict passed based on employment, education, and income.

The Hukou historically implemented barriers to anyone looking to migrate from rural to urban areas of China. The rural areas created the most opportunity for the government to utilize the labour output of the population, which translated into economic gain for the country. Conversely, giving people passage to move around the country freely was perceived as a potential threat to this output. The Hukou system is controversial, particularly in regards to the requirements that Chinese residents face when applying for official resident status in another city in the country (especially for rural-to-urban applications). However, ending the system could see a large migration from rural to urban areas, potentially resulting in damage to urban infrastructures, a decrease in agricultural output and the establishment of slums in the larger cities. While this system has largely contributed to China's success in becoming one of the largest economies in the world, it has also contributed to the widening divide between rural and urban areas of China.

### *Poverty*

Children in urban areas tend to be more socio-economically advantaged than those in rural areas. This is in part due to the disparity between the impact of industrial vs agricultural exports from China, while also due to the local governments in the urban areas having more money and resources to provide better social benefits for its citizens. In addition, children growing up in the urban areas of China will ultimately have better access to jobs due to a higher level of education available to them relative to children in poorer provinces. A recent study by Gao and Wang (2021) indicated that children in rural regions were more likely to experience deprivation in areas such as access to safe drinking water, sanitation, shelter, education, healthcare, internet access, and ownership of durable consumer goods when compared to their urban counterparts. Despite this, the authors clearly demonstrate a decrease in multidimensional and income poverty in both rural and urban areas of China in recent years (Gao & Wang, 2021). The Chinese government announced in November 2020 that they had eradicated extreme rural income based poverty (based on the national poverty line of 2,300 yuan per person per year, which is equivalent to approximately €307.35). While it is unclear the extent to which this statement relates to multidimensional poverty in children, it is nevertheless a significant effort on behalf of the Chinese government to combat poverty and narrow the divide between rural and urban regions.



#### **d. Government Institutions for the Welfare of Children**

The China Center for Children’s Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA) is run by China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs. The CCCWA is responsible for the welfare of children in terms of domestic and intercountry adoption, in addition to overseeing state-run child welfare institutions. There are two types of institutions providing child welfare support in China. The first type includes traditional orphanages, which are mainly responsible for the care of children over longer periods. The second type of institution includes minor rescue and protection centres, which are tasked with providing temporary and emergency aid for children in need. These centres are responsible for taking on temporary custodial responsibilities and organising care services for orphaned children and children facing difficulties. As of 2020, 1,217 child welfare institutions in China cared for approximately 65,000 orphans, many of whom are ‘social orphans’ who have been deprived of their parents through abandonment. Furthermore, 1,806 minor rescue and protection agencies provided temporary assistance and care for 5,675 children, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhao, Zhu, & Hämäläinen, 2021).

According to the Statistical Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the China National Program for Child Development (2011-2020), the number of child protection institutions is decreasing steadily. As the Chinese Government strengthens its efforts to improve child protection, the number of orphans has accordingly decreased each year, alongside a similar decline in the number of child protection institutions. In 2018, there was capacity for 97,000 abandoned children in child adoption and assistance service institutions, decreasing from 103,000 the previous year. In addition, the number of orphans has continuously decreased in China for six consecutive years, dropping by 410,000 between 2017 and 2018 alone. In 2018, about 5% of the total number of orphans living in China were adopted by families through either ICA or domestic adoption. In the same year, 93,000 children were under the care of adoption institutions, with 49,000 of these children cared for by child welfare institutions, representing a decrease of 12.3% and 16.9% since 2017, respectively.

#### **e. Developments in Child Protection and Domestic Adoption**

Both the decreasing number of orphans in China nationally and the increase in rates of domestic adoption are reflective of China’s recent developments in social welfare and child protection. Hawk et al (2018) outlined that poverty was generally observed as the primary factor that resulted in a lack of parental care for children. In recent years however, the Chinese government have made significant efforts to reduce poverty across mainland China. Several policies



have been formulated to reduce poverty and, specifically, to improve the welfare of children. For instance, the Chinese government provides a monthly living allowance for orphans in the state, partly subsidises healthcare expenses, provides free compulsory education, and has made efforts to provide greater care for orphans with disabilities. Through interventions such as the ‘Tomorrow Plan’ (2004), the Chinese government paid for operations and rehabilitation treatment for 35,000 orphans with physical disabilities, of which 5,000 found new families through domestic and intercountry adoption. In terms of domestic adoption, the processes has become easier and more accessible in recent years. With the cessation of the “one-child policy”, which essentially only allowed childless couples to adopt, it is now possible for a wider range of Chinese couples to adopt orphans domestically. Moreover, the Chinese government has raised the limit on adoption from 14 years of age to 18 years of age. Although the statistics from the report on the Chinese National Program for Child Development (2011-2020) provide an overview for the number of children adopted or cared for in childcare institutions, there is no clear breakdown of the amount of domestic adoptions in China, and therefore it is hard to interpret the impact of ending the “one-child policy” on domestic adoptions.

#### **f. Orphans in China**

In previous decades, China had faced an increase in abandoned infant girls, relating to the cultural preference for boys and strictly enforced family planning policies. In recent years however, orphans are fewer in number, tend to have special needs, and are older. The Chinese Ministry of Health recognised an increasing number of birth defects in children during the early 2000’s, increasing from 109.79 per 10,000 in 2000, to 153.23 per 10,000 in 2011. This trend is reflected in the increasing percentage of orphans presenting with physical, chromosomal, and mental issues identified at birth, including (but not limited to) congenital heart defects, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and spina bifida. During fraught times such as famine and political unrest, children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has furthered the vulnerability of all children, and heightened the hardships and discrimination faced by children with disabilities globally (Zhao, Zhu, & Hämäläinen, 2021). However, the Chinese government has continued to regularly monitor and adjust laws and regulations in the country with the aim of preventing and reducing birth defects. Since 2005, the government declared 12<sup>th</sup> of September as “National Birth Defects Prevention Day”, and has engaged in several projects in an attempt to control the rate of birth defects in children born in the country. Such projects include the provision of folic acid to approximately 102 million pregnant women from 2009 through to 2018, an increased screening rate for neonatal diseases, and the provision of free pre-pregnancy health examinations (Li



& Di, 2021). Through these efforts, the Chinese government has managed to decrease infant mortality rate from 3.5 % in 2007, to 1.6% in 2017, and continues to reduce the prevalence of birth defects in children born in the country (Department of Maternal and Child Health, 2019).

In general, orphaned children require more care and attention than non-orphaned children, with efficient training of staff and proper funding required to effectively meet the child's needs (Hailegiorgis, et al., 2018). Children with disabilities or in need of specialised care require even greater and often more expensive resources. There is heavy expenditure associated with raising a child in China, excluding the added financial costs of raising a child with disabilities or special needs. Prospective parents who wish to adopt domestically in China would have to consider the substantial costs of raising of child in the country. For example, a family would need to be in possession of a Hukou to avail of attending public schools. If a family is not eligible for a Hukou and cannot send their child to a public school, payments for private schooling alone can cost anywhere between 40,000 yuan and 250,000 yuan per year in urban regions (roughly equivalent to €5,346 and €33,417 respectively). Despite clear efforts from the Chinese government, UNICEF (2018) reports that there are still a large number of children with disabilities (including orphans) that have limited access to assistance and subsidies schemes.

It has been suggested that up to 90% of all orphans living in state-run childcare institutions in both urban and rural regions have a disability of some kind (Shang, 2008). The Chinese government has not provided an updated census on the number of people living with disabilities in China since its second report in 2006, despite allegations of human rights violations in orphanages and discriminatory practices against people with disabilities (Shang, Fisher, & Xie, 2011; Qian, 2017). Researchers have estimated that at least half of all children recently adopted from China through ICA have additional needs (Raffety, 2019). Wang (2016) highlighted that the prevalence of disabilities among children adopted through ICA from China increased from 9% in 2005 to a significantly larger 48.8% in 2009. Such a huge increase may be reflective of stigma and discrimination associated with disabilities in China (Tang & Bie, 2016; Lim, Downs, Li, Bao, & Leonard, 2013), in addition to the cost of care, specifically in the poorer rural regions.



### 3. The Irish Context

#### a. Reasons for ICA

Approximately 78% of all intercountry adoptions from China to Ireland took place between 1994 and 2007, before the noted rise of children with disabilities in Chinese institutional care as outlined above. The vast majority of Chinese children adopted into Ireland at that time were infant girls, and reflected the ongoing issues with girl abandonment due to the 'one-child' family planning policy at the time (O'Halloran, 2015). Greene and colleagues (2008) reported that a number of prospective adoptive parents first considered adopting from China in response to media coverage on the abandonment of young girls and the reported abuse in Chinese orphanages in the late 1990's/early 2000's. However, it was also reported that the majority of couples chose to create their family through adoption after exhausting all other routes, including in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Prospective adoptive parents outlined that the unavailability of Irish children to adopt was a significant motivating factor in choosing to adopt a child from abroad (Kelly & Das, 2012).

#### b. Health and Development

##### *Physical Health*

In recent years, there has been a higher incidence of physical and cardiac issues in children adopted from China globally. In Ireland, while there is little information available on the exact prevalence of these health issues, collated data from AAI medical reports suggest that these health problems mainly encompass physical facial issues, issues concerning fingers or toes, cleft palate, and heart murmurs. Certain physical health issues that adopted children from China present with, such as spina bifida, require specialised treatment that is unfortunately in very high demand in Ireland. Considering the high demand for treatment of conditions such as scoliosis, coupled with the low numbers of paediatric surgeons in Ireland, access to suitable, affordable and timely treatment could be considered a cause of concern for any child adopted from China in need of surgery upon arrival in Ireland (Boyle, Walsh, & Grace, 2012). Many adopted children from China with spina bifida not only require surgery, but also require ongoing occupational therapy and lifelong interventions (Liptak & El Samra, 2010). A recent academic report commissioned by Cliona's Foundation entitled 'Too Dear to Visit' (2018) outlined the extensive hidden costs of caring for a child with a severe illness, including overnight accommodation, travel expenses, additional childcare (e.g. private care) and household bills. The Irish healthcare system is somewhat limited in what it can provide for particularly vulnerable children arriving from China, while balancing expenses of care can be challenging for their caregivers. However, as there is currently no published medical information available on ICA



individuals in Ireland, we can only estimate the prevalence of physical health problems in adoptees based on the current situation of children available for adoption in China in recent years and the experience of other countries who have accepted ICA from China.

### *Developmental Issues*

Greene and colleagues (2008) reported that the adoptive parents of children arriving in Ireland from abroad felt that the Irish healthcare system was lacking in specific and culturally appropriate services for the developmental needs of children adopted through ICA. For instance, the United States' ICA programme with China, which operated until China's suspension of international adoptions in 2020, saw many children with developmental issues adopted into families. Miller and Hendrie (2000) reported that 75% of children adopted from China into the United States experienced developmental delay in at least one key area. These included (but were not limited to) delays in gross motor skills requiring whole body movements, fine motor skills consisting of coordinating movement with eyes, hands and fingers, language acquisition and production, and cognitive skills. Developmental delays and similar difficulties seem to be commonly reported issues within the first year after adoption in children adopted from Asian or Eastern European countries (Canzi, et al., 2021). Indeed, children adopted from China into Ireland reportedly experience similar developmental delay (O'Shea, Collins, & Bourke, 2016). In spite of the high volume of adopted children presenting with developmental issues in international studies, it is notable that, in most cases, a safe and secure environment created by the adoptive families allows the child to recover from developmental delay and 'catch-up' with their peers, demonstrating substantial resilience akin to other ICA adoptees from countries such as Romania and Russia (Juffer & van Uzendoorn, 2012). This phenomenon can occur even if the child experienced a significant amount of disruption to early development:

*"Adoptive families can and do provide an environment where children can recover from very serious developmental delay, disadvantage and emotional deprivation"*

- Greene et al (2008) pg.8

While children can recover from developmental delays (Lancaster & Nelson, 2009), their recovery is highly dependent upon the age at which the child was adopted, also known as the 'age of adoption' effect (Younes & Klein, 2014). According to the authors, a child who was adopted at 6 months or younger would be expected to catch up with peers in physical and cognitive development by the age of 4, while a child adopted above this age range would be more likely to experience developmental, academic and attachment issues growing up. However, the age of adoption effect is



not the only consideration in adoption outcomes. Children can suffer from a range of constitutional adversities which can cause lasting damage, and are not easily remediated or improved through adoption, even in the best possible environment (for example, foetal alcohol syndrome). Nevertheless, children (irrespective of age) adopted through ICA tend to experience better developmental outcomes and have demonstrated heightened developmental gain when compared to their peers who remained in institutionalised care in their country of origin (Younes & Klein, 2014; Greene, et al., 2008).

### *Outcomes and Care in Ireland*

Studies have consistently shown that children adopted through ICA are more at risk of developing mental, developmental and behavioural problems throughout their life in comparison to children who were not adopted (Woolgar & Baldock, 2015; Bramlett, Radel, & Blumberg, 2007; Yarger, Bernard, Caron, Wallin, & Dozler, 2020). O'Shea, Collins and Bourke's (2016) survey of Irish General Practitioners (GPs) noted that 18.9% of children adopted from China who presented at their clinics demonstrated signs of mental health issues, including behavioural, social, emotional, psychological, psychiatric, and attachment issues. Although 92% of adopted children who presented at GP services had mental health issues that could be dealt with in the clinic by the practitioner, 8.8% of children were referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE)/ Child Family Agency (CFA) or to the Child and Adolescent Mental-Health Services (CAMHS) for further assessment. However, respondents to the survey expressed concern over the services provided by CAMHS, particularly in relation to the communication between GP and mental health services, and the time it took for referrals to be acted upon within the mental health service. Not only does this present an issue in terms of the treatment of children adopted from China, but it may also exacerbate future mental health problems. In the context of these issues, the report concluded that GPs have significant difficulties accessing public services for their ICA patients, highlighting a need for increased training and guidance for GPs in addition to the requirement for more appropriate treatment options available to patients in need.

Notwithstanding these issues in the current healthcare system, researchers have generally argued that intercountry adoption can result in positive developmental outcomes for adoptees. Children who were adopted tended to have greater improvements in mental and physical health in comparison to children who were not adopted and 'aged out' of the childcare centres in their home country, even if there is a distinct lack of longitudinal data to follow the progression of adopted children throughout childhood and into adulthood (Misca, 2014; Thoburn & Charles, 1992).



## *Education*

While ICA children may experience more difficulties than their peers in terms of developmental delay, their educational performance may not necessarily differ significantly. Dalen and Rygvold's (2006) study comparing Chinese adopted children with Norwegian born children did not find a significant difference in educational outcomes between the two sets of children. However, there were some differences between the two groups. Issues with language and hyperactive behaviour was more commonly seen in the children adopted from China, and was related to some disparity in educational outcome. Greene et al (2008) further suggested that hyperactive behaviour, in addition to inattention, were related to certain disparities between adopted and non-adopted children in the school system. Essentially, the presence of developmental delays and emotional problems are likely to reflect issues with educational attainment and school functioning. A large body of research suggests that children and young people who are or have been in care are more likely to have lower educational outcomes than peers who were not involved in care (Connelly & Furnivall, 2013; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Gardner, 2017). However, these reports have been disputed, with Mercieca and colleagues (2021) outlining the often complicated and varied factors that affect school performance; including behaviour, attendance, peer-to-peer relationships, carers as educators, and effective communication between the home and the school. Scottish primary school teachers suggested that more support and assistance would help adopted children with special needs to perform optimally in the school environment (Mercieca et al, 2021).

## **4. Growing up: Experiences of Adult Adoptees from China**

### *Outline*

Much has been discussed about the immediate and childhood impacts of adoption. However, adoption has a lifelong impact on adoptees, and can result in many life-course issues and complexities as adoptees continue to experience adoption differently across the many different stages of their lives. Across the lifespan, adoptees face unique challenges as they encounter each developmental stage, grappling with concepts such as identity, belonging, self-worth, and life satisfaction (Henig, Brodzinsky, & Schecter, 1993; Roszia & Maxon, 2019). In addition, adult adoptees' feelings on adoption and their opinions and views about their relinquishment by their birth parents can change over time, particularly when adult adoptees appraise and assess their experiences as a young child adopted into another family (ter Meulen, Smeets, & Juffer, 2019). Yet, research from the United Kingdom (UK) has suggested that people adopted from China tend to do



well in life, and reported a lack of serious psychological and social issues (Rushton, Grant, Feast, & Simmonds, 2013). The purpose of this section of the report is to give an insight into the experiences of adult adoptees from China in terms of the general outcomes and challenges faced by the adult adoptees, their appraisals and views of adoption, and their satisfaction with life as an adult adoptee.

#### *Adult Adoptees- Educational Outcomes and Identity*

Although adopted children do face greater difficulties when it comes to adapting to a new educational system, and have a greater probability of requiring special needs assistance than their peers (e.g. Canzi, et al., 2021), studies have started to examine the wide range of educational outcomes for adopted children. Comparing internationally adopted children with non-adopted children in Sweden, Dalen et al (2008) noted that the ICA children obtained higher educational levels than predicted on intelligence tests, scoring quite similarly to non-adopted children, despite potentially adverse early experiences. This suggested a positive effect of adoptive families promoting and encouraging education in adoptive children, as parents provide and create an educationally supportive environment for the child (Cheesman, et al., 2020). A similar study by Anderman and colleagues (2021) found that internationally adopted students (including adoptees from China) scored significantly better than domestically adopted youths and similar to non-adopted youths in America in terms of high school achievement, even while controlling for special education status. Many Chinese adoptees are adopted transracially. While transracial adoptees perform similarly to non-adopted children living with a biological parent, they may face many issues and challenges unique to their situation and scenarios, which the USA's national school system does not often attend to (Witenstein & Saito, 2015).

Anderman, Ha and Liu (2021) noted in their study on an American sample that in spite of there being little difference between internationally adopted and non-adopted youths in educational achievement, international adoptees were less likely to apply for third level education than their non-adopted peers were. Distinct factors impact uniquely on children adopted from abroad. Perhaps because of early trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACE), internationally adopted youths often experience deficits in areas such as language development (Scott, Roberts, & Glennen, 2011; Rakhlin, et al., 2015), hold lower motivation and self-confidence in their ability to achieve and succeed in school (Anderman, Koenka, Anderman, & Won, 2018; Dalen, Theie, & Rygvold, 2020) and have a higher chance of reporting mental health problems than non-adopted youth (Dekker, et al., 2017). Furthermore, Samuels (2009) notes that adult interracial adoptees encounter issues in negotiating and becoming comfortable with their identities and how they fit within the complex natural and adopted family trees they belong to. Considering Chinese adoptees may have little to no



communication with their family of origin as per the guidelines of the Chinese state, it is understandable that many adult adoptees question their racial identity, sense of belonging, culture, and definition of family (e.g. Reynolds, et al., 2021).

### *Views on Adoption*

While recognising a delay in comparison to the general population, studies have consistently shown that intercountry adoptees from China demonstrate a remarkable 'catch-up' with their non-adopted peers in terms of physical, cognitive and mental development (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006; Finet, Vermeer, Juffer, Bijttebier, & Bosmans, 2019). Yet it is important to note that these positive developmental trajectories outlined in the literature do not necessarily correlate with positive views or experiences of adoption from the viewpoint of the adult adoptees. While ter Meulen et al (2019) noted that a minority of adoptees (10% of the study sample) had negative feelings about adoption, this 10% tended to represent the older adoptees of the sample, indicating that those who were adopted around the early 1990s felt less happy about the adoption process and the impact it has had on their lives. Although a majority may have positive views on their adoption overall, Greene and colleagues (2008) point out that many adoptees have experiences with racism or prejudice due to their racial differences or adoptive status in Ireland. Indeed, intercountry adoptees experience distinct and unique adversities throughout their life due to the nature of their relinquishment in childhood. The literature has found that many adoptees report struggling with the loss of their birth family and the development of their identity, which in turn can be exacerbated by discrimination, racism, and prejudice (Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008; Greene et al, 2008; Juffer & Tieman, 2009).

This search for identity is widely noted as a significant factor related to views and experiences of adoption (Roszia & Maxon, 2019; Caballero, Edwards, Goodyer, & Okitikpi, 2012). This process of identity formation involves a reflection of what it means and represents to the adoptee to have a connection to both a birth and adoptive family, and how their understanding of that connection fits into their own sense of self, culture and family (von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). For adoptees from China however, the search for identity is further complicated by the Chinese state's policy to restrict birth and adoptive families' access to each other's information to combat illegal abandonment of children (Johnson, 2004). According to Holt International Children's Services, it can be very difficult to find birth parents in China due to the legal issues around relinquishment and the lack of identifying information on birth families:



*“Because birth parents cannot legally relinquish their children in China at this time, families unable to support their children are forced to “abandon” them, usually in very public places to ensure they are found immediately. Typically, the child’s name and date of birth are assigned by Chinese authorities, and no information regarding birth parents is known”*

Holt (n.d)

Wang and colleagues (2015) argue that the lack of clarity and ambiguity surrounding an adoptee’s origins can worsen feelings of loss and can rouse the desire to search, obtain a sense of identity, and understand the factors behind their relinquishment during childhood. In fact, it has been reported that the main motivators behind searching for birth families are related to understanding the reasons of relinquishment, enquiring about the existence of potential siblings, cultural ties, and knowledge of medical history (Koskinen & Böök, 2019; Wrobel & Grotevant, 2018). However, these difficulties have resulted in adoptee-led responses to the search for one’s origins. (See MyTaproot (<https://mytaproot.org/>) as an example of an adoptee-run, international effort to guide adoptees and/or adoptive parents to search for birthroots in China.).

Koskinen and Böök (2019) outlined three broad themes of adult international adoptees tracing family origins: search and reunion, meaning of reunion for identity, and sense of belonging to birth family. These three factors are reflective Roszia and Maxon’s work(2019), which describes loss (of self, birth family, identity etc) as a trigger which leads to issues of rejection, shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and mastery/control of skills. In some respects, one could argue that searching for and reuniting with a birth family could help an adoptee to understand themselves. However, the difficulty of locating birth families within the context of the restrictive Chinese legal system makes coming to terms with these issues problematic for Chinese intercountry adoptees, with further studies required to fully investigate and understand the impact of these restrictions on adoptees looking for answers about their origins and sense of self.

### *Life Satisfaction*

While there are many definitions of life satisfaction within the literature, there is a consensus among authors that adoptees tend to hold a positive attitude towards their lives. Intercountry adult adoptees reported that they were generally satisfied with life, in line with the measures of well-being in the general population (Rushton, 2014; Mohanty & Newhill, 2011). Warth (2021) notes that there was no distinction in life satisfaction between transracial and same-race adoptees, although greater reported openness about adoption and the relevant adoption process was related to higher levels of satisfaction among transracial adoptees. Moore (2017) found that



feelings of belonging were linked to higher emotional well-being in transracial adoptees. Moreover, ter Meulen et al's (2019) study found that adult intercountry adoptees were generally satisfied with their lives, with this particular sample demonstrating even higher levels of satisfaction than the general population. International adoptees still face several challenges throughout their lives, but the findings about life satisfaction may reflect resilience, strength, and an ability to create a satisfying and fulfilling life, despite these challenges.

## 5. Conclusion

Intercountry adoption is controversial. The act of removing a child from their native country and placing them with a family in a different country with disparities in ethnicity and culture has been criticised extensively, and continues to prompt debates in the field. In many cases, however, adoption has provided children with safety and support that unfortunately could not be provided in their home country. China is the fourth largest sending country of international adoptees to Ireland, although these numbers have decreased significantly in recent years and stopped altogether in 2020 due to COVID-19. The current average age of a child adopted from China into Ireland is 19 years old as of the writing of this report, and consists mainly of females stemming back to the family-planning policies implemented by the Chinese government and the subsequent child abandonment issues. China has since made considerable strides to combat poverty and improve the quality of life for orphans living in the state. However, there still exist complicated issues deeply rooted in China's communist political system. The issues relating to obtaining information about birth families in China makes it extremely difficult for adoptees to find out about their origins. While Chinese adoptees arriving in Ireland tend to develop appropriately in line with their peers, there is little follow-up information available on their status. Further investigation is warranted to assess the lifelong impact of adoption from China into Ireland.



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