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Connecting to “Roots”: A study of Taiwan and Australian Adoption

National University of Taiwan & University of Sydney Collaboration

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History of Taiwan – Australian Adoption

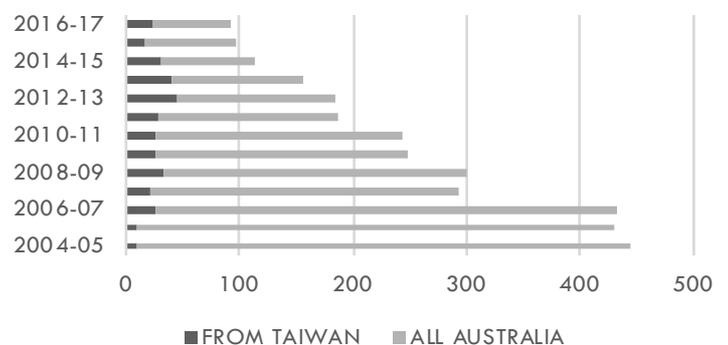
Since 1998, there have been 365 adoptions of Taiwanese-born children to Australia (AIHW, 2017). Taiwan continues to be one of the main countries for intercountry adoptions to Australia. This study sought the perspectives and experiences of adoptees and their families, birth and adoptive, with the aim of strengthening future policies and practices.

Changing practice of adoption

Domestic and international adoption practice has become increasingly open over the last 2 decades, with growing emphasis on maintaining birth family connections. It is understood that openness supports a child’s identity development. This study explores the concept of *connection* to culture and family in the context of intercountry adoption between Taiwan and Australia.

Intercountry adoption (ICA) poses particular challenges for openness and connection, including barriers of geographical distance, language and culture. This study investigated adoptees’ desire for connection to their families and country of origin. This includes how adoptees’ needs may change as they mature. Younger children may want to ‘fit-in’ with their peers and adoptive parents. When they grow older, they may seek to reclaim their birth culture and to embark on a search for their birth family.

PROPORTION OF ICA ADOPTIONS IN AUSTRALIA FROM TAIWAN



Source: Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2017

Adoption practice in Taiwan

Taiwan is not a signatory to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. The adoption process between Australia and Taiwan is governed by a Bilateral Agreement, which brings adoption practice in line with the Convention.

Changes to the Taiwan Children and Welfare Act in 2003 included the establishment of the Taiwan Child and Juvenile Adoption Information Centre, to keep records on the identity of adopting parties, adopters and adopted children. Adoptees aged 20 years or older can contact the Centre to inquire about their personal adoption information or seek assistance with a family reunion.

The process of intercountry adoption between Taiwan & Australia

Currently there are three Taiwanese adoption agencies conducting intercountry adoptions with Australia. These are: Christian Salvation Service (CSS), Child Welfare League Foundation (CWLF), and Chung Yi Social Welfare Foundation (Chung Yi).

Adoption workers often support mothers before, during and after the adoption. There is also careful attention to preparing the child for an overseas adoption. A life story book is compiled to provide the child with the photos of the new family, home and country. Video conferencing and toys related to the new country may be used to help the child become familiar with the new culture and family.

The adoptive parents must come to Taiwan and spend time with the child before the adoption is finalised. A 'farewell' meeting may be arranged with the birth parents and other relatives. Photos and videos may be taken during this visit to add to the child's life story book.

After the adoption, the Taiwanese agencies are required to maintain contact with biological families for three years after an adoption. However, since they are not providing services to the birth family they do not maintain contact information. In some cases, the adoptive family sends letters and photos to the agency for the birth family; however, the birth family is not obligated to respond.

Taiwanese adoption agencies have different internal policies for assisting adoptee reunions. Chung Yi has a minimum age of 10 years for a reunion, whereas the minimum age for other agencies ranged from 12 to 18 years of age. The agencies are not funded to provide reunion services, although many agencies offer this assistance.

There have been significant legislative changes in Taiwan to become more open in adoption record keeping. However, Taiwanese families tend to maintain a culture of secrecy around adoption.

The Study

Two research teams from University of Sydney and National Taiwan University collaborated throughout the study. From April to August 2018, participants were recruited for interviews and focus groups. The Australian team interviewed children and young people who had been adopted from Taiwan, adoptive parents and intercountry adoption professionals. The Taiwanese team interviewed birth mothers whose children were adopted via intercountry adoption and conducted focus groups with intercountry adoption professionals.

Participants

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with birth parents, adoptees and adoptive parents. Interviews and focus groups were held with adoption professionals to learn about adoption practices.

The study participants included:

Taiwan

- Birth mothers (n=7)
- Adoption professionals (n=17)

Australia

- Adoptees (n=11)
- Adoptive parents (n=16)
- Adoption professionals (n=11)

Feelings about connection

The conception of *connection* is central to family formation through intercountry adoption. Adoption creates a connection to another family, and to different cultures, racial, ethnic and national groups as well. The aim of this research is to explore the concept of *connection* to culture and family of origin in the context of intercountry adoption, from the perspectives of adult adopted persons and adoptive parents in Australia, from families of origin in Taiwan and from professionals in both countries.

Who you are, where you are going and where you fit into society

Personal identity - how a person sees themselves on an individual level

Relational identity - how they see themselves in relation to other people



Collective identity - how they see themselves amongst a group or social category

Material identity - the way people see themselves with respect to their material possessions.

Birth mothers

In-depth interviews with birth mothers in Taiwan found that most had their children adopted when they were in their early 20s. The main reasons for relinquishing their child were:

- Unintentional and unwed pregnancy
- Insufficient economic independence to provide adequate care for a child
- Lack of family support

Often, these birth mothers did not want their children to grow up in a single-parent, low-income household. Others had their children removed and placed for adoption due to substance addiction or domestic violence. All of these mothers were seeking to ensure a better life for their child.

There were mixed feelings about intercountry adoption. Some mothers worried about their child being adopted to a foreign country, far from their culture and origins. Others preferred intercountry adoption as they thought their child would have access to better resources and education in a western country. All were sad about the separation and some hoped they would see their child again in the future, while others did not expect to meet their child again.

Adoptees

Adolescence is a time when many adoptees became more interested in their story and knowing about their birth family. Having a child is another life event that spurred an interest in connection.

There are a number of barriers when starting or sustaining a search for birth families. Post-adoption services and resources to assist people are scarce, requiring most adoptees to self-fund their search. Record keeping may not be current or reliable. If contact is successful, reunions may be emotionally fraught for both the adoptee and their family of origin.

Adoptees often had mixed feelings about connecting to their birth family. While some adoptees wanted to know about their history, others had no desire to meet their birth family. One commented: *“you get all of these questions so then you’re having to answer for your adoption all the time.”* *“Do you want to go back?”* *Have you searched?”* [Adoptee 2]

For some, adoption was a natural part of their life, and included regular visits to Taiwan to meet with their family of origin. However, they also reported frequently being asked where they were from and not automatically accepted as an Australian. For example, some experienced others assuming they were an international student when they enrolled at university.

From an external point of view, I feel when I am out and about with strangers, or generally in public. I am the centre part of a Venn diagram, I’m not in the circle labeled Asian, and I am not in the circle labeled Australian. [Adoptee 3]

Other adoptees stated that they were not particularly interested in Taiwan or knowing their birth parents because they felt settled in their lives in Australia. While they enjoyed attending events organised by adoptive families that enabled them to meet other Taiwanese adoptees, they didn’t talk about being adopted when together. Several adoptees noted it was their adoptive parents who had arranged visits to Taiwan to meet with family members.

I would feel comfortable not going back to Taiwan again You know my parents really want me to connect to that... But I really wouldn’t be bothered if they didn’t want that I just go with the flow ... [Adoptee 6]

Adoptive parents

A number of adoptive parents planned to support their child to meet their birth family when they were older and wanted them to have as much information as possible.

I think if the child is driving it needs to be supported. ...the older they are the better equipped they are to handle it. For our son it’s just not top of mind, for our daughter it would change her life; it’s just that they are all different. [Adoptive parent 9]



Culture keeping

To support cultural identity development, adoptive parents have been encouraged in pre-adoption training to connect with birth culture. This is often done by attending cultural events, eating at ethnic restaurants that serve typical cuisines, and purchasing cultural artefacts or books for the home.

Adoptive parents often make significant effort to familiarize their adoptive children with the culture of their birth country. These efforts may convey a lot of meaning by creating recognition for the importance of birth culture and for acknowledging the role of race, ethnicity, and culture in the lives of adoptees.

Some of the parents had made choices to live in areas where there were Asian families and a diverse mix of children attending the local schools. They did not want their children to feel different because of their ethnicity and wanted them to have an opportunity to engage children from a range of backgrounds. They thought their children would find it easier to fit in in a multicultural suburb.

Celebrating cultural events, such as Chinese New Year, and Chinese cooking were other ways parents made an effort to maintain a sense of cultural identity for their children. When birth family were not available, visits to Taiwan and celebrating cultural events were used to form the link with the child's birth place.



Family holidays to Taiwan were seen as an opportunity to normalise the connection and to avoid a culture shock for their child when they grew older. Some parents had encouraged their children to learn Mandarin, so they would be able to communicate with their birth family.



... so it is never like this mysterious for or foreign place that they hope to visit one day as an adult, that looms in their mind or heavy on their heart, but actually it's just so comfortable. You know, "that's where you were born, yeah we know Taiwan." It's just easy and part of who they are and what they talk about... [Adoptive parent 7]

Types of connections

The following types of connections between the adoptee's birth parents and the adoptee and/or adoptive parents were identified:

- **connection through information**
- **connection through communication**
- **connection through meeting**
- **connection through technology**

In some cases, connection started as one type and changed to another over time. For example, a connection could start through information received about the birth family at the time of the adoption, then gradually change to connection through communication as the adoptive parents sent information to the birth family or a two-way exchange was established. Where the adoptee, adoptive parents and birth families had regular communication, this was often a prelude to a face-to-face meeting that could be the beginning of a real relationship.

However, patterns were not necessarily predictable. Some adoptive parents reported sending letters for years without an acknowledgement, then suddenly received a response. For others, the adoptee had no connection with their birth families. Some adoptive parents felt reassured that the adoption agency would hold that information for the birth mother to access when she wished to.

Connection through information

This involved having some interaction with the birth family through information received at the time of adoption and/or information sent by the adoptive parents to the birth family. There is an expectation that adoptive parents send information for a period of time. The information exchange could be simply procedural as per legislation or agreement at the time of adoption.

Knowing the information was being received and was desired by the birth family changed the feeling from an obligation to provide information, to more of a personal connection. When the birth parent had sent letters or gifts, this communication provided a valued connection for the child. Information about the birth family was perceived as very precious, and something for the adoptive parents to share with the adoptee.

Information or photographs that indicated that the child was loved by the birth family were particularly appreciated. For example, one adoptive parent [#16] noted that they had a photograph of the birth mother nursing the adoptee, and that they would share this photo to reinforce that *"somebody loved her in Taiwan and loves her still."*

One adoptive parent noted that her family felt very lucky to have regular contact with the birth mother, knowing a lot of birth mothers don't keep in touch with families.

I actually asked them the last time I wrote one: "Does she ever ask for it? Does she ever see it? What is her feeling about that? Is she involved or has she just completely walked away and shut the door?" Because, to me, it is like; if this person has walked away, then it is a bit upsetting that she has just turned away, but I found out, no, she asks for them and she reads them, and she is happy to read them. So now, I can write to her and say, "Hey, this is where we are at. This is what he is doing." It is more of a personal thing now. [Adoptive parent #6]

Connection through communication

Having contact through communication involved a two-way exchange, of letters or phone calls. This was described as happening in "fits and starts," over time, and provided reassurance for the child as well as the family.

Two-way communication was facilitated by the adoption agency, which served as an intermediary by translating materials and sending on to the families on both sides. One adoptee mentioned being able to ask questions of her birth mother by emailing the social worker, who would ask the mother and get back to her.

We've never heard back from them until this year. [Adoptee]'s birth mother made contact and that was a wonderful thing that was so unexpected. We've been praying for ages and it's been the longing of his heart. He has been talking about it for years and saying "It's not fair I have to wait until I'm 12" and "this is dumb, I should be allowed to meet them now." ... then she sent him a letter and a package out of the blue earlier this year and it couldn't have been more wonderful for him. [Adoptive parent 7]

Some birth mothers had made contact with the adopted family, writing letters and sending presents. One of the birth mothers had another child and wanted the siblings to meet.

She's written to us about three times. ...This last time, she said she's sorry she hasn't been in contact but she has been working two jobs and studying. But she is just really thankful of the letters and photo's and just to see how well he's going and how he's been. She said it makes her very happy to see that and he is going so well. And so, it was a lovely letter to receive and obviously we read it to him...[Adoptive parent 12]



Connection through meeting

Connection through meeting involved face-to-face meeting and ongoing relationships between the adoptee and the birth family.

Farewell meetings were also perceived by adoptive parents as an opportunity to make a connection. This included the emotional need of the adoptive parent at the time of adoption to express the importance of becoming a parent through adoption and to gain information that could later meet the identity needs of the adoptee.

A number of adoptive parents commented that they anticipated planning a visit with the birth family when their child reached the appropriate age. Some adoptees have managed to have an ongoing relationship with their birth family. One adoptee described what has become a natural relationship, with her birth relatives forming part of her extended family.

'And we've learnt more of my family over the years of the many visits and things and it's always just been – It's like whenever I see them back home, it's just - feels like a family reunion....you just catch up and check on how everyone's going and things. It's like a normal sort of – It's all very normal. [Adoptee 3]

Connection through technology

In some cases, technology has enabled the adoptee to take over the communication and build relationships. Despite the language differences, a few adoptees described using social media, along with other technology to translate between Mandarin and English. For one adoptee the exchange started with his birth sibling and eventually extended to connections via social media to many members of his extended birth family.

I thought, okay this is going to be interesting, typing in English, trying to find words that could easily be translated through the means of technology to Mandarin." [Adoptee 8]



Connection through communication – A story from the triad

One adoptee and adoptive mother pair gave permission for their story of connection with the birth mother to be shared as a case study. When the adoptee was about 12 years old, her birth mother approached the adoption agency to make contact with her daughter. Since then they have maintained regular correspondence with her birth mother for more than 10 years and plan to meet in Taiwan in the near future.

Here is their story:

Adoptive mother: [Birth mother] wanted to make contact, send a little gift to [Adoptee], which was lovely. And we said, 'Oh yes, love to but we want to ask [Adoptee]'. And we asked her and she burst into tears and she was, 'Oh yes, love to' and so it's been a lovely, you know so little gifts went to and fro. [Adoptee] did a photo album and sent them overseas...we just wanted to keep in touch.

Adoptee: I remember mum sat down my family, so my dad and my brother and myself and she said, "[Adoptee's] mum would like to make contact with her." My family was really supportive, and I started crying ...really emotional, like happy emotional, nervous as well but why not, this might be a great start. So I've been on and off with my birth mum since then, since I was 12. We've been sending each other photos and letters. I think she was just very overjoyed to hear from me. I remember how she was so happy to see how I'd grown up. That made me feel so happy for her to say that she's happy for the person that I've become and how beautiful I am and I'm doing all the things that I wanted to do in life and that I'm going to do. I've got this big letter that I can read to you if you would like?

Letter from birth mum: ...She said, "Dear beautiful daughter [Adoptee]. When I saw your photo I cried. It has been...quite a long time. I've never stopped thinking about you. I hide my love to you deeply in my heart. I want to tell you that I love you, please forgive me for the fact that I cannot take care of you. Please thank your parents and older brother because of their love to you so you can grow up healthy and happy. I am fine and I look forward some day that we can meet each other. I hope that day can come sooner, I hope you like the gift that I got for you. I love you."

Adoptive mother: I'm sure when they do meet there's going to be, it's going to be very powerful and very meaningful, so yeah. And I think yeah not just for [adoptee] but for all of us, so it'll be lovely....It will be on [Adoptee's] time schedule, so whenever she's ready she'll be ready.

Adoptee: "I think the connection we have – gosh – in some ways it's like a friendship. Not like your best friend friendship I would say, it's more like you're still getting to know the person. That's how I – it's hard to describe the connection. I definitely feel like we're friends who are still at the beginning stages, still saying, "How are you, what are you doing? This is what I'm doing, what about you, what are you doing?", sort of that still....I'm hoping in the next couple of years [to go to Taiwan with her adoptive family to meet her birth mother]. I feel like I'm ready. Very, very nervous but I'm ready for it."

Benefits and Risk of Connection

Connections between the adoptee and the birth mother can result in benefits as well as risk. Adoptees benefited from understanding their origins, learning about why he/she was put up for adoption, and meeting their identity needs. Connections preserve adoptees' right to know their familial roots and cultural heritage. It is also a way of validating the birth mother's decision for adoption. Similarly, for birth mothers, connecting with their child is a way to ensure that their child is having a better life as expected and their past decision was correct.

After receiving information about the child's life and development or meeting the child after several years, birth mothers felt relief and reduced guilt. All their worries throughout the years were released.

'I was finally relieved after this [reunion] meeting. When I found that I have a second baby and decide to keep him, I worried if one day, the older one [adoptee] came back and would question why I had given him away for adoption but keep the younger brother. ... After the reunion this year, it was such a load off my mind. He didn't blame me. Rather, he was very happy about having this younger brother and they like each other very much' [Birth mother 7]

Many birth mothers felt very grateful to the adoptive parents for facilitating the connection with the child's familial roots and affirming the birth mother's love. Although some birth mothers may worry about disrupting the adoptive family and their child's new life. They expressed the view that 'the grace of rearing a child is much greater than giving birth to him or her.'

In many cases, birth mothers expressed their appreciation toward the adoptive parents for not only caring for the child as their own child, but also treating the birth mother as a family member. Some adoptive parents indicated their concern about the birth mother's health or financial condition. One birth mother [#7] found the adoptive parents had more energy after adopting her child. She was glad that she have made a good decision.

'Believe it or not, having a child matters for a family. When I first met the parents [at the farewell meeting], they did not look that well. When we met again this time in April, they looked quite different. Then I felt I have done something good. ... It was a difficult decision for me, and it was a cruel decision for the child. But, my past decision completed another family'. [Birth mother 7]

However, connections between the adoptee and the birth mother may not always lead to positive consequences. For some birth mothers connecting with their child through searching and/or meeting involved a number of risks. It opened a Pandora's box, and implied uncovering the secrets among birth families.

First of all, connection can be disrupting, especially for the birth mothers who intend to sever the relationship with the child and the adoption agency. Some adoptions were a secret and remain a secret among the birth families. These children may be considered as having never existed within the family.

Secondly, birth mothers with a good life or who have their own family and children, may be questioned why they did not keep the child. For birth mothers living a poor life, they may not want the child see how miserable they are. Thus, in many cases, connection can disrupt birth mothers' new life which they tried very hard to establish after many years of grief.

In addition to the risk of disruption, there may be boundary issues between the birth mothers and the adoptees following a reunion. When the adoptees and adoptive parents had assisted the birth family with financial support, the birth family members could feel like a stranger has a form of control over them. This action not only disrupted the birth family, but also broke the family's rule and roles. Thus, when actions after reunion are not wanted, there may be boundary issues among the triad.

Thirdly, connection or family search may have a tremendous emotional cost. Even when the connection leads to positive outcomes, birth mothers have to face what they may have intentionally forgotten for years. Some birth mothers may feel happy and thankful, while others may feel guilty, shameful, and anxious. All birth mothers have to recall the feelings of giving own child away for adoption. They may also have to re-examine whether their past decision was right. Ongoing support, including counselling services and frequent contacts provided by adoption professionals, may be necessary to address the birth mother's complicated feelings after connection.

In many cases, birth mothers and adoption professionals expressed concerns about connection. Connection, search, and/or reunion may fulfil the needs of adoptees. However, for the birth family, it is like uncovering the wound again. After a reunion meeting, the adoption professional is the one who has to support the birth mother through the grief and negative thoughts which may come up.

'We think that search or reunion does meet the adoptees' and adoptive parents expectation. But for the birth family, it would be more painful than their adoption decision'. [Adoption professional 2]

Finally, there still exists global hierarchies in intercountry adoption. In all connection stories, birth mothers are more disadvantaged and passive than adoptees and adoptive parents. Some birth mothers thought that they already gave up their rights to be a parent, and therefore, it is not necessary to meet again.

'I'm just the person giving birth to him. It's not really important whether I exist in his life. ... I was not able to provide a good care for him and offer him a good future, so that I chose a new family for him. That was the only thing I did. I didn't fulfill responsibility [as a parent]. So, I felt conflicted to connect with him at that time' [Birth mother 7]

Discussion

There is a movement internationally towards openness and connection in adoption. In Australia, open adoption defined as regular contact between adopted children and their birth families, is expected and indeed required for an adoption to be approved. Openness in adoption is understood to support children's identity development, so that they can know who they are and where they came from. The findings in this study also highlighted that adoptees need or desire for connection changed over their life course. One adoptee referred to this as the "ebb and flow" of the adoption story.

For children with a different cultural background to their adoptive parents, openness and contact with birth family is also expected to support the child in developing their cultural identity. However, there is something of a double standard, with greater openness practiced in domestic adoptions than intercountry adoptions in Australia. Adoption agencies in Taiwan are not funded to provide reunion services, however, many agencies do offer this assistance without any funding to cover their costs.

There are barriers to openness in intercountry adoption that are discussed in this report, including distance, cultural and linguistic differences and possibly the preference of adoptive parents and birth parents who are part of intercountry adoption. This report opens a debate about the prospects for openness in adoption between Taiwan and Australia, and considers the potential barriers, benefits and strategies.

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