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Touching the Proverbial Elephant: The Multiple Shapes
of Chinese Law

WANG, Leslie K. 2016. *Outsourced Children: Orphanage
Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*. Stanford:
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Book reviews

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Book reviews

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- 1 Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Chinese state-run orphanages collaborating with Western NGOs in 2006 and 2007, *Outsourced Children* analyses the process by which the PRC has outsourced the care of locally devalued children to Westerners, who use their resources to remake them into global citizens. Wang argues that “outsourced intimacy” has operated in two ways: the exportation of healthy girls into Western families via adoption and the subsequent importation of humanitarian actors into orphanages for the care of special needs children. Thanks to participant observations in Beijing and Henan Province, the author offers a unique ethnographic case study that connects daily life in orphanages with broader implications for the future of the PRC. Usually considered pure and untouched by politics, these children are actually symbols of China’s modernisation, and at the

same time instruments for achieving economic development. Whether or not they still hold Chinese citizenship, these orphans located at the juncture of local and global agendas represent the future generation or possible gains for the nation. Outsourcing children has, for instance, allowed China to fund its child welfare system, to take care of disabled children thanks to humanitarian organizations, and, in the long run, to foster relationships with industrialised countries, especially by choosing the USA as the first receiving country for adoption.

- 2 Another feature of this book is its focus on the “losers” in China’s economic development, namely children from rural regions who were rejected by their Chinese families and given up to international adoption, in contrast to the well-documented “little emperors.” Indeed, as current literature puts great emphasis on these spoiled singletons, products of the one-child policy that was established in 1980, the book shows how the study of discriminated children can be revealing of China’s path to modernisation. By filling this gap in academic literature, Wang clearly highlights the key role that children are playing in globalisation processes.
- 3 Providing a historical background of population reform, the first chapter introduces us to the PRC’s quest for “high-quality” individuals (*gao suzhi* 高素质) by limiting the quantity of desirable babies. This objective for productive bodies has guided family planning policies since the late 1970s. Among them, the well-known one-child policy caused many quandaries to Chinese parents, who had to meticulously select in which offspring to invest their resources. Due to cultural preferences for sons, they mostly relinquished healthy rural daughters and special needs children. Unexpected waves of infant abandonment led to the creation of China’s international adoption program in 1992. The second chapter follows the destiny of these 140,000 children, made up 90% of females, given to white middle-class families across the global north. Wang describes their migration as a true reversal of fortune and one of the most privileged forms of diaspora. Always at the forefront of current research on China, the author also cites the high number of adopted rural daughters since the 1990s as the cause of the contemporary phenomenon of “missing girls” and the current unbalanced sex ratio. The third chapter then explains how China allowed global humanitarians to enter its own borders since the 1990s, after being closed to the West for decades. By taking the example of orphanages, Wang brilliantly analyses the reorganisation of social welfare in China after the shift to a market economy. Due to the decentralisation of social provisions and the diminution of funding, state welfare institutions received permission to build partnerships with foreign NGOs. Among these state-run institutions that also receive Western support, the author draws up a typology of hybrid orphanages: adoption-related, expatriate/overseas Chinese, and faith-based organisations. Again, the book shows how international adoption and private foundations helped to pursue the globalisation of Chinese society. Directly drawn from her ethnographic fieldwork, the fifth chapter exposes the tensions between Chinese workers and Western volunteers who have an approach more centred on individual needs. Since the goal of NGO volunteers is to restore these orphans into potentially adoptable children, they prioritise emotional care and maternal love. On the other side, local caregivers still regard disabled children in a very pragmatic way: without opportunities due to their lack of lineage and the competitive education context in China. Finally, the sixth chapter connects this type of Sino-Foreign relationship to the concept of “soft power.” Indeed, the waiting list of Western adoptive parents has

increased not only due to a changing supply of available children, but also due to the American Evangelical movement. The author describes with a critical perspective the adoption movement as the expression of a pro-life missionary agenda carried out under the guise of compassion. Furthermore, she shows that this coalition of Evangelical groups made the Global Orphan Crisis a central concern of American foreign policy. In this section, Wang criticises the fact that the religious movement does not work to alleviate poverty in these children's birth country but instead perpetuates global inequalities through adoption.

- 4 While the book shows the evolution of the demographics of abandoned children, from healthy rural girls in the 1990s to disabled children since the mid-2000s, it does not put much emphasis on the latter category. In comparison with two whole chapters on healthy daughters, the author does not provide a comprehensive background on children with special needs. Perhaps Wang purposely avoids this topic, a sensitive one in the PRC because economic growth has caused a rapid increase in children born with congenital illnesses and disabilities. Indeed, many of these births have been attributed to environmental problems, especially in coal-producing regions. Due to social stigma and a lack of financial support for these families, numerous children have been abandoned to state care. It would have been interesting to further investigate the political causes behind the rise of disabled children in contemporary China.
- 5 Overall, the book deconstructs the reductive perspective that conceives of international adoption as a unidirectional migration of babies from developing countries to industrialised ones. In fact, it reveals how this form of migration is a continuing transnational exchange of humans, resources, and knowledge between sending and receiving countries. Indeed, adoption is more than just a means of individual family formation, but an influential global institution between the PRC and Western countries. *Outsourced Children* is for any reader interested in understanding the human consequences of China's global rise, namely how global capitalism in China has transformed families and reshaped the destiny of children. As suggested by the author, the field of adoption in academic literature will slowly diverge from its conventional research focus on children towards assisted reproductive technology or diaspora studies. Indeed, as China's international status continues to rise in the future, the number of children available for adoption will dramatically decline. A developing country's need for international adoption might actually be a temporary stage in a nation's path to modernisation.

AUTHOR

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