



Enacting the Family: The Performance of Kinship in Adoptive Parents' Weblogs

Macarena García González

Institut für Populäre Kulturen, Universität Zürich

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

Adoptive parents have turned out to be passionate bloggers. Couples adopting internationally are using the Internet intensely to share experiences and pieces of advice in the form of autobiographical accounts of their (troubled) adoption processes. These blogs not only connect a community facing multiple difficulties but, moreover, enact the family where the blood ties are missing. This study examines how the blogs of parents adopting girls in China perform parenthood by paralleling the adoption to the biological processes of pregnancy and giving birth. These blogs illuminate life writing's "performativity" showing how they give the parents a sense of parenthood and offer the adoptees a sense of "daughterness". Moreover, they reveal how the performance of the adoptive family not only serves domestic purposes but also legitimates the practice of international adoption of children, which is regarded with suspicion by the international community.

ABSTRACT IN SPANISH

Los padres adoptivos han demostrado ser apasionados blogueros. Las parejas que hoy adoptan internacionalmente están usando internet para compartir experiencias y consejos en recuentos autobiográficos de sus (difíciles) procesos de adopción. Estos blogs no solo conectan entre sí a una comunidad que afronta múltiples dificultades, sino que también construyen una familia allí donde no hay lazos de sangre. Este estudio examina cómo los blogs de padres adoptando niñas en China construyen la paternidad a través de paralelismos con los procesos biológicos del embarazo y parto. Estos blogs ilustran como la escritura autobiográfica es 'performativa', cómo en estos relatos se *hace* a los adoptantes, padres y al bebé a adoptar, hijo. Más aún, estos relatos revelan

cómo esta representación de la familia adoptiva no solo sirve a propósitos domésticos, sino que también legitima la práctica de la adopción internacional, vista hoy con suspicacia por la comunidad internacional.

Keywords: Weblogs, transnational adoption, web-based communities, performativity.

Today, adoption is no longer denied or avoided by adoptive parents but, on the contrary, integrated into a life narrative of which adoptees can be proud. This shift not only responds to new approaches promoted by developmental psychologists towards the transracial adoptees' socialization but also to the emerging socio-cultural context in which each individual is meant to have a coherent narrative to understand their lives and introduce themselves to others (Giddens 1991, p. 215). Much more than biological children, international adoptees need a "story of origin" to explain where they come from and to introduce their (racial) difference to others, and to themselves. In family storytelling and very notably in the increasingly public and ritualistic family storytelling on the internet, this story of origin is narrated to the adoptees even if they are at the moment too young to read it. Adoptive parents put considerable effort in registering the adoption process as a means to hand down a story to the adoptees; at the same time, these online journals help them to connect with other adopters and to enact their parenthood as if given.

The adoptive families' storytelling needs to be understood in the frame of the spectacular rise of international adoptions of the last two decades and the heated debate triggered by it. Multiple factors have a bearing in this phenomenon, among others, that, in these years, the demand for adoptees has risen dramatically, due to delayed parenthood and the concomitant decline of Western couples' fertility. In the last five years, this rise in "demand" has coincided with a decline of the "offer" caused by new policies of China and Russia (the two largest sending countries), which have been restricting the number of international adoptions as a means of changing their image of being unable to take care of their children (Selman 2009, p. 590). UNICEF has called attention to the risks involved in inter-country adoption and the need of strong regulation (UNICEF, 2011). The considerable sums of money involved in the international transfer of children have made international adoption vulnerable to the charge of surreptitiously "pricing the priceless child" (Zelizer 1985). Even more so, the Hague Convention that has regulated international adoption since 1993 has been criticized for being incapable of safeguarding adoption from child trade and child kidnapping (Triseliotis 1999, p. 14; Thompson 2004), and recent ethnographic research into practices of relinquishment

shows that birth mothers are insufficiently aware of the consequences of their actions and may, in certain cases, act under pressure (Bos 2008, pp. 220–221).

Life stories and life writing have played a fundamental role in this debate. Adoptees from earlier generations – mainly those adopted from Korea in the aftermath of the Korean War – have called attention to their failed experiences of assimilation through the publication of different types of ego-documents (cf. Trenka 2003; Borshay Liem 2000; Jung 2008). In the last years, Korean adoptees have organized themselves in different associations – even giving shape to a social movement – and have told their story, a story in which adoptive agencies and parents are often accused of naïveté and color-blind racism (Kim 2010, p. 15; Hübinette 2004, p. 70). Their experience has impacted enormously the practice of contemporary adoption if only because the humanitarian aim that was put forward to justify their adoptions by middle class Western families is no longer used to explain the transnational adoption of children (Selman 2002, p. 223). The experience shared by adult Korean adoptees has also been fundamental in shaping new approaches to the raising of adoptees in which the racial difference between the adoptee and his/her parents is no longer denied. In this context, the adoptive parents' life writing can be understood as one that elaborates new explanations of transnational parenthood. The autobiographical writing on the Internet helps adopters in the creation of new narratives in which their parenthood is enacted; a path is given to assist the adoptees in their racialized identity construction. The open and public space of the Internet facilitates the performance of the family.

The World Wide Web's growth in the mid-1990s coincided with the boom of international adoption, which was mainly triggered by the establishment of an apparatus to facilitate international adoptions from China. The Internet not only helped to connect would-be adopters with agencies in the country of origin, but it also boosted the formation of active communities and the creation of multiple parenting sites (Anagnost 2000, pp. 389–390; Volkman 2003a, p. 3). Weblogs documenting adoption processes in which adoptive parents shared their experiences flourished. It is not possible to estimate how many adopters read the blogs other adopters publish, but blogs probably play a fundamental role providing references in a time where the whole culture of transnational and transracial adoption is changing, and adopters are on the search for new models in which to explain and frame their actions (Volkman 2003a, p. 2). Strikingly, blogs create a contact zone between the global geopolitical sphere and the domestic sphere just like international adoption: the private decision of forming or extending a family is shaped by the world

economy and international regulations, much like the way the writing of a weblog is shaped by its dual condition of an intimate text that is accessible to every internet user even if it is very often addressed to the adoptee as an ideal reader.

In this article, I examine how weblogs written by adoptive parents are fundamental to what anthropologist Signe Howell (2006) has called the “kinning of foreigners” in transnational adoption. Recent anthropology research (Volkman 2003b; Marre 2004, 2009; Dorow 2006; Howell 2006; Jacobson 2008) reveals how today adoptive parents invest a lot of cultural work to turn their transnationally-adopted children into their next-of-kin. In *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*, Heather Jacobson (2008) argues that is more the case when the racial difference between the adoptive parents and the adoptee is visible, as in the case of Chinese adoptions. Jacobson describes how white adoptive mothers engage in a form of “ethnic labor” registering the adoptees in language lessons, cooking traditional dishes, decorating their houses with Chinese motives, and so forth. In her introduction to an insightful collection of essays on the cultures of transnational adoption published in the journal *Social Text*, Toby A. Volkman explains that it has just been in the last two decades that adoptees are pushed to explore their “multiple identities” and the so-called “birth cultures” (Volkman 2003, p. 2). These identities conflate in origin stories that explains how it is that they look so different to the (most often White middle-class) family to which they belong. So far research on transnational adoption cultures has given little attention to the narratives that adoptive parents use to negotiate and construct their identity as an adoptive family.

For this article, I focus on weblogs created by US American and Spanish parents adopting in China in the last 10 years. A sample of 20 blogs was constituted after searching for “China” and “adoption” in the search-engines of Blogger and Wordpress platforms and following the links between blogs forming a community. Even if it was beyond the scope of this study to estimate the total number of adoption blogs, 100 blogs of Spanish parents adopting in China could be indexed. Among American parents, we may encounter more, but that number is more difficult to calculate.¹ The USA and Spain are the two countries adopting the largest number of children internationally, and since the mid-1990s China has been the undisputed principal sending country. In 2005, the year when adoptions from China peaked, US-Americans adopted 7906 Chinese

¹ Adoption blogs written in Spanish almost always refer to the adoption of Spaniards, whereas in English we find links to adopters in Canada and the UK, among others. For this sample, I selected the blogs that appeared to me as actively updated.

children and Spaniards 2753. Because of China's one-child policy, most of Chinese adoptees are girls, who have become the (modelic) image of the contemporary adoptee in Western countries (Marre and Bestard-Camps 2004, p. 30; Volkman 2003b, p. 81). The blogs here considered were created at the beginning of adoption processes and had the image of a Chinese girl as an ideal future reader; in one of the cases, the couple was finally assigned a Chinese boy.²

Pioneer research on weblogs done by Phillipe Lejeune pointed out how in the Internet we face the paradox of writing that is as instantaneous as speech, in which the private seems to be placed on the outside immediately (Lejeune 2009, p. 301). Autobiographical studies have begun to estimate how the interactivity and the publicity of on-line texts model life writing and bring it closer to oral storytelling or to engaging in a conversation than to traditional forms of print communication (Langellier and Peterson 2004, p. 166). As weblogs are geared towards an interactive audience, the production of meaning would be grounded in this "conversation" in which the feedback of the followers is needed to reinforce the identity of the blogger (Serfaty 2004, p. 466). Nevertheless, little attention has been paid up to now on how this feedback impacts the life writing and creates shared (autobiographical) narratives.

The question of how online autobiographies differ from those kept in notebooks is often tackled without paying enough attention to how the traditional notions of author and reader are challenged. Instead of a "top down" writing process where the author expresses him/herself, we find recurrently in blogs a "bottom up" (Turkle 1997, p. 166) writing process in which the blogger copies and pastes bits and pieces from diverse texts, which are then reproduced from blog to blog. Moreover, the notion of readership also changes with the emergence of a "wreader" (Landow 2006, p. 20) who produces the text following his/her own hypertextual path and, rather than following a blog, follows a community of blogs devoted to a topic jumping from one to another in an "horizontal" navigation (instead of following a vertical, diachronic order). In online life writing, stories are transferred and multiplied, and a community of writers-readers is constituted, in which we can witness the process of consensus-creation.

In an effort to pinpoint the key features of online life stories, Michael Hardey argues that these stories "reflect and are immersed in a self that is struggling to make choices and establish relationships in a world characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, change and ever greater levels of classification and surveillance" (Hardey 2004, p. 197). This quest for a self-identity may not be driven by an effort to state one's particularities

² See *Our China Journeys*.

but one's belongings. Life writing in the public domains of internet may differ significantly from traditional life writing in that it is not steered by the desire of registering an unconventional life, but by a quest for shelter and identification. The blogs of adopters reveal a desire to stabilize their identity as parents just like other adoptive parents and as close as possible to the "natural" model of biological parents.

THE ADOPTIVE PREGNANCY

In the numerous weblogs published by adoptive parents, we may trace a common "master-plot" (Porter Abbott 2010, p. 47), a recurring story in which the commitment and struggles of the adoptive couple are featured in two concatenated moments: a waiting period that is presented as an "adoptive pregnancy" and an "adoptive birth" of the child, when s/he is finally assigned to the couple. The specificity of the autobiographical writing – as done within the interactive and participative community of the internet – facilitates the enactment of the adoptive family as close as possible to the biologically-constituted family and, in this way, "produces" the family.

The blogs are usually started when the couple receives a certificate of approval as suitable parents from the local authority, hence at the very beginning of the adoption process. As Kim and Matt state in their first post "blogging is a very common occurrence in the adoption world"; it is also common –as they do next- to refer to the adoption process as an "adventure" or "journey" and to welcome their readers to join them in this complex process. Some years ago, adopting a child from China took 9 months, just like pregnancy, but in the last 5 years this waiting period has prolonged into a seemingly endless phase due to the decreasing number of children available for international adoption from China. In this context, weblog writing works as a sort of therapy that helps parents to keep the illusion of the positive outcome, i.e. the "birth" of the adoptive family. This therapeutic use of blogs needs to be understood in the frame of the specificity of the virtual media and its interactive features. Mar, the blogger behind *Mi peque vino de China*, posted on March 2009 the statistics showing how the waiting time for adoptions have lengthened enormously since 2007. The post received 17 comments from other blogging waiting parents who were also feeling discouraged but had words of hope to each other. "Paciencia y esperanza son palabras clave para todo este proceso" [Patience and hope are key words for this process] wrote "Juan y Helena", bloggers from *La Gran Aventura China*. Elen, the blogger of *Farolillos Chinos* adds: "cariño, no desesperes (...) No sé cuándo, pero va a haber un acelerón, si no, nos alquilamos un avión y vamos todos a echarles una mano a los del CCAA".

[darling, do not despair (...) I don't know when, but a burst of acceleration shall come. And if not, we will rent a plane and go to give a hand to these guys from the CCAA] (China Center of Adoption Affairs).

The adoption blogs are often followed by two groups of people: the ones who have offline relationships with the writer – the family, the friends and possible acquaintances, and a larger and more active group of readers formed by other adopters, most of them also bloggers with whom the writer develops an on-line relationship, which may in cases also go off-line. The first group is usually smaller and less visible in the blogs itself as they hardly ever leave comments. Nevertheless, we know that these blogs are meant to be read by them, because the bloggers usually address their relatives as expected readers of their posts.

The posts about the waiting period can be read as being intended to construct the pregnancy in the eyes of the readers and, in turn, of the writer him/herself. During this long and difficult time-period, adoptive parents have no physical change evidencing the process they are going through – being expecting parents – but turn themselves into the parents-to-be through the blog writing. As Sidonie Smith argues in “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance”, the self narrated is a self performed. Autobiographical storytelling *affects* the interiority of the writer and these expressions of interiority are produced through the action of public discourses, which legitimate certain written lives, with the result that “[a]n audience implies a community of people for whom certain discourses of identity and truth make sense” (Smith 1998, p. 110) The performance of pregnancy can be traced in recurrent metaphors and motifs deployed by the bloggers. As in biological pregnancies, future adoptive parents register the passing of time in a ritualistic way. The template of weblogs – in which every post is situated under the date of its creation – seems not to be enough, so they often include digital applications counting the days and weeks gone by since their file was logged in in China. Waiting time is transformed into gestating time and divided into different cycles depending on the stage of the paperwork. Randy & Cara, the bloggers behind *Our China & South Carolina Adoption Journey*, share with their followers how they celebrated the milestone of having their file gone through the review room, one of the final stages of an adoption process: eating Chinese food and watching (again) a documentary about abandoned girls in China. Their readers – most of them also waiting for their adoptions to be concreted – congratulate them in their comments.

A recurrent saying about the waiting phase is that adoptive children “grow in the heart” during it. In *Our Journey to “Bree Mei”*, we find a short poem titled “Not flesh of my flesh” quoted:

“Not flesh of my flesh
 Nor bone of my bone,
 But still miraculously my own.
 Never forget for a single minute,
 You didn’t grow under my heart,
 But in it.”³

The hierarchical position of the heart may reveal superiority over the biological womb-pregnancy, and the bureaucracies and uncertainties of the long waiting period may establish a comparison with the rather easy biological pregnancy. The bloggers of *Our China Journeys* give accurate reports of the bureaucracies a couple needs to go through when deciding to adopt. In the first 20 posts, they inform the readers about all the official papers, stamps, and pictures they had to collect in order to send their dossier to China: they keep records of all the bureaucracy in a column on the right where they add every new process they have to go through adding up almost 70. When their file is finally logged in by the Chinese authorities, they post a celebratory note: “Whew! Another milestone! Now the TRUE wait begins”. The readers will get an account of how this waiting goes – longer than expected – until they are assigned a child. But things are still not that simple, and they need to prepare a package to be sent to the orphanage. One of their readers – “foreign” to the adoption blogosphere, presumably a relative – offers a hand to the troubled parents: “Sounds like lots of work ahead! I am not sure if you are interested in help ... but depending on the what they recommended as gifts to the orphanage, I would love to help buy or make some of them!” The friend/relative wants to help them through, but wonders what if the “*what*” can neither be bought or made, if it is something only the adoptive parents can do, in the same way that no one can help a pregnant mother to be pregnant.

Adoptive parents may feel the need to demonstrate that they can be as good or even better than biological parents. The long waiting period shows their ability to love and builds a strong attachment with a child that they yet do not know. Paradoxically, this admirable adoptive parenthood does not propose a new approach to kinship, but represents the family under the traditional biological model. “The pregnant wait” another poem quoted in American adoption blogs puts it simply: “some are pregnant/ we’re adopting/what’s the difference/really nothing” (McCrossin 2002).

On a first discursive level, adoptive parents prove that they love the child as if he or she was their own and that there was no difference

³ This poem is reproduced in other blogs and is part of a “canon” of adoption poems that have been collected in websites such as <http://www.scrapbook.com/poems/cat/56.html>

between adopting or having children. But on a second, slightly more elaborated level, adopters construct a proud adoptive parenthood, which outdoes the “mere” biological one. Revealing enough of the “silent pride” of adoptive parents is the image of an ultrasound scan where the map of China takes the place of the fetus (see Figure 1).

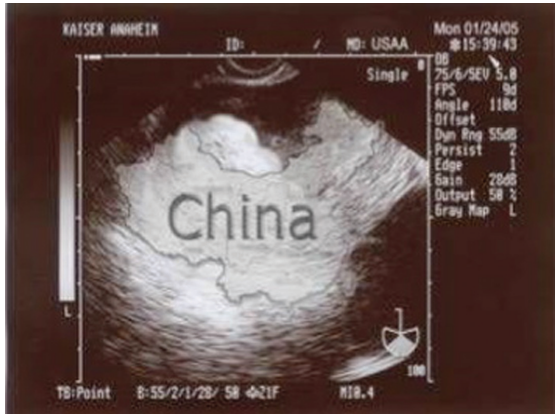


Figure 1: Adoptive ‘ultrasound’ widely shared in adoption blogs.

In both, American and Spanish blogs this image is profusely used to represent the adoptive pregnancy. In times of communication through the Internet and digital social networks, ultrasound pictures have become a way to communicate and celebrate the future arrivals. Adoptive parents do not have scans attesting their “pregnancies”, but they share this image with pride in their blogs. The adopting-China scan promises that they will have a child if they wait long enough but also reveals a vindictory aim: adoptive parents, as the online autobiographies insist, need to go through much longer and complex “pregnancies” and pass harder tests than those posed to biological parents.

In this image, the adopter *is*, strikingly, a womb – a reproductive organ/nature – whereas the adoptee *is* China – a country/culture. The scan can be read as caught in a Western ideological order in which China plays, among other roles, that of the next world power. Squeezing China’s geography into a womb may speak aloud one of the greatest (unconscious) fears of (adoptive) parents: the lack of resources that they will have when their children come of age. The coming of age of Korean adoptees – which entailed the circulation of *their* stories of failed assimilation – haunts, as mentioned before, the practice of transnational

adoption today. This scan is, therefore, a tool against the fear constructing the kin bond as if biological between the adopters and the Asian baby. In this image, Nature contains Culture, and we may read this scan as one in which the origin of the adoptee as a threatening past is deactivated by its subordination (in) to Nature.

This scan also negotiates the belonging and cultural identity of the adoptive families. The Chinese origin of the adoptee is acknowledged with pride; would they have created this scan if the country of origin had been Rwanda? (Strikingly, similar images are found in other adoption communities, presumably copied from the Chinese adoption scan yet not so profusely reproduced as this one. Browsing the adoption blogosphere, I found one in which the uterus shows the map of Vietnam and another one in which Africa as a whole is outlined, as if it would make no sense to identify particular countries.) Anthropological research on families adopting in China show how parents engage themselves in a “multicultural parenting” that approaches the Chinese origin as one to be proud of (Volkman 2003b, p. 34–35; Cheng 2004, p. 74; Jacobson 2008, p. 67). Is this pride connected to the idea of China as a future world power? Or it is more an acknowledgment of its imperial past and thousand-year-old traditions? In any case, the image ties the child born in China with his/her Western mother in an indissoluble as-if-biological relationship and makes China – the country – an inalienable part of the life of the adoptive family.

This sonogram is also often found in Spanish blogs, a journey that reveals the existence of an emerging Western adoptive culture. By Western adoptive culture, I refer to shared narratives of transnational kinship that resist against the claims accusing adoptive parents of profiting from the capital flows of late modernity and third-world poverty. The interconnected blogosphere is fundamental to understanding the emergence of this Western adoption culture, as in the blogs we find tropes, poems, and images traveling from blog to blog. Adopters, such as Lisa of *Life with Briana*, look for identification: “When I first dipped my toes into the blogging waters, I came across so many people like myself. I connected with people that had experienced the pain of infertility like I had, and I found others that were also on the road to adoption (...). I became a part of an amazing group of people and it felt so nice”. The community she became part of will in the future imply the adoptee’s affiliation to a particular minority – the Chinese-adopted Americans, which will play a fundamental role in the negotiation of the adoptee’s racialized identity.

The approach to the racial origin differs in these two countries. American blogs often refer to the racial/ethnic difference as a positive and distinctive feature of adoptive families. The bloggers of *Jazmyne Rose-Noel’s Amazing Red Thread Journey Home*, for instance, describe themselves as a

“proud American-Chinese biracial family”. The Spanish parents, on the contrary, avoid phrasing the racial difference as such and prefer to stress how their Chinese adopted daughters maintain a cultural “heritage” while being at the same time “fully” Spanish. In the blogs, the Spanish adoptive parents post images of their daughters dressed in Chinese traditional dresses as well as with the local Spanish outfits to participate in the different festivities.⁴ The different approach to the racial difference can be explained attending the dissimilar discourses of national belonging: while the US is considered to be a nation of immigrants where the citizenship is given to those born in the land, Spain, – as the rest of Europe – follows the *jus sanguinis* principle of blood-line citizenship. Europe political communities pose as pre-political and ethnic, while the US consistently builds a national identity that is political and civic celebrating the plurality of its “hyphenated” Americans (Hedetoft 2002, p. xiv).

Adoptions in China are organized in groups that travel together to pick up the children; some Spanish blogs use these shared experiences as founding pillars to the construction of a new (Spanish) belonging. The bloggers behind *La Princesa del Alto* post a picture of a group of Galician girls who were adopted the same day in which they all wear a T-shirt with their names on the front and the phrase “As nenas de Poyang” – the Galician phrasing for “the girls of Poyang”, the city of the orphanage – on the back. The picture fixes their belonging to a social group and, moreover, links their origin – Poyang – with their Galician destination. The cultural identity of the Chinese adoptees is founded in their travel *from Poyang to Galicia* acknowledging this way their origin at the same that fixating their belonging to home, Galicia. The T-shirts reveal the orchestrated staging of this belonging, which might be more necessary in Spain where the national discourse is more attached to bloodline heritages and local identities attached to the land – Galicia.

During the adoptive “pregnancy”, the community of readers is there to reassure the parents that they are on the right track and that desiring so much to parent those imagined girls makes them more suitable candidates for parenthood. This community of “adopters-writers” will enable the performance of pregnancy in the eyes of the less-participatory readers, which tend to be the ones that are not part of the adoptive circle, but offline related to the bloggers and perhaps suspicious about the practice of international adoption. A final aim of these blogs may be allocated in

⁴ Check for instance the post “Los vestidos de Jianxi” in *El blog de Chun Yan* where the two adopted sisters appear dressed in traditional Chinese, the header picture in *Mi pequeña mariquita Jinghai* or “Hoy hemos celebrado el santo de Rocío” in *Esperando a Rocío*.

how they transform the imagined child, the child-to-be-adopted, into a daughter.

I use the adjective “imagined” to stress that they are not just waiting for any Chinese girl there for the taking but for the particular girl to whom the blog is addressed. In more than a third of the blogs studied, this girl has already a name even if adopters in China cannot even be certain of the sex of the adoptee (5%–10% of the adoptees are boys, Volkman 2003b, p. 53). Paradoxically enough, the blog is addressed to this girl who most probably has not been conceived yet, but is featured as a “waiting child” suffering from the long separation. Esther, the blogger behind “*Mi niña Candela*”, asks the fictionalized adoptee, to trust that they are soon going to be together, as they are destined to be. She also explains to Candela, the imagined waiting-girl, that during this period their paternal love grows stronger. Before being born and before being even conceived, the adopted child has a first “building block” for her future identity construction: before being born she is already waiting for her parents, the ones destined to meet regardless of her Chinese origin.

THE ADOPTIVE BIRTH

The idea of a shared destiny between the couple who wants to adopt and the child in the orphanage leads us to a second moment in the adoption masterplot: the matching. The referral of a certain child to a certain couple is often communicated through a letter with the picture of the child assigned. Bloggers often refer to this moment as “giving birth” and share the picture of the adoptee in their blogs, a practice that can be assimilated to sharing photos of a newborn. Parents may be keener to construct a familial story in this interconnected community of blogs rather than in baby memory books. Traditional baby books are meant to be completed with data about the pregnancy, the birth, and the baby’s first days. Adopters do not always have that information and, as the accounts in the blogs make clear, it is not what they want to place at the core of the adoptee’s early life story. The custom in blogs is to announce and celebrate the milestones of the adoption process: the “log in” date, frequently called LID, the referral and what the American blogs call the “Gotcha Day”, the day they meet the adoptee in China. In many families, the “Gotcha Day” will be celebrated in the years to come as a sort of family birthday as Sara, the blogger of *Angels brought me here*, explains: “to me THAT is her birthday”.

Through blog writing the parents transform the orphaned Chinese baby into one of their next-of-kin. The ultimate challenge is to assure this “new born” – a child that has suffered abandonment at least twice: first, by being given away by her mother, and second, by being transferred from

her caretakers to this new foreign family – an enduring and all-encompassing love, the “real” parenthood. The posts about the referral, as well as the accounts on the “Gotcha Day”, stress the strength of their paternal feelings and how everything starts again after being integrated into the new family. The bloggers writing needs to demonstrate that this was not a child by any means acquired – as this would confirm the swelling criticisms on international adoptions, but one meant to be theirs regardless not only of the racial difference, but also of the geopolitical forces that shape contemporary adoption of children. The adopters resort to different narratives to demonstrate this and provide their children with a proof of their uniqueness.

The argument of a Western responsibility for the world’s orphans was used to justify international adoptions in previous decades but is now seldom used (Herman 2008, p. 39). Today, rather than referring to the “rescue” narrative (cf. Dubinsky 2007), adoptive parents claim to be blessed with a magical connection to their internationally adopted children.

In both American and Spanish Adoption blogs, adoptive parents often refer to what they call *The Red Thread Tale*, a story they use as an all-embracing metaphor of the adoption process. They credit it to be an ancient Chinese belief that every child is born with an invisible red thread, which binds him/her to those whom they are [or “he/she is”] destined to meet regardless of time, place or circumstance. The belief, which is copied from blog to blog, assures that the thread “may stretch or tangle, but will never break” (Sarah’s story). *The Red Thread Tale* gives a name to adoption agencies, webforums, blogs, adoption books and to a great number of adoption “merchandising”, becoming highly commoditized (cf. García and Wesseling 2013). Ironically, in China it was previously used to justify arranged marriages: the red thread ties the fates of men and women, and furnishes the material for numerous folktales about what happens when a man tries to kill the girl who is supposed to be his future wife (Birch 2000, p. 39). In the adoption blogs, the original tale is never mentioned – most likely, the bloggers do not know it – instead, it is used to explain how the child assigned to a particular couple is in fact destined to become theirs. *The Red Thread Tale* is often mentioned in the context of the long and difficult path the couples need to follow in order to adopt. The adoptive parents often explain that they have to “pull”⁵ or “untie”⁶ the thread; some of them describe the process as being “pulled to China” by it.⁷

⁵ See “No me olvido de ti”. Esther, the blogger of *Mi niña Candela* also asks the waiting-girl to keep the thread tightened.

⁶ The motive gives title to the blog *Desenredando el hilo rojo. Pase lo que pase desataré todos los nudos para llegar hasta ti*.

⁷ See *Our China Journeys*.

Strikingly, adoptive parents describe themselves as *believing* in *The Red Thread Tale*, as if it was a matter of faith. In a post titled “Enough Red Threads to make a Quilt”, Charity shares with her followers her conviction that Natalie Wanhan, the Chinese girl they have been assigned, was the one destined to become their daughter. She shares what she calls the “red threads of her own adoption process”: that the girl was born the same day that her grandfather was, has the same astrological sign as her adoptive father and their dog, and that they – the adoptive parents – have been contacted by people adopting in the same orphanage.

In times of incredulity towards meta-narratives, adopters do not anymore turn to the religious idea of rescuing souls (Herman 2008, pp. 126–127), but to a story upon which they can re-write their own experiences. The rather sad folktale is transformed into a happy-ending fairytale that matches with the celebratory spirit of contemporary international adoption.

The use of what they take to be ancient Chinese culture also allows adopters to replace the uncomfortable question of the child’s Chinese parents with the notion of China as a relinquishing land: instead of imagining the burdens of a mother that gives away her child, they imagine a land that “sends” children abroad (a trope also present in the Chinese adoptive-scan). None of the bloggers here studied appears to be aware that the legend was originally meant to explain love relationships.

Some adoptive parents do not only believe in the magical *Red Thread Tale*, but also that the Chinese-adoption system warranties a matching between the profiles of the parents and the adoptees. Some Spanish and American bloggers describe the existence of a “Matching Room” where as Ana states in her blog “una tierna persona une las pequeñas estrellas del firmamento” [a tender person works linking the little stars in the firmament]. Mar, from Galicia, explains to her followers how Chinese employees work hard to find corresponding data on the parent’s and the daughter’s documents. This fictionalized image of the Chinese bureaucracy, as the faith in the *Red Thread Tale*, reveals how important it is for the bloggers to parent a chosen child and not just any there for the taking. The meticulous matching of the girl presents another “building block” for the adoptee’s identity construction: she is not a girl abandoned, but a specially chosen girl, someone really special.

The adopted girl is not portrayed as taken or removed from her native country to a foreign place, but as one born in a foreign land to be taken to a place destined to become her home. The belief in the Red Thread Tale and on the Matching Room constructs this idea of a child destined to grow up in a different country from which s/he was born. The autobiographical writing helps to erase the intricate geopolitical order that

allows middle class Western families to adopt children from the so-called Third world countries replacing it with a magical destiny. The trip from China to the US or Spain is a trip back "home". The blogger of "*Our Adoption Journey*" celebrates, after coming back from China, that they finally reached "Anna's FIRST real home ever". The motive of the "first real home" assures the bloggers and their audience that past will not haunt them.

Anthropologist Judith Modell states that the cultural model of the adoptive family is and has been the biologically constituted family. She argues that adopters present themselves "as-if-begotten family" (Modell 2003, p. 12) even if that puts them in an inferior position, "a 'second-best' way of having children" (Modell 2003, p. 129). This provides an interesting interpretative frame to the autobiographical writing of the parents. The recurrent use of a first person plural – which not only refers to the couple, but to the group of parents struggling to adopt from China – reveals a vindicatory aim, as if they were a minority group using life writing to make their voice heard. Kristin Langellier explains that life writing takes often the form of a cultural group's strategy to enact ritual self-definitions about their existence, values, and worth (Langellier 2001, p. 700). The adoption weblogs may be read as an aim to rewrite the institution of the family in opposition to the dominant (biological) discourse. They do so sharing these narratives that tell an unheard story of parenthood. But, paradoxically, they end up revealing a need to assimilate their experiences to the "real" biological parenthood. Through the autobiographical writing they move the adoptive model from its inferior position to a proud superiority, which rather than explicated or represented is enacted.

Adoptive parent's autobiographical writing plays a fundamental role in the legitimation of international adoption. In their weblogs, adopters avoid touching upon the overheated debate, and if they respond to the controversies, they do it with persuasive narratives rather than in the form of propositional statements. The autobiographical writing constructs, projects, and performs the identity of the adoptive family as one that is as good as the biologically constituted one. And even as a better family: parents have passed through harder tests, and the love for the child has grown while the couple struggles with the bureaucracies and limitations. The adoptive kinship is here a forever-lasting bond that has already managed to pass tests that natural reproduction does not pose to everyone. Moreover, the child is carefully matched to the couple. In the narrative identity of adoptive families, adoption is not the second best way to form a family, but a difficult way with a precious reward, a path for the strong ones.

The virtual community of adopters – the online social network – is fundamental for this performance of kinship as it provides the blogger not only with an audience to which their discourses make sense but also with a cultural toolkit in the form of an imagined tradition in which to frame their experiences and write their own life stories. This process resembles the one described by Eric Hobsbawn of how nationalism invented traditions that appeared or claimed to be old (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1992, p. 1). In the adoption blogs, traditions that appear to stem from Chinese folklore are shared and enacted. Apart from the use of the *The Red Thread Tale* as a magic explanation – supposedly Chinese – to transnational parenting, we find other mentions to cultural practices that are supposed to be Asian: ladybugs as symbols of luck, and the custom of making for the adoptees a “100 Good-Wishes” quilt (in *Almendras y Mandarinas* we find a record of how the different members of the blogosphere send fabric squares as a form of wishing the best to the adoptee). These traditions,⁸ as the adopters call them, are perhaps the most visible form of shared adoptive narratives.

The online autobiographical writing of adopters constructs a collective identity in which identification and difference are negotiated. The adopting bloggers provide a first sample of a community to which the adoptees will belong, a group in which the foreign origin is acknowledged with pride. Several researchers have called the attention to how today transnational adoption celebrates the so-called “origin cultures”. The aim is to prevent adoptees from the suffering what stemmed from their impossible belonging to both origin and adoptive country (as described by Tobias Hübinette, 2004).

The blogging of adopters also impacts the adoptive practice presenting the truth of the adoptive parents to a society that does not always take adoption as a praiseworthy enterprise. Adoption literature often refers to the adoption triad of the adopters, the adoptees, and the biological parents, the latter being the silenced end of the triad (cf. K.L. Manley (2006) for a revision of the position of relinquishing parents in the law, and T. A. Volkman (2005) *Cultures of Transnational Adoption* (2005) for a reflection of the underrepresentation of birth parents in adoption culture). Through their writing, adopters tell their part. They do not do so by telling their reasons and points of view of the controversies that surround the Western demand of children and the Chinese “supply” of them, but giving their life stories there to the readers for identification. Adoptive parents tell how they are driven by love and how the geopolitical forces that shape transnational adoption and make possible for them to parent

⁸ “Adoption traditions” in <http://komplexify.com/ladybug/2007/05/>

have nothing to do with their intimate experience. Readers get acknowledgment of how hard it is to go through an adoption and how much love these parents have to give. The adoptee – as a sort of future, ideal reader – gets reassured of the love of his/her parents at the same time that a story which they can be proud. Moreover, the autobiographical writing not only helps the adopters or the adoptee in their processes of identity formation, but also constructs the idea of the family as a cohesive entity. For these transnational and transracial families, blogs play a similar role to the described by Marianne Hirsch (2007) of family pictures and albums: it creates a memory of the family, the illusion of cohesion. This illusory cohesion is necessary in any family, but perhaps the desire for it appears stronger when the family is not the result of biological reproduction.

The detailed record of the adoption process, the reinforcement given by the readers, and the emergence of an adoptive culture with numerous “traditions” altogether play a fundamental role in creating parenthood in the adoptive parents. Those babies born in the far-away China are in this way “kinned” to their parents. Strikingly, this “kinning” is negotiated along the lines of racial, ethnic, and class difference creating a “life script” for the adoptee. (Anthony K. Appiah coined the concept of “life scripts” explaining how certain minorities have gained recognition in the public space transforming scripts of self-hatred into positive life scripts: from *negro* into proud African American, from homosexual and *faggot* into gay pride). Through their life writing, the parents also present a “positive life script” for the adoptee: from an abandoned child to a carefully matched one, from the surplus of China’s population to a precious citizen of the adoption country. But as Appiah (p. 161–163) claims, in the politics of recognition the so-called “minorities” get too tightly scripted lives: they are pushed to be proud of their difference as if this difference would explicate their whole identity. In the life writing of adoptive parents, adoptees get their story written before they can read it (and in many cases, before they are even born). We may wonder if adoptive parents are not writing their stories so intensively in a compulsion to prevent a mismatching with the stories the adoptees will tell in the future.

REFERENCES

- Appiah, Anthony K. “Identity Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies Social Reproduction.” *Multiculturalism: (Expanded Paperback Edition)*. Ed. Gutmanm Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univisity Press, 1999 149–164. Print.
- “Chinese Folkore & Factoids.” Sarah’s Stories. N.D. WEB. October 31st, 2011.
- Anagnost, A. “Scenes of Misrecognition: Maternal Citizenship in the Age of Transnational Adoption.” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (2000)8(2): 389–421.
- Birch, C. *Tales from China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

- Borshay Liem, D. dir. *First Person Plural*. National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 2000. Film.
- Bos, P. *Once a Mother: Relinquishment and Adoption from the Perspective of Unmarried Mothers in South India*. Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2008. <http://dare.ubn.kun.nl/bitstream/2066/73643/1/73643.pdf>.
- Cheng, V.J. *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- Dorow, S. *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Dubinsky, K. "Babies without Borders: Rescue, Kidnap, and the Symbolic Child." *Journal of Women's History* (2007) 19(1): 142–150.
- García González, M. and E. Wesseling. "Stories We Adopt By: Tracing 'the Red Thread' in Adoption Narratives, 2013." *The Lion and the Unicorn* (2013) 37(3).
- Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Hardey, Michael. "Digital Life Stories: Auto/Biography in the Information Age." *Auto/Biography* (2004) 12: 183–1200.
- Hedetoft, U. *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Herman, E. *Kinship By Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Hirsch, M. *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MT: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Hobsbawm, E. and T. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Howell, S. *The Kinning of Foreigners: Transnational Adoption in a Global Perspective*. New York-Oxford: Berghahn Publishers, 2006.
- Hübinette, T. "International Adoption Is Harmful and Exploitive". *Issues in Adoption. Current Controversies*. Ed. Dudley, William. Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press, 2004. 66–71.
- Jacobson, H. *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*. New York: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008.
- Jung, S.J. *Couleur De Peau: Miel*. Quadrants astrolabe, 2008. Print.
- Kim, E.J. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010.
- Landow, G. P. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Langellier, K. "Personal Narrative", in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. Vol 2, ed. Margaretta Jolly, 699–701. London: Fitzroy Bearborn, 2001.
- Langellier, K. and E. Peterson. *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative*. Harrisberg, PA: Temple University Press, 2004.
- Lejeune, P. *On Diary*. Hawaii: Versa Press, 2009.
- Manley, K. L. "Birth Parents: The Forgotten Members of the International Adoption Triad." *Capital University Law Review* (2006) 35(2): 627–644.
- Marre, Diana and Joan Bestard-Camps. *La adopció y el acogimiento. Presente y perspectivas*. Barcelona: Edicions Universitat Barcelona, 2004.
- Marre, D. "I Want Her to Learn Her Language and Maintain Her Culture': Transnational Adoptive Families' Views of 'Cultural Origins'." In Wade, P. Ed. *Race, Ethnicity and Nation: Perspectives from Kinship and Genetics*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 73–94.
- McCrossin, T. (2002) "The adoption wait". China adoption poems. Web. November 1st 2011. <http://chinaadoptpoems.blogspot.com/2007/03/pregnant-wait.html>

- Modell, Judith. *Kinship with Strangers: Adoption and Interpretations of Kinship in American Culture*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Porter Abbott, H. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Selman, P. "Intercountry Adoption in the New Millennium; the "Quiet Migration" Revisited." *Population Research and Policy Review* (2002)21: 205–225.
- Selman, P. "The Rise and Fall of Intercountry Adoption in the 21st Century." *International Social Work* (2009)52(5): 575–594.
- Serfaty, V. "Online Diaries: Towards a Structural Approach." *Journal of American Studies* 38.3 (2004)38(3): 457–471.
- Smith, S. "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance". In S. Smith and J. Watson, Eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory a Reader*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 108–115, 1998.
- Thompson, N. S. "Hague is Enough? A Call for More Protective, Uniform Law Guiding International Adoptions." *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, (2004)22: 441.
- Trenka, J. J. *The Language of Blood: A Memoir*. Borealis Books: St. Paul, MN, 2003.
- Triseliotis, J. "Inter-Country Adoption: Global Trade Or Global Gift?" In Anne-Lise Ryggvold and Monica and Saetersdal Dalen Barbro, Eds. *Mine - Yours - Ours and Theirs. Adoption, Changing Kinship and Family Patterns*. Oslo: Department of Special needs Education, 1999. 14–31.
- Turkle, S. *Life on the Screen*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- UNICEF. "UNICEF's position on Inter-country adoption". Unicef Press Centre. N.d. Web. November 1st 2011. http://www.unicef.org/media/media_41918.html
- Volkman, T. A. ed. *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Volkman, T. A. "Introduction. Transnational Adoption." *Social Text* (2003a)74: 29–55.
- Volkman, T. A. "Embodying Chinese Culture. Transnational Adoption in North America". *Social Text* (2003b)74: 29–55.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

BLOGS CITED

- Mi *pequeña mariquita jinghai*. February 14th, 2012. mipequeamariquitajinghai-jinghai.blogspot.com/
- Ana. "El Matching Room". *Esperando con ilusión*. September 16th, 2007. Web. October 31st, 2011 esperandoconilusion.nireblog.com/
- Bbanshe. "Adoption Traditions". *The Ladybug Princess*. Web. October 10th, 2012. <http://komplexify.com/ladybug/adoption-traditions/>.
- Charity. "Enough Red Threads to Make a Quilt". Welcome Home to the Happy Haus.... October 5th, 2011. Web. October 31st, 2011. welcometothehappyhaus.blogspot.com/ - DTHOFF3. *Our journey to "Bree Mei"*. October 30th, 2012. <http://journeytobreemei.blogspot.ch/>
- Esther. "Más de tres años esperandote." May 5, 2009. and "No me olvido de ti" July 29th, 2008. Mi niña Candela. Mi tesoro chino. Web. November 5, 2011. <http://preciosacandela.blogspot.com/>
- Juan y Helena. *La Gran Aventura China*. Web. February 21st, 2012. <http://granaventurachina.blogspot.com/>

- José Antonio y España. Hoy celebramos el santo de Rocío. *Esperando a Rocío*. June 1st, 2009. Web. February 21st, 2012. www.rocioenchina.blogspot.es.
- Isabel. "Cuarto Festival de Deseos" en *Almendras y mandarinas*. December 31st, 2008. Web. October 15th, 2012. isabel-miblog.blogspot.com/
- Kathy. *Jazmyne Rose-Noel's Amazing Red Thread Journey Home*. Web. February 14th, 2012. <http://jazzyrose.blogspot.com/>
- Kim and Matt "Just starting out." December 1st, 2009. *Journey to our 1st Child!!!* <http://adoptionofourfirst.blogspot.ch/>
- Lisa. "The Internet and Blogosphere - A Double Edge Sword" *Life with Briana*. January 21, 2011. Web. <http://waitingforbriana.blogspot.ch/2010/05/so-is-she-your-biological-daughter.html>.
- Magdaleno, Silvia. *Desenredando el hilo rojo. Pase lo que pase desataré todos los nudos para llegar hasta ti*. October 11th, 2012. Web. <http://desenredandoelhilorrojo.blogspot.ch/>
- Manuel, A. "As nenas de Poyang." *La Princesa del Alto*. September 26th, 2009. Web. March 14th, 2010. princesadelalto.blogspot.com/.../as-nenas-de-poyang.
- Mar. "Tiempo de espera para la adopción en China." March 14, 2009 and "Del abandono a la Matching Room." August 30, 2008. *Mi peque vino de china*. Web. February 10th, 2012. mipequeesperaenchina.blogspot.com/
- Melissa. "We are home." May 22, 2011. *Our adoption journey*. Web. February 10th, 2012. <http://reyesfamilyadoptionjourney.blogspot.ch/>
- Randy & Cara. "How we celebrated getting out of review." *Our China & South Carolina Adoption Journey*. July 6th, 2007. Web. October 31st, 2011. <http://www.waitingforourgift.blogspot.ch/>
- Rosalía Yan. "Los vestidos de Jianxi." *El blog de Chun Yan*. October 7th, 2009. Web. February 10th, 2012. www.chunyan.lacocctelera.net/
- Sara. "4th Birthday" *Angels brought me here*. June 21st, 2012. Web. October 18th, 2012. <http://lanechinaadoption.blogspot.ch>
- Tony and Sue. *Our China Journeys*. October 21, 2008. Web. February 14th, 2012. <http://smith-tigers.blogspot.ch/>

THE AUTHOR

Macarena García González (1980) is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Popular Culture, University of Zurich. She holds an MA in Cultural Studies from Maastricht University, and a BA in Journalism from the Pontifical Catholic University in Chile. Apart from academic publications in Swiss, Spanish, and American academic journals, she has written a book about Chilean culture and society under dictatorship, numerous articles about culture and society in newspapers and magazines, and a collection of children's books. Her current research project deals with the representation of ethnic differences in children's books about adoption and immigration published in Spain (1990–2010). The article published here is adapted from her master's thesis during a research appointment in Maastricht University in 2010–2011.