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The Lie We Love

By E. J. Graff

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Foreign adoption seems like the perfect solution to a heartbreaking imbalance: Poor countries have babies in need of homes, and rich countries have homes in need of babies. Unfortunately, those little orphaned bundles of joy may not be orphans at all.

We all know the story of international adoption: Millions of infants and toddlers have been abandoned or orphaned—placed on the side of a road or on the doorstep of a church, or left parentless due to AIDS, destitution, or war. These little ones find themselves forgotten, living in crowded orphanages or ending up on the streets, facing an uncertain future of misery and neglect. But, if they are lucky, adoring new moms and dads from faraway lands whisk them away for a chance at a better life.

Unfortunately, this story is largely fiction.

Westerners have been sold the myth of a world orphan crisis. We are told that millions of children are waiting for their “forever families” to rescue them from lives of abandonment and abuse. But many of the infants and toddlers being adopted by Western parents today are not orphans at all. Yes, hundreds of thousands of children around the world do need loving homes. But more often than not, the neediest children are sick, disabled, traumatized, or older than 5. They are not the healthy babies that, quite understandably, most Westerners hope to adopt. There are simply not enough healthy, adoptable infants to meet Western demand—and there’s too much Western money in search of children. As a result, many international adoption agencies work not to find homes for needy children but to find children for Western homes.

Since the mid-1990s, the number of international adoptions each year has nearly doubled, from 22,200 in 1995 to just under 40,000 in 2006. At its peak, in 2004, more than 45,000 children from developing countries were adopted by foreigners. Americans bring home more of these children than any other nationality—more than half the global total in recent years.



ALEXANDER MARTINEZ/AFP/Getty Images

Who's your mommy?: Parents might never know if their adopted child is truly an orphan.

Web Extra: For a photographic tour of the global baby trade, visit:
ForeignPolicy.com/extras/adoption.

Where do these babies come from? As international adoptions have flourished, so has evidence that babies in many countries are being systematically bought, coerced, and stolen away from their birth families. Nearly half the 40 countries listed by the U.S. State Department as the top sources for international adoption over the past 15 years—places such as Belarus, Brazil, Ethiopia, Honduras, Peru, and Romania—have at least temporarily halted adoptions or been prevented from sending children to the United States because of serious concerns about corruption and kidnapping. And yet when a country is closed due to corruption, many adoption agencies simply transfer their clients' hopes to the next "hot" country. That country abruptly experiences a spike in infants and toddlers adopted overseas—until it too is forced to shut its doors.

Along the way, the international adoption industry has become a market often driven by its customers. Prospective adoptive parents in the United States will pay adoption agencies between \$15,000 and \$35,000 (excluding travel, visa costs, and other miscellaneous expenses) for the chance to bring home a little one. Special needs or older children can be adopted at a discount. Agencies claim the costs pay for the agency's fee, the cost of foreign salaries and operations, staff travel, and orphanage donations. But experts say the fees are so disproportionately large for the child's home country that they encourage corruption.

To complicate matters further, while international adoption has become an industry driven by money, it is also charged with strong emotions. Many adoption agencies and adoptive parents passionately insist that crooked practices are not systemic, but tragic, isolated cases. Arrest the bad guys, they say, but let the "good" adoptions continue. However, remove cash from the adoption chain, and, outside of China, the number of healthy babies needing Western homes all but disappears. Nigel Cantwell, a Geneva-based consultant on child protection policy, has seen the dangerous influence of money on adoptions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where he has helped reform corrupt adoption systems. In these regions, healthy children age 3 and younger can easily be adopted in their own countries, he says. I asked him how many healthy babies in those regions would be available for international adoption if money never exchanged hands. "I would hazard a guess at zero," he replied.

THE MYTH OF SUPPLY

International adoption wasn't always a demand-driven industry. Half a century ago, it was primarily a humanitarian effort for children orphaned by conflict. In 1955, news spread that Bertha and Henry Holt, an evangelical couple from Oregon, had adopted eight Korean War orphans, and families across the United States expressed interest in following their example. Since then, international adoption has become increasingly popular in Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States. Americans adopted more than 20,000 foreign children in 2006 alone, up from just 8,987 in 1995. Half a dozen European countries regularly bring home more foreign-born children per capita than does the United States. Today, Canada, France, Italy, Spain, and the United States account for 4 out of every 5 international adoptions.

Changes in Western demography explain much of the growth. Thanks to contraception, abortion, and delayed marriages, the number of unplanned births in most developed countries has declined in recent decades. Some women who delay having children discover they've outwaited their fertility; others have difficulty conceiving from the beginning. Still others adopt for religious reasons, explaining that they've been called to care for children in need. In the United States, a motive beyond demography is the notion that international adoption is somehow "safer"—more predictable and more likely to end in success—than many domestic adoptions, where there's an outsized fear of a birth mother's last-minute change of heart. Add an ocean of distance, and the idea that needy children abound in poor countries, and that risk seems to disappear.

But international adoptions are no less risky; they're simply less regulated. Just as companies outsource industry to countries with lax labor laws and low wages, adoptions have moved to states with few laws about the process. Poor, illiterate birthparents in the developing world simply have fewer protections than their counterparts in the United States, especially in countries where human trafficking and corruption are rampant. And too often, these imbalances are overlooked on the adopting end. After all, one country after another has continued to supply what adoptive parents want most.

In reality, there are very few young, healthy orphans available for adoption around the world. Orphans are rarely healthy babies; healthy babies are rarely orphaned. "It's not really true," says Alexandra Yuster, a senior advisor on child protection with UNICEF, "that there are large numbers of infants with no homes who either will be in institutions or who need intercountry adoption."

That assertion runs counter to the story line that has long been marketed to Americans and other Westerners, who have been trained by images of destitution in developing countries and the seemingly endless flow of daughters from China to believe that millions of orphaned babies around the world desperately need homes. UNICEF itself is partly

responsible for this erroneous assumption. The organization's statistics on orphans and institutionalized children are widely quoted to justify the need for international adoption. In 2006, UNICEF reported an estimated 132 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. But the organization's definition of "orphan" includes children who have lost just one parent, either to desertion or death. Just 10 percent of the total—13 million children—have lost both parents, and most of these live with extended family. They are also older: By UNICEF's own estimate, 95 percent of orphans are older than 5. In other words, UNICEF's "millions of orphans" are not healthy babies doomed to institutional misery unless Westerners adopt and save them. Rather, they are mostly older children living with extended families who need financial support.

The exception is China, where the country's three-decades-old one-child policy, now being loosened, has created an unprecedented number of girls available for adoption. But even this flow of daughters is finite; China has far more hopeful foreigners looking to adopt a child than it has orphans it is willing to send overseas. In 2005, foreign parents adopted nearly 14,500 Chinese children. That was far fewer than the number of Westerners who wanted to adopt; adoption agencies report many more clients waiting in line. And taking those children home has gotten harder; in 2007, China's central adoption authority sharply reduced the number of children sent abroad, possibly because of the country's growing sex imbalance, declining poverty, and scandals involving child trafficking for foreign adoption. Prospective foreign parents today are strictly judged by their age, marital history, family size, income, health, and even weight. That means that if you are single, gay, fat, old, less than well off, too often divorced, too recently married, taking antidepressants, or already have four children, China will turn you away. Even those allowed a spot in line are being told they might wait three to four years before they bring home a child. That has led many prospective parents to shop around for a country that puts fewer barriers between them and their children—as if every country were China, but with fewer onerous regulations.

One such country has been Guatemala, which in 2006 and 2007 was the No. 2 exporter of children to the United States. Between 1997 and 2006, the number of Guatemalan children adopted by Americans more than quadrupled, to more than 4,500 annually. Incredibly, in 2006, American parents adopted one of every 110 Guatemalan children born. In 2007, nearly 9 out of 10 children adopted were less than a year old; almost half were younger than 6 months old. "Guatemala is a perfect case study of how international adoption has become a demand-driven business," says Kelley McCreery Bunkers, a former consultant with UNICEF Guatemala. The country's adoption process was "an industry developed to meet the needs of adoptive families in developed countries, specifically the United States."

Because the vast majority of the country's institutionalized children are not healthy, adoptable babies, almost none has been adopted abroad. In the fall of 2007, a survey conducted by the Guatemalan government, UNICEF, and the international child welfare and adoption agency Holt International Children's Services found approximately 5,600 children and adolescents in Guatemalan institutions. More than 4,600 of these children were age 4 or older. Fewer than 400 were under a year old. And yet in 2006, more than 270 Guatemalan babies, all younger than 12 months, were being sent to the United States each month. These adopted children were simply not coming from the country's institutions. Last year, 98 percent of U.S. adoptions from Guatemala were "relinquishments": Babies who had never seen the inside of an institution were signed over directly to a private attorney who approved the international adoption—for a very considerable fee—without any review by a judge or social service agency.

So, where had some of these adopted babies come from? Consider the case of Ana Escobar, a young Guatemalan woman who in March 2007 reported to police that armed men had locked her in a closet in her family's shoe store and stolen her infant. After a 14-month search, Escobar found her daughter in pre-adoption foster care, just weeks before the girl was to be adopted by a couple from Indiana. DNA testing showed the toddler to be Escobar's child. In a similar case from 2006, Raquel Par, another Guatemalan woman, reported being drugged while waiting for a bus in Guatemala City, waking to find her year-old baby missing. Three months later, Par learned her daughter had been adopted by an American couple.

On Jan. 1, 2008, Guatemala closed its doors to American adoptions so that the government could reform the broken process. Britain, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain all stopped accepting adoptions from the country several years earlier, citing trafficking concerns. But more than 2,280 American adoptions from the country are still being processed, albeit with additional safeguards. Stolen babies have already been found in that queue; Guatemalan authorities expect more.

Guatemala's example is extreme; it is widely considered to have the world's most notorious record of corruption in foreign adoption. But the same troubling trends have emerged, on smaller scales, in more than a dozen other countries, including Albania, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Peru, and Vietnam. The pattern suggests that the supply of adoptable babies rises to meet foreign demand—and disappears when Western cash is no longer available. For instance, in December 2001, the U.S. immigration service stopped processing adoption visas from Cambodia, citing clear evidence

that children were being acquired illicitly, often against their parents' wishes. That year, Westerners adopted more than 700 Cambodian children; of the 400 adopted by Americans, more than half were less than 12 months old. But in 2005, a study of Cambodia's orphanage population, commissioned by the U.S. Agency for International Development, found only a total of 132 children who were less than a year old—fewer babies than Westerners had been adopting every three months a few years before.

Even countries with large populations, such as India, rarely have healthy infants and toddlers who need foreign parents. India's large and growing middle class, at home and in the diaspora, faces fertility issues like those of their developed-world counterparts. They too are looking for healthy babies to adopt; some experts think that these millions of middle-class families could easily absorb all available babies. The country's pervasive poverty does leave many children fending for themselves on the street. But "kids are not on the street alone at the age of 2," Cantwell, the child protection consultant, says. "They are 5 or 6, and they aren't going to be adopted." That's partly because most of these children still have family ties and therefore are not legally available for adoption, and partly because they would have difficulty adjusting to a middle-class European or North American home. Many of these children are deeply marked by abuse, crime, and poverty, and few prospective parents are prepared to adopt them.

Surely, though, prospective parents can at least feel secure that their child is truly an orphan in need of a home if they receive all the appropriate legal papers? Unfortunately, no.

NURSERY CRIMES

In many countries, it can be astonishingly easy to fabricate a history for a young child, and in the process, manufacture an orphan. The birth mothers are often poor, young, unmarried, divorced, or otherwise lacking family protection. The children may be born into a locally despised minority group that is afforded few rights. And for enough money, someone will separate these little ones from their vulnerable families, turning them into "paper orphans" for lucrative export.

Some manufactured orphans are indeed found in what Westerners call "orphanages." But these establishments often serve less as homes to parentless children and more as boarding schools for poor youngsters. Many children are there only temporarily, seeking food, shelter, and education while their parents, because of poverty or illness, cannot care for them. Many families visit their children, or even bring them home on weekends, until they can return home permanently. In 2005, when the Hannah B. Williams Orphanage in Monrovia, Liberia, was closed because of shocking living conditions, 89 of the 102 "orphans" there returned to their families. In Vietnam, "rural families in particular will put their babies into these orphanages that are really extended day-care centers during the harvest season," says a U.S. Embassy spokeswoman in Hanoi. In some cases, unscrupulous orphanage directors, local officials, or other operators persuade illiterate birth families to sign documents that relinquish those children, who are then sent abroad for adoption, never to be seen again by their bereft families.

Other children are located through similarly nefarious means. Western adoption agencies often contract with in-country facilitators—sometimes orphanage directors, sometimes freelancers—and pay per-child fees for each healthy baby adopted. These facilitators, in turn, subcontract with child finders, often for sums in vast excess of local wages. These paydays give individuals a significant financial incentive to find adoptable babies at almost any cost. In Guatemala, where the GDP per capita is \$4,700 a year, child finders often earned \$6,000 to \$8,000 for each healthy, adoptable infant. In many cases, child finders simply paid poor families for infants. A May 2007 report on adoption trafficking by the Hague Conference on Private International Law reported poor Guatemalan families being paid between \$300 and several thousand dollars per child.

Sometimes, medical professionals serve as child finders to obtain infants. In Vietnam, for instance, a finder's fee for a single child can easily dwarf a nurse's \$50-a-month salary. Some nurses and doctors coerce birth mothers into giving up their children by offering them a choice: pay outrageously inflated hospital bills or relinquish their newborns. Illiterate new mothers are made to sign documents they can't read. In August 2008, the U.S. State Department released a warning that birth certificates issued by Tu Du Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City—which in 2007 had reported 200 births a day, and an average of three abandoned babies per 100 births—were "unreliable." Most of the hospital's "abandoned" babies were sent to the city's Tam Binh orphanage, from which many Westerners have adopted. (Tu Du Hospital is where Angelina Jolie's Vietnamese-born son was reportedly abandoned one month after his birth; he was at Tam Binh when she adopted him.) According to Linh Song, executive director of Ethica, an American nonprofit devoted to promoting ethical adoption, a provincial hospital's chief obstetrician told her in 2007 "that he provided 10 ethnic minority infants to [an] orphanage [for adoption] in return for an incubator."

To smooth the adoption process, officials in the children's home countries may be bribed to create false identity documents. Consular officials for the adopting countries generally accept whatever documents they receive. But if a

local U.S. Embassy has seen a series of worrisome referrals—say, a sudden spike in healthy infants coming from the same few orphanages, or a single province sending an unusually high number of babies with suspiciously similar paperwork—officials may investigate. But generally, they do not want to obstruct adoptions of genuinely needy children or get in the way of people longing for a child. However, many frequently doubt that the adoptions crossing their desks are completely aboveboard. “I believe in intercountry adoption very strongly,” says Katherine Monahan, a U.S. State Department official who has overseen scores of U.S. adoptions from around the world. “[But] I worry that there were many children that could have stayed with their families if we could have provided them with even a little economic assistance.” One U.S. official told me that when embassy staff in a country that sent more than 1,000 children overseas last year were asked which adoption visas they felt uneasy about, they replied: almost all of them.

Most of the Westerners involved with foreign adoption agencies—like business people importing foreign sneakers—can plausibly deny knowledge of unethical or unseemly practices overseas. They don’t have to know. Willful ignorance allowed Lauryn Galindo, a former hula dancer from the United States, to collect more than \$9 million in adoption fees over several years for Cambodian infants and toddlers. Between 1997 and 2001, Americans adopted 1,230 children from Cambodia; Galindo said she was involved in 800 of the adoptions. (Galindo reportedly delivered Angelina Jolie’s Cambodian child to her movie set in Africa.) But in a two-year probe beginning in 2002, U.S. investigators alleged that Galindo paid Cambodian child finders to purchase, defraud, coerce, or steal children from their families, and conspired to create false identity documents for the children. Galindo later served federal prison time on charges of visa fraud and money laundering, but not trafficking. “You can get away with buying babies around the world as a United States citizen,” says Richard Cross, a senior special agent with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement who investigated Galindo. “It’s not a crime.”

ROCKING THE CRADLE

Buying a child abroad is something most prospective parents want no part of. So, how can it be prevented? As international adoption has grown in the past decade, the ad hoc approach of closing some corrupt countries to adoption and shifting parents’ hopes (and money) to the next destination has failed. The agencies that profit from adoption appear to willfully ignore how their own payments and fees are causing both the corruption and the closures.

Some countries that send children overseas for adoption have kept the process lawful and transparent from nearly the beginning and their model is instructive. Thailand, for instance, has a central government authority that counsels birth mothers and offers some families social and economic support so that poverty is never a reason to give up a child. Other countries, such as Paraguay and Romania, reformed their processes after sharp surges in shady adoptions in the 1990s. But those reforms were essentially to stop international adoptions almost entirely. In 1994, Paraguay sent 483 children to the United States; last year, the country sent none.

For a more comprehensive solution, the best hope may be the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, an international agreement designed to prevent child trafficking for adoption. On April 1, 2008, the United States formally entered the agreement, which has 75 other signatories. In states that send children overseas and are party to the convention, such as Albania, Bulgaria, Colombia, and the Philippines, Hague-compatible reforms have included a central government authority overseeing child welfare, efforts to place needy children with extended families and local communities first, and limits on the number of foreign adoption agencies authorized to work in the country. The result, according to experts, has been a sharp decline in baby buying, fraud, coercion, and kidnapping for adoption.

In adopting countries, the convention requires a central authority—in the United States’ case, the State Department—to oversee international adoption. The State Department empowers two nonprofit organizations to certify adoption agencies; if shady practices, fraud, financial improprieties, or links with trafficking come to light, accreditation can be revoked. Already, the rules appear to be having some effect: Several U.S. agencies long dogged by rumors of bad practices have been denied accreditation; some have shut their doors. But no international treaty is perfect, and the Hague Convention is no exception. Many of the countries sending their children to the West, including Ethiopia, Russia, South Korea, Ukraine, and Vietnam, have yet to join the agreement.

Perhaps most important, more effective regulations would strictly limit the amount of money that changes hands. Per-child fees could be outlawed. Payments could be capped to cover only legitimate costs such as medical care, food, and clothing for the children. And crucially, fees must be kept proportionate with the local economies. “Unless you control the money, you won’t control the corruption,” says Thomas DiFilipo, president of the Joint Council on International Children’s Services, which represents more than 200 international adoption organizations. “If we have the greatest laws and the greatest regulations but are still sending \$20,000 anywhere—well, you can bypass any system with enough cash.”

Improved regulations will protect not only the children being adopted and their birth families, but also the consumers: hopeful parents. Adopting a child—like giving birth—is an emotional experience; it can be made wrenching by the abhorrent realization that a child believed to be an orphan simply isn't. One American who adopted a little girl from Cambodia in 2002 wept as she spoke at an adoption ethics conference in October 2007 about such a discovery. "I was told she was an orphan," she said. "One year after she came home, and she could speak English well enough, she told me about her mommy and daddy and her brothers and her sisters."

Unless we recognize that behind the altruistic veneer, international adoption has become an industry—one that is often highly lucrative and sometimes corrupt—many more adoption stories will have unhappy endings. Unless adoption agencies are held to account, more young children will be wrongfully taken from their families. And unless those desperate to become parents demand reform, they will continue—wittingly or not—to pay for wrongdoing. "Credulous Westerners eager to believe that they are saving children are easily fooled into accepting laundered children," writes David Smolin, a law professor and advocate for international adoption reform. "For there is no fool like the one who wants to be fooled."
