

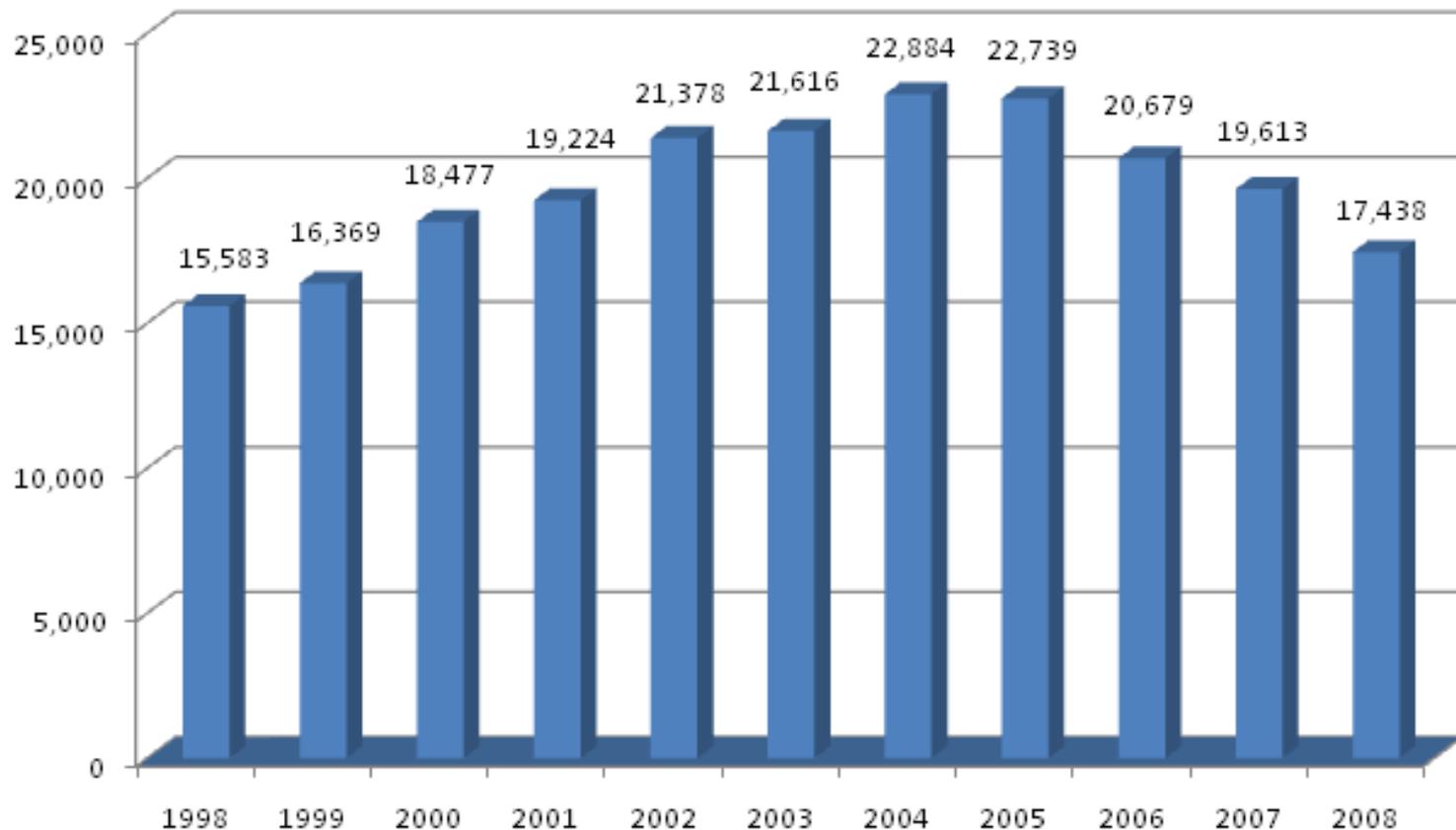
Complex Family Relationships in International Adoption:

Search, Reunion, and Contact

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Total Adoptions to the U.S.

Adoptions to the United States



Top Ten Sending Countries

(http://adoption.state.gov/news/total_chart.html)

	FY 2008	FY 2007	FY 2006	FY 2005	FY 2004
1	Guatemala 4,123	China 5,453	China 6,493	China 7,906	China 7,044
2	China 3,909	Guatemala 4,728	Guatemala 4,135	Russia 4,639	Russia 5,865
3	Russia 1,861	Russia 2,310	Russia 3,706	Guatemala 3,783	Guatemala 3,264
4	Ethiopia 1,725	Ethiopia 1,255	South Korea 1,376	South Korea 1,630	South Korea 1,716
5	South Korea 1,065	South Korea 939	Ethiopia 732	Ukraine 821	Kazakhstan 826
6	Vietnam 751	Vietnam 828	Kazakhstan 587	Kazakhstan 755	Ukraine 723
7	Ukraine 457	Ukraine 606	Ukraine 460	Ethiopia 441	India 406
8	Kazakhstan 380	Kazakhstan 540	Liberia 353	India 323	Haiti 356
9	India 307	India 416	Colombia 344	Colombia 291	Ethiopia 289
10	Colombia 306	Liberia 314	India 320	Philippines 271	Colombia 287

Complex Families in International Adoption

□ International adoption brings:

- Birth Parents (from countries with social, economic, and political environments that can result in relinquishment or abandonment)
- Children (orphaned, abandoned, or over-quota children)
- Adoptive Parents (childless, altruistic, single-parent led, or religious)
- Cultures (birth country cultures and adoptive country culture)
- Countries (spans at least two countries)
- Races (may span at least two racial groups)

together through an ever-evolving practice without clear rules and expectations

- Does the international nature of these adoptions really mean little if any birth parent contact?
- Must families negotiate lifelong adoption issues with little, if any, expectation of birth parent contact?

Contexts for International Adoption

Triad Contact

- Relationship between international birth parents and adoptive parents
 - Adoptive parents as caretakers, biology endures, gratitude, fantasies
 - Affected by fears, disappointments, sympathy, resentment
 - Birth parents as foreign, unrelatable, trapped, child-like
- Relationship between international birth parents and adoptee
 - Birth parents are idealized, denigrated, feared, longed for, foreign, unrelatable, poor, pitied, powerless, heartless, victims of oppression (social and political)
 - Adoptee as angry, resentful, damaged, lucky, grateful, scared, sad, rejecting birth culture
- Other Contextual Factors
 - Social class differences between birth and adoptive families
 - Projections about the character of birth parents given cultural, social, and political constraints that led to relinquishment

Challenges to International Birth Parent Contact

- ❑ Translation services needed—dynamics dramatically affected
- ❑ Social class differences
 - Financial means to travel
 - Cultural responsibilities of children in birth countries (regardless of adoption status—bloodlines endure adoption)
- ❑ Cultural attitudes toward bloodlines and adoption differ
- ❑ If birth parent and adoptive parent contact ever occurs, it will have additional layers of complexity—race, culture, language
 - Complicated by hierarchical attitudes toward adoptees' birth cultures (e.g., culturally disadvantaged or cultural anthropologist)
- ❑ Generational patterns of international adoption created vastly different adoption stories for adopted people

International Adoptee Fantasies About Birth Parent Contact

- ❑ Projections about poverty and cultural mistrust impact nature of fantasies
- ❑ Childhood fantasies impact by the foreignness, distance, and unfamiliarity of birth country
- ❑ Images of birth parents range from royalty to paupers
- ❑ Fantasy about identification with and acceptance within birth culture
- ❑ Dream of international custody options: one month w/birth parents, one with adoptive parents

Expectations for International Searches

- ❑ Little if any chance of search and reunion
 - Few or non-existent records
 - Language and cultural barriers
 - South Korea and cases of reunion in China
- ❑ Little likelihood of a birth parent reclaiming child
- ❑ If a child was “abandoned” and no “adoption plan was made, then the birth parents truly don’t want contact
- ❑ Birth families are “out of sight, out of mind”
- ❑ Generational shifts in searches
 - Korean adoption—searching as adults
 - Recent international adoptees—adoptive parents initiating searches

Searching for Person, Place, or Idea

- What is a “Successful” search?
 - Finding birth families?
 - Resolving the loss
 - Finding Person, Country/Place, Ideas/Knowledge
- Focus tends to be on finding a particular person rather than the meaning of the search
- International adoptees may search for their birth culture (which can be just as elusive as birth parents)
- Identity process for adoptees tends to incorporate some attitude toward search

Obstacles for International Searchers

- ❑ Logistics:
 - (1) Language, (2) Distance, (3) Lack of familiarity with the foreign country's system, and (4) Lack of connections within the foreign country
- ❑ Cultural Taboos—unsure if the social (S. Korea), political (China), or personal circumstances that lead to your relinquishment have changed
- ❑ No format or systematic process for searching in some countries
- ❑ Birth country regulations on searches but new hope due to support via Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (1993)
- ❑ Pre-adoptive and/or early post-adoptive contact is virtually non-existent
- ❑ Supports for Searchers: Organizations, TV, Newspaper

Research on International Searches & Reunions: Complications

- Fear the reaction of the birth country?
 - Discontinuing international adoption programs
 - Closed adoptions
- Difficulty identifying birth families due to social stigma, policies, language, and cultural values

Research on International Searches & Reunions

- ❑ Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst (2008) studied international adoptees in The Netherlands via a longitudinal study. $N= 1417$ young adults aged 24 to 30 ($M=26.24$, $SD=1.365$).
- ❑ Uninterested Non-Searchers (36.41%), Interested Non-Searchers (31.97%), Searchers (17.64%), Reunited Searchers (13.97%)
- ❑ Complicated findings:
 - Searchers had higher problem levels but those problems were not caused by search itself but were present before search began
 - Contradictions with prior research: Search is normative

Complex Families: Observations & Themes

- ❑ Lack of definitive reasons for birth parent relinquishment creates boundary difficulties for adoptive parents
 - Leads to avoidance of full adoption story so children have no grounding or basis for contact fantasies
- ❑ Greater commitment to heritage tours for adoptees
- ❑ Focus of adoptive parents may be on celebrating and exoticizing birth countries' cultures
- ❑ Families may struggle with connections to American communities from adoptees' birth countries
- ❑ Adjustments and search issues for international adoptees are often conceptualized as “adoption issues” rather than issues about race and culture
- ❑ Tendency to focus on whether issues are related to adoption status or whether they are part of “normal development”