



Baby girls adopted by Westerners are photographed before they leave China



Navigating adoption's choppy international waters, many would-be parents find hope, love and happiness. For some, though, it's heartache, scams and baby brokers, writes *Sue Russell*

# The Baby Maze

International adoptions are thriving. In 2004, Americans alone adopted almost 23,000 children inter-country, up from 1994's total of 8,333. Most work well and it's a generally beautiful way to secure orphans' futures, one child at a time.

It would be remiss to ignore the caveats, however. The many thousands aching to adopt are often emotionally vulnerable and when you throw scam artists into the mix — offering ineligible, unavailable or illegally trafficked children — the outcome can be devastating.





This photo: Angelina Jolie and adopted son Maddox from Cambodia – Jolie has said she wants to adopt many more children from different countries  
 Right: Russia's Yekaterina Lakhova who heads the state Duma's Women and Family Affairs Committee, complains that Russian children are being sold overseas



Latrace denies paying West's child's mother and dismisses all allegations against her as mere misunderstandings. Reportedly, West has an e-mail that strongly indicates that Latrace has lied – and she will need it. For after Mosely and West spread their cautionary tales on message boards, Latrace sued them for libel.

Latrace does have her defenders, with one agency owner even likening her to Mother Teresa. But in March 2005, the Vietnam Embassy in Washington, DC, labelled her "a child trafficker for money." The libel case and other investigations are ongoing.

Americans adopted 4,090 Vietnamese children between 1994 and 2002 when Vietnam stopped adoptions to fix their problems with infant trafficking and corruption. A new bilateral agreement could soon get things moving again.

Sadly, Latrace's alleged scams are not isolated cases. A Massachusetts couple learned that the infant they had "on hold" had been adopted months earlier by Australians. An American felt forced to drop her adoption after a tearful meeting with the child's so-called foster

mother left her convinced she was the birth mother. A Hawaii-based couple who saw five different dates of birth on their future child's documents pulled the plug, fearing she might not really be an orphan.

Russia's adoption scene is a veritable cauldron of turbulence. Government liberals and child care agencies are butting heads with nationalists like Yekaterina Lakhova who heads the State Duma's Women and Family Affairs

is now serving 12 years in prison for the abuse-related death of her adopted son.

One murder is definitely one too many. Yet crying politics, Lakhova's critics note that she fails to mention the approximately 2,000 children who die in Russia each year from domestic violence.

More than 700,000 Russian children are thought to be without families. Lakhova says 7,400 were adopted internally in 2004 while

9,600 went overseas. Several international agencies have lost their licenses to operate in Russia and Lakhova's battle already has had a negative impact. Close to 6,000 of Russia's 2004 inter-country adoptions were with the US and early numbers for 2005 show a one-third drop. Meanwhile, Russia's domestic adoptions have also plummeted to half the number of a decade ago.

Lakhova and her followers also want a bilateral treaty allowing Russian officials to follow and intervene in adopted children's lives after they go overseas. That could singlehandedly grind their inter-country adoptions to a halt.

**The costs of adoption vary. Overseas, it could run to US\$35,000 with China and some South American countries in the low \$20,000s, but Russia costs \$35,000 or even \$50,000**

Committee. Lakhova complains that Russian children are being sold overseas and that the system is geared to that, rather than to finding them Russian families.

Claiming there had been 13 recent deaths of Russian children living overseas, Lakhova is calling for a moratorium on adoptions anywhere Russian adoptees have met with violence. And that includes the US. While some abuse claims are hotly contested, one infamous example is inescapable. Irma Pavlis of Chicago



Inset above: The White Swan Hotel in Guanzhou, China is a popular place for newly adoptive parents to stay and interact with other parents in a similar situation  
 This photo: Mia Farrow was one of the first Hollywood stars who helped make adoption an acceptable norm. Farrow has adopted 10 children since the 1970s. She and Woody Allen are pictured with adopted daughter and son Dylan and Isiah, and biological son Satchel



Judi Mosely of Saipan privately adopted Tran Thi Thuy, her little Vietnamese girl, in 2000. Months later, Mosely stared disbelievingly at Tran Thi Thuy's photograph up on a website offering Vietnamese children for adoption. Worse, messages posted by American Carrie West made it all too clear that she believed that she was adopting Tran Thi Thuy through an agency in Ohio. It fell to Mosely to break the news to West.

West had even travelled to Vietnam to see Tran Thi Thuy. Once there, her agency contact Mai Lyi Latrace was absent but Latrace's mother informed West that Tran Thi Thuy had tuberculosis and couldn't be adopted. West left Vietnam devastated but sent money back for the child's medical care. She soon

returned to Vietnam and adopted her daughter Pham Thi Thuy.

In more heartache for West, she later learned that Pham Thi Thuy was allegedly taken from her birth mother illegally, with Latrace promising the mother US\$500 for giving her up. Meanwhile, Latrace was also busy on the Internet, brazenly seeking donations to build an orphanage where Tran Thi Thuy could live.

Appalled, Mosely and West collaborated on a sting. Mosely posted a note using an alias and incredibly, she was once again offered her own daughter, Tran Thi Thuy. There's more. A California agency owner is claiming that she gave Latrace \$35,000 to build a non-existent orphanage.

## The Chinese Landscape

Hard numbers for orphans and adoptions are often tough to come by and Asia's no exception. However, China reportedly has around one million orphans in approximately 1,000 state-run orphanages. The Asian take on adoption is steeped in history and a long tradition of family being built on blood relations. Even today, few get past that to fully embrace non-related children as their own.

Abby Chen of the Child Welfare League Foundation told the *Taipei Times*: "Taiwanese families view children as precious possessions and a means to carry on the family name. Therefore, adoptive parents in Taiwan are often people who suffer from infertility."

In Taiwan, adoption remains a shameful, secret, last-ditch option for the infertile. The Taiwanese fear an adopted child will leave to find their birth parents. Yet although Taiwan is focused on boosting domestic adoptions and gives welfare groups government subsidies, adoption is falling. Of around 5,000 children abandoned annually, only about 10 percent will be adopted domestically. The Dutch, Taiwan's top

adoptors, have only taken 663 children in the past 15 years.

Gretchen Ryan of Hong Kong's Mother's Choice believes the stigma and shame surrounding adoption in Asia is "pretty universal." It's still seen as a second-best choice, and there's still "much focus on why you could not give birth."

Yet, as an adoptive mother with an Asian-Western family and a child with very apparent special needs, Ryan has felt appreciation, gratitude and curiosity from locals, never resentment. And in China, domestic adoptions have risen along with inter-country ones.

"I have heard and seen some Chinese express a sense of shame that China does not take care of their own children, and allows them to be adopted overseas," says Ryan. "These same people will express gratitude to the adoptor. So it is often mixed emotions, positive and negative feelings. I believe that in the future of China, as in Korea, there will be more focus on domestic adoption and the number of international adoptions will decrease."



Who wants the Russian government breathing down their neck when they get home?

"I think it's embarrassing to some in Russia that they can't take care of their own children and that they're being placed abroad," explains Anne Carin, director of Canada's Choices Adoption and Counselling Services. "But there are thousands of children in orphanages in Russia who desperately need homes."

The costs of adoptions vary. In the US, an agency adoption might cost \$25,000. Overseas, it could run \$12,000 to \$35,000 with China and some South American countries generally in the low \$20,000s, but Russia costs \$35,000 or even \$50,000.

Under Russian law, adoption is meant to be free, although certain expenses are understandable. But cultural differences do make it tough to know when inter-country adoptions cloak a

rip-off or worse, baby selling. Adoption attorney Kevin Cohen, founder of the Adoption Annex in New York state, concedes that it's sometimes hard to distinguish corruption from business as usual. A warning sign? "It's not uncommon for them to say, 'You need to bring \$10,000 unmarked, unfolded bills,'" he says. "Why? I don't know, and I don't ask. The agencies don't ask. They have a good thing going. In the culture of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republic, corruption was par for the course."

Against all this tumult, China's efficient

adoption infrastructure looks positively peachy. "They don't want their children growing up in orphanages," says Anne Carin, "so it's win-win. It's fiscally and socially responsible, everything's in place to make it smooth, and families know the exact timeline."

Thanks to China's 1979 one child law, more than 95 percent of the waiting children are abandoned girls under age two, housed in orphanages. Forty-nine percent of Chinese children in inter-country adoptions are under one year old, 48 percent are under four years old.

Fees are approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000,

**"People waiting on our domestic list could wait for two years, five years," admits Anne Carin. "They may never get placed if birth mothers are involved"**



Brad Pitt with Angelina Jolie's adopted daughter Zahara

agency and turn her into a sex slave.

One simple follow-up visit by social workers would have thrown up a red flag: where was the child's bedroom? Mancuso's apartment had just one bed. No visit ever happened. State laws vary but in Pennsylvania, while post-placement supervision is required for domestic adoptions, it's not needed for international. Mancuso is now behind bars but it took an unthinkable five years to catch him via sexually explicit photographs of the child he put on the Internet.

Of several matching methods being tried, one controversial scheme had batches of Ukrainian children spending last summer with American families in places like Virginia and South Carolina. The idea was for would-be

plus adoptive parents are required to donate \$3,000-\$4,000 to a state orphanage. "This donation is *not* a bribe," the US Department of State's website points out. Americans adopt more Chinese children than any other nationality: 7,044 in 2004 compared to 1995's 2,130.

Back in the States, although two percent of Americans aged under 18 are adopted, the roughly 120,000 annual domestic adoptions are dropping. Why the fall off? Many factors are at play.

Where once adoptees were expected to mirror their new families in religion, race and even physical characteristics, by the mid 1970s, parameters were shifting. Stigmas about infertility and even single motherhood have evaporated in much of Western Europe and North America. This directly translates into less newborns being put up for adoption.

In addition, Hollywood has also jumped on the bandwagon in recent times, with Mia Farrow, Sharon Stone, Nicole Kidman, Angelina Jolie, Michelle Pfeiffer and Calista Flockhart all adopting.

Many people now care little if their adoptive children look like possible blood relatives, so trans-racial and inter-country adoption is ever more popular. Population growth shifts also factor in. Western Europe's birthrate drops as China's one child law makes more babies available in China.

Some would-be adoptors are drawn by overseas adoptions, but not all. North American homosexuals are more likely to adopt domestically where acceptance of same-sex couple parenting is increasing. Overseas, they'll likely face prejudice.

Using an agency to adopt is one of the best safeguards but occasionally, things still go horribly wrong. Pittsburgh sex offender Matthew Mancuso, a single, 41-year old-man, managed to adopt a little girl from Russia through an

adopters to get to know a child and test the waters, no strings attached.

"Can you imagine how devastating it would be to go back and not be chosen?" says Anne Carin. "A child will be on their best behaviour, trying desperately to be picked. It's a cruel thing to do to a child."

A creative and positive way of showcasing special needs children in the US, however, is in a photographic exhibition called the Heart Gallery. In November, Norfolk, Virginia, staged one of these shows. Professional photographers donate their talent and the resulting personality-revealing shots of hard-to-place kids are coupled with endearing anecdotes. Originally inspired by an exhibit in New Mexico, this idea has since taken flight in dozens of US states.

The hurdles North Americans face in adopting children currently in care in the US and Canada certainly pushes some to look abroad.

"People waiting on our domestic list could wait for two years, five years," admits Anne



**Above:** Photographer Jesse Miller, left, and Carolyn Eastman look at photos of children that are up for adoption. Child welfare officials hope the photos of children in the various travelling Heart Galleries will inspire instant emotional connections and help find "forever homes" for older children and sibling groups – those foster kids in the state system for whom permanent placement has always been difficult  
**Right inset:** Adoptive parents in China must fill out official papers as part of the adoption procedure



In Pakistan, about 50,000 children were orphaned or separated from their parents after the recent earthquake

## In the Wake of Nature's Wrath

**A**fter December 2004's cataclysmic tsunami and Pakistan's devastating October 2005 earthquake, the death tolls were incomprehensible. While thousands upon thousands searched desperately for lost loved ones, agencies everywhere handled a massive outpouring of calls from people anxious to adopt young victims.

Yet in the chaotic aftermath of tragedy, these children were incredibly vulnerable to exploitation, and officials knew it. They had legitimate fears of child traffickers and pedophiles lurking among the genuinely kindhearted. What's more, no one knew for sure which children were actually orphaned. Unicef encourages a two year wait post-disaster for that reason alone.

One guesstimate was that 50,000 children were orphaned or separated from their parents in Pakistan, and President General Pervez Musharraf moved fast to ban these innocents from being handed over to anyone.

As for the tsunami victims, adoption simply isn't part of Indonesian or Sri Lankan culture. Americans adopted just 70 children from Thailand in 2003. Indonesia requires would-be adoptive parents to live there for two years. Plus, they must be of the same religion as the child, partly to prevent Muslim conversion to Christianity.

No wonder US authorities cautioned Americans that adopting tsunami victims was inappropriate and possibly illegal. Only local governments, they warned, would decide if and when foreigners could adopt.



Carin whose agency is in British Columbia. "They may never get placed if birth mothers are involved in choosing the home. Whereas going to China, you definitely will have a child." Interestingly, she helps a few Canadian families adopt from the US, but not the other way around. "It's usually black infants," she says. "I know it's a supply and demand thing, but it's always really disturbing to us that it's cheaper to get a black baby."

When American or Canadian caucasians seek out caucasian children, however, it's sometimes simply because they want to avoid complications for the child later in life. "Racism is alive and well in North America," says Carin. "And it's very difficult helping a child of another race integrate, because you won't see or experience the racism. It's just like men can't see when women are being discriminated against. It's very subtle sometimes."

She admits that it would probably be easier and quicker to place a Chinese girl with a British Columbia family than a black or handicapped American child. No matter the country, sadly, very few special needs kids ever find adoptive parents.

Yet trans-racial adoption expert Elizabeth Dore, Associate Professor of Educational Studies at Virginia's Radford University, sees African-American children's adoption prospects in the US as brighter than ever before. "In many geographical areas, people are more open to 'differences'," she explains. "There is much more acceptance and openness than even 10 years ago."

**Right:** Four-year-old Sasha Nikultsev raises his hand during lessons in an orphanage just outside Moscow  
**Below:** Orphans from India's tsunami pray in a residential home. Despite the billions of dollars that have been put towards the devastation, the recovery process is slow and the situation still grim for many local inhabitants



Any underlying problems in a trans-racial or inter-country adoption often emerge between ages 12 and 14. "Families," says Dore, "who have adopted children from other countries who have been in an orphanage for a number of years report that even though the children had food and toys, the missing element was the touching and hugging. That never happened, causing the bond not to be made."

Would-be adoptors have to stay on top of the often confusing policy and rule changes of individual nations. "Countries open and close in the blink of an eyelash," explains Cohen. For instance, the Ukraine temporarily froze international adoptions in 2005. And while the US is still working with Guatemala, Canada

has stopped doing so. "Due," says Carin, "to a rather damning report on what was happening there around the selling of babies."

You really need a world chart to keep track of all the open and closed doors. Take Canadians. For them, Romania, Guatemala, Sarawak, Cambodia, Vietnam and Georgia are currently closed, and Sierra Leone is on hold.

Assessing the scene for Americans, Cohen sighs: "Romania was closed, now it's open. Russia was open for many years, now it's the wild, wild west out there. When they

have to live with knowing that she could take the baby back for that first 30 days. So it's a very emotional, very difficult time."

Wanting to shorten their time spent on tetterhooks can also tempt people to look overseas. North Americans find inter-country adoptions often firm up fairly quickly, yet Kevin Cohen cautions against over-confidence.

"Literally, until you are not only on American soil but outside of the airport terminal," he explains, "the child is still the property of the other country. It's like torture because you

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announced a moratorium in December 2004, no one knew how to define it. If you had a date to go over there and bring a child back, did you lose it? It was chaotic."

It's heartrending when disappointment strikes excited prospective parents at the eleventh hour, but it can happen with any adoption.

In British Columbia, a birth parent is not allowed to sign the adoption consent until day 11 and has 30 days from the birth to change her mind. "So people take the baby home from the hospital," says Carin, "but

don't want to borrow the kid. You want the kid to be yours, and you want to be theirs."

Open adoptions are now increasingly popular domestically where sealing birth parents' names and locations used to be the norm in North America. Some families like keeping contact with birth mothers, exchanging addresses and baby photographs. By contrast, the closed adoptions overseas appeal to those who want zero contact with the birth mother and fear an unwanted knock on the door years later.

Cohen, an adoptee himself, is adamant that

## The Impact of Adoption on Orphans

Global statistics indicate that there are 40 to 60 million orphans worldwide, with 13 million in sub-Saharan Africa alone due to AIDS

### Leading Countries Where Americans Adopt

China: **7,044**  
Russia: **5,865**  
Guatemala: **3,264**  
S. Korea: **1,716**  
Kazakhstan: **826**  
Ukraine: **723**  
India: **406**  
Haiti: **356**  
Ethiopia: **289**  
Columbia: **287**

(US Department of State statistics based on US visas issued to orphans in 2004)

### The Rules:

You practically need a handbook to follow each country's quirks and rules

- You must be under age 43 to adopt an Ethiopian infant.
- Bulgaria has over 30 orphanages housing children from ages one to six. You

can't adopt a child under one year old, nor can you adopt if you already have a child (unless it's another Bulgarian child).

- Brazil will adopt to singles or couples, married or unmarried.
- While the US puts no restrictions on adoptive parents, the birth mother might – perhaps requesting they be of the same racial makeup.
- El Salvador requires married couples be married for over five years. Yet adoptors can be divorced or single. If single, however, they're given extra vetting to explain why.
- Mexico only adopts out children over three years old.
- The Philippines wants married couples aged over 27 who are practising Christians. Adoptive parents are put on six months probation and adoption can take one to three years after documents are filed.

all children should be told they're adopted so early that it becomes something they've always known. Carin suggests making it a story they'll ask to hear over and over. "If you go to China to get your child," she says, "take pictures of when they're first put into your arms. That will be the child's story."

Gretchen Ryan of Hong Kong's Mother's Choice agency also favours families embracing a child's birth culture. "Once we adopt cross-culturally, we are never the same again," she says. "We embrace a new culture and we need to get to know it and learn the language and traditions. Heritage trips are so important."

Dore also favours telling children they're adopted. "Not only have the young people I've worked with had the regular doubts and questions such as, 'Who am I?' and 'Who do you think I am?'," she says, "they also wonder why they look different from the rest of their families."

Yet while there's much to commend keeping the heritage connection, Dore's experience suggests that it's not vital. "About half the families I've been involved with," she says, "kept their child in close contact with his/her ethnic heritage through weekend classes, cooking classes, and even returning to the birth country to see where they had been born. The other half did nothing special in this arena. And both were equally as successful." □



Photography: AFP; Ami Vitale/Getty Images; AP; Junko Kimura/Getty Images; Komersant Photo Agency; Reuters; Rex/Features; Sinopix