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From global families to domestic solutions: China's child welfare after international adoption

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ABSTRACT

China's recent decision to end its international adoption program marks a pivotal shift in the nation's child welfare landscape, concluding a 30 year policy that facilitated the placement of over 160,000 orphaned and abandoned children – many with disabilities and/or congenital diseases – into permanent families abroad. This policy change raises urgent concerns about the future of these vulnerable minors, particularly those with complex medical and developmental needs who are now at increased risk of prolonged institutionalization. This commentary explores the implications of this transition, emphasizing the potential developmental and psychosocial consequences for affected children. It proposes a set of actionable reforms, including the expansion of domestic adoption, the professionalization of foster and kinship care, the enhancement of institutional care quality, and the strengthening of cross-sector partnerships. These measures are essential to building a more inclusive, sustainable, and family-centered child welfare system in the post-international adoption era.

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Introduction

China's decision in September 2024 to terminate its international adoption policy marks a pivotal turning point in the country's child welfare landscape. For more than three decades, international adoption in China served as a critical outlet for orphaned and abandoned children, particularly those with disabilities, to find permanent families abroad: mainly in the United States, Canada, and Europe (Selman, 2015). Since 1992, more than 160,000 such children have been adopted abroad (Reuters, 2024). While Chinese officials acknowledge the contributions of international adoptive families, the practice has also faced significant criticism, including allegations of "baby buying" scandals, potential exploitation of birth families, and the commodification of children (Bartholet, 2007; Loyd, 2008; Parry, 2014).

Despite it, the cessation of this policy raises pressing concerns about the future of children who, in previous decades, might have found families abroad.

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This is particularly true for children with disabilities and/or complex medical and developmental conditions – groups who are least likely to be adopted domestically due to stigma, caregiving demands, and limited public support services. As China transitions away from intercountry adoption, a critical question emerges: is the domestic child welfare system equipped to meet the diverse and intensive needs of these vulnerable children?

This transition also invites renewed scrutiny of China's obligations under the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, which it ratified in 2005. The Convention, adopted in 1993, aims to safeguard the best interests of the child and prevent abduction, sale, and trafficking. Its core principles include the subsidiarity rule (prioritizing domestic care solutions), requirements for free and informed parental consent, prohibition of improper financial gain, and centralized oversight mechanisms (Hague Conference, 1993). Although China's formal alignment with these principles is evident, the degree to which they are consistently implemented remains contested (Selman, 2015). With the termination of international adoption, the burden now falls on domestic systems to ensure that child protection standards, particularly the prioritization of family-based and community-based care, are not only maintained but enhanced.

Against this backdrop, this commentary explores the implications of China's policy change and offers a set of policy recommendations aimed at strengthening domestic adoption, enhancing institutional care, expanding family-based alternatives, and fostering cross-sector collaboration. Together, these strategies represent a pathway toward a more equitable and sustainable child welfare system in post-international adoption China.

Background: changing landscape of child welfare in China

In the context of China, orphaned and abandoned children are either parentless or abandoned by their parents; in many cases, one parent has died and the other has relinquished him/her/them (Yin, 2024a). Since 1949, the Chinese government has assumed full responsibility for them through a centralized, state-managed childcare system. Institutional care has served as the core of this system, historically promoted not only as a protective mechanism but also as a symbol of socialist welfare success (Shang, 2001; Yao & Liu, 2018). All childcare institutions (known as *fuliyuan* in Chinese) operate under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), with most located in urban areas and primarily serving orphans who lost at least one parent (Shang et al., 2008). Later, the implementation of the One-Child Policy since 1979, combined with deeply rooted cultural preferences for sons, an underdeveloped social welfare system, and the collapse of traditional family support structures

amid rural-to-urban migration flows, resulted in the widespread abandonment of infant girls and children with disabilities and/or congenital conditions (Chen, 2019; K. Johnson, 1993; Wang, 2016; Yin, 2024a). At its peak, approximately 100,000 children were abandoned annually in China (Xin, 2010). According to the Children's Welfare Research Center (2011), the number of officially recognized orphans under MOCA reached 712,000 in 2010—excluding many additional cases likely to exist beyond official records. The initial system was under great pressure.

To respond, on the one hand, childcare institutions started accepting external fundings to improve care quality and expand facilities, often through increased cooperations with civil society and NGOs (Shang, 2002). But still, China's institutional care system was overwhelmed and under-resourced, unable to accommodate the rising number of orphaned and abandoned children (Jia et al., 2019; Shang et al., 2005). Risk factors of living in institutions at that time include material deprivation, substandard living conditions, inadequate caregiving practices, educational neglect, and pervasive social exclusion (Yin, 2024b). On the other hand, international adoption emerged as both a humanitarian response and a practical strategy to alleviate overcrowding in childcare institutions, especially after international media coverage exposed the dire conditions in many facilities (K. Johnson, 2004; Shang, 2001). Therefore, China opened its door to international adoptive families in 1992, and the establishment of the China Center of Adoption Affairs (CCAA) in 1996 further formalized intercountry adoption procedures and aligned them with international child protection standards, ultimately positioning China as one of the world's leading "sending" countries (Marn & Tan, 2015; Yin, 2024a). For the Chinese government, the policy also served diplomatic purposes, enhancing global ties while signaling a commitment to child welfare (Bartholet, 2012; K. Johnson, 2002).

In recent years, however, the profile of children in need of alterative care in China has changed further. While the overall number decreases, children with complex medical conditions, disabilities, and developmental delays now constitute the majority of those in care (CCAFC & CYRA,[1] 2012). This trend is driven by multiple intersecting factors. Financial strain is deemed as a major reason why many parents are unable/unwilling to care for children with disabilities (Chen, 2019). The costs associated with long-term medical treatment, specialized care, and education can be overwhelming. Furthermore, social stigma and cultural perceptions that associate disability with misfortune or disgrace deter families from seeking assistance or continuing care (Woods, 2021). The limited availability of community-based services – such as inclusive schools, rehabilitation facilities, and respite support – adds to the burden, making home care practically unmanageable for many (Xin, 2010). As a result, despite the legal prohibition of child abandonment in China, some families ultimately turn to institutional care as the only feasible means of securing necessary support for their children.

International adoption used to serve as a crucial pathway to permanent, family-based care for children with disabilities and complex needs in China after they were sent to institutions – a vital option that is no longer available following the cessation of the international adoption program. Meanwhile, these children are the least likely to be adopted domestically due to persistent stigma, the intensive caregiving they require, and the limited availability of support services (Yin, 2024a; Zhu, 2018). Consequently, they, although the number may be small, now face significantly increased risks of prolonged institutionalization, raising questions about whether they will receive care comparable to what international adoption could have provided. Currently, no comprehensive index directly compares services for children with disabilities and complex needs in China to those in receiving countries. Nevertheless, extensive global evidence highlights family-based care as markedly superior to institutionalization in terms of developmental, psychosocial, and health outcomes (Better Care Network, 2024; R. Johnson et al., 2006; Kendrick, 2013; MacLean, 2003; Petrowski et al., 2017; Sand et al., 2024; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Furthermore, children aging out of institutional care frequently face limited transitional support, resulting in heightened vulnerability to unemployment, housing instability, and ongoing marginalization (Yin, 2024c). The situation would be undoubtedly worse for those with disabilities and complex needs. Without urgent improvements in domestic childcare systems, ending international adoption exacerbates existing challenges and further jeopardizes the well-being and future prospects of these individuals.

Policy recommendations: toward domestic solutions

To address, a central priority is to promote domestic adoption. In China, national policy reforms are frequently rolled out through a centralized yet locally adaptive process. MOCA can lead the charge by issuing policy directives that are piloted in selected municipalities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen. These pilots may involve targeted recruitment campaigns, local media engagement, and financial subsidies coordinated through municipal civil affairs bureaus. Following positive evaluation, successful models can be scaled nationally via administrative circulars and integration into the State Council's Five-Year Plans, which set strategic priorities for local governments. MOCA can also tie compliance with reform goals to budget allocations or institutional performance evaluations.

While stigma surrounding adoption, particularly of non-biological children or those with disabilities and/or complex health needs, remains a barrier for many families in China, the country's policy history suggests that cultural norms are not immutable. For instance, China has successfully reshaped public attitudes toward family size through large-scale campaigns promoting the One-Child Policy in the 1980s and, more recently, encouraging multiple-

child families to address demographic decline (Cai & Feng, 2021). These policy shifts were reinforced by media messaging, community engagement, and tangible state support, leading to broad societal compliance. Similar strategies can be applied to promote domestic adoption. National campaigns that celebrate adoptive families, normalize adoption as a legitimate and valued form of parenthood, and actively challenge misconceptions, particularly around disability, could gradually shift public perception. These campaigns can be disseminated through state-controlled media outlets, public service advertisements, and popular platforms such as *Xuexi Qiangguo* and China Central Television, coordinated with the Central Propaganda Department. As in past policy campaigns (e.g., rural poverty alleviation), public figures and Party-endorsed narratives can amplify the message and foster moral legitimacy. With visible government endorsement and community-level engagement, domestic adoption could be culturally reframed as a meaningful and socially recognized contribution to child welfare and national development.

Equally important is improving the domestic adoption process itself. This includes streamlining bureaucratic procedures and offering tailored pre- and post-adoption services – such as disability-specific parenting education, home modifications, and access to subsidized medical care. Financial incentives like tax benefits, childcare subsidies, and housing assistance are also essential to reduce barriers for prospective adoptive families (Tang et al., 2024). Such changes could be mandated through MOCA-issued implementation guidelines, with performance indicators embedded in local officials' governance assessments to ensure compliance. Funding could be channeled via earmarked central government transfers or competitive grants to cities demonstrating capacity to innovate. Crucially, matching efforts should prioritize children with higher support needs, paired with long-term case management and linkage to community-based rehabilitation services.

Simultaneously, the quality of institutional care must be significantly strengthened for children who remain in state facilities. Although institutionalization should be minimized, existing institutions must evolve to provide specialized, child-centered care, particularly for children with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or trauma histories. Investments should focus on creating smaller, family-like environments, reducing caregiver-to-child ratios, and integrating multidisciplinary care teams that include pediatricians, mental health professionals, and disability specialists. Facilities must also ensure access to early intervention, rehabilitation, and inclusive education programs. Care standards should be formalized nationwide, with mandatory training for staff in trauma-informed care, disability inclusion, and individualized developmental planning.

The expansion and professionalization of foster and kinship care is another urgent priority. These family-based alternatives must be designed to accommodate children with complex medical and developmental needs. Foster and kinship caregivers should receive specialized training in caring for children with

disabilities, along with access to respite care, adaptive equipment, home-based nursing, and regular medical supervision. Legal recognition, financial support, and psychosocial services are also vital to sustaining these placements over time. Drawing from South Korea's investment in legal protections and subsidies for foster families (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2024), China could adopt similar strategies to scale its programs more equitably. Kinship caregivers, often grandparents or extended family, may face particular challenges in caregiving and should be supported through targeted assistance, including health care coordination and home-based service delivery.

To implement these reforms effectively, cross-sector collaboration is essential. Partnerships with NGOs, universities, and international organizations can bring technical expertise, disability-specific knowledge, and innovative models of care to complement state-led reforms (Marchetti, 2017). These collaborations should be formalized through mechanisms that support co-design of programs, capacity building, and evaluation. Additionally, disability advocacy organizations should be meaningfully involved in policy design to ensure reforms reflect the lived realities of children and families navigating disability within the child welfare system.

Conclusion

To conclude, China's decision to end international adoption marks a critical juncture in its child welfare trajectory. It places greater responsibility on domestic systems to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children. By promoting domestic adoption, improving institutional care, investing in family-based alternatives, and strengthening cross-sector collaboration, China has an opportunity to build a more inclusive and sustainable child welfare system-one that ensures every child has the chance to grow up in a safe, stable, and nurturing family environment.

Note

1. China Children and Adolescent Charity Relief Foundation and China Youth Research Association.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Shian Yin is a social work lecturer and researcher, holding a PhD degree from the University of Nottingham. His research interest falls in the following themes: Child Social Care; Care

Leavers; Lived Experiences in Care and Leaving Care; Child Welfare Practice and Policy; Youth Agency and Voice.

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