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# Searching in Photographs: Photography and the Chinese Birth Parent Search

LILI JOHNSON

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the use of photography by Chinese adoptees searching for their birth parents using the website *Baobei Hui Jia*. The website facilitates birth parent searches for individuals adopted from China both domestically and internationally. I theorize the use of baby photography and selfie photography by adoptees that create a digital archive defined by the shared experience of the birth parent search.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese transnational adoption, photography, internet, archives

WHEN I BEGAN my birth parent search in the summer of 2014, it was in the midst of growing attention given to Chinese adoptees searching for their birth parents. As the wave of Chinese-born children that had been adopted in the wake of China's one-child policy entered adolescence, narratives abounded in scholarship and popular media of young women embarking on journeys to find their birth parents. Films like *Somewhere Between* captured the ambivalences and tensions of being a transracial, transnational adoptee. The publicized journey of adoptee Jenna Cook on her birth parent search further encapsulated the complicated emotions of the birth parents she encountered (Cook; Venema). Furthermore, the recent publication of Kay Johnson's *China's Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One-Child Policy* on the stories of Chinese birth parents also greatly com-

plicated the representations of Chinese birth parents, Chinese transnational adoptees, and what it might mean to seek reunion between these two subject positions.

Having been adopted in 1991, just so slightly before this highly publicized wave of international adoption from mainland China following the implementation of China's highly publicized birth planning policy, I spent my adolescence representing "the Chinese adoptee" in my age and peer group. The surge of international adoption from China followed me by as few as three years.<sup>1</sup> But three years felt like many more as I entered adolescence. With a mother who was a China scholar, my beginnings were narrated with increasing complexity.<sup>2</sup> China's one-child policy forced families to make painful and difficult choices about family planning; I was abandoned because of the harsh implementation of these laws; my birth family was probably poor and felt an economic need for a son; I was not abandoned simply because they just "didn't like girls." With no specific information about the circumstances of my birth, I also fortified my own identity as a young woman adopted from China: my adoptive parents were just "my parents" (no "adoptive" modifier necessary) and they were my "real" parents; my relationship with China was complicated, but I was uninterested in finding my birth parents; and I was not "lucky" to be adopted since I was no more privileged than my nonadopted peers who were also in loving families.

I was the first adoptee that I knew who entered college. Throughout college, I spoke at several adoption-related events and talks as the adoptee representative. Parents of children a few years younger than me (in high school or middle school) were enthralled hearing me speak about the racism I encountered in high school, my thoughts on going back to China, and my achievements as an adoptee who successfully made it to college (which is usually all they knew about me). I enjoyed being the person who people saw me to be, and part of that presentation was being confident, well adjusted, and (what I thought was) without internal conflict about adoption. When I first began seeing a therapist who specializes in transnational adoption, it was perhaps too obvious that my confidence and resoluteness was a shield. Any implication that emotional troubles might be related to my adoption made me angry. Any critical reflection on my relationship with adoption was met with defense. However, as time went on, I found some small space to wonder about my birth family, to feel a sense of loss. To wonder about things I had refused to be curious about because I knew they were things I could never know. I allowed myself, first, to wonder what it might be like to *want* to know who my birth parents were, even as I knew that it was a near impossibility. I then found myself mourning the knowledge that it might be something I wanted deeply but could never have.

Finally, I found myself wanting to search, despite the miniscule chances of finding them. The chances were truly small. I was one of the first one-child policy-era adoptees from China, born in late 1990 and adopted in early 1991. This was shortly before there was high demand for Chinese infants for transnational adop-

tion and before orphanages began sending children that had arrived with notes and other information from their birth families. I was chosen to be adopted internationally precisely because there was little to no information about my finding or my birth family.

When I decided to embark on my birth parent search, I had realized that there might be something meaningful in the search process itself, beyond the end goal of reunion. As I began, I found myself among a significant population of Chinese adoptees, adopted both internationally and domestically, searching for their birth parents and facing incredible odds to find them. That is where this analysis begins. I recount my personal journey because for adoptees, their families, and the general population, it takes some preamble to understand the context for birth parent searching. It both is and isn't something you *just do*. It takes courage and curiosity and preparation. At the same time, there is never a "right time," and the process never feels complete. You just have to start somewhere, and for many, that somewhere is online.

## Searching Online, Searching in Photographs

From United States-based Facebook groups to Chinese applications like WeChat and QQ, the internet has become a place teeming with conversation about adoption from China. My introduction to the website that became the site of this research was through my own birth parent search. I started with a website called *Baobei Hui Jia* (宝贝回家) because the website has built a reputation in China for facilitating family reunions; it began as a forum for lost, missing, and kidnapped children in China both for children to search for parents and for parents to search for children. The site functions through the collection of thousands of profiles sortable by identifying details like province, age, and year of separation. These public profiles also include additional information like name, birthday, finding place, and a space to include one image.<sup>3</sup> Since the implementation of China's birth planning policy in the 1990s and the adoption of thousands of Chinese infants domestically and abroad, the website has expanded to include birth parent searches within China.

When I began this research in 2014, of the women with profiles on this website born between 1990 and 2000 searching for birth parents in Hubei Province, I was one of twenty-nine. Because of the particular geographic and historical circumstances, all of these women were separated from their first families in infancy and have no memory of their birth parents. While these circumstances do not characterize all adoptees from China, many were adopted as infants with little to no memory of or information about their birth families. These profiles represent a miniscule percentage of people who lost their birth families at that time and in that province,<sup>4</sup> yet the collectivity of these profiles provides a type of online ar-

chive that captures how the site is able to provide a tool for birth parent searching. Using these twenty-nine profiles as my sample, I translated all of the text in the profiles from Chinese to English and analyzed each profile as a composite web-page of image and text.

As I examined these profiles, this convergence of text and image became central to the very meaning of the birth parent search itself. Unified by the goal of identification and subsequent reunion, the textual descriptions of people's stories substantiated the reality of the people in the photographs. Of the photographs that I examined, all of them were either baby photographs or selfies. Because each profile was allowed only one image, the mix of ages represented served as a temporal symbol of the birth parent search attempting to reconcile the experiences of infancy with the desires of adulthood.

While the figure of the birth family is often related to the meaning of biology and genetic relation, the loss of the birth family is also meaningful because of what it represents: the absence or what I call "un-knowing" of the adoptee's beginnings, a birth story and the people who (in the absence of memory) can possess and share that birth story. Here, baby photography operates as the literal and symbolic referent to that "un-knowing," and the archive (of details, facts, and questions) produced in the birth parent search process becomes the corpus through which selfie photography as a mode of self-representation can be made meaningful in the context of one's adoption journey. In other words, the baby photograph and the selfie serve as uniquely meaningful visual representations of the self in the birth parent search process. Together, the profiles produce a type of archive defined by both the specificity of the individual and their entrance into a broader archive designed for a common purpose.

In this context, the importance of biology and the genetic and imaginative connection of the birth family to the adoptee are broadened to include not just what the birth family is, but the embodied knowledge and experience they carry that the adoptee lacks. I aim to theorize what it means to search for one's birth family in a way that is more complex than the often-assumed sole motivation to seek biological connection. In fact, none of the profiles I examined utilized language of biological relation to express motivations for searching. In accordance with views that critically interrogate narratives of essentialism in adoption, I suggest that the birth parent search is precisely about what Margaret Homans describes as "an irresolvable tension between essentializing and anti-essentialist apprehensions of human being: between belief in the innate givenness of human traits and belief in their madeness, contingency, and changeability" (3–4). In this way, the practices of birth parent searching constituted by this archive are far more complex than biological narratives suggest.

In the online profiles of this archive, I consider the photograph as an active participant in adoptee "making." That "madeness, contingency, and changeability" is captured in the photographic process and the process of birth parent searching

for which those photographs are used. In considering how the once-infant adoptee uses photography to seek knowledge of her birth family, I aim not only to shed light on the meaning of the search process but also to broaden the theoretical landscape from which we can consider memory and its very relationship to reality.

Like others who have utilized their own subjectivity as a launching point for theorization, I fully acknowledge my entrance into this material, and in fact I believe that it has given me a stronger theoretical foundation for analyzing this site. The intricacies of my own motivations to search were just as challenging to come by as the intellectual training to analyze theorists like Derrida in the first place. But ultimately, what I found to be most generative about this material was precisely the ways in which the analytical depth and breadth of theorizing birth parent searching engaged with the emotional landscape of those who are actually doing it. Furthermore, from a representational perspective, my personal involvement in the subject of this research has allowed me to think critically about the ethics of representing my “subjects,” of which I am also one. It is for this reason that I do not include any adoptee photographs from the website even as they are publicly available online. All adoptees are making themselves vulnerable through the process of birth parent searching. To express desire for something that may not be achievable is a risk. I believe that is partly why many do not choose to search. Loss is inherent when something you desire is impossible. Absence becomes ever present if one is willing to let oneself feel it.

## Beginnings and Un-knowing

For the adoptee, when does the infant in their baby photographs become the child they remember being? If I don’t remember the moment a photograph was taken, the person taking the photograph, the me that is represented by the photograph, how do I know it is even me? As an adoptee, what if there was some big mix-up and my photograph is actually of another child in the orphanage, whose picture was sent across oceans to a couple being told, “This is your baby”?<sup>5</sup> And isn’t the bigger conundrum the mix-up that *is* my life, a child that, following a photograph, was brought across oceans by a couple who had been told, “This is your baby”? And I wasn’t. Until I was. I have memories of only one family: a family I have been told is my second family. I know without remembering that I was born into a different, first, family. “Abandoned” is how my second mother describes it. At a point existing before memory, she (my second mother) entered my life and has since never left. There has been no overlap in my knowing two mothers, what adoption scholars have critically discussed as a “clean break” (Dorow 60; Yngvesson 8).

In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn examines the power of memory in relation to family photography and the “memory work” that “makes it possible to explore connections between ‘public’ historical events,

structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and 'personal' memory" (5). She writes, "Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves. To the extent that memory provides their raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account—whether forgotten or repressed—as by what is actually told. Secrets haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape" (2). Extending this description to the Chinese adoptee, what is "left out of the account" is further unsettled by the distinctive nature of its denial: neither forgotten nor repressed, our beginning is "left out" because it is completely unknown to everyone we know.

The birth parent search, then, serves as a type of "memory work," a "method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of 'lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work'" (Kuhn 9). In the active pursuit of the "untold stories" of their birth families, Chinese adoptees both embody and enact this type of "unearthing" in their subject position as adoptees. What comes before a beginning? Unlike children with ties to their birth families, we have no memories of birth: neither our own (as all babies lack) nor the memories of our family to bestow upon us as lore. As one profile writes, "I would very much like to know who my birth parents are. Then I could know my actual birthday, and any other details. I hope some good people might have some clues and get in touch with me." Here, the desire for knowledge of an "actual birthday" and "other details" articulate a motivation for searching.

For the Chinese adoptee searching for her birth parents, memory both creates her and destroys her. It becomes the foundation for understanding and forming the self (starting at the time when memory develops as a child) and it becomes the ether into which she loses a family, once known and now unknown. As E. Ethelbert Miller describes in the systemic absence of missing family members, "In many African American households there is a dark, empty space where a man or father once was. Black holes sucking us in and out. Where do we go? What do we leave behind?" (61). The birth story, too, is unknown, a black hole in the destructive force of memory. As we ask ourselves the same questions, "Where do we go? What do we leave behind?" birth parents become that which we cannot quite let go, cannot quite leave behind.

The baby photograph represents a question that may never be answered: what was at the beginning? Even though the infant experiences birth, it has no memory of that birth. We are told we have biological mothers and fathers and families and history. They are out *there* but never *here*. This is the only rational and physical explanation (that stork story is, after all, not to be believed beyond childhood). I have no witnesses of my birth and no evidence of it except for my very existence. In searching for birth parents, I search for a witness, someone who not only saw but also can testify to my birth. As Michael Taussig suggests, "*To witness*, as opposed to *see*, is to be implicated in a process of judgment—even if the court before

which one is called to bear witness is (how shall I put this?) imaginary . . ." (71). In the imaginary courtroom of the adoptee's consciousness, the figure of the birth mother represents both the evidence of birth and someone who can give testimony to it (even if that testimony includes "I don't remember"). As if forced to obey the court ruling of another person's trial, the adoptee has no choice but to believe that she has a birth history and a birth family, not based on her own memory of this early kinship but based on speculations of those who were not there. There is a before and after, and the demarcation is not the moment of adoption in fact but that which makes our adoption possible (at least for us "clean breaks"): the complete erasure of a life before abandonment. In our search for our birth parents, we search for the witnesses of the events that transpired decades ago, events for which we have no memory, no "judgment," no testimony of existence.

In the process of a Chinese adoptee searching for her birth family, the baby photograph operates as a reference to this very state of *un-knowing*. It serves as an indexical reference to this un-knowing by serving as the representational trace of that self. At the same time, the baby photograph also serves as the symbolic reference to that which was lost: a family, a set of memories held by the family of that infant, a story of infant personhood. As Barthes famously observes in *Camera Lucida*, "The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory . . . but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents" (85). This testimonial quality of the photograph as "what has been," particularly that of the baby photograph in the birth parent search process, complements the very desire to know "what has been" in regards to the adoptee's beginnings.

The traces of these lost memories become the foundation from which we conceptualize the past. In "Images of the Family Body in the Adoptee Search Narrative," Emily Hipchen considers the visuality of the family as an iteration of the body. She observes in a drawing of a photograph, a different type of family photograph, "What haunts this picture . . . are not the bodies it shows, but those it excludes" (176). In a triangulation of the photograph, the body it represents, and the narrative that contextualizes each, two profiles reflect these traces of a lost birth family through the figure of the umbilical cord. For one woman born in September of 1992 and found at a bus station in Xishui County in Hubei Province, the searching description reads, "Barely born, umbilical cord not yet dropped off, left inside of a vegetable basket." Another profile belonging to a woman born in October of 1991 and found in the same county includes the following description: "Skin color is very white, big eyes with double eyelid, umbilical cord had not yet fallen off, other details unclear." Here, the umbilical cord serves as both an indexical sign and a symbolic one. Its physical existence remains as a trace of birth, a tie to a birth



mother that was literally cut. Its symbolic existence reflects the severing of kinship and the loss and yearning for that family. Miller suggests, "The idea of family is both real and abstract. At times it is a small head falling asleep on your chest, a grin or smile with chocolate candy dripping from the sides. It is also the desire to be held, to find someone in a crowd after searching everywhere. The family is an image we seek so desperately" (61). How can photography help us find this family that "we seek so desperately"? While photography most broadly serves as a mnemonic provided by contemporary technology, helping us remember, recall, and relive an experience of memory, we hope it can help us find someone beyond the image.

In *The Book of Sarahs*, Catherine E. McKinley demonstrates this imaginative power of photography to express the desire for family. A mixed-race, transracial adoptee, McKinley recalls going to a Black Liberation Day festival as a teenager and snapping a photograph of a woman who catches her eye. She sees a resemblance and imagines that the woman could be her birth mother. Keeping the photograph and calling the woman Mattie, McKinley recounts, "Mattie stood up to the ever-elaborate stories of who she was and why we were apart. An adoptee's boon is that she can imagine and reimagine herself into any life" (30). For McKinley, the photograph not only represents a desire for a lost birth mother but also demonstrates the imaginative possibilities of photography for the adoptee. For others, photography physically facilitates reunion between adoptee and birth family. In "Relating to Photographs," Jo-Anne Driessens narrates her discovery of a photograph in the archive depicting a member of her birth family. Adopted in Brisbane, Australia, when she was two weeks old, Driessens finds a photograph of a woman named Nancy Chambers. She then learns that Chambers was her great-grandmother and describes the encounter with this photograph as "the beginning of a turning point in my life" (20). Here, Driessens literally finds her biological family members in a "crowd" (to use Miller's term) of photographs. In ways that McKinley and Chinese adoptees searching for their birth families only hope for, photography initiates the existence of a connection to a birth family.

On the website *Baobei Hui Jia*, photography attempts to initiate this existence of an unknown biological family. This fits with other considerations in adoption studies that take on the challenges of visually representing absent family (Deans; Hipchen). The baby photograph, in particular, functions on the level of family photography and ontological conundrum simultaneously. As Patricia Holland observes in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, within the practices of recording and preserving family photographs, "Dreams of home and a need for belonging come up against the conflicts and fragmentations of family history" (1). Holland and co-editor Jo Spence explore the meanings of domestic photography in its various cultural, social, and historical locations. Extending their framework, the baby photograph can be understood as part of an "act of faith in the future"

that produces the family album (1). Although by contrast the profile photos on *Baobei Hui Jia* are conspicuously not part of a family album, they nonetheless aspire to do the same type of work of fulfilling those “dreams of home” and “need for belonging.”

As a record and a creation of existence, the photograph becomes an ontological promise to the adoptee, a transmission of memory in nonexperiential ways. Akin to Marianne Hirsch’s theorization of “postmemory,” memory of adoption is produced through the inheritance of narrative, told and retold, that comes to define identity and produce new experiences of *being* born from those narratives. According to Hirsch, “the ‘generation after’” recalls experiences “only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” but in ways “so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (5). For the adoptee, the family album actively participates in a process of telling and retelling, building the identity of the infant into that of the Chinese adoptee. Born from the un-knowing of a lost birth family, the Chinese adoptee as infant in a photograph is embedded in a set of relations that produce her as such.

Even as the baby photograph serves as the starting point for the adoptive family album and for the adoptee’s coming into being, it is also part of another unknown archive, that of the birth family. When a baby photo is posted in *Baobei Hui Jia*, it faces both ways, referring to the person the baby became through adoption and also to the unknown family from where she came for which she now searches. As famous pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott explains, “I once risked the remark, ‘There is no such thing as a baby’—meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a *baby and someone*” (137). In the adoptive context, there is also someone in the shadow of Winnicott’s parental “someone”: the someone that is her birth family, made invisible by the state of un-knowing. The baby photograph testifies to the existence of the baby herself, and in so doing, it testifies to the only state in which the adoptee ever encountered both of those “someones,” the people who created her and the people who created her subjectivity as an adoptee.

It is in this insistence of the photograph that something or someone or some event existed that we build family narratives, a mix of fantasy and reality that allows us to imagine and remember in affective and material ways. As the family album becomes its own archive, it creates and recreates the past and carries it into the future. As Kuhn suggests, “The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain. From these traces, markers that point towards a past presence, to something that has happened in this place, a (re)construction, if not a simulacrum, of the event can be pieced together” (4). Like remembering the baby picture, the birth parent search seeks the memory of an absent beginning. We ask, how did this self come to be? “Like the scene of a crime,” the past holds a violent break, in which our history, present, and future veer in different directions that we must attempt to “(re)construct.”

## Searching for an Archive

Constituted by the combination of text and image, the profiles on *Baobei Hui Jia* produce a corpus of persons searching for their birth families. Each profile represents an individual through a sense of visual presence and narrative. Together, through the traces of reality to which they refer, the profiles constitute an archive. Historical considerations of the archive have actively challenged the structures of colonial, gendered, and racialized power embedded in the figure of the state archive (Lowe; Steedman; Stoler). In "The Body and the Archive," Allan Sekula examines the use of photography and the creation of an archive in the fields of physiognomy, phrenology, and taxonomy, through the use of photography in producing subjectivity (he examines the figure of the "criminal"). Sekula sees the photographic archive as a technology in the production of the modern subject. He understands photography to be foundational to this process, particularly in the distinction of criminal and, in relation, normative or law-abiding subjectivity. In *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning*, John Tagg uses a Foucauldian framework to interrogate the history of the photographic archive and its authority as a medium to "document." His engagement lies in the "'technologies of power' that constitute the status of the document and record and frame the evidentiary value of the image in the varied institutions of what Foucault called 'disciplinary knowledge'" (xxx-xxxi). For Foucault, this archive is a set of discursive "systems" coconstituted with processes of knowledge production and disciplinary power (128). In this context, Foucault uses a discursive framework to consider how the archive comes to serve as an authority on that which can be considered knowledge or history.

While the *Baobei Hui Jia* website is not a formal state or educational archive, its formation as a collection representing various subjectivities, narratives, and material relations produce it as a valuable site in which to understand the stakes and meaning crafted by adoptees about their subjectivity. These representations are built, in part, through the use of individualized portrait-style photography to index and categorize the included profiles. As in Sekula's examination of Alphonse Bertillon's use of portrait-style photography for the purpose of categorization, this photographic archive is also predicated on the relational meaning of the individual. According to Sekula, "And the individual existed *as an individual* only by being identified. Individuality as such had no meaning. Viewed 'objectively,' the self occupied a position that was wholly relative" (363). Likewise, the individual adoptee's profile is defined by the broader communal (or categorical) context in which those photographs and narratives exist.

In this context, archivization constitutes subjectivity in relations of power; it is also a process of unmaking and erasure. In contrast to Foucault, Derrida utilizes a psychoanalytic framework to theorize the ontology of the archive. If Foucault sees the archive as discipline and discourse, Derrida's view of the archive as psychoan-

alytic metaphor is uniquely affective. Through that affective register, his formulation of the archive has a particular ability to reconceive of the birth parent search and the emergent collectivity used in order to implement that search.

In Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, the archive is inherently violent. This process of archivization is defined by the simultaneity of the conservation of what is archived and the destruction of what is excluded, left, or forgotten. According to Derrida, "right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction . . . introducing, *a priori*, forgetfulness . . . into the heart of the monument . . ." (12). Because "the archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself," Derrida sees it as an articulation of the "death drive" and names the impulse toward archivization "*en mal d'archive*" or "archive fever" (12). His reflection on archive fever itself sounds like a reflection on the very feeling of the birth parent search: "It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it. . . . It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no '*mal-de*' can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d'archive*." (91)

The archive is the state of un-knowing as well as the knowledge that we seek. As adoptees, we were once subject to this violence of archivization. We were the thing that was lost to an archive of our first family's history, cut out of the family. Abandoned, left, lost: no matter the degree of violence with which we were severed from this now stranger Chinese family, we are no longer part of their family archive. For them, at most we are traces of memories. Perhaps we are the ghosts that haunt them still. As infants, we endured the very destruction that severed our first family ties.

And now, as adoptees searching for our birth parents, we seek the violence of the archive as a strategy for searching. We actively seek our own entrance into the archive through voluntary exposure of our stories and photographic images. We seek that destruction because of its potential to yield recuperation. As Derrida formulates, there is no archival construction without a drive toward destruction. And while the violence of archivization was felt in the beginning of our experience of family, the violence we volunteer for in entering into it now, not only through the website (a type of exposure) but also in to the collective body of adoptees searching, serves a new purpose: the potentiality of recuperation. We expose our stories of infant vulnerability in order to enter into the archive of birth parent searching.

Short narratives provide detailed descriptions that speak to the individuation of experience and the vividness with which stories are told to those who may have no memory of them. These narratives also demonstrate the violence with which the archive excludes the unknowable, a process of archival forgetting: "Abandoned at

the doorway of the county bureau at only three days old, was put into an ASHiMa brand cigarette box. Inside the cardboard box there was a slip of paper (on it had the child's birthday), a packet of sugar, a baby's feeding bottle, and a silver ring (on it had four words), 60 yuan, and one set of red clothes." "One day in April of 1995 between 7 and 8 in the morning, in a market in Hanchuan, Hubei, a baby girl was picked up with a small pouch attached to her neck, inside was an envelope, it said: Tingting, born January 3, 1995 early morning at 2am." In these two examples, these descriptions mark the origin of family memory for the adopted person. However, their inclusion in family memory also means the losing of what came before being placed in the doorway of the county bureau or the market in Hanchuan. These orphaned beginnings gesture toward an unknown origin story of birth, one before the beginning. And what we seek is what came before the memories we do have; we seek the original holders of that "prememory."

As Carolyn Steedman suggests, "Derrida sees in Freud's writing the very desire that *is* Archive Fever: the desire to recover moments of inception: to find and possess all sorts of beginnings" (5). The archive of profiles created by Chinese adoptees searching for their birth parents is created online through this very "desire" to "find and possess all sorts of beginnings." Each story is both different and the same. Each photograph reflects that sense of difference, and yet their purpose is the same. They become the traces of reality that define this digital archive. Like a hodgepodge family album hung on the walls of cyberspace, the community searching for birth parents creates its own archive using the tools of the internet.

## Searching through Photographs

Within this archival expanse, images converge with texts to represent adoptees searching and to define what constitutes searching in practice. Each profile allows for only one photograph, and while technically possible to combine multiple photographs and upload them as a single image, every profile picture I examined was either a selfie-style portrait or a baby photograph. As other examinations of biographical narrative and visual archives demonstrate, the meanings of these photographs do not exist isolated from their functional context (El Refaie; Tamboukou). Therefore the constellation of text and image in the birth parent search profile must be considered. In "The Photographic Message," Barthes untangles three important aspects of the press photograph as a message: source of emission, point of reception, and channel of transmission. Barthes's reading of the press photograph offers a helpful lens through which to interpret the relation between text and image in the adoptee profile.

For birth parent search profiles, the source of emission is the adoptee herself, and she also serves as the subject both interpersonally and visually of this emission. The birth family and those who might facilitate the elucidation of their

identity serves as the point of reception. And the channel of transmission is the website or, as Barthes describes, “more precisely, a complex of concurrent messages with the photograph as centre and surrounds constituted by the text, the title, the caption, the lay-out and, in a more abstract but no less ‘informative’ way, by the very name of the paper . . .” (15). In this case, the name of the website *Baobei Hui Jia* translated into English means “Baby Come Home,” a name that actively situates the meaning and motivation of its users in facilitating their use of the website as a tool.

As situated visual objects, both baby photographs and selfie photographs in the profiles aim to represent the adoptee searching for her birth parents. One profile shows a round-faced baby looking alert in a plaid jacket. Her profile reads, “In childhood, she had a long wart on the ear. The child’s surname was given at the orphanage and her birthday is uncertain, we only know it is September or October. [She] was adopted by a couple to the United States and now lives a happy life.” In another profile, a young woman faces the camera head on at arm’s length. She is winking with a defiant girlish look, and her fist is raised against her face. There is a graphic of cartoon radiation emanating from her. The watermark of the website logo on the photograph makes it look even more cartoonish. Her profile lists that she was born on April 8, 1993 and was found on May 5, 1993. Her description reads, “Single eyelids, hair is a little naturally curly.” A third profile depicts a young woman on a white couch, with thick white curtains and a bouquet of flowers behind her. She’s looking downwards at the camera as if facing a computer on a coffee table. It looks like she’s in a lounge or an expensive living room. She gazes at the camera expectantly, a half smile on her face. The details of her profile are surprisingly minimal: all it says is that she was born on November 1, 1990, in Wuchang in Hubei Province.

In his consideration of the relationship between text and image in *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes helps us consider the position of these photographs in their social context and, importantly, situate the relationship of image and subject position that makes these photographs unique. Barthes first acknowledges that “the viewer of the image receives *at one and the same time* the perceptual message and the cultural message” of a photograph and then goes on to describe how “the literal image is *denoted* and the symbolic image *connoted*” (36–37). Of the aforementioned profile photographs, the profile with the baby photograph denotes infant personhood. The denoted meaning explicitly recalls the existence of an infant child. The connoted meaning of the image includes the varying associations that we have with infant personhood: innocence, helplessness, cuteness, and so on. However, the meaning of the image is further impacted by the social context of the photograph and what Barthes calls the “linguistic message.” This particular photograph is not only of an infant, but an infant who is an adoptee and who is now searching for her birth parents.



In contrast, the profile selfie photographs carry different denoted and connoted meanings even as their purpose and narratives are akin to profiles with baby photographs. The denoted images of young woman looking at the camera are seen “at the same time” as the connoted images of their status as agential beings taking the selfie. The connoted image in this type of self-representation also assists in the articulation of the subject position of agential persons. More specifically, as the avowal of the birth parent search process through the profile text indicates, these photographic subjects are actively participating in their own birth parent search.

In another example, the profile photograph shows a young woman with thick hair and blunt cut bangs. There’s a small mole on her left cheek, and she is biting her lip as she gazes downwards. The text in her profile states that she was found December 12, 1990, in Xiantao City in Hubei Province and recounts her version of an origin story: “When I was still a newborn, my birth parents abandoned me on the side of the bus stop in Xiantao city dressed in worn clothes (my adoptive parents have given me my old clothes). My right leg had a slight defect, but it was cured after I joined my adoptive family; this could have caused my abandonment. Someone from my hometown was passing through the bus stop and picked me up, and then gave me to my adoptive parents; they took me, then just a girl, and raised me as if they had birthed me. But when I was small, I was unable to escape the shadow of being abandoned. As a result I have felt inferiority and anxiety, and now live with much turmoil. Now I hope to find my birth parents. I feel no resentment, and only want them to talk with me. It would allow me to let go of all these years of hardship in my heart and mind, give me some relief, and I could continue on my path in life.”

Here, the “linguistic message” more deeply defines her image. The person in the photograph speaks to us through this textual account, enacting her ability to narrate as a form of active engagement with the search process. Whereas the story she tells is one of desolation, the presence of the photograph and the unusual lengthiness and emotional richness of her narration denote her agency and subject position *as a searching adoptee*.

Juxtaposed against one another, from one profile to another, the selfie also operates as a symbolic counterbalance to the baby photograph. Our origin stories are defined by the fact of “I don’t know.” The baby photograph serves as a reminder of just how many “I don’t know” there are in the birth parent search process. In contrast, the selfie insists, “I know.” I know myself and I see myself. In a life in which her experience of her own birth is so unknowable, the production of self-knowledge through the selfie is a powerful expression. While the selfie will never repair or replace loss within adoption, it can create something else.

Approximately half of the profile photographs I examined on *Baobei Hui Jia* resembled selfies: face shot taken at arm’s length, looking into or toward the camera, and in low definition. As a genre of photography, the selfie is defined by an encounter with the self and technology. This encounter is constructed by specific

relations to space ("selfies are nearly always taken from within an arm's length of the subject"), subjecthood (as connoted by its reference to the "self" taking a photograph), and the body (here the camera becomes an extension of both the hand and the eye) (Saltz). It represents the agency to narrativize the self and one's encounter with that self. As Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*, "What does my body know of Photography? I observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look" (9). These "three practices" correspond to the subject positions that produce the photograph: the position of taking the photograph (photographer), the position of being photographed (photographed), and the position of looking at the photograph (viewer). Within the selfie, an individual enacts and embodies all three.

As we have seen with the help of Taussig, adoptees searching for their birth families seek witnesses to testify to their having come into being. While the assumption motivating adoptees' searches is that only the birth mother or birth family can serve as such as witness, the selfie in the context of the search website can constitute an alternate form of witness: it constitutes and celebrates the agency of the adoptee as an active searcher. A form of ontological recognition, the selfie becomes an act of witnessing the self.

Whereas the baby photograph marks the unmaking from loss through abandonment and adoption, the selfie becomes an act of remaking. In this way, the relationship between the baby photographs and the selfies on the website relate to one another through their coexistence in the archive. They reference a temporality of past, present, and future marked by recognition and memory. Through this shared reference, the selfie becomes the inverse of the baby photograph in its remaking of the self (one that was once an infant, perhaps in a baby photograph). And in this remaking, the self can be recuperated through its photographic creation. In this way, the selfie serves a psychic purpose of facilitating what the adoptee was denied in her abandonment: the agency to preserve a self in memory, record, or photograph. In other words, she who was once without the agency to know her family becomes the adoptee using the selfie to search for that lost family. And in this remaking, the self can be recuperated through its photographic creation.

This remaking also extends beyond individual recuperation through the relationality of the birth parent search process and the nature of the selfie as a photographic genre. In his characterization of the selfie as a "gestural image," Paul Frosh writes, "the selfie as an index is less the trace of a reality imprinted on the photograph than of an action enacted by a photographer. . . . the selfie exploits indexicality in favor of connective performance rather than semantic reference" (1609). As such, the selfie "inscribes one's own body into new forms of mediated, expressive sociability with distant others" (1622). Like the birth parent search profile itself, the selfie categorically seeks relationality and recognition from others. Frosh further discusses the selfie's phatic nature, explaining, "The selfie represents a parallel process to this mainly verbal phenomenon: the production of the *medi-*



ated phatic body as a visible vehicle for sociable communication with distant others who are expected to respond" (1623). In our efforts to communicate with "distant others" whom we hope will "respond," we want people to see our photographs.

To place a photograph representing our selves online within the profile and to build that profile from the imagination derived from a *lack* of memory produces the online profile as a kind of simulacrum, a memory built on a lack thereof. Derived from a physical encounter with the self, the digital profile picture indexes she who is searching and the narrative she claims in order to do so. Even if our stories have been remembered and re-remembered in different ways, the individuals in the photographs are real. Photographs online become the traces of reality that define this digital archive.

This reading of the adoptee selfie joins a broader history of considering photography's recuperative potential in the wake of structural forms of loss and trauma. As Laura Wexler shows, Frederick Douglass saw the representational potential of photography in the fight for racial justice. In addition to his support of the use of photography to testify to the lived experience of African Americans postslavery, Douglass used his own portraiture "to represent that life and introduce the formerly excluded black man into the national pantheon" (Wexler 36). In this way, photography becomes a method through which humanity and life can be recognized and reclaimed. In reading the work of Roland Barthes in conversation with Douglass, Wexler suggests, "Douglass . . . thought of himself as one born socially dead. Like Barthes, he also lost his mother. As a boy he was separated from her by the practical fact of slavery, and he never ceased to note her absence in his life. Nonetheless, Douglass learned how to make 'something' of 'nothing' within the self" (32). Here, the mother becomes an important figure in the construction of selfhood. The loss of one's mother was fundamental in both Douglass's and Barthes's accounts of personhood. It marked not simply the loss of something that once was there but the presence of photography as something else.

For Barthes reflecting on photographs of his late mother, he recounts, "I had acknowledged that fatality, one of the most agonizing features of mourning, which decreed that however often I might consult such images, I could never recall her features (summon them up as a totality)" (*Camera* 63). While photography cannot substitute for someone's being, for Barthes it becomes the referent of his mother through which he can understand her existence in relation to her death. For Douglass, the loss of kinship defined by historical trauma, uncertainty, and silence motivates a search for recuperation in the form of social change. He saw photography as "an emblem of human progress" and, more specifically, as a mechanism of self-representation for African Americans during and beyond the American Civil War (Wexler 23). In this context, while photography is not the sole solution to loss, it serves as a mode of recuperation in the wake of erasure.

The loss of kinship cannot be erased by the memories or creation of a photograph. Perhaps it is not that we expect to find something with our limited human

efforts but that the sense of agency enacted when one becomes a subject of themselves can remain beyond the lingering effects of trauma. In my own searching profile next to a photograph of myself as an infant, my “searching description” reads, “Abandoned at approximately 3 weeks old, relatively small, malnourished, black hair, fair face, wrapped in a shabby blanket or bed sheet.” Like many others, mine is not one of those stories where a girl puts up a few posters and a stranger appears that recognizes my image.

Many Chinese adoptees who search do not find their birth families. The search for one’s origin story, to recover a loss and to recover from a loss, is a process of longing. This longing is defined by a sense of futurity: that things might be different, that silences might be spoken, and stories might be told. Our photograph holds a memory and a promise. The internet beckons us with its capacity for possibility. Within its archive, we abstract ourselves to exist as a photograph beside text, within a profile. And yet, in this voluntary archivization and the violence of abstraction, I lay myself most bare. Details of my “relatively small, malnourished” body “wrapped in an shabby blanket” found by a passing woman become a first memory I cannot remember and perhaps a last memory of my first mother: an infant named something else, born somewhere else, and become someone else. Memories cannot bring me back there. But perhaps my photograph will.

## Notes

1. International adoption of children from China began in the early 1990s. In April of 1992, the China Adoption Law officially allowed foreigners to adopt from China. International adoption from China reached its peak in the early 2000s, with 7,903 adoptions in 2005 to the United States, the leading receiving country every year recorded. Between 1999 and 2016, there were over 78,000 adoptions to the United States.
2. My mother is the previously mentioned scholar on China and its one-child policy, Kay Johnson. As such, both of her books on the effect of China’s birth planning campaigns, *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son* and *China’s Hidden Children*, have not only shaped my understanding of the societal context of my adoptive circumstances but also greatly impacted my emotional and political relationship to this work.
3. As of 2017, this has changed to be able to include multiple images. While this does impact the visual context for the images, in particular how images might relate to one another, I believe this does not undermine the theorizations presented here.
4. On the *Baobei Hui Jia* website in 2017, there are approximately 7,000 profiles of children searching for family members. However, it is difficult to quantify the broader social context for these searches. Regarding international adoption, over 120,000 children were adopted from China internationally, though, as Johnson shows in *China’s Hidden Children*, informal domestic adoption within China during this period has been vastly underreported. Furthermore, there are no published statistics or quantitative studies on the numbers of Chinese adoptees, within China or abroad, actively searching for their birth parents.

5. This very situation has been documented by Korean adoptee and filmmaker Deanne Borshay Liem in her films *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*.

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