Maggie Mac Neil.
PC: haqexpress.com.

The Melancholy of Kinship in Post-One-Child China

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Canadian swimmer Maggie Mac Neil's Olympic gold medal sparked heated discussions on the Chinese internet, bringing to the fore practices of child abandonment and transnational adoption in China's one-child era (1979–2015). This essay examines related online discourses and how their implications generate a more comprehensive and personal understanding of the ramifications of the One-Child Policy and contemporary social imaginings of kinship. It considers how Jiangxi Province, once a place where child abandonment was widely practised, has emerged as an important site of memory.

On 26 July 2021, Canadian swimmer Maggie Mac Neil won the Olympic gold medal in the 100-metre butterfly, beating China's Zhang Yufei by 0.05 seconds. This sparked heated online discussions regarding child abandonment, especially of baby girls, in China during the one-child era (1979–2015). According to reports in Chinese mainland media, Mac Neil was given up by her biological parents in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province, at the time of her birth in 2000, and then adopted a year later along with her younger sister from a local orphanage by a Canadian couple, Susan McNair and Edward Mac Neil, who took them to London, Ontario, in Canada.

In the comment sections of posts and reports on Mac Neil's victory, Chinese netizens conveyed their sense of disturbance at the ironic situa-

tion of an abandoned Chinese girl, trained in a foreign environment to become a world champion, defeating the ‘authentic’ Chinese athlete. Some indicated that Mac Neil’s abandonment, and the practice of abandoning baby girls in general, should not be discussed, to avoid China losing face, whereas others actively emphasised the swimmer’s Chinese genes and asserted that she must be ‘claimed back’. The tone of the women responding, however, tended to be both more reflective and more generous. Besides extolling her Canadian foster parents and criticising her Chinese biological parents, and the general practice of sex-selective child abandonment, many female commentators expressed genuine happiness for Mac Neil, and even a sense of relief that she had been given away. Had she stayed, they suggested, she would probably have ended up working in a factory to help pay for her little brother’s tuition fees. Many also denounced the attempt to reclaim Mac Neil’s ‘genetic Chineseness’ for the purpose of approximating and subsuming her glory.

Taking the popular discourses around Mac Neil’s Olympic gold medal and transnational adoption as a departure point, in this essay, I aim to provide critical analysis of the ramifications and the afterlives of China’s One-Child Policy with respect to its impacts on the lives of single children, Chinese adoptees, and diasporas, as well as how their experiences shape their social imaginings of kinship and interactions with each other. I begin by examining online reactions to Mac Neil’s achievement to understand how contemporary memories of the One-Child Policy unveil ways in which kinship is reconceptualised within different groups in present-day China. My focus will be on Jiangxi Province, where Mac Neil was born—a crucial geographical locus that has been featured in an increasing number of works addressing the historical practices of child abandonment and transcultural adoption (Valentino and Winstead 2018; Wang and Zhang 2019; Wang 2021). I then consider the ways in which testimonies and words of memorialisation are connected and contested at this juncture. This is followed by an analysis of Jiangxi-born American filmmaker Wang Nanfu’s contentiously received *One Child Nation* (2019), a

documentary co-directed with Zhang Jialing that showcases the tension and negotiation between the local and the global avenues of this memory discourse.

The ‘Invisible Costs’ of the One-Child Policy

The young female netizens’ ‘protective’ attitudes discussed above were built on an empathetic identification with Mac Neil that challenges the ideas of kinship and compatriotism underpinning Chinese patriarchal nationalism. On the day Mac Neil won the gold medal, one netizen wrote on the popular Chinese social networking platform Douban: ‘I’m from Jiangxi. After the elders at home heard that the winner of the women’s 100-metre butterfly was an abandoned baby born in Jiangxi, they said that she must be claimed back.’ According to such views, ties of kinship and compatriotism with female children can be conveniently forfeited when the patrilineal culture that favours male progeny conflicts with the population-control policy, and then effortlessly restored depending on the political (or economic, cultural, or emotional) capital that the abandoned, such as Mac Neil, possesses on the global market. In this regard, kinship ties, originally bound by blood, stop being something innate for females and instead become something that must be earned by proving self-worth and utility. This corresponds to Christian Joppke’s (2021) conceptualisation of neoliberal nationalism among immigrants—that is, the idea of an ‘earned citizenship’ (kinship). The only difference is that while immigrants actively work to ‘earn’ their ‘citizenship’, in Mac Neil’s case, she was renounced and is now being claimed back without having a say in the matter.

Another recurrent theme in the posts of young female netizens supporting Mac Neil is the custom of a big sister being financially responsible for her little brother (for instance, by paying for his education, betrothal gifts, and house), which usually involves the sister’s engagement in physical toil to earn money to this end. The netizens generally

resorted to such stories to argue that Mac Neil had ‘fortune born out of misfortune’. References were often made to the film *Sister* (我的姐姐, 2021), in which director Yin Ruoxin tells the story of an orphaned older sister, An Ran, who must choose between raising her younger brother, whom she has never met, in Chengdu and pursuing graduate studies in Beijing—her only way out of the patriarchal violence she has experienced in her life so far.

Posts like these highlight how young Chinese women, most of whom are only-children themselves, have every reason to celebrate the culturally independent status of Chinese female adoptees—an unintended ‘freedom’ resulting from the One-Child Policy. This gesture of solidarity enables them to channel their own rage about the patrilineal culture and find comfort in their experiences as ‘singletons’—a term I adopt in Vanessa Fong’s (2002) sense of ‘the only child’. However, these seemingly ‘positive’ outcomes (Hong 1987; Fong 2002) and emancipatory aspects of the policy cannot be considered without a concomitant examination of the ‘invisible costs’.

Even though many young female netizens consider the policy—and even resulting transnational adoptions—in a positive light, as a measure that saves them from competing with male siblings for attention and resources, this imagined protection essentially stems from fear of patrilineal traditions and the phallogocentric order of sibling obligations. In this sense, female singletons do not enjoy the epistemic privilege of recognising, let alone mourning, the loss of sibling possibilities as do their male counterparts. Chinese contemporary artist Li Tianbing offers one such instance of male privilege. In 2008, he was able to create paintings of his child self with his imaginary brother sitting beside him and remake *HIStory* by reminding the public of ‘what could have been’, thus disrupting the official narratives that mainly chart the achievements of the policy while hailing singleton status. However, siblings, particularly male ones, remain an ungrievable subject for female single children, rooted in a compromised vision of kinship fraught with competition, jealousy, and enmity.

A Perplexing Identification

Mac Neil, on the other hand, maintains a polite distance from and limited interest in subjects relating to her origin. In an interview, she said: ‘I was born in China and I was adopted when I was really young, so that’s just as far as my Chinese heritage goes. I’m Canadian. I’ve always grown up Canadian’ (Zhou 2021). Biological family, ‘home’ country, and cultural roots become ungrievable for transnational adoptees as well. Following the increasing public interest in Mac Neil, on 2 August, the Chinese podcast *Stochastic Volatility* (随机波动) published an article titled ‘Once Abandoned, Later Embraced’ (被抛弃的, 又被抱起) on its WeChat official channel, introducing the photographer Han Meng and photos of several Chinese adoptees in the United States that she shot between 2014 and 2015 (Zhang et al. 2021). Of more than 20 adoptees mentioned in the article, none of them articulated positive associations with China, although a few identified with ‘Chineseness’ in a diasporic sense, and some had returned to volunteer in the orphanages that cared for them before their adoption. Perhaps some resemblances could be drawn between the grief of the female singletons growing up in China and that of transnational adoptees. For them to be comfortable in their singleton and culturally autonomous states, respectively, grief over sibling experiences and biological family/birth country must be consigned to oblivion.

However, as the Jiangxi-born Chinese writer Dong Lai (2021) laments in an article questioning the celebratory mood of discussions of Mac Neil’s adoptive status, ‘she is the one in a million, and the majority of abandoned girls would have to face pain and loss’. Behind these detached attitudes and silences towards China and natal kinship ties lie the Chinese adoptees’ daily negotiations with racial and cultural encounters and differences in their adoptive families and countries. Many were adopted by white parents. Scholars working on Asian transnational adoption have suggested that a great number of white parents adopt colour-blind approaches when raising their Asian adoptees (Register 2005; Louie 2015). This results in

epistemological gaps in parents with regard to anticipating and understanding how their children could be treated differently due to their skin colour, which has critical consequences concerning the adoptees' physical and mental wellbeing.

These scholars are also alert to the contexts of multicultural societies, where issues of race and cultural differences are allowed and encouraged to be discussed openly. However, multicultural discourses often end up reinforcing white parents' (static) projections of Chineseness and Chinese-American identities, many of which are based on essentialised and commodified representations (Dorow 2010; Louie 2015). Significantly, David Eng contends that in some cases Asian transnational adoptees serve as ideological and affective labours in sustaining an 'ideal' family format (white, heteronormative, middle-class, nuclear) and a 'feeling of kinship' for white parents, when white adoptees are not easily attainable and black adoptees are not preferable (2010: 108). This kind of transnational adoption can come with heavy psychological costs for Asian adoptees, with some susceptible to what Eng terms 'racial melancholia'—namely, enduring the process of working through past losses alone—when compared with Asian-American immigrant families who share a common experience with these issues.

Hence, some adoptees who wish to shield themselves from trauma may opt to refuse any contact with their birth country or remain in denial regarding the negative effects of the (interracial) adoption experience. This is reminiscent of Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism'—that is, the situation 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (2011: 1). By imagining that biological ties, birthplace, race, and gender do not matter, it may be possible for some transnational adoptees to avoid actively working through such struggles. Similarly, the female Chinese netizens' identification with transnational adoptees is likely to be based on a form of cruel optimism as well, as these women tended to highlight how understanding, well-educated, and affluent the adoptive family was in Mac Neil's case. Those tendencies seem to affirm the better care, education, and financial support they believe they have

gained from singleton experiences, which makes it more difficult to admit the losses, such as the desire for sibling experience.

The Complexities of Breaking Silences

Despite those cruel aspects of the optimistic visions of singleton and transnational adoption experiences, Chinese adoptees gaining international fame is conducive to breaking the silence of Chinese official media—as broaching the subject means implicitly acknowledging the common practice of child abandonment and the gendered cost of the One-Child Policy—and inciting spontaneous reflections and memorialisation. Apart from condemning Mac Neil's biological family and the (sex-selective) practice of abandoning children, Chinese netizens frequently singled out Jiangxi Province as a 'major province where child abandonment was practised' (弃婴大省). One by one, people from that province started sharing online the stories they had witnessed or heard, or their own traumatic experience of discovering—from overheard conversations or inadvertent revelations—that they had nearly been given away (Dong 2021). In the context of such discussions, some netizens mentioned Wang and Zhang's documentary, *One Child Nation*.

The film, which has a particular focus on the implementation of the One-Child Policy in Jiangxi, draws attention to a diverse array of stories told by witnesses, enforcers, victims, artists, and child traffickers. Despite the directors' efforts to circulate pirated copies of the film among a Chinese audience, the censors always held sway. The contrast between the invisibility of the subject matter in mainland discourses and the hypervisibility of it in Western countries raises the question of what it means to transplant the mourning and memorialisation to a different cultural context. What are the risks involved when this kind of trauma is underrepresented in China yet seemingly subsumed into the memory industry of the United States?

Some of the criticisms and controversies that followed the release of *One Child Nation* in the United States provide insight in this regard. For some critics, the most disturbing aspect of the documentary is its portrayal of the masses—represented by Nanfu’s own relatives and villagers—as brainwashed and incapable of reflecting on policy enforcement (Li et al. 2020). This excludes the possibility that they could genuinely believe in the official justifications and the vision behind the policy or that their actions could be informed by historical imperative. That the documentary foregrounds the coercive facets of the policy also makes it not dissimilar to the stories prevalent in Western media in the 1980s and 1990s, and less representative of the practices in other provinces where the policy was more loosely enforced and some positive outcomes were achieved.

These are all legitimate critiques. Nonetheless, whatever the ideological impulses of the directors, the interviews included in the documentary present various nuances and complexities that deserve to be further explored. The film shows that the deprivation of the imagined possibilities of the children not born and aborted, or who died after birth, or were given away, haunts witnesses and survivors in Jiangxi, despite or precisely because of the lack of testimonial documentation and public mourning. Wang Nanfu’s uncle was pressured by his mother to abandon his second child, a girl, in the market and she eventually died after two days without care. ‘If she had not died, she would have been 27, 28 years old by now,’ he sadly recalls. Ironically, the gendered orientation of this event brought about a different kind of obsession with, or lingering fear of, the alternative history in male children who survived the policy. Wang Zhihao, Wang Nanfu’s little brother, says: ‘If I were a girl, I would be put inside a basket and given away when I was born. I would be abandoned if I were a girl.’

Between siblings, the feelings are even more intricate. Zeng Shuangjie’s twin sister was involved in the infamous ‘Orphans of Shao’ incident—a case in the early 2000s that saw nearly two dozen babies forcibly taken by One-Child Policy enforcers under various pretences, renamed ‘Shao’, and handed over to an orphanage in Hunan Province if the parents could not afford to pay the steep fines

(Shangguan 2011). Zeng’s twin was soon adopted by a foreign couple. Seventeen years later, when she learns she has a twin in the United States, Zeng starts imagining the many activities they could do together: ‘I ... hoped that she will come back and we can reunite ... we can visit our relatives ... we can catch loach ... we can have a snowball fight. We can dress in the same clothes and wear the same haircut. We can go to school, eat, and go home together. It would be good to have company and to do everything together.’ By saying ‘can’, Zeng might well mean ‘could have’—an oblique way of saying that, growing up, she has been haunted by the sibling experience denied to her by the One-Child Policy and which now can only be imagined.

The documentary mentions that at least 130,000 Chinese children have been adopted by foreign couples since 1992. It also explains that many of these adoptive parents did not know their babies were bought by orphanages from policy enforcers who snatched them from their parents, as in the case of Zeng’s twin. When people like the American foster parents of three children adopted from China, Longlan and Brian Stuy—both of whom appear in the film—started to collect DNA from the bereft Chinese families and tried to match them with children overseas, many adoptees for whom matches were found responded negatively; after growing up wondering why their biological parents did not want them, they had no desire for contact (see also Ma 2021). For those Chinese parents, these negative responses were almost tantamount to losing their children a second time, while the adoptive parents also panicked for fear of losing the children they now discovered had been adopted illegally.

As for Wang Nanfu herself and other interviewees in the film, such as Wang Peng, an artist whose work features abandoned foetuses, they bore witness to the coercive policy implementation yet were too young to resist the normalising force of the state propaganda, so their responses to the policy came in a belated manner; when they become parents themselves, this experience endows them with the ethical imperative to tell what it means not to be able to become parents. Indeed, as Caruth (2013: 87) puts it, ‘the traumatic event is its future, is its repetition as some-

thing that returns but also returns to erase its past, returns as something other than what one could ever recognize’.

Melancholy Kinship

As a Jiangxi-born female singleton, I felt compelled to write this essay. Like many other families, mine was disappointed I was a girl. I felt lucky and grateful that their love did not seem diminished. As I become more accomplished by their standards, their attitude has improved, and they respect me more as an independent adult. I thought gender did not matter to them—not anymore—until recently when a female classmate of mine had a baby and my father asked me about the sex of the child. I told him the baby was a boy. He immediately smiled and, without thinking, said that her parents must be very happy. The indignation and grievances that had been sealed off for more than 20 years returned and overwhelmed me.

Mac Neil’s gold medal brought to light the notorious patrilineal aspect of social reproduction in Jiangxi. The buried stories remind me that I am, as are generations of people, living in the aftermath of the One-Child Policy, and the ‘progress’ it brought about concerning gender equality can be superficial. What I have outlined in this essay is only a small fraction of the effects rippling out from the policy—the convergence of multiple strands of what I would like to term ‘the melancholy of kinship’. I could have been one of those Chinese adoptees, reticently finding my biological parents unforgiveable and the Chineseness in me ungrievable. And those adoptees could have been me, hoping to outgrow the confines of gender yet still feeling profound pain from those subtle moments of violence inflicted by people I love deeply. ■

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