

FEATURE

A Story of “West Meets East”

Giving adopted children some aspects of a bicultural upbringing is valuable in the long run

By Eric Goldscheider

The personal became professional for UMass sociologist Richard Tessler about 10 years ago when a friend told him that the Chinese government was interested in studying how babies (almost all girls) adopted by Americans were doing in their new lives.

Tessler’s field is social psychology. So analysis based on surveys is his stock in trade. “I know how to ask questions and translate them into a research design and to choose measures,” he said. But adoption and issues specific to China had never been part of his expertise—at least not at work. At home was a different story: He and Patricia Gorman were the adoptive parents of two Chinese daughters.

“At first I said, ‘no, it’s too close to home,’” recalls Tessler. But ultimately he was persuaded to study American adoptive parents’ attitudes about how much to teach their daughters about Chinese history, customs, and language. (The technical term is bicultural socialization.)

The question at the time was whether parents felt it was important to instill in their daughters an understanding and appreciation for Chinese culture to supplement their identities as Americans.

Another professor, Gail Gamache, and a graduate student, Liming Liu, worked with



Professor Tessler

Tessler on the initial survey. They publicized their undertaking through Families with Children from China and soon found 526 parents in 361 families willing to answer questions. The data became the basis for *West Meets East: Americans Adopt Chinese Children* (Bergin & Garvey; 1999).

The book is not just a quantitative recitation of approaches to bicultural socialization; it also looks at things like the history behind China’s decision to make so many of its infant girls available for international adoption. Understanding the country’s “one child policy” as a response to fears of a population explosion, in conjunction with attitudes favoring boy-children over girls, must be part of any effort to comprehend the phenomenon that to date has resulted in more than 60,000 foreign adoptions.

Learning such facts of geopolitics in addition to studying aspects of Chinese food, art, traditions, and language can be part of a strategy adoptive parents use to give their children a sense of “cultural biography” where personal ancestral biographies are missing. Most respondents felt it important for their children to learn about Chinese culture as a basis for taking pride in their ethnicity. Tessler was gratified by the response. “We had a very big sample,” he said, “people thought they were pioneers, and they were.”

In 2001 Tessler went back to the families and was able to collect follow-up information from 90 percent of them. By then the adopted children were seven years old on average. In an account titled, “How They Are Doing in America: A Follow-Up Study of Children Adopted from China,” Tessler and Gamache

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reported that most parents were firm in their belief that introducing their girls to basic information about China was important to their future well-being. They also found that most of the children “achieved what can reasonably be described as a modest level of bicultural competence.”

The first phase, said Tessler, was “descriptive.” He wanted to find out if and how parents were planning to teach their daughters about Chinese culture. The second phase sought to find out whether parents were succeeding. The next phase, pending funding from the National Science Foundation, will include asking the children, now adolescents, questions designed to probe the effects of bicultural socialization.

Kay Johnson, a professor of Asian studies and politics at Hampshire College, sees the longitudinal part of Tessler’s research as the most important. We have studied how parents feel about adopting, she said, but there is very little research on how children adopted across cultures view their experiences. “That is why what Rick is doing is crucial,” said Johnson, who herself adopted a daughter from China and who has written on the topic. The information Tessler hopes to get from adoptees as they come of age will have practical implications for adoptive parents and adoption professionals, said Johnson: “The application of this knowledge for practice is more important than a lot of things we academics do.”

Now the task is to “link identity with other outcomes,” said Tessler. In other words, has the integrating of their Chinese and American

elves promoted social adjustment and self-esteem?

Tessler, who is 59, has some hunches.

His daughters, Hannah and Zoe, were not part of the study. But Tessler and Gorman, who teaches Marriage & Family Therapy at Saint Joseph’s College in West Hartford, had opportunities and the desire to expose their daughters to Chinese culture. They spent a sabbatical semester in China in 1999 and two years later bought an apartment in the city of Hefei as a way to maintain connections to friends near the orphanage from which they adopted Hannah and Zoe. Tessler now visits Hefei about twice a year. “I took them back several times,” he said. Paradoxically, seeing the differences between themselves and Chinese children raised in China tended to reinforce his daughters’ American identities. Tessler is still confident that the benefits of his and Gorman’s efforts to encourage their daughters to study Chinese, visit China and respect Chinese culture will become more tangible later on even though the girls may not fully realize it in their early adolescence.

In the long run Tessler believes that giving adopted children at least some aspects of a bicultural upbringing is valuable, but perhaps not for the reasons he hypothesized at the outset of his study.

At his older daughter Hannah’s bat mitzvah earlier this year, he publicly thanked her for enriching his life and for the respect she was showing to his birth culture. “When you were much younger I celebrated your birth culture,” he

told her in front of the congregation, “today you are doing much the same for me.”

Even if bicultural socialization does not produce a bicultural identity, says Tessler, “it enhances the parent–child relationship. It sends a message to the child that the fact that she was different was something that could not only be accepted but celebrated.”

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