

# Bridging a way to their origins – Introduction to the NTU-USYD Collaborative Project

**Interview** Professor Yu-Wen Chen

Intercountry adoptions have been justified as being in the best interests of children who cannot receive suitable care in their country of origin. However, the rights and wellbeing of these children are a point of concern. Australia and Taiwan are indelibly linked by the adoption of Taiwanese-born children by Australian families through intercountry adoption. From 2011 to 2014, Taiwan sent the most infants to Australia and was the leading sending country for Australian intercountry adoptions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2016). However, post-adoption services in Taiwan remain unclear. Little is known regarding the new lives of Taiwanese adoptees in Australia. On the other hand, with an increase in the number of grown adoptees searching for their birth families, it is important to create a way for adoptees to connect with psychologically relevant family members, to help adoptees know who they are and where they are from.

Thanks to a Partnership Collaboration Award from the University of Sydney (USYD) and National Taiwan University (NTU), Professor Yu-Wen Chen from the Department of Social Work at NTU and Director Amy Conley Wright from the Institute of Open Adoption Studies at USYD School of Education and Social Work started their collabora-

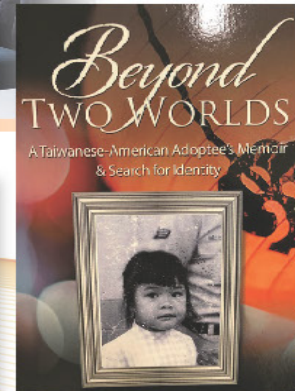
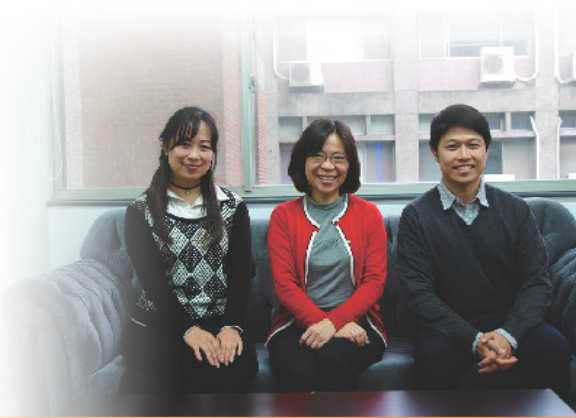
tive project on the issues related to intercountry adoptions. This research partnership leverages a key research strength for the School of Education and Social Work at USYD: the newly established Institute of Open Adoption Studies. Dr. Wright serves as the Director of this Institute, which brings expertise in adoption, networks among governmental and nongovernmental organizations facilitating adoption, and visibility through its website and distribution lists to disseminate findings to a wide audience. Dr. Chen's research background is also an excellent match, focusing on the welfare and rights of disadvantaged children and youth. In addition to Dr. Wright and Dr. Chen, Assistant Professor Ching-Hsuan Lin and PhD candidate Chin-Wan Wang from NTU were invited to join the collaborative project. Dr. Margaret Spencer and Dr. Sonja

Van Wichelen from USYD are also a part of the research team. The main goals of this collaboration encompass research and teaching and include establishing an enduring institutional tie between the Department of Social Work at NTU and the School of Education and Social Work at USYD.

This collaboration seeks to increase knowledge and awareness of intercountry adoptions and hopes to develop implications for practice and policies. There are two aspects—one central to Australia and one to Taiwan—to the research focus in this project. Cross-cultural and identity issues have been a primary point of discussion in intercountry adoptions. In terms of the Australian aspect, previous studies have found that interracial adoptees often experience







confusion about their ethnic/racial identity as well as challenges handling discrimination. Thus, adoptive families need guidance and support regarding how to support their child's adoption- and ethnicity-related identity issues over the course of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Connections with families and countries of their origin and discovering their own personal identity are part of the lifelong journey for internationally adopted persons. In terms of the Taiwanese aspect, birth families involved in intercountry adoptions have received little attention in the literature; therefore, it is critical to better understand their awareness and perspectives on adoption to provide professional support in the adoption process.

The most spectacular part of this collaborative research is giving voice to the birth mothers involved in intercountry adoptions, who have been described

as the "forgotten member of the intercountry adoption triad." There are deep social justice concerns regarding intercountry adoptions. These adoptions typically involve, on one side, desperately poor mothers who may be members of less privileged racial and ethnic groups, and on the other side, wealthy white adoptive parents in developed countries (Bartholet, 2005). Birth mothers involved in intercountry adoptions may not fully understand the implications of signing documents that sever the legal relationship with their child, allowing for their child's emigration and adoption (Manley, 2006). This research also attempts to explore the concept of openness, which is a standard feature of domestic adoptions within Australia but is lacking in intercountry adoptions. Open adoptions allow the child to receive information and retain links to their birth family, and has evolved as a practice through recognition that people

have an inherent drive to know their origins to develop a coherent narrative identity (Grotevant, & Von Korff, 2011). In contrast, traditional intercountry adoptions are closed, with no ongoing contact between the birth families, adopted persons, and adoptive families.

Data will be collected in both countries. Interviews will be conducted in Australia with adoptees from Taiwan and their adoptive parents to learn about their experiences, the services and support they have received, and efforts they have made to promote the adoptees' cultural socialization. In Taiwan, interviews with original family members will be conducted to learn about their opinions regarding services in the adoption process, issues related to reunion, and services they needed after adoption. In addition, focus groups will be conducted with adoption case-workers involved in the process



of intercountry adoption to gain an understanding of the current services and challenges. This effort is expected to fill the gaps in knowledge in intercountry adoptions between Taiwan and Australia and allow more voices to be heard via qualitative data presentation. We also hope to contribute to the literature on intercountry adoption, particularly with regard to cross-cultural adjustment, post-adoption services, and reunion issues.

An iterative research process will be used to guide the collaboration so that emerging findings from research in both countries will inform subsequent stages of the project. Through quarterly teleconference meetings, interviews with stakeholders, symposiums or seminars to present findings, and other collaborative tasks, the research team will share findings, receive feedback and work together more efficiently. This project will also culminate in two symposia, one hosted in Taiwan and the other in Australia, to disseminate the findings to academics, social work professionals, and policy makers. The entire research team will present at both events and will share their perspectives on intercountry adoption. Research participants, such as adopted persons, birth family members, adoptive parents, and/or adoption professionals, will be invited to speak at both events, representing the views of important stakeholders. In advance of each symposium, a media release will be issued to inform policy makers and the field about how people are involved with adoption (the child, adoptive family, and birth family).

Findings from this research will also inform joint curriculum development. A curriculum module on adoption will be co-developed and integrated into the social work degrees at both in-

stitutions. This module will also be disseminated through the national associations of social work in both countries to enhance professional understanding of adoption and working with birth families, adoptive families and adopted children. This curriculum module will capture the voices of birth and adoptive families and children, drawing on direct quotations from the interviews. Learning outcomes will include building awareness and knowledge of how to support adoption, including the longer-term cultural identity of adopted children.

These research and teaching collaborations will build strong institutional ties between the social work programs at NTU and USYD. The project will establish a joint track record of publications among the NTU and USYD researchers that will support the development of competitive grants from foundations or other sources. This exploratory research will identify future areas of research related to the well-being of adopted children and their birth and adoptive families. It is also expected to inform professional practice in both Taiwan and Australia, including implications for connecting the diaspora of Taiwanese-born Australian adoptees and their adoptive families in Taiwan so that they can support their children's cultural identities. The research team will seek media coverage in both Taiwan and Australia, which will highlight the partnership between NTU and USYD as well as enhance public awareness of the needs of adopted children and their birth and adoptive families.

Additionally, the team-based collaboration, exploring and linking both sending and receiving countries, is likely to gain international recognition and may pioneer a collaborative model for other countries involved in

intercountry adoptions, such as the United States. Findings from the research will include multiple angles on intercountry adoption and represent the perspectives of adoptees, adoptive families and birth families, as well as the professionals who facilitate and support adoptions. These findings are likely to be of interest to policy makers and adoption practitioners. There has been little to no research on the perspectives of birth mothers in intercountry adoption; thus, this aspect of the research will be groundbreaking.

The two-way collaborative relationship between NTU and USYD is off to a good start, and will continue to address more issues related to intercountry adoption after the launch of the joint project. We anticipate an abundance of research, practice, teaching and policy reforms in the future.

## References

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