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Abduction, Adoption, and Two Families' Search for Answers

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A medic holding a rescued baby in her hands moves past police and press in Xichang, Sichuan province, December 18, 2012.

In March 2011, Rose Candis had the worst lunch of her life. Sitting at a restaurant in Shaoguan, a small city in South China, the American mother tried hard not to vomit while her traveling companion translated what the man they were eating with had just explained: her adopted Chinese daughter Erica had been purchased, and then essentially resold to her for profit. The papers the Chinese orphanage had shown her documenting how her daughter had been abandoned by the side of a road were fakes. The tin of earth the orphanage had given her so that her daughter could always keep a piece of her home with her as she grew up in the U.S. was a fraud, a pile of dirt from the place her daughter's paperwork was forged, not where she was born. Candis had flown thousands of miles to answer her daughter Erica's question—who are my birth parents?—but now she was further from the answer than ever.

Almost exactly a year earlier, Liu Liqin had the worst day of his life. He was out on a temporary construction job, looking forward to lunch and his next cigarette break, when his wife called to tell him that their two-year-old son Liu Jingjun was missing. Liu rushed home and began a frantic but fruitless search for the boy. He and his wife called relatives, ran to the local police station to report Jingjun missing, and then fanned out through their city neighborhood calling the boy's name and asking passers-by if they had seen anything. The police told him they couldn't take the case because not enough time had passed since the boy had disappeared. Finally, late in the evening, Liu thought to check the footage from a surveillance camera at a building on the street outside his family's apartment. Sure enough, when the video footage was queued up, in a small corner of the frame, Liu could see a man, face obscured, carrying little Jingjun down the narrow alley where the Liu family lives. I met

Liu for the first time in that same alley; he had agreed to become the first subject of a documentary film I was making about kidnapped children in China. “Watching the man in the footage taking him away, I just...” Liu trailed off. “There’s really no way to describe that feeling.”

Rose Candis and Liu Liqin’s backgrounds could not be more different, but both parents have spent the past couple of years searching in China for the truth about their children. Both will do almost anything to get at it. And both have been stymied at almost every turn.

Child trafficking and its relationship to adoption in China is a serious problem, but also a deeply opaque one. It is a taboo topic for the Chinese government, which acknowledges the problem exists but also does not make public statistics about the number of children kidnapped or the number of children sold into adoption. Because of the implications for the tens of thousands of families in the United States and elsewhere in the West who have adopted children from China—Americans alone adopted nearly 3000 Chinese children in 2012—the topic is often taboo outside of China’s borders, too.

Neither child trafficking nor baby buying in Chinese international adoptions are widely studied. No one can say for certain how many children are kidnapped in China each year, or what percentage of them end up being put up for adoption domestically or internationally. But the problem is a lot more serious than most people know, as I have come to learn over the last few years. In the process of making a documentary film on the subject, my wife and I have spoken to dozens of parents of kidnapped Chinese children and adoptive parents in the U.S. who have come to believe their children were sold into adoption.

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When Candis, an Ohio-based therapist (who asked that I use her pen name to protect the privacy of her daughter), decided to adopt a child, she chose China both because adopting from China can be a bit cheaper than adopting from other countries such as South Korea, and also because she thought the adopted Chinese kids she saw around the U.S. looked cute. “It was touted as the most stable program, the most above-board program,” Candis says of the way the agency she worked with advertised its Hague-certified process, developed over twenty years to connect dozens of children with new parents annually. “Certainly they never ever mentioned trafficking.”

Adopting a child from any country can feel like an endless process, especially for someone like Candis who at age thirty-six was extremely eager to become a parent. But when adoption day finally came, Candis didn’t see anything to raise suspicion. She felt an instant connection to her new daughter, and everyone at the orphanage seemed friendly and warm. It was, quite literally, a dream come true. “They really know how to put on a show,” she says. “The [orphanage] director took us to this lovely lunch and he stood up and talked and had tears in his eyes. He did a beautiful job.” Candis and her daughter went home ready to start their new life together.

Rose Candis says that at first, things went smoothly—at least, as smoothly as they can for a new parent of a young child. But at four years old, Erica began saying that she missed her birth mother. Then she asked, “Can you find her?” Candis genuinely didn’t know, so she started looking online, and found an organization called Research-China.org that helps parents look into the origins of their adopted Chinese children.

Brian H. Stuy, a father of three adopted daughters and the founder of Research China, looked at Erica's documentation and gave Candis bad news: there seemed to be a good chance that Erica's adoption was connected to a kidnapping scandal in Hunan province. The story rocked the U.S. adoption community in November 2005 when Chinese journalists reported that infants from Hunan and several other provinces were being sold to several major orphanages in China, and that the orphanages then lied about the children's origins to adoptive parents. Looking at the numbers of adoptions coming from Erica's orphanage, the Qujiang Social Welfare Institute, in Shaoguan's Qujiang district, Stuy saw that adoptions dropped precipitously after news of the scandal broke and the government moved in to shut the trafficking down—a sign that the orphanage had been involved. He sent Candis a link to a news story about it. "I started freaking," she said.

Most parents, Stuy says, stop there. But Candis wasn't willing to give up: "I needed to know," she told me. So she kept searching. She hired a researcher in China to put up posters in the area surrounding her daughter's orphanage asking for information. Nothing came back, but Candis couldn't stop. "I just kept calling Brian and Lan (Stuy's wife and Research China's researcher) every month," she told me, laughing in retrospect at how single-minded she must have seemed. After nearly two years of persistence, Lan agreed to travel with Candis to China to see what they could dig up about Erica's origin.

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In the Shanxi city of Taiyuan, Liu Liqin was searching, too. The first week after Jingjun's kidnapping, he and his wife barely slept. "We couldn't tell day from night," he said, "We really couldn't tell the difference." But days of scouring the streets and alleys near their house while relatives combed public transportation hubs throughout the city, produced nothing. The police offered little help. When Jingjun first went missing, police came but they told Liu and his wife, the boy would likely turn up at a relative or friend's house and that they shold just search on their own. After Liu discovered the surveillance footage, the police took the case, but they failed to uncover any leads. Like most parents of kidnapped children, Liu has been told by local police to share any clues he finds during his own search with them, but in the absence of those clues, it is apparent to him the police will not do anything. Three years since he was kidnapped, Jingjun's case remains open, but Liu says no one on the force is actively investigating it. (I called the local police station but the officer who answered refused to comment or transfer us to somebody who could).

As time went on, tensions began to pull at the Liu household. Liu and his wife had an older daughter, but their son was gone. They could not have any additional children; local family planning officials had asked Liu to undergo sterilization surgery after Jingjun's birth. Having a son is of great importance in traditional Chinese culture, and the loss of the Liu's only chance to pass on the family name hit hard. Friends and relatives began to urge Liu to leave his wife, whom they blamed for Jingjun's loss, saying she wasn't watching him carefully enough. "I tell them that's not possible," Liu says. "Did she want to lose our son? Of course not."

Together with their seven-year-old daughter, a feisty girl named Jing, they have done nearly everything they can to get the word out about Jingjun's kidnapping. They have been in local newspapers, on the local radio, and on television. The little boy is listed on dozens of missing children websites (non-profit sites run by parents and volunteers and funded mostly via donations), and his face is plastered on banners and posters that Liu and his family post around Taiyuan and other cities where their search leads them. When they hear about

traffickers being arrested on television, Liqin often travels to wherever the men were arrested to speak with local police and see if he can find news about Jingjun. He links up with other local parents whose kids are missing to organize street rallies and impromptu gatherings where they hand out flyers and try to enlist the help of passers-by.

At one such rally I attended in Taiyuan, the parents simply parked the "ChildSearch Car"—a small truck covered with the images of scores of missing children and information about their cases—on a sidewalk near a busy intersection. It was an unusually clear day for Taiyuan—the city is generally buried under a thick haze of smog—and a weekend, so pedestrians were out in force. The families spread canvas banners with their children's photos and stories on the sidewalk around the truck, and then stood behind them to answer questions and hand out flyers as passers-by began to stop to see what the fuss was about. At first, people seemed puzzled by the display, but the crowd grew. Liu and the parents walked around, chatting with people who had questions and passing out information. Even Liu's young daughter was working, smiling and handing out flyers about her kidnapped little brother to pedestrians. "She remembers, even now she does," said Liu of his daughter. "When she wakes up she says 'Dad, I dreamed of my brother last night,' and things like that. When we hear that, it's devastating." But on this day, she was all smiles, darting around the truck with another youngster other parents had brought to the event, taking advantage of the rare blue-sky day.

I bounced around the impromptu demonstration, taking photos and video while trying to keep a low profile so as to not to get any of the parents in trouble. Eventually, several police officers arrived at the rally and pulled a few of the parents aside. I figured the jig was up—and it was—but the police were friendly about it. There was no strong-arming, but the families did not have a permit for their activity, and like most local police in China, the authorities were sensitive to how street rallies like this look to outsiders. The police didn't say anything to me, but my presence at the rally with a camera may have been part of the reason they stepped in and shut it down. In fact, the next day, police visited Liu at his apartment to ask why there was a foreigner at the event. Liu told them that I was just a tourist who happened to be passing through, and the officers left.

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After Candis arrived in China with Lan, they traveled to Shaoguan and tracked down He Zaolin, the man who is listed on Erica's paperwork as her "finder." He was supposed to have come across her abandoned on Sheng Li Road in Shaoguan and turned her over to the orphanage. He agreed to have lunch with them and then, to Rose's shock and horror, admitted candidly that he had never found any child. He was simply friends with one of the Qujiang orphanage's directors—at the time, he said, he was the Director of the Civil Affairs Bureau in Qujiang District—so his name was used on the paperwork. The children, he said, were purchased in Hunan. He called his friend, the orphanage director, on the phone, and the director seemed to confirm this because then Mr. He repeated it: we bought these babies.

In a surreal twist, after lunch Mr. He took them to a local Buddhist temple, perhaps hoping that Candis would find some peace there. She spent the time wandering the grounds looking at statues of Guanyin—a Buddhist spirit often called the Goddess of Mercy—and wondering what she was going to tell her daughter. Then Lan suggested they go to the orphanage to see if they could discover anything further.

When they arrived at the orphanage, Candis immediately spotted one of the directors; not the man who had apparently just admitted buying her child over the phone, but the orphanage's

other director. Not knowing that Candis was aware of the truth, the director greeted her and offered to take her on a tour to the place where her daughter was found. “I wanted to fucking belt him,” she said, “But I wasn’t interested in going to jail, so I told him, ‘That won’t be necessary.’” He asked twice more, and Candis says she came inches from exploding and telling him she knew the truth. But still hoping that she might uncover more information, instead she quietly refused. So he invited them to dinner instead. She kept pushing for more information but by the end of the night, Candis was spent, and she and Lan hadn’t been able to uncover anything further about her daughter. “I went home that night and just sobbed,” she said.

Over the next few days, Candis tried everything, including trying to bribe some of the orphanage’s workers, to uncover more about her daughter’s origins. She talked with workers at the orphanage and even offered to pay one of them for more information, but nothing new came to light. She tried to pry more information out of He Zaolin, but he stopped answering her calls. Erica had been sold to the orphanage: that much was clear. But where she came from before, that was anyone’s guess.

The worst moment of the trip came later, in a Skype video chat conversation with Erica back in the U.S. ‘We’re not going to be able to find your birth mother,’ Candis told her. Her daughter’s face fell. “She just looked so dejected, and she just said, ‘Oh.’” Then Erica started crying. “It was just heart-wrenching that I could not be there with her. It was one of the worst things I've ever had to do. Really, really awful.”

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In China, parents of kidnapped children like Jingjun soon discover that their missing child opens them up to a whole new world of problems. According to every parent we spoke to, police generally offer little more than cursory help when children disappear. Like Liu, most parents are told to look for their kids on their own. Many Chinese police stations won’t even consider accepting a missing person’s case until the child has been missing for a full twenty-four hours, according to the Shi Richeng, Lei Yong and several parents of kidnapped children we interviewed for our film. Unfortunately, in many documented trafficking cases, twenty-four hours after the abduction, the child is already hundreds of miles away. In Liu’s case and many others, halfhearted initial investigations quickly give way to apathy.

So, of course, parents conduct their searches and try to raise awareness by themselves, but often this puts them at odds with local law enforcement officials eager to put a muzzle on almost anyone who expresses discontent in public. Shi Richeng and Wang Yeye, two other parents of missing children from the Taiyuan area, both have been searching for their children for much longer than Liu Liqin, and both have been subject to extreme levels of police interference. Wang told us that police sometimes knocked on her door in the middle of the night, citing bogus phoned-in complaints of domestic abuse, asking her where she’d traveled recently, and telling her not to go anywhere without their prior approval. They also ordered her not to go to Beijing to appeal to higher authorities for help with her case. She went anyway, but found no help there.

Shi, a middle-aged worker from China's central Shanxi province whose son has been missing for more than five years already, has also been to Beijing. There, he was detained by police for a full day. “I was left hungry until 5:30 in the afternoon; they didn’t give us anything to eat,” he says. He was released in the evening, but he returned home no closer to finding his son than when he left, and more frustrated than ever about the police who were supposed to

be helping him. “They’re using their energy to track parents,” he said, “if they spent that energy on solving the cases, what case couldn’t they solve?”

Unfortunately, the police are not the only people who aren’t helping. Liu says that, like most parents of missing children, he gets frequent messages from scammers trying to get him to pay large sums of money for information about his child’s whereabouts, information that ends up being fake. “They try to swindle you,” he says. “Sometimes they put your kid’s face on [a photo of] another kid’s body and say ‘This is your kid, I know where they are,’ but they’re actually just tricking you for money. There are many of these people.” And Liu knows that even if someone who comes across his son learns the boy has been kidnapped, they probably won’t say anything:

He’ll never know he was kidnapped and purchased, sold to others by human traffickers. It’s not possible. In our hometown when people buy wives, no one says anything. No one will say, ‘This one was purchased from here,” right? No one talks. And our child was so young, he won’t understand that it’s all fake.

Even when the child knows, it often doesn’t help. When Wang Qingshun, a Hangzhou vehicle salesman who was kidnapped and sold as a child, was handed over to his new “adoptive” family in Zhejiang, he went around telling everyone in the neighborhood that it wasn’t his real home, and that Wang Qingshun wasn’t his real name. He spoke with a different accent than the locals, to the point that he was difficult for his new family to understand. “Everyone knew I wasn’t from there,” he says, “Adults generally didn’t talk about it, but the children would talk about me, saying, ‘Oh, that kid was purchased,’ and things like that. When I was in kindergarten, I was suspended by the teacher multiple times. Why? It was not actually because I was naughty, it was because the other kids made fun of me and cursed me [for being purchased], so I would retaliate and hit them, sometimes I’d take things and break them over their heads.”

Wang says that everyone in his village knew that he was purchased, and yet not a single person reported the crime to police until over a decade later, when it was probably far too late to do anything about it. Sadly, his story is not uncommon. Parents of kidnapped children explain that part of the problem is that many people who might have information about trafficking don’t report it to police for fear that it can only result in trouble for themselves, and could potentially even invite retribution from local trafficking gangs.

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When Candis returned to the United States, she knew she had to do something but she wasn’t entirely sure what. As her daughter continued to grieve what seems likely to be the permanent loss of her birth parents, Candis pondered what she could do to spread the word about fraud and trafficking in international adoptions from China. A family friend suggested that she contact her local congressman.

She did, but “he was not much help.” So she contacted another, but “they didn’t care.” She kept pushing, and eventually came across an organization that was pushing for Congress to broaden the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) to include sale for adoption in the U.S. government’s definition of trafficking.

Part of the problem is that as things stand now, Candis’ child was not trafficked, at least not according to U.S. law. Erica fits the first two conditions of a trafficked child laid out in the

TVPRA (she was transported, and fraud and deception were involved) but not the third (the purpose of the deception was not to sell her into slavery, prostitution, indentured servitude or pornography). Some international organizations, including the United Nations, define trafficking more broadly. But for the U.S., a child could be kidnapped, transported, sold to an orphanage, and put up for adoption with false papers, and none of that would be defined as trafficking. A U.S. State Department official explained:

We believe the best available protections against the abduction and sale of children for purposes of intercountry adoption, bribery, fraud, and inappropriate financial gains are offered by the Hague Adoption Convention. China is a party to the Hague Adoption Convention.

For all Convention adoptions, a U.S. consular officer must first review all pre-adoptive steps before a family can adopt or seek custody of a child in the Country of Origin. After the adoption is completed, consular officers must certify that all steps in the intercountry adoption process were done in accordance with the Convention and the Intercountry Adoption Act before a child may immigrate to the United States.

Fraudulent intercountry adoptions are sometimes mislabeled as "child trafficking" because of varying international definitions related to the two phenomena. Children made eligible for intercountry adoption may fall victim to bad actors engaged in criminal practices and questionable procedures. In the majority of these cases, however, the persons committing the fraud do not intend to exploit the child for purposes of commercial sex or forced labor and, consequently, do not meet the defining characteristics of human trafficking under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act.

But Candis and others feel U.S. obligations under the Hague Convention are insufficient to combat the kind of scheme that lead to Erica's adoption. So she has joined in the fight to amend the TVPRA to include "children bought for the purposes of adoption" to the legal definition of trafficking. For months, she spoke with congressional researchers and aides, trying to wrangle a public hearing with Congressman Chris Smith (Republican, New Jersey) and Senator Sherrod Brown (Democrat, Ohio), the co-chairs of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC). Despite a series of meetings with aides, hearings failed to materialize, and eventually Candis was told to wait until after the 2012 election was over.

"Part of me is like, 'ugh, should I give up?'" Candis said. "But I'm not going to do that...I'm not going to give up." In late February, she returned to Washington, D.C. for the third time in nine months. She showed our film to representatives of the CECC, and also met with representatives from the offices of Senator Mary Landrieu (Democrat, Louisiana) and Representative Steve Chabot (Republican, Ohio). She came back from the meetings without any tangible result but still optimistic that if she keeps pushing, eventually the TVPRA could be changed. "I plan on continuing to work on the hill and with the commission until the children who were victims of buying and selling get the support and validation they need," she said.

At the same time, like the Liu family in China, she has struggled to spread the word to a community that, very frequently, simply isn't interested in hearing about how their children might have been trafficked. A Yahoo adoption discussion group she was a part of "did not want to hear it," she said. "There was a lot of dissension. Some would say, "Jesus wanted us to have [the children]; it doesn't matter, they're ours now." Others sided with Candis, and the divide eventually became so wide that the group, which used to meet up in the real world at least once a year, hasn't met in person in the more than twenty-four months since Candis

returned from China. A local adoptive parent group didn't want to hear about it either. Candis reached out to the national organization Families with Children from China (FCC), which has well over one hundred local chapters nationwide, and offered to share information with any parents who were interested. "Two people out of the entire FCC emailed me back," she said.

"My friends who don't have adopted children are way more supportive than my friends with adopted children," Candis says. From time to time, the issue becomes very personal. After her return from China, one couple told Candis they didn't want their daughter to play with Erica for a while "because they didn't want [their daughter] asking questions." The real issue, Candis said, is that many parents are terrified that a thorough investigation into this issue could end in their losing their children. But she does not see that as a legitimate reason for rejecting what she believes is in the children's best interests. "I felt scapegoated," she said.

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It is true that many in America's adoption community do not want to talk about trafficking in China. I contacted nearly a dozen American adoption agencies that specialize in China adoptions for this story; all but one of them refused to comment or ignored the request entirely. The one person who did respond was Lisa Prather, executive director of A Helping Hand Adoption Agency, who said that "the term trafficking should never be used in the description of an adoption [and by using this term] the media is perpetuating erroneous propaganda," since adoptions don't meet the TVPRA definition of the term.

Of course, another reason the issue isn't widely discussed is money. U.S.-China adoption is big business; U.S. Adoption agencies make thousands—Candis said it cost her nearly $20,000, and many adoption agencies publicly list prices in this range—for each child adopted from China, and Chinese orphanages generally receive a donation of at least $5,000 from the adoptive parents; Candis paid $3,000 but the mandatory fee has since been raised to $5,000 nationwide. On the American side, shutting down the China adoption program would lead to a big drop in revenue for many adoption agencies, and would shut down others completely. In China, orphanages make money for each child placed with adoptive parents, and since trafficked children often cost an orphanage around $500 to purchase, a quick overseas adoption can bring in a tidy profit.

In part because it is such an unpopular and sensitive issue in both countries, and in part because there are very few people doing serious research, it is extremely difficult to say with certainty to what extent Liu Liqin's story overlaps directly with Rose Candis'. The U.S. State Department estimates that every year, around 20 thousand children are kidnapped in China, and some independent estimates are much higher. Tens of thousands of resolved cases, and the fact that many of those kidnapped are boys but very few boys are adopted internationally, indicate that many of those children are sold into domestic adoption. But we know that at least a few of them do end up getting adopted internationally. We know that of the children adopted internationally, many of them (like Erica Candis) may arrive overseas with doctored paperwork or origins that are otherwise unclear.

"I would say that fraud or trafficking is involved in more than three-quarters of all adoptions from China," says Brian Stuy. Stuy is a controversial figure in the adoption field—parents have accused him of having an agenda (they think he wants the China adoption program shut down), and Research China does produce paid reports on the background of adopted children whose parents are interested in looking into it and have $50 (the average research fee) to spare. But he is also one of the only people who has done extensive statistical analysis and

investigative fieldwork within China to determine which orphanages are involved in baby-buying, and to what extent. Stuy says cases like Candis' are quite common, and that despite China's proclamations in official media that it has dealt with the problem behind the trafficking in Hunan and other high profile scandals, baby buying and selling continues. In mid-January, a Chinese whistleblower posted shocking allegations about an orphanage in Guixi, Jiangxi province in Southeast China, that places many children internationally, accusing it of corruption, baby buying, and abuse. The case is still under investigation and it is not yet clear whether the allegations are true, but Susan Morgan, a mother to two adopted children from China including one who came from the Guixi orphanage, was still saddened when she read the news. "I've known for years that corruption is rampant in international adoption," Morgan said, "[But] suddenly being faced with an anonymous whistle blower who cites corruption in your own child's orphanage is still shocking, especially when you've met some of the people accused."

But Morgan fears interest in the story will peter out before long, in part because there are a lot of people who simply don't want to hear it. "Most adoptive families, I feel sure, do not understand how serious the issue of baby buying is in China, and the ties it can have to child trafficking and kidnapping," Susan said. "Of course, this is an issue that most adoptive parents do not want to explore, for obvious reasons." They fear losing their children, and they fear the nightmarish legal battle their children could be dragged through if it was ever discovered that their children had biological parents who hadn't truly given them up and actually wanted them back. That fear is both understandable and warranted—no one really seems to be sure what would happen in such a case if both sets of parents were unflinching in demanding the child stay with them—but American adoptive parents' general disinterest in investigating corruption and baby buying in Chinese orphanages may be part of the reason why Chinese parents like Liu Liqin are still losing their children at a rate of dozens per day.

Although news of the Guixi scandal had yet to break when I spoke with Stuy, he made it clear that these kinds of scandals are small enough that they can be explained away by the adoption community as isolated incidents. "These little fires can be put out so easily," he says, "what we need is for somebody to show that the whole country is burning."