

Teaching China through the Lens of Girls' and Women's Lives

By Peter Gilmartin and Kristen Hayward Strobel

Touching Home in China

In Search of Missing Girlhoods

A TRANSMEDIA PROJECT, BOOK, AND CURRICULUM

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY MELISSA LUDTKE

HTTP://TOUCHINGHOMEINCHINA.COM



Illiterate paternal grandparents raised Jin Shan, a teenage girl living in rural China. Her parents, unable to afford milk for their child, had no choice but to become migrant workers when Shan was seven months old. Shan remained behind with her grandparents, who farmed in the town of Xixiashu in Jiangsu Province, and did not live with her parents again until the age of ten.

Shan's experience was not unusual. In fact, it was anything but rare. Her story places her among millions of

"left-behind" children who remain in their villages, often with extended family, while their parents move to urban centers to fuel China's economic transition into the twenty-first century by providing labor for construction and production. When Shan took China's *gaokao* (college entrance exam), her score did not qualify her to attend an academic university, though she scored well enough to attend a lower-tier technical college. As such, she failed to meet the expectations of years of hard work and sacrifice on the part of her family.¹ As an only child, her educational success was seen as the key to her family's advancement. Once she'd failed to achieve this high goal, her lesser achievement was seen as not a worthy outcome of their years of sacrifice.

We know of Shan's story because soon after she graduated from high school, she met Jennie, a teenager from the United States who had been abandoned as a day-old infant in Xixiashu during the time of China's One-Child Policy. Jennie, like many female babies born during this era, was not kept by her birth family. That restrictive policy permitted each couple only one child, or the children from one birth. With the traditional preference for sons, who were seen as contributing more to the family's prosperity and carrying on the patrilineal family line, healthy girl babies were often abandoned. As happened with a number of abandoned infants, an American family adopted Jennie from an orphanage. As a teenager, Jennie returned to the town where she was found as an infant to see what her life might have been like if her



Jin Shan at her naming ceremony 100 days after her birth in 1995.
Photo by Jin Shan.

birth family had raised her. On this quest, she met Shan, who aided in her journey of discovery. In turn, Shan learned about Jennie's girlhood in suburban America.

The stories compiled in *Touching Home in China: In Search of Missing Girlhoods* revolve around the lives of the six Chinese girls that Jennie and her fellow American adoptee, Maya, spent time visiting in their Chinese towns. The girls' experiences are presented as



Maya, left front, and Jennie, left in second crib, at Changzhou Social Welfare Institute, June 1997.
Photo by Melissa Ludtke.

multimedia stories with accompanying lessons, each of which culminates in a project-based learning activity.² This digital Open Source educational project and book facilitate exploration and critical thinking about contemporary China through its portrayal of the lives of rural girls and women.

The digital stories of *Touching Home in China* feature embedded videos to show students these American and Chinese girls' cross-cultural encounters and discussions. The lessons, which align with the project's six stories, touch on a wide range of topics and themes relevant for middle school-, high school-, and college-level classes in Asian Studies, World and American History, Global Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and English/Language Arts. See the accompanying sidebar that lists the topics and themes connected with the six stories/lessons.

The National Council for the Social Studies has endorsed this engaging collection of stories, lesson plans, videos, and resources as meeting national social studies standards and frameworks. Of additional value to educators and students is its continually updated, annotated, online resource library.³ In it, themes and topics are differentiated, as is reading level for its content, and easy-to-use links connect the students to stories, videos, and journal articles. For those teachers and students who want to stay abreast of current changes in China, *Touching Home in China's* postings on Facebook are a helpful supplement.⁴

A challenge for teachers when adopting new materials is integrating them into their lessons and guiding students to meaningfully grapple with complex questions generated by multifaceted sources. Fortunately, each of this project's individual themes and topics can be taught separately with a prepared lesson plan that provides solid teacher and student guidance.

Touching Home in China provides accessible materials to enhance lessons and topics already on educators' radars:

- A discussion about change and continuity with the premodern Chinese themes of filial piety, gender roles, and the Confucian-influenced imperial exam system, and an exploration of how core principles of Confucianism guide learning in China's schools today
- An examination of China's massive internal migration, including the influence of *hukou* (household registration) on migrant



Jin Shan, middle, with her parents, Chen Liuhong, left, and Jin Jianru, right, during Lunar New Year, 2014. Photo by Jocelyn Ford.

workers and a comparison with America's Great Migration, or more current migration from Appalachia or other rural areas of the United States

- A comparative case study of the social and economic impact of government policies (Chinese and US) regarding women's roles as mothers and wives, including the convergence of Chinese traditions related to gender preference with the impact of medical technology, such as ultrasound and DNA testing
- A rare opportunity to explore various global and national issues through the lens of China's rural women's and girls' lives, whose voices, experiences, and perspectives are scarce in historical accounts and documents, yet it is impossible to study China today without understanding the role of women

Though China ended its One-Child Policy on January 1, 2016, the ripple effects of this policy are important to understanding China's social, economic, and political circumstances today. For decades, China will confront ramifications of that policy in its abnormal gender disparity, its disproportionately aging citizenry, and reductions in its labor force. *Touching Home in China* delivers personally told stories from key decades of this historic change. Its stories of Chinese girls and women who are not part of the nation's urban elite—along with the multicultural identity issues of the American adoptees—provide a content-rich, multimedia wellspring of captivating materials for learning about China. ■

NOTES

1. "Touching Home in China: In Search of Missing Girlhoods," YouTube, *Touching Home in China: In Search of Missing Girlhoods*, <https://tinyurl.com/y2qau9tf>.
2. "Lesson Plans," *Touching Home in China*, accessed June 23, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yxdee5jo>.
3. "Curated Resources for Further Learning," *National Council for the Social Studies*, accessed June 23, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y3xjotxe>.
4. See the *Touching Home in China* Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/touchinghomeinchina/>.

PETER GILMARTIN is a Consultant at Primary Source in Watertown, Massachusetts, and former chair of the AAS Committee on Teaching About Asia.

KRISTIN HAYWARD STROBEL is a World History Teacher at Lexington High School in Massachusetts.



Jin Shan, middle, with her paternal grandparents, Pei Adi, left, and Jin Lixing, right, at Lunar New Year, 2014. Photo by Jocelyn Ford.

Themes and Topics

Abandoned baby: When government intersects with families' lives

- China's One-Child Policy and gender imbalance
- Impact on girls' and women's lives
- Care of the elderly
- Coming to America

Touching home: How personal identity is shaped

- International adoption
- Identity, race, and adoption
- Living in a transracial family
- Being Asian in America

Daughter wife mother: How societal expectations and norms for girls and boys influence their lives

- Daughter
- Wife
- Mother
- Voicing discontent

Learning about learning: How learning reflects a nation's cultural values

- School pressures
- Equity and education
- Family expectations
- Heading to America

Women's work: Why women do the work they do

- Migrant work
- Family and work
- City dreams
- Work and gender

The girls reflect: Why bridge building across culture, class, race, and ethnicity matter

- Search for connection
- Filial piety
- Rural–urban divide
- China's generational chasm