

Inter-Country Adoption – a new beginning.

ANNA HAYES

Throwaway Daughter by Ting-xing Ye
London: Faber and Faber, 2003.

In Queensland, we live in a state where slow bureaucratic processes have restricted the adoption of overseas born children, a process that can drive a local family to sell their home and move interstate to have a better chance of adopting. These events were recently publicised on *The Sunday Program* and in national and regional newspapers, a process of publicity that may have contributed to a recent government decision to allow Queenslanders to share with other Australians the opportunity to adopt from overseas once more. These recent events make *Throwaway Daughter* particularly relevant in Queensland today, and on this basis it will be of interest to a wide audience. While overseas adoptees were once rare in regional communities, this is no longer the case and Ye's book will help increase understanding of the benefits of inter-country adoptions for both the adoptee and adopting parents.

Written by Ting-xing Ye, an established prize winning author, *Throwaway Daughter* is an account of Grace Dong-Mei Parker's search for her identity as a Chinese born Canadian. Although classified as juvenile fiction, the book offers the adult reader an emotional journey into the many-sided triangle of inter-country adoption as well as an insight into the social and political upheavals of twentieth-century China, which form the backdrop for much of the work. The use of differing voices in each chapter allows the reader to explore the emotions, motivations and the roles the central characters played in Dong-Mei's abandonment and adoption. The style of the work is both dramatic and touching and Ye immerses the reader in the emotional turmoil and unique cultural characteristics of inter-country adoption.

The book begins from the perspective of Dong-Mei who just wants to be "normal". She resents her parents' attempts to connect her with her Chinese "roots", and is especially bitter that her parents continue to call her Dong-Mei, the name given to her by her birth mother. She feels resentment towards her birth parents and China, because all that she's knows of them is that they abandoned her. For Dong-Mei, life in Canada is a new beginning and although she is different to her friends, she feels that such differences are only minor. In a bid to appease her parents, Dong-Mei reluctantly agrees to learn Chinese from a Chinese friend of the family (deliberately sought out by her parents because of his connection to China). However, Dong-Mei's interest in China remains forced until the events of the June 4 Incident begin to unfold on the television. It is only then that Dong-Mei realises that China is not "a free country", and that life there is very different to her own life in Canada. This causes Dong-Mei to develop an interest in the country of her birth, a curiosity which only increases with age.

Eventually, Dong-Mei travels to China for a language course and during her time there decides that it is time she discovers her past. However, for Jane, Dong-Mei's Canadian mother, this decision brings about a series of emotions in which she regrets her "open-mindedness" and insistence that her daughter stay connected with her "Chinese roots". Her pain and fears over her losing her daughter are powerfully summed up when her character states, "I don't want to share her with a stranger. She's ours." This brief but emotional chapter clearly illustrates Ye's ability to dissect many of the intricate nuances of adoption, and the fears that many adopted parents feel when faced with the possibility that their child wants to make contact with their birth parents. Nevertheless, Dong-Mei is supported by her family and is able to make contact with her birth parents. While the reunion with her birth father is somewhat apathetic, the meeting with her birth mother is the most poignant moment of the work, because Dong-Mei is finally told the circumstances of her abandonment. She is also assured that her birth

mother truly loved her and that she was wanted. The meeting also offers Dong-Mei's birth mother relief from the guilt, grief and pain she had suffered over her forced decision to abandon Dong-Mei. Ye's ability to immerse the reader into the emotional roller coaster journey of adoption is perhaps evidence of the pain she too suffered when she was forced to leave her own daughter behind, when she left China to live permanently in Canada.

While written as fiction, *Throwaway Daughters* is clearly representative of the real life experiences of many Chinese women. It not only details the gender inequalities and abuse that many Chinese women face, but also the impact that government policies, such as the 'One Child Policy', have had on the status of women in China. While *Throwaway Daughter* itself is not a memoir, it could be said that the publishing success and worldwide acclaim of Jung Chang's memoir *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, paved the way for the recent proliferation of memoirs by overseas Chinese women about their experiences in China, including Ye's own memoir *A Leaf in the Bitter Wind*, as well as fictional stories about Chinese women such as *Throwaway Daughter*.

It has been estimated that worldwide 40,000 children are adopted each year. However, even at a time when baby bonuses abound and the treasurer called on Australians to "have one for mum, one for dad and one for the country", inter-country adoption in Australia is being circumvented by an obvious lack of political will and bureaucratic mismanagement. While the United States show figures of over 18,000 inter-country adoptions in the year 2000, Australia only had 278 inter-country adoptions in 2002. Clearly Australia's figures could be a great deal higher, and *Throwaway Daughter* makes us question why our government cannot match the policies of other rich industrial nations when there are countless children worldwide, abandoned or orphaned, who are in desperate need of a new beginning.