

## Adoption in France: who are the adopted children and who are the adopters?

Juliette Halifax and Catherine Villeneuve-Gokalp\*

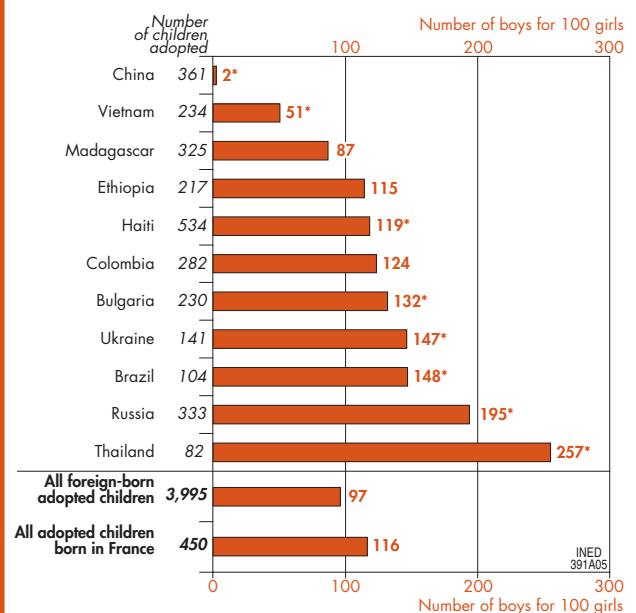
While the number of people wishing to adopt a child in France is increasing, the number of children available for domestic adoption is in decline, since today most births are planned. For this reason, many families now adopt children from other countries. Where do these children come from and who are they? And who are the adopters? A recent INED survey – the first of its kind – sheds light on these questions and, in particular, helps to explain why adoption is more frequent among the more affluent social categories.

The number of people applying to adopt a child in France has almost doubled in the last fifteen years, and now exceeds 10,000 per year. Of this total, 8,000 receive approval (1) while others abandon their project before the procedure is completed or are turned down. Approval remains valid for five years and 25,000 approved potential adopters were waiting for a child in 2003 [1]. This increase in demand has led to the development of international adoption. Of the 4,500 children adopted in France in 2003, almost 4,000 (90%) were born abroad. France ranks second in the world for the number of foreign children adopted, behind the USA which counts over 20,000 per year. In relative terms however, international adoption is less common in France than in certain northern European countries: Norway, Sweden and Denmark count ten to twelve such adoptions per thousand births, compared with five per thousand in France [2].

### ◆ Adopted children: wide-ranging origins and profiles

Twenty-five years ago, four-fifths of foreign-born adopted children were from Asia – primarily South Korea – while very few were from Africa or Europe [3]. Today, they come in practically equal numbers from the different continents: 27% are born in Asia, 27% in Africa, 26% in America and 20% in Europe. The top three countries of origin for international adoption in

Figure 1 - Number of boys for 100 girls among children adopted in France in 2003, by country of origin



Sources: foreign adoptions: MAI [3], domestic adoptions: DGAS [1]  
\* proportion significantly different from 100 boys for 100 girls (5% level)

\* Institut national d'études démographiques.

(1) Under French law, persons wishing to adopt must be approved by the chair of the council of the *département* on the basis of recommendations submitted by an approval committee.

France are currently Haiti, China and Russia. Together they accounted for more than a third of all foreign-born adopted children in 2004.

The children's characteristics vary according to their country of origin, and they are unequally distributed by sex and age. In China, the government's one-child policy, combined with boy preference, means that practically all the children available for adoption are girls: there are only 2 boys for 100 girls among adopted children born in China (Figure 1). The proportion of boys is also low in Vietnam (51 boys for 100 girls), but high in Thailand (257) and in Russia (195), though it is not known why more boys are available for adoption in these countries. These differences between countries balance out, so that the total number of adopted boys and girls is roughly equal.

Children tend to be adopted at an early age – two years and ten months on average – and half arrive in their new homes before the age of nineteen months. Here too, there are major differences by country of origin, with the mean age at adoption ranging from under six months in South Korea to almost seven years in Brazil. According to the visas granted in 2003, 89% of children from South Korea were below the age of twelve months, compared with only 2% of children from Brazil. In Brazil, domestic adoption has developed in recent years and Brazilian families prefer to adopt young babies, leaving the older children for international adoption: one in three Brazilian children adopted in France are over six. The situation is very different in South Korea, where single mothers are practically compelled to abandon their baby, and in China, where parents who do not want to keep a girl child give away the baby at birth [4].

French children available for adoption are either newborn babies that can be adopted very rapidly (most often born to anonymous mothers), or older children who became wards of the state at a later age (Box 1). Hence, in the case of domestic adoption, 57% of children are adopted in their first year and 9% after their seventh birthday, versus 31% and 7% respectively for international adoption.

### ◆ Adoption candidates: nine in ten are couples

But who are the potential adopters? To answer this question, INED was authorized to conduct a survey based on the application files for adoption in ten French *départements* (Box 2).

Nine in ten applications are submitted by a couple. In the case of persons not living with a partner, the candidate is practically always a woman. Applications by men without a partner are extremely rare: 5 out of 1,857 in the INED survey (Table). Almost three-quarters of couples have been married for at least two years when they apply for approval. In order to make a joint application (2), the other couples marry in the two years

*Table – Marital status of adoption candidates in 2001-2002*

Application submitted by:	Distribution of candidates at start of procedure (%)	Distribution of adopters (%)
Man not living with a partner	0.3	0.0
Woman not living with a partner	10.6	6.8
A couple	89.1	93.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: INED adoption survey*

preceding the application (11%) or during the procedure (12%). Only 6% do not marry, generally because they are still waiting for a child to adopt. Women with no partner are half as numerous among candidates as among the female population of the same age, perhaps because their desire for a child is weaker, or because they do not wish to raise a child without a father. Another reason might be that people without a partner anticipate the difficulties they will encounter in the adoption procedure, resulting in self-selection. These difficulties are real: there are fewer people without a partner among those who actually adopt than among adoption candidates (7% versus 11%).

### ◆ New adoptive mothers are 38 years old on average

For seven couples in ten, adoption is the only way to achieve parenthood: they have no shared biological children and have given up ART treatment (assisted reproductive technology) because it was ineffective or too demanding. Another 7% of couples also have difficulty conceiving and do not have a biological child but prefer to opt directly for adoption without attempting ART. For the remaining quarter, adoption is not the only alternative: 12% of candidate couples have no physiological reproductive problems and 12% have become sterile after having one or more biological children.

The moment of adoption is delayed by an accumulation of factors: repeated unsuccessful attempts to conceive, medical infertility treatments, decision to opt for adoption, administrative procedures, etc. As a result, adoptive mothers living with a partner are eleven years older on average when they receive their first child than women giving birth to their first baby: 38.5 versus 27.5 (mean ages in 2001-2002). Their application was submitted three years earlier, on average, at age 35.5. These women are nevertheless slightly younger than those who had biological children before opting for adoption: in this case, the woman's mean age at the time of application is 37. But it is women without a

(2) Any person aged over 28 or any couple married for more than two years of which one member is over 28 may apply for plenary adoption. No-one may be adopted by more than one person other than a married couple.

partner who wait the longest before first applying: those with no children are 38.5 years old on average, and those with children are 40.

### ◆ Major social inequalities, even at the application stage

From one social category to another, the chances of success in adopting are very uneven. For couples, this selection takes place at an early stage, when deciding to submit an application. Manual workers represent only 19% of male adoption candidates living with a partner (3) and aged 30 to 49, compared with 35% for the comparable male population in the *départements* where the survey took place. Conversely, one potential adopter in four is a manager or professional, compared with 16% for the reference population (Figure 2). The adoption procedure in itself adds practically nothing to the social selection process that occurs upstream. The position of managers and professionals moves ahead by three percentage points, that of manual workers drops back two points, while the intermediate categories remain unchanged.

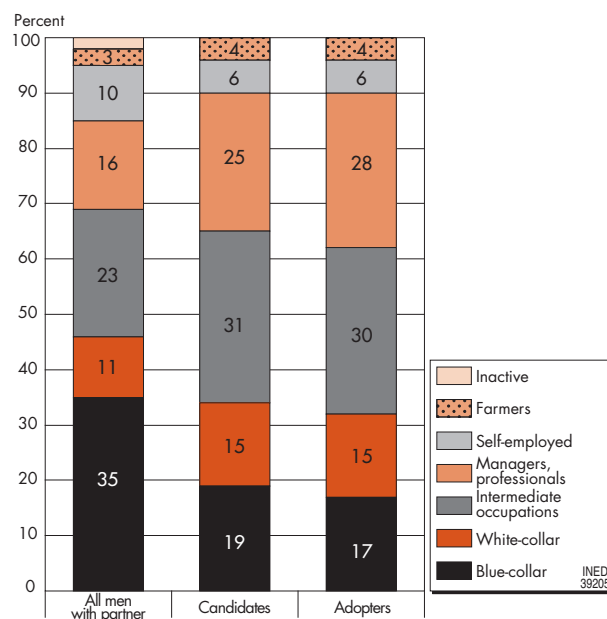
These inequalities are even more pronounced among women without a partner. Practically no female manual workers attempt adoption, while three-quarters of candidates are managers or professionals (24%) or have an intermediate occupation (49%) (versus 8% and 22% respectively in the reference population). Moreover, though the proportion of white-collar workers is the same as that of managers and professionals among partnerless female adoption candidates (one in four), white collar workers represent only 18% of adopters, and managers and professionals 34% (Figure 3).

Social inequalities in access to adoption are primarily a consequence of self-selection. How can this be explained? One hypothesis might be that potential candidates tend to anticipate the final outcome. Based on the widely-held belief that adoption is “reserved” for the rich, the lower social categories may be more reluctant to apply for adoption because they believe they have little chance of success.

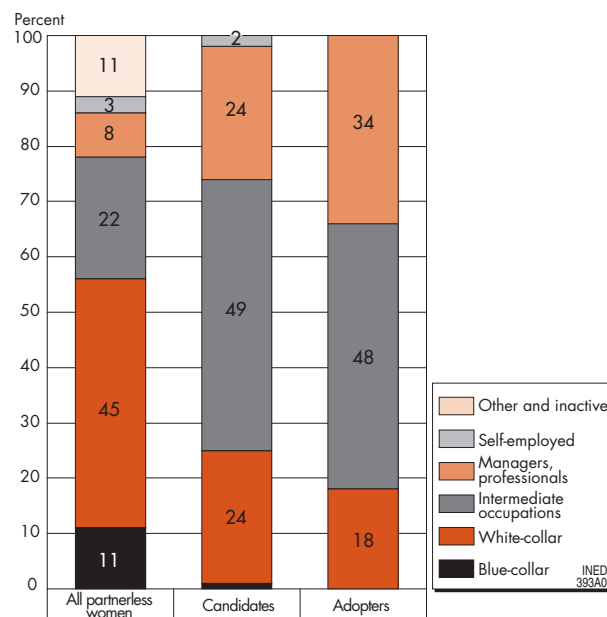
Alternatively, this self-selection might reflect systems of preference that differ from one social category to another. We might postulate that the lower social categories have a strong attachment to blood ties that deters them from adoptive parenthood. Or perhaps we should conclude that in a climate of general reticence towards adoptive parenthood (regularly fuelled by media coverage of international adoption failures and of the obstacles encountered), the more affluent or educated social categories feel better equipped to meet the challenge. A qualitative survey would be needed to examine this question.

And why does the outcome of the adoption procedure

**Figure 2 - Socio-occupational status of male adoption candidates living with a partner and of male adopters**  
Comparison with all men living with a partner aged 30-49 in the ten *départements* covered by the survey (3)



**Figure 3 - Socio-occupational status of female adoption candidates without a partner and of female adopters**  
Comparison with all women without a partner aged 30-49 in the ten *départements* covered by the survey (3)



appear to be closely linked to the social category for candidates without a partner, but much less so for couples? In reality, this inequality is not linked to social category, but to marital status. Unlike couples, persons without a partner have practically no chance of adopting a ward of the state (Box 1), and international adoption is difficult to undertake on a single wage, unless the person concerned is a manager or professional. Above a monthly income threshold of 1,500 euros at the start of the procedure, the chances of adopting a child become independent of income for couples, but continue to increase steadily for persons without a partner.

(3) As not all women living with a partner are economically active, only the man's socio-occupational status is represented for couples.

## Box 1

## Wards of the state

Wards of the state are children who have no legal ties with their biological family or with a replacement family. In two-thirds of cases, they are taken in by the child welfare services because they were not acknowledged by their birth parents. They may also be children abandoned by parents who consent to their adoption (14%), or children who are declared as wards after parental rights are withdrawn in court (13%) or after being orphaned (4%) [1].

Wards of the state “fostered with a view to adoption” are children fostered by a family approved for adoption or for whom the foster family has submitted an adoption application. They must share the home of their future adoptive parents for at least six months before the plenary adoption decision (article 345 of the French Civil Code).

Legally, “children accepted as wards of the state [...] must be placed for adoption as quickly as possible” (art. L.225 1 of the *Code de l'action sociale et des familles*). However, this is not the case for all children, since at the end of 2003, out of 2,882 wards of the state, only 1,009 had been fostered with a view to adoption (35%). If they are not placed for adoption within the first few months after becoming wards, children are unlikely to be so later on: 78% of placements occur within the first six months and 95% within two years.

There are large disparities between children fostered with a view to adoption and those who live with foster families or in institutions. For example, the children fostered with a view to adoption are very young: two years and ten months on average in 2003, compared with twelve and a half years for other children with permanent ward status. So the chance of being taken in by an adoptive family decreases with age, and age has a clear discriminatory effect. Moreover, age is not the only factor affecting placement, since among unplaced children under one year of age, 37% have a physical or mental health problem. Overall, one-third of wards are not placed because of a disability or health problem, and 12% because they have brothers and sisters from whom they cannot be separated. Families agreeing to adopt a child with disabilities or at least three children together are rare: respectively 2% and less than 1% of candidates (INED adoption survey).

## Box 2

## The INED adoption survey

The survey was conducted in 2003 and 2004 in ten *départements* (4) with very different numbers of adoption candidates, economic characteristics and local cultures. Persons aged 30-49 (more than 90% of adoption candidates are aged between 30 and 49) living in these ten *départements* are representative of the population of the same age in France as a whole.

All persons wishing to adopt apply to the child welfare services of their *département*. They are then invited to attend a briefing session before submitting a letter of confirmation and various administrative documents. As soon as this dossier has been received, a file is opened in their name. The data presented in this article are taken from the files of all candidates who applied for approval to adopt an unrelated child in one of these *départements* and for whom the procedure was completed in 2001 or 2002, making a total of 1,857 files.

To obtain further information, a short questionnaire was mailed to all candidates and 40% replied. Data from the files and the questionnaires were anonymous. The survey was approved by the national data protection agency (Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés).

This research was commissioned and funded by the Ministry of the Family (Direction générale de l'action sociale, DGAS), with the aim of developing statistical information on adoption candidates and on the outcome of their adoption projects [5].

(4) A *département* is a unit of local government. There are 104 metropolitan and overseas *départements* in France.

## REFERENCES

[1] Direction générale de l'action sociale - *Situation des pupilles de l'État au 31/12/2003*, Statistical document issued by the Ministère des solidarités, de la santé et de la famille, 2004

[2] Peter SELMAN - “Intercountry adoption in the new millennium; the ‘quiet migration’ revisited”, *Population research and policy review*, 3, 2002, pp. 205-225

[3] Mission de l'adoption internationale (MAI), Ministère des affaires étrangères

[4] Isabelle ATTANÉ - *Une Chine sans femmes ?*, Paris, Perrin, 2005, 391 p.

[5] Juliette HALIFAX and Catherine VILLENEUVE-GOKALP - “Designing a survey on adoption in France”, *Population-E*, 59(5) 2004, pp 675-688.