



A Chinese Adoption Tale

One family's story of bringing home a local child



People ask me all me all the time, “What’s it like adopting in China?”

But I don’t think that’s quite the right question. What we have done is bring a little Chinese girl home to live with us and made her a part of our family. And what’s that like? I only have one word for it: interesting.

Our adopted daughter Little, as I will call her for the purpose of this article (our older daughter will simply be known as Big), has been with us now for several months. She is nearly 2 years old. We arrived in Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi Province (arguably, one of its least interesting cities) to meet our little girl. It was cold—and I admit that we were a

bit apprehensive when we met Little for the first time. We were scared of everything that we couldn’t possibly foresee: her past and our future together. It was a stress-filled day, the very end of a process fraught with bureaucracy, false starts, long periods of apparent inactivity and days where you felt your life had suddenly changed forever.

Endless paperwork

It took us just over a natural gestation to bring Little home. In adoption terms, however, this isn’t really all that long. If you want to know the actual application process, then I am about the worst person to ask. My wife

dealt with most of that, I’m embarrassed to say. I listened a lot, and did what I was told, went where I was told. These were embassies and government offices, for the most part. I also scanned and sent a mountain of documents to various places. My wife was the one who negotiated the bureaucratic maze, but what I learned was that there is a process (and a long and arduous one at that) and it must be adhered to precisely at all times.

The paper trail is massive. Before we even entered the system, we had to account for our lives over the past few decades. That meant medical and financial records to prove that we were both solvent and healthy. It

also required a detailed list of addresses for the past 20 years of our lives, and providing police checks from the countries and regions where we've previously lived. All of these must be verified by not only the country of issue, but also by the Chinese embassy in that country. It took a while, suffice to say.

The final hoop is the "home study": a three-day questioning with our case worker, a U.S.-certified social worker whose word and authority is accepted by the China Center for Children's Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA), the government agency that deals with adoption in China. That's the main difference between domestic (what we did) and international adoptions. In the latter, chances are that the home study will be carried out by an agency (government or otherwise) in your home country. In China, there are only a few individuals with credentials that are trusted by the CCCWA—and they're very busy.

Eventually, the home study rolled around. And we were frightened. Before her arrival, our social worker requested that we provided her, via email, all documentation. She also requested that we have three copies of everything to build stacks of folders for different interested parties. We had to write up thorough biographies that covered our entire lives. It covered our marital relationship, our family relationships, how we were raised, how we raise Big and how we planned on raising Little. Would we smack her? Would we talk about her adoption? What would we do if she wanted to seek out her birth mother?

The social worker also wanted to know about any alcohol and drug use, criminal history (however small) and our psychological background. That included a history of our (and our extended families') mental health, including any bouts of depression or any therapy sessions. How did we handle stress?

It is impossible to know the right answers to any of these questions, or the million others that she asked us over that long weekend, with our future hanging in the balance. It's a state of mind that I've grown used to over the past year. We didn't know what the right call was, but we had to make one anyway and deal with the fall-out. I suspect there are no right answers here.

Evidently, we passed. We were deemed to be of sound mind and body (and wallet, it seems). At the end of the third day, my wife asked the social worker whether she'd be willing to write us a positive home study. And we'll never forget how she responded, "I'd be delighted!" She submitted her folder and we

awaited approval from the CCCWA. It took some time, but we knew the nod was forthcoming. Our folder was submitted to match us with a baby in need of a home.

Learning about yourself

There is a database somewhere—some sad and miserable database full of hope—of all the babies and children that have been abandoned in China. It is divided up by province and the child's age and gender, then further subdivided according to the child's individual needs. Non-Chinese adoptions for children without special needs have a long waiting time—longer than most people are prepared to wait. That's fine, and that makes sense. That means more Chinese families will be encouraged to adopt.

But that also means that, along with proving that we were normal human beings, we had to think long and hard about what special needs we could cope with. We, too, had to write up a long and miserable list of our own, and tick things off. Sporting an extra digit? Sure, why not? Fetal alcohol syndrome or drug addiction? I was sorry to say that we just didn't think we could handle that.

The list was just horrible. We didn't resent it, it was just this lingering sense that we were making decisions about a child's life based on how (we thought) it would affect our lives. It felt selfish. Really selfish and really cruel. And yes, it is selfish. But if our circumstances—two working parents with a child—could not provide the home that a child needed, what really were we doing?

My wife would spend hours with Dr. Internet and report back to me with what she'd found. That missing toe or extra finger? It could quite often be symptomatic of some far more complicated malaise or syndrome. We changed our minds often, changed our minds but our hearts stayed strong. Eventually, we made our choices. And those decisions would affect the rest of our lives.

The matching is performed in batches. Once a month, a folder of new children arrives on someone's desk that lists their medical needs, age, personality and their orphanage. Our folder just missed a batch arrival, and yet another month was added to our wait.

A match is found

After that month, it was incredibly quick. We received, by email, a photo and a medical report of our future child. She was a summer baby, from Shanxi, with a repaired cleft lip and a cleft palate. She was ours. We had 72

hours to decide, but it didn't take 72 minutes. We promised ourselves that we'd talk about it, that we'd take the files to the doctor's office and hear their clinical advice. We said we wouldn't look at the picture.

We dutifully took the files to the doctor. Having looked at her weight on the charts and examining her most recent blood tests, she told us that our baby was unlikely to have any undiagnosed syndromes. The picture quickly left my email and was on my phone. And there it remains, along with about a million others of Little and Big.

Then we waited again. This time for a final approval and travel papers. A date was set to meet her in person. It was still summer in Beijing when the picture arrived, but it would be the deepest, darkest winter when first we would seek out her smile. Our jobs afforded us long holidays, but zero flexibility as to when we might take them. So while we waited, we prepared everything. We bought clothes and sorted through Big's closet to see what might fit Little, what might protect and warm her, just as they had for Big.

We prepped Big, spoke to her about her new sister and explained that we would have to go away for a while to meet Little. Mostly, though, we simply waited. Waited for now to be over, and for our new lives to begin. It is hard waiting for one thing to end, for something else to begin. There were rows, there were tears. There was reconciliation, capitulation and reassurances flitting back and forth in every direction. The waiting was the hard part. Little kept us waiting right up until the last moment.

The day of reckoning

We boarded the plane, still waiting to meet her. We checked into our hotel. We wandered the streets of Taiyuan, ate a forgettable meal with still four hours to go. We tried to sleep, tried to talk, to make the time pass faster. We tried not to think about what was about to happen, but at the same time, wishing it already had.

At the appointed time and place, we were there. Little was late. Ten minutes, 20, nearly half an hour. She kept us waiting right up to the bitter end. But then, there she was. Our daughter, our smiling, stumbling daughter that we had waited so long for. She was ours from the moment we saw her, ours forever more. ●

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