



HAVING A BABY IN CHINA

Recounting his own experiences, Tim Lyddiatt says that it is not as frightening as he thought it would be.

It begins with a conversation. 'Do you want to have a baby?' Answered 'yes,' the next question follows immediately: 'in China?' Because this is how you have to think. You are in a foreign country, but you have been building up to having a baby for a few years. Something has to give, compromises need to be made. Either you hold off for another year or so, or you make the decision to trust the medical professionals you choose to guide you through the process.

It is very easy to be frightened. China can be difficult, even at the best of times, and in having a baby, do you really want to just be muddling through? As two westerners, our choices seemed to be limited. But for parents consisting of one native

speaker, the options are greater, if no easier a decision to make.

We did the Google thing, and found a clinic that sells its services on the fact that it has 'English speaking medical staff.' It was one of two places we found in Qingdao and, having heard good things about them, made our first appointment. The first thing you have to understand is that there are degrees of English speaking. And whilst our doctor spoke some English, the nursing staff were more than capable of translating for us as we began this nine month odyssey. At least in the beginning.

Early on in the process you are but merely spectators. You are pregnant, but there is really very little you can

do to affect what's going on. You read the advice on the internet, you stop drinking and avoid problem foods such as blue cheese and sushi. But in the early scans, everything is about what medicine can do to show you what's going on. You watch the screens and listen to the speakers with a slowly growing sense of wonder as to what is happening in there.

Later on though, there are choices to be made and questions that you want answering. And this is where the communication can begin to break down. An example: after one of our questions was translated for the doctor, the nurse spent five minutes in discussion about it all and then responded with less than 10 words. I don't think for a second that

we didn't get the most important information, but nor do I think we got it all. It can be frustrating and my advice would be to take notes about what is discussed with you and then consult your most trusted online resource from home to get the bigger picture.

A friend of ours, an Australian with a Chinese husband had different problems. His mother is doctor of Chinese medicine and when it came to choosing which hospital they would use, her opinion counted "more than perhaps I would have liked," our friend said. "But that is just the Asian way," she continued. "Future grandparents here expect to be very involved in every aspect of the pregnancy, delivery and even the raising of the baby afterward." It caused problems because the grandmother believed that only the municipal hospital was good enough. "It is the biggest hospital in Qingdao, has great facilities, and has been producing babies day in day out for years." In other words, they know what they are doing and could be trusted.

But 2012 is a dragon year, a time when the birth rate in China goes through the roof. "We had our first few appointments there but as New Year approached, the hospital got so busy that we feared that if mistakes were going to be made, they would be made this year." Eventually, they switched hospitals and ended up at the Women and Infant's hospital like we did.

Before any of this started, our travails through the interweb led us to believe that there was one battle that we were not going to be able to avoid when having a baby in China: we had been led to believe that Chinese hospitals like to always opt for a caesarean delivery over a natural birth, and that we might feel pressured into making that decision. The thing about a caesarean is that it can be scheduled and managed, it can be controlled and medical staff can

factor yours into their schedule for the day. It is much more efficient in many ways. But such a delivery is not always the desired choice for many western women who have grown up knowing that the birth - despite the pain and effort - is an integral part of bonding with your child.



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My wife was adamant that hers was to be a natural birth unless continuing would put her life or the baby's in danger. She also wanted a water birth, and whilst neither of these things eventually happened - preeclampsia and soaring blood pressure saw to that - both remained

on the table until circumstances took over and we had to bow to medical advice. The same happened to our friends, but nature intervened much more slowly for them. Whilst my wife's options ran out after just a few hours of real labour, theirs progressed for twenty before their baby's heartbeat began to slide and there suddenly became no other choice.

It was reassuring to not feel that pressure, to know that the doctors understood the western desire for a natural birth. Conversations I've had since our baby was born have shed some light on this Asian way. The fundamental difference would seem to be that in China, it is common for parents to not raise their kids, but to raise their grandchildren. The need for both parents to work in order to help support their parents in their old age and to pay for the child's education means that (again) it is more efficient for children to be raised by their grandparents. Certainly, some of our friends (when one of the couple is Chinese) have come under tremendous pressure to send their baby off to live with the grandparents. In these circumstances, where the child will be raised by someone else, no wonder there is not such a pressing need to endure the rigours of childbirth.

It is the same with breastfeeding. For many women, the most natural thing in the world is to feed their baby. But it doesn't always happen as easily as they would like. My wife was lucky and she was able to feed our S-Bomb right from the start. Our friend was not so lucky. Even for us, whilst we remained in hospital, the (excellent) nurses were forever suggesting that my wife gets some sleep (she needed it after all, her blood pressure remained high for more than 48 hours) and that they would feed the baby with formula. Formula is apparently the norm in China.

But it is a self defeating strategy. The less you feed a baby naturally, the



harder it becomes to do so in the future. My wife (again) was adamant, and she would wake up, feed the baby, and then go back to sleep. There was one 24 hour period when she was out all the time, so we fed her formula, but other than that, we slept when the baby did.

During those 24 hours, I had another battle: to have the nurses let me feed her. This was my baby too, and whilst it is not the same as breastfeeding, giving her the food she needs to grow seemed like the very least I could do to help her along. But the nurses seemed surprised that I would either want, or know how, to do it, and would take her off me to give her a bottle. After a couple of rounds of this, I put my foot down and took my daughter from them and made a point of feeding her in front of them, so they could see I knew what I was doing. It worked, and the nurses

never fed again unless I asked them too.

So that was that. In all, the experience of having a baby in China was not nearly as harrowing as I thought it

was going to be. It was perhaps not as smooth as it might have been at home, and certainly we had to do much more reading than we otherwise might have done, the answers to all our questions not being so immediately forthcoming. But we survived, and our baby has just passed her 100 days, a big deal in China.

“As a man, I had another battle: to have the nurses let me feed my daughter.”

One final footnote: Being a dad in China, carrying your baby around when you are out and about is amazing. “Men don’t take their babies out in China,” a very nice Chinese man told me on the Beijing Metro recently. “That’s why they are all taking pictures with their phones.” So, not only am I a proud father with a beautiful, healthy daughter, I am something of a talking point too!