

Waiting on

by **Laura Lofy**

As an expat in China, living amongst the massive population, and regularly encountering the parents and grandparents devotedly raising their single-child little emperors and empresses, one cannot help but think about the children one does not see. Although largely invisible, they are the children waiting for adoption in China's state-run children's welfare institutions.

In 1979 China imposed the One Child Policy in an effort to slow population growth. The strict enforcement of that policy, combined with cultural and economic realities, resulted in a massive increase in both selective abortion and abandonment of female and disabled infants. As a result of infant abandonment, the population within the state-run children's welfare institutions exploded in the past three decades.

To solve the growing problems, China formally opened its doors to international adoption in 1992, and parents throughout the world welcomed many Chinese girls into their hearts and homes as daughters. Between 1995 and 2005, American families adopted more than 60,000 children from China; the peak was in 2005 when 7,903 Chinese children were adopted into forever families in the US. Although many of these were considered healthy children, most suffered some short- and/or long-term problems associated with institutionalization like malnourishment, growth retardation, attachment problems, developmental delays, and institutional autism.

Today, the landscape of Chinese adoption has changed dramatically. Chinese international adoption of children with no health impairments or medical problems has slowed to a crawl. Wait times for a typically developing child are five to seven years; some adoption agencies, no longer have a

"regular" China program. Ann Kedl, Orphan Care Director of the Baobei Foundation, a US charity that provides medical care for orphaned children in Shanghai, diplomatically says, "For whatever reason, China is no longer making healthy children available for international adoption."

Where Are the Children?

Undoubtedly, a combination of several factors has contributed to this change. While the One Child Policy remains in effect, the implementation has loosened up in recent years resulting in a reduction in infant abandonment. In the countryside, the policy is actually not as strict as it is in the cities. In the mid 1980s, China broadened the One Child Policy into the One-Son or Two-Children policy for rural families, giving families whose first-born child was a girl the opportunity to try again for a boy. Loosening enforcement and improved economic conditions mean that some families are now willing and able to pay the fines associated with over quota births, and are willing to keep bearing children to get their boy.

Another contributing factor is the correction of the skewed financial incentives for welfare institutions. In the past, the placement of an infant with a foreign family could result in a 10-20 times greater income for the orphanage than a domestic placement. This imbalance created a strong preference among orphanage directors to place children overseas.

While the international adoption of typically developing Chinese infants has come to a near standstill, China's children's welfare institutions are still full of children, the vast majority with some sort of special need. According to China's Ministry of Health, over the past 15 years, the rate of birth defects, like congenital heart problems, neural tube defects, cleft lip or palate,

Forever

We all know that China's orphanages are overflowing with girls, right? It's the common belief, but very, very far from reality. This special report on adoption in China uncovers the sad truth.

hyperdactylism (e.g. extra extremities), has increased 70 percent in China. When translated, this means that 1.2 million (6%) of the infants born in China each year are affected in some way by birth defects and/or learning disabilities.

Surprisingly, a large and growing proportion of disabled children in welfare institutions are boys, largely because foreign families who do adopt children with special needs have a strong preference for girls. Kelly DeRosier, a social worker responsible for placing China's waiting children with American families, says, "Everyone thinks there are no boys, but there are three times as many boys as girls. But the vast majority of adoptive parents want girls, so the boys have to wait. Parents will take a girl with two special needs over a boy with a minor special (need). Boys are so hard to place." It is also the case that the older children get, the harder they are to place.

Finding a Forever Family

Jessica and Keith Giddens describe their adoption journey as one that has been guided by faith. Upon finding herself in China with time on her hands, Jessica made her way to the door of a charity that arranges surgeries for orphaned infants with cleft lips and palates. The day of her first visit, Jessica held a two-month-old baby named Jia Wei who, unbeknownst to her at the time, would become her son. With each subsequent visit, Jia Wei (now also known as Sam) inched his way further into Jessica's heart. Twelve months passed, but Sammy's poor health prevented him from receiving the series of surgeries that he needed. While other infants came and went, Sammy stayed put and kept waiting. Although Jessica and Keith had a strong desire to foster Sammy to help attend to his health, the organization was reluctant as they had never entered into such foster

arrangement in the past. Ironically, just as Jessica and Keith were preparing to repatriate, the charity got the necessary approval from the home orphanage for them to foster Sammy. After a lot of thought and prayer, the couple made plans to stay in China and brought Sammy home. Within a week, he had his second surgery.

For Jessica and Keith, adoption had been nowhere on their radar when they came to China. They hadn't had biological children of their own, and while they weren't opposed to adoption, they simply had never really considered it. When asked about how they made this decision to go forward with Sammy's adoption, Jessica says, "I felt in my spirit that I should adopt this child, and that feeling scared me. I felt afraid because I lived in a foreign country with limited resources to the healthcare and assistance I knew that Sammy needed."

Despite the fear, the couple moved forward with the adoption process, and have spent the year elbow-deep in paperwork. Jessica and Keith have just heard that they have been officially matched with Sammy, the news they were waiting on pins and needles for since they first met him.

And Gabriel Makes Six

In September 2010, a baby was born and abandoned in Jiangsu province. Seventeen months later, this same boy is named Gabriel and is living in Jinqiao, waiting to become the fourth child of Cleo and Josh Brookhart. Gabriel was born with multiple birth defects affecting his brain and spine. Fortunately, he was found and placed in an orphanage that has close ties with the Bao-bei Foundation. At the age of six months, Gabriel received life-saving surgery at Shanghai Children's Medical Center, and was placed in the Brookhart's healing





home. They provided nurturing and took him to follow-up hospital visits and rehabilitation appointments recommended by his surgeon, Dr Bao Nan. The Brookharts were seasoned aftercare providers, having taken in several Baobei infants prior to Gabriel.

The family's three biological children once again opened their hearts to a new baby, but this time they were not as willing to let go. Their nine-year-old daughter pleaded with them, "If you let this one go, I'll die."

Given that their children were now getting a bit older and more self-sufficient, Cleo and Josh began to think seriously about adoption. Cleo recalls the couple's reasoning, "On one hand, what if we meet this child twenty years down the line, and he's homeless because he has grown up in the system and there is no longer a place for him in that system. We will think, 'we could have made a difference.'" She adds, "On the other hand, what if we meet him twenty years down the line and he is doing fantastically. Then we will think, 'Wow, we could have been a part of his story.'"

Adoption is not all smooth sailing. Cleo says, "The hardest part is not knowing what other obstacles lie ahead. But, at the same time, I think, 'He was abandoned with this horrible disease and now he could have a family with three siblings who love him.' So if that can happen, what else can happen? We're hopeful."

The Reality of Expat Adoption

While healing home care resulted in adoption in the cases of Sammy and Gabriel, this is by no means a sure thing. Karen Friedman, a Beijing-based social worker who has facilitated hundreds of expat adoptions says, "The parents who find themselves in this situation (caring for a baby they want to adopt) spend many sleepless nights worrying whether or not the adoption will happen." In reality most children who receive surgeries through these types of charitable organizations are placed with other adoptive families.

Typically, the adoption of Chinese children with special needs does not happen through foster care to adoption process, but

rather through a more formal matching process that is coordinated by an adoption agency in one's home country. From the Chinese side, there are criteria that potential adoptive parents must meet in terms of age, marital status, medical history, mental health and even body mass. However, there is often "wiggle room" when it comes to some of the rules, especially for those children who the government identifies as "special focus" children due to their disability status, age or time on the placement list.

Friedman has learned that US citizens are in the best position to adopt as expats because their national laws make it possible for them to proceed through an adoption agency and participate in the regular matching process. Their adoption may also be expedited if the conditions around their expat assignment are right. Europeans and Australians are in a tougher bind and generally expats fall outside of the regular home country process.

Think Twice

Adopting a child with special needs is an

undertaking not for the faint of heart or ill-prepared. Adoptive father Guillaume Gauvain is Founder of the Bethel Foundation, a charitable orphanage that cares for and educates children who are blind or visually impaired. To people who are considering special needs adoption, he offers this advice, "Think twice!"


Gauvain explains, "I think a lot of families really have this compelling desire of wanting to help the needy -- which is not wrong -- but I think they don't really grasp how much of a commitment that is beyond thinking. 'Oh we can really help that child. We have so much to give him. It wouldn't be big sacrifice for us to bring him home and give him a good life.' But there is so much they are overlooking. Making a difference in a child's life goes way beyond how much you can give him -- even how much love. First of all, that child doesn't even know he needs more love from someone else, so he is likely to reject your love. That is the first shocker for new parents," he adds.

He continues, "It [adoption] should not be just an emotional or humanitarian decision... Potential parents need to push the thinking process further and make sure they understand that it is not just going to involve you and your wife, but your children in the home, your extended family. Your whole life is going to go berserk for a few months or years before it settles down."

Does Your Husband Know You're Calling?

Adopting a child with special needs is not for everyone, but is the right decision for some. DeRosier says when she is screening clients, she looks for parents who have a strong marriage, a good support system, who are flexible and have a sense of humor. She says the most important things that parents should do when they are beginning the adoption journey is to talk with other families who are already living the experience, and encourages them to join adoptive parents groups (such as Families with Kids from China), and says it is essential that the

couple be strong enough to turn down a referral of a child that they feel has needs beyond those they can manage. Finally, it is essential that both parents must be ready and willing to jump in with two feet. Her first question to mothers who call her is always, "Does your husband know you're calling?"

The children who are still living in China's welfare institutions are referred to as waiting children, a euphemism for orphaned children with special needs that implies "that someone is coming. For children like Sammy and Gabriel, faith, fate and good fortune came together to help end their wait, but for hundreds of thousands of others, the wait continues. 

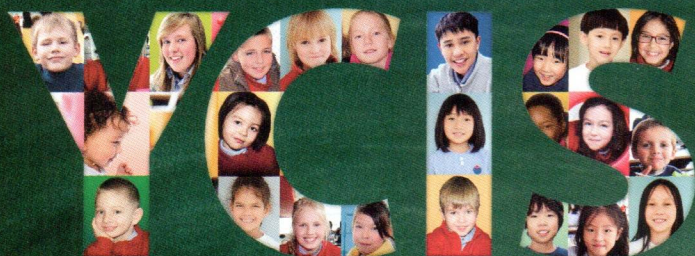
Places you can help support children while they are waiting...

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