



OUR CHINA STORIES

我们的中国故事

Cotter, Charlotte

Adoption place: Zhenjiang City, Jiangsu Province

Adoption date: August 1994

Age at adoption: 5 months

Kurland, Willa Mei Kurland

Adoption place: Urumqi, Xinjiang Province

Adoption date: April 1996

Age at adoption: 20 months

Friends Charlotte and Willa Mei embarked on first family searches, together, in the summer of 2016. They blogged as their searches unfolded. As you read the whole amazing story, bear in mind that you will move backward, through their discoveries in China, past the moment they landed and headed, together, to their provinces, to their preparations before leaving the United States. This post "begins" on March 28, 2017, as Charlotte reflects on a trip that surprised them both.

CHARLOTTE, March 2017: This past weekend I was delighted to reunite with Willa in Boston. We decided that if we could survive in China, we could survive in Chinatown. We re-lived our trip by sifting through countless photos of our searching trip and retelling the greatest hits.

It seems so weird to know that, at this time last year, we had just begun to plan our searching trip. Neither of us could have known all that this trip would come to be. I always say it is incredible how we got on the plane to go to China with little to no concrete plans (honestly, it felt as if we were stepping off into the abyss) and that it worked out alright. No, more than alright. However, I realized this weekend that I have felt for a while that I lacked a sense of closure from the trip. Perhaps I am trying to seek some closure with this blog post. That's a lot riding on one blog post. Challenge accepted.

One of the biggest things I wanted to do was to officially announce that the DNA test confirmed that the family I found was indeed my birth family. We decided to run a second DNA test, conducted by a completely neutral third party, in order to confirm that the family I found was, in fact, my birth family. In mid-December, I received a call from my mom while I was studying abroad in Taiwan, telling me that according to the results, the potential birth mother that I found shares more than 60% of her DNA with me. It was super weird and exciting to see the relation "mother" on the result. It was extremely validating and relieving to know that the family that I had spent so much emotional time and energy on was actually my biological parents.

To tell you a little bit about them: It turns out that I was, indeed, born in a hospital in Zhenjiang city, but my family's hometown is in Huai'an, Jiangsu. (Incidentally enough also the hometown of Zhou Enlai). Both of my birth-parents were born and grew up in a ShuiJing Village in the Chuzhou district outside of Huai'an. Their respective families were linked by a number of marriages, and I have a very large extended network of familial relations. Back in the late 80s and early 90s, my parents had a small mud hut in which they had my oldest sister and in which my two older sisters spent the majority of their youth. They were involved in farming and agriculture and were living in poverty. By the time they had me, I already had two older sisters, which would make me the third sister. One year after me, they had my younger brother. (You could say that they got their boy).

Now, my birth parents are migrant laborers working at odd jobs around Jiangsu province. My birth dad had been working on a contract construction job in Iraq and sending back money that was supporting the family for a number of years before I located them. They're doing a lot better than they were back in the 90s, which makes me very happy. With the rise of the Chinese economy, and financial and business support from the dad's older brother, they have managed to pull themselves out of poverty, and have constructed a new house and garage for their new car in the same spot that the mud hut once stood! My oldest sister is married with two young kids, a boy and a baby girl. My second sister went on to get a college degree and now is teaching math at a local primary school. My younger brother is living in Suzhou and working in a delivery company.

I was lucky enough to spend the week of my birthday with them and their entire extended family (with much pomp and circumstance), as well as a more intimate, quiet week in my hometown in late August. It was exciting when they had their first slice of pizza.

As for why I was given up, my birth parents say that they never intended to abandon me. They thought they were giving me to another family, a military family that was seeking a baby girl and that was better off than them. They hoped I could find a better life there. Apparently, they had arranged to leave me in a set location on a set date where a third party would come and bring me to the other family. This arrangement ensured that my birth parents did not know who the military family was. This was because families who are adopting domestically in China often do not want an open adoption in fear that one day the birth family would come back to claim the child. They agreed through their third party that I was to be dropped off at the steps of 314 Nanmen Street in Zhenjiang, which at the time was one of the largest buildings in the area. At this point, they claim that either a passerby found me before the third party arrived and assumed I was abandoned and thus took me to the local police station, or that the third party never showed up, so I was found by a passerby and taken to the police station. I unfortunately can't rule out the possibility that there never was a third-party person to begin with (and whether or not my birth parents were aware of this fact is also debatable), but I'd like to believe this story.

In any case, I feel like a void has been filled. I have had many questions answered, and I feel much more at peace. Of course, it has been weird to grapple with the shift from someone who for 22 years regarded her status as an adoptee from China who knew

close to nothing about her beginnings as her core identity to someone who knows the exact details of her roots. In the best of circumstances, having a core identity taken out from you leaves you feeling powerless. Even more, there was always a sense of mystery and intrigue that came with not knowing who I was. My ignorance left a space open to fantasize about my origins. Now, everything seems so definite, and my own powerlessness regarding whether or not I would find and what I ultimately found seems to stand in high relief. BUT, I am very relieved to know that the family I spent time getting to know is indeed my family of birth.

As for the search, I look back at the craziness of media frenzy, the surprise and drama of finding, and the suspense of waiting for results fondly, but now, oddly enough, with greater emotion than I had while I was actually there. For the longest time, I was saying that the result did not really affect me emotionally, but I have realized that it has – how could it not? Searching is a lot to take in, regardless of outcomes. As for practical searching tips, I don't know that I would actively recommend working with the media in the sense that I really enjoyed the experience, but I also wouldn't discourage it, since they can often have access to places that you would never be able to touch. I feel, like in everything, there are pros and cons to both. The main thing, I think, is having someone who is fluent in Chinese, and ready to translate 24/7 with you. It also really helps if you, yourself, can speak a little bit, but in order to translate dialects and make out obscure handwriting, I would recommend someone local who is available and willing to help you, (whether for the sake of helping or to write a news story, or honestly, a mix of both). Ideally, find someone who cares about you and whom you enjoy working with.

In some ways, it feels so odd to succeed within two days from the week of preparation I put into the searching where others have searched for years without results. I have grappled with feeling guilty about this. Should I feel bad that I found while others didn't? Is there someone who "deserves" it more than I do? In the end, I think there isn't really anything for me to feel guilty about and it isn't a question of whether or not someone deserves to find. The truth is, is that of course I do feel sad, and I wish from the bottom of my heart that all adoptees who were searching would be able to find the results that I did. But, the honest truth is that I succeeded in finding my birth parents because of factors that were completely out of my control. It had very little to do with the amount of time or effort I put into it. I had no say over the fact that I had a note with the hospital of my birth written on it; no say over the reality that my birth mother chose to give birth in a hospital instead of at home.

In other ways, I suppose that I did do more than two days of preparation. It would be a dramatic overstatement to say that I'd been preparing for this my whole life, but there is some truth to saying that I actually put in a number of years of work in order to make this plan work, if we count the eleven years I spent chipping away at the Chinese language. (Alec Ash in his afterward to *Wish Lanterns* likens this process to "smashing your head over and over again with a very ancient and beautiful brick." I am inclined to agree.) My ability to speak the language was extremely helpful. Obviously, and I am very grateful for this, I couldn't have done this part (or any part) of the journey without the support of my parents. If I could give two main tips for those who are thinking about

searching, they would be 1) find someone local who is willing to work with you full time on translation 2) insist on seeing ALL documents from your file yourself. Pay attention to the details as you piece things together– nothing is unimportant (in the logistical sense, but also in the emotional sense I found. For people who know so little about their backgrounds, any information is precious).

But I'd just like to make a note on preparation. Logistical and mental preparation is extremely important, but it isn't everything. You can read manuals, prepare to do lists, do all the research in the world, be on every channel in the world and get on the front page of every newspaper, but then, at some point, one has to relinquish all control over the searching process. We can't control if or what we would find in these journeys. Being open to many possibilities, the good and the bad, is important, and of course, easier said than done. Preparing to be unprepared is also I think something that I had to learn through this search.

In different ways, my success both has and does not have implications for my life going forward. My family and my life is and will always be centered in America, but to be able to find my birth family and to be able to get my questions answered is something by which I am extremely humbled and for which I am extremely grateful. I wish to thank every person who has helped me along this journey. To people who helped share my story on Chinese social media, to friends who were supportive and understanding, to the Chinese adoptee community who lent their support and their ear, to OCS for providing a place for me to document the journey, to the reporters who made crucial steps happen, to Willa, an amazing travel partner and life-friend, and, last but certainly not least, to my family for their unwavering support, I owe a great deal of gratitude.

FINAL UPDATES, Summer 2016: Willa heads home on August 23rd, while Charlotte will spend her fall semester in Taiwan. They have explored (Willa went to Vietnam and they both visited Shanghai) and they now send these final thoughts about their amazing birth family search trip, Willa first and then Charlotte. They offer more observations in this new audio interview. If you're new to this story, you can also listen to the interview they did with each other before leaving for China: <https://soundcloud.com/profheath>.

WILLA: 8/20/16:

As our China trip comes to an end and I'll be back in the U.S. this time next week, it's kind of funny to look back at our updates. I'm somewhat amused that we thought our plan would work, and almost more amused that it basically did. It's nearly impossible to thoroughly describe all that has happened and it still feels surreal. I think it probably always will. At least I can now say I've been back, I've searched, and I have a few stories to go along with it.

I've always found the phrase "searching for your roots" kind of misleading...what does that even mean? Especially for adoptees. Is it a search for information, culture, community, or specific people? I suppose it's different for everyone and largely depends on what information you have to begin with. Perhaps our trip was portrayed as a birth family search, but it was more than that. I personally would have been perfectly happy with more information than the story I've been told my whole life. However, in situations like this you don't get to pick and choose. I think that is what makes it difficult. As

adoptees we have no say in what we get to know. We have to be prepared to handle what information the world might give us, whether that be nothing or everything. I'm lucky to be able to say that in this search, I do feel like I got what I asked for. Even though the outcome was not my biological family, I sure got a crash course in what life might have looked like. Most importantly I've been back to see it for myself.

As far as birth family searching, here's what I was able to do during my time in Altay:

1. Left a DNA sample with my foster family in case anyone comes forward. However, when I left the DNA sample was sitting on top of my foster family's TV...I'm not entirely convinced that's going to be very useful. But hey, it's something.
2. Put in a request for the local Altay hospital to look at their records around my birthday, July 21st, 1994. Unfortunately at the time they did not keep consistent records nor had computers...but some official person (and friend of my foster mom) said they would have someone start looking and will let us know if they find anything. If nothing else, this has spread the story to a few more people.
3. Made an appearance in the local Altay and Urumqi (provincial capital) news. Although I didn't involve the media to the extent I could have, I know my story has reached many. Altay is a relatively small city and people around town recognized me from the news. However I do not think the story reached a diverse enough audience. I'm beginning to think the families I want to reach may not have access, or the time to keep up with the internet and media.
4. Made connections with people in the area. My foster family seems to know half of Altay. From extended family to family friends, I can't count the number of people I met who held me as a baby. Thanks to their connections I also now know two UCD students who were born in Altay a few years after me. In a matter of days I went from knowing no one to having many connections who know my story.

In some ways it doesn't feel like I've done much, but I'm actually so much further in this than I ever thought I'd be. I do believe my foster family will continue to try searching, but it's hard to tell what might be most effective. I haven't decided if I'll do anything else, at this point it doesn't feel pressing. It's possible I'll change my mind but for now I don't think there's much to do but wait and see if anything happens.

Charlotte writes 8/6/16:

Hello everyone!

Today (8/6/16) we will take a train out of Zhenjiang to our teaching program in Henan, so I thought I'd write a quick wrap up of my time in Zhenjiang.

Of course, it feels like no wrap up long or short could completely encompass all of the different complex facets of this week. It has been a crazy, surreal, confusing, and overwhelming week, full of more than an entire year usually brings.

What would I say about it though?

Well I am lucky enough to [most likely] have done what I came to do - find my birth family. I told them that I was doing well in America, and that I am healthy and happy and that I'm getting a good education. I told them that I didn't hate them or resent them at all for giving me up. I've filled in gaps in my story - even if it is just with potential information. I've learned that my [potential] birth parents are farmers and temporary workers and that my birth father works on construction projects in places like Iraq and Nigeria for years at a time. I've learned that I have two older sisters, one of whom just had her second child and the other who just took a job as a primary school math teacher, and that I have one younger brother who is living in the city while he learns to drive and working at a KTV. I've found out the [likely] circumstances of how I got to where I am now. I have learned that my birth parents intended to send me to be raised by another family but that I was taken to the orphanage by a passerby. I've even met and talked to said passerby. It is an incredible amount of information that will help me move forward with a great some peace of mind.

I have also spend a lot of time with a really caring and gracious family who have treated me so well during short week in Zhenjiang.

I guess one thing that struck me is just the sheer amount of family I found through my search. The week was full with fancy family reunion dinners at large hotel function rooms, culminating in a major reunion with over 40 different relatives. It was the biggest family reunion I had ever seen.

Maybe a lot of adoptees dream about an intimate reunion with a birth father and mother and maybe a sibling, but maybe this is not what they picture haha.

We were also whisked away to many different places – karaoke on many an occasion, a family outing to Jinshan temple on what may have been the hottest day of the year, and two visits to their rural hometown house in Huai'an. I think that the entire extended family regarded it as a special time not just because of me but because it gave them time to come back together and spend time as a whole family, even returning to their hometown, which is something they don't usually do. At first the media was with us (which is a whole other blog post!!!), but by the end of the week, after we had filmed a short TV program on Thursday called 人间真情 the media bade farewell and we were left on our own. The media was slightly annoying, but they had been so helpful, especially Wang Fan at Modern Express, so I did what I could to thank them. It was extremely emotionally taxing the first couple of days trying to figure out what was going on. At some point I just realized I was best off going with the flow instead of trying to sort out every little thing.

Of course, there were definitely some other difficult parts of the trip as well. Mainly the most difficult part was trying to navigate so many different moving parts, each with agendas and feelings and input of their own: the media, the potential family, my family back home, and, most importantly perhaps, myself and what I personally wanted. I felt

as if I had to tell each person a different narrative, and that I was juggling the feelings and suggestions of a hundred different people. There were times I was so overwhelmed I didn't even know what to think or what I even wanted. It was the constant struggle to pin down what was "truly" happening to me and to create a coherent narrative. Perhaps though that's what is so interesting about it - that there is no one coherent narrative that can capture everything about this complex trip.

Perhaps the most difficult thing was that my parents, for good reason, wanted me to be very cautious about the whole situation. They do not want me to be emotionally involved until we get verification from a second DNA test. However, once the Nanjing testing center results came out, it was very clear that everyone in China believed the results. And of course my heart wants to believe that I have found them as well. Dealing with this tension was a major characteristic of the trip. It took and still takes a great amount of self control to keep calling them my potential birth parents, but it is for the best. I'd like to just thank everyone who has been following and supporting my story. Most of all, I'd like to give the biggest thank you to my parents and my sister back in the states for all their amazing support. I am so lucky to have such an amazing and understanding family. I am more grateful than you will ever know. I love you.

Overall, it has been an amazing experience to meet my potential birth parents. I don't think I would change a thing about how I went about this search. It all added up to a unique and quirky experience.

But I feel also a little odd about the whole thing; there are so many adoptees who have searched for years and years and nothing has come up. How come I was able to find them so quickly? Does this mean that others will find their birth parents as well? I feel obligated to add the caveat that I feel my experience is very uncommon and is the result of a lot of extremely lucky leads completely out of my control coming together. Although there are aspects of my journey that I certainly really do help people who intend in the search in the future, I also feel that each person's circumstances are so unique that it would be ludicrous for my particular experience to serve as a step-by-step guide to finding birth parents in China. Although I wish they really could though of course. Life is such a weird thing. It really unfolds in ways one could never have imagined.

I've had some amazing experiences here with my birth parents in Zhenjiang and their hometown of Huai'an. I have no qualms about saying that I feel immensely lucky and fortunate in so so many ways.

Even though our traveling portion of our searching journey is over, our searching journeys themselves are far from ended. I will keep in touch with this family over WeChat, the app that started it all through our shared poster. I think it will also take me a good amount of time to process all that's happened so far. One final major question that a lot of people have: What happens if it is not them? Will I keep searching? The answer is I don't think I will. I have come and searched and found and expressed what I needed to express and I have been lucky enough to put in effort to this search, supported by my amazing family back in America. Even if it is just

symbolic, it means a lot to me. I feel able to move forward with a peace of mind that I've never been lucky enough to have before. So I'm happy to keep it at that.

UPDATE TEN 8/3/16: Charlotte writes:

With the help of the media, I've found a family that is very possibly my birth family. The Chinese DNA report from Nanjing Medicine Hospital's Legal Evaluation Center confirms that they are my birth parents, but I am waiting for additional confirmation from a second test to be sure. In the meantime, I've been spending time with this family this week. It's been surreal and amazing. Wang Fan, a reporter for Modern Express, a Nanjing newspaper that focuses on human interest stories, has been instrumental in helping this search. I'll be putting together a longer update soon."

UPDATE NINE 8/2/16: Willa writes:

We have made it to Zhenjiang, Jiangsu and were welcomed by a heat wave and some humidity. We definitely miss the weather and delicious fruit (especially the watermelon) in Xinjiang, but are excited to see what we can learn about Charlotte's past as well as experience the contrast in our provinces!

We spent last week with my foster family. We were in Altay, on a mountain excursion, and in Urumqi, before we flew out Sunday. Just to clarify, there are four immediate family members; foster mom, dad, older brother, younger brother...and a lot of extended family. I met SO many people who knew me as a baby. We spent the most time with my foster parents and the oldest brother because the youngest doesn't live in the area anymore. Before leaving Altay on Thursday I was able to wrap up my time with both foster parents (since only my foster mom and brother went with us to Urumqi) by asking more questions.

During this conversation my foster mom gave me two important documents that she has kept for the last 20 years. While she had been telling me that she had wanted to adopt me, these documents really solidified how hard she had tried. She mentioned that she was hesitant to give them to me, but I'm glad she did. Local officials threatened to prosecute her if she did not turn me over. Here is a summarized translation of the documents with notes in brackets for clarity [Translation by Shanshan Zhang].

"The first document is a bill of indictment by Altei Civil Affairs Bureau....It says [foster mother] has raised Meizhen Li for some time. After the Civil Affairs Bureau placed Meizhen for international adoption, [foster mother] asked for unreasonable conditions, otherwise she refused to give the child up. The Bureau requests: 1) [Foster mother] must hand over the child on March 29, 1996 [the day before Willa's parents arrived from the U.S. to adopt her] to the orphanage under the Civil Affairs Bureau, 2) The Civil Affairs Bureau will pay [foster mother] expenses for raising Meizhen, according to the Bureau's regulation, 3) If [foster mother] fails to hand over the child on time, she is liable for any possible consequences thereof including negative international influence. The Bureau asked the court to enforce the request to protect national reputation and avoid negative international influence. The second document is the notice by the court to the

[foster mother] informing her of the bill of indictment by Aletai Civil Affairs Bureau and asks her to follow legal procedures and submit a reply to the complaint."

I've always wondered if I was a product of the One Child policy or if it was because of economic, health, or marital status reasons. It's funny to think that I still would have been adopted if it weren't for family planning regulations in China. Although perhaps I wouldn't have been given up in the first place, but that I may never know.

I have however filled in many blanks. I know exactly where I was left, who I lived with, and why I went to the US. It was July 25th, 1994 when my foster mom found me on her doorstep, which was the Altay Construction Company unit where the family both lived and worked. I was just 4 days old with a note that read "7/21 Birthday." Unfortunately they have misplaced the note, but I do believe everything she has told me to be true. My adoption documents say otherwise, but I never actually lived in a social welfare institute (SWI). I did spend a good amount of time with a Uyghur family who nannied for me and a few other kids. Apparently I spoke some Uyghur and Chinese! I wish that was still true.

At the end of March 1996, when my my foster mom received the government mandate to relinquish me, she tried to hide me with the Uyghur family. As a minority group, there were no restrictions on how many children they could have. That clearly didn't work, though. A few days later, April 2nd, 1996, I was officially adopted to the U.S. I'm not sure if she knew before March, but the government had begun the adoption process months prior.

I am still processing what this all means, but I am truly grateful for the time we had in Altay and the insights into how I could have grown up. While this part of our trip was fun, memorable, and picturesque, it definitely wasn't all easy. I think it's important to acknowledge how strange, uncomfortable, awkward, and emotional reunions can be. From language and cultural barriers, to the fact that I have no recollection of these people who took care of me- I often felt as if I wasn't expressing the right emotions nor communicating effectively. In fact I didn't even have the words in English to explain how I felt. I had to remind myself I was doing the best I could and perhaps there is no best way to go about this kind of situation. It's overwhelming to know how many lives have played a role in my existence, and visa versa. But as my foster family says, I now have three families. My family, my foster family, and my biological family. I will update on the birth family search in a later post.

Until then, a huge shout- out to Charlotte for her company, translating skills, and surviving the countless hours of travel together!

UPDATE EIGHT 7/29/16:

Hello everyone! This is Charlotte here with an update on my birth parent search on the start of our second leg of the trip to my hometown of Zhenjiang. As you might have read, with the help of reporters, I have found one possible couple who could be my birth parents in Zhenjiang. On Tuesday, I sent over a preliminary DNA sample from Altay,

Xinjiang to compare with the samples already taken from the possible couple. The samples arrived on Thursday at the Nanjing Medicine Hospital's Legal Evaluation Center where the couple had undergone their test as well. The reporter who has been working closely with me since finding the potential couple has talked with the center and the experts hope as fast they can to get the results.

I'm not getting my hopes up, but it is hard not to get excited. Either way, I'm looking forward to the results. If the initial results are positive from the sent blood sample, I plan to take another test in Nanjing, at the same center that my possible birth parents left their samples. I also plan to do additional DNA testing for confirmation.

Until I get all the results back, it is still up in the air.

Nevertheless, if initial results look positive, I would like to meet this family. I would just have to be careful about making sure that I keep avenues open and keep a healthy distance.

On another note, as I mentioned before, media can be so helpful, but also so overwhelming. There are a number of media people who have contacted me besides the original newspaper who found the initial couple. I have been in touch with many of them as they are all very friendly! But as journalism often works, they seem to be competing to report on my story rather than working together. I'm not sure what to do because I want to work with everyone and help everyone out, but that would just be too many people following me! I also don't know how to tell them that I am thinking I have enough people following. I hope to work closest with the reporter who found the initial possible parents.

Willa and I have one more day with her foster family and we head out to Nanjing early on July 31st. (More on Willa's side and what she and her foster family have done and will continue to do to search on her end!) We are eagerly awaiting our arrival in Zhenjiang! More updates on this later! See you in Jiangsu!

Here is the translation of the news article by Wang Fan, from the Modern Express (Xian Dai Kuai Bao), that started it all off. Note that this headline gets ahead of the facts at the moment!:

Miracle! 22 years after adoption by American parents, the Chinese girl found her birth parents!

Jiangwen Zhou, abandoned on a street of Zhenjiang city soon after birth, then adopted by American parents, found her birth parents in a village of Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province on July 14th.

On August 5, 1994, Jiangwen was born. In September she was found on a street of Zhenjiang and sent to a police station. Then she was sent to a local orphanage. At 5 months old, she was adopted by an American couple.

Jiangwen has been thinking about searching for her birth parents and her American parents are very supportive.

Jiangwen said, "I have no hatred at all for my birth parents. I just want to let them know that I am very happy now, so they won't worry about me."

The local journalist helped with the search. The journalist went to the orphanage, the police station and the Jiangsu Provincial Welfare Archives for clues. Finally from a birth record, she found Lijin Du, a woman of Huai'an, Zhenjiang, could possibly be the mother. She contact Du to confirm more details.

Liqin Du told how her daughter was sent away: With a relative as the intermediary, they decided to send the baby to a childless family. The husband left the baby at a building at a time agreed to by both parties. But it is unknown whether the adoptive family went there too late or they didn't show up. The baby was sent to police station as being abandoned. The Du couple said they knew nothing of this. They asked the intermediary about the baby but the intermediary refused to reveal any information. Now the intermediary has passed away.

"I feel painful and heartbroken. I am very sorry for my daughter." Du said. In a video chat, they said to Jiangwen "Welcome home."

UPDATE SEVEN 7/26/16:

Willa and Charlotte have each decided to have DNA tests. At her foster parents' urging, Willa is leaving a DNA sample in China, a bread crumb trail for any possible birth parents. When the girls return to Urumqi from sightseeing adventures, Willa plans to look at her adoption file in hopes of resolving the discrepancy over her birthday (July 14, as her documents say, or July 21, as her foster mom has recently told her).

Charlotte is sending her DNA to a testing center at the university in Nanjing. A Chinese reporter who has written about Charlotte's story has arranged for a couple, potential birth parents who came forward as a result of news coverage of her search, to send their DNA to this center, too. As you will learn here, reporters in China have played both a confusing and clarifying role in Charlotte's search so far. She writes here about how her decision to search came about and about how she is carefully weighing all that is unfolding:

Why now?

Actually it's kind of more happenstance that I am searching this summer than planned and strategic. I knew that I was going to be on fellowship in the Fall, which means I had a paid ticket to Asia. I thought that it would be a waste of an opportunity not to take a short trip to China while I was in the area. My first idea was to go back to my hometown and just explore my roots that way. But I couldn't go alone. Willa, whom I met at a volunteering program back in Beijing in summer of 2013, heard that I was hoping to visit

China, and approached me with the idea of traveling back together on a roots searching trip. I thought that was a great idea, but never thought it would actually pan out.

In the larger sense, if there was to be anything strategic about it, I think that the period during and right after college comes as an appropriate time for me to search. Firstly, I wanted to make sure that I was mature enough to handle such an intensely emotional experience. I had heard from other Chinese adoptees who had searched about the extreme emotional roller coaster of ecstasy and heartbreak at finding a family that did not turn out to be yours. But at the same time, I had to factor in that I couldn't wait too long or perhaps it would be too late – perhaps my birth parents would pass away or they would move to a different town. Of course, it should be said that 22 years later is a significant amount of time anyway, so any more time that were to elapse would not be in my favor.

In that sense, I suppose timing was a combination of feeling ready for it and timing just happening to be right.

What would I do if I found them?

As I noted before, searching is about three main things for me: identity, peace of mind, and looks. Therefore, what I would do if I found them would closely follow my goals. For identity, I would ask about the circumstances that led them to abandon me so many years ago. I would ask if I had any brothers or sisters. I would ask whether they have ever thought of me since. For peace of mind, I would share with them how happy and healthy I have been and how loving a family I have found. I hope that this way they will not worry about me so much any more. I will tell them that I don't hate them at all and that I understand what they did, and I hope they will not feel as guilty anymore. I will tell them that I hope that we can both be well in the future to move on to live positive lives. For looks, I will definitely see if I look like them! Do I have my mother's nose? My father's eyes? I would definitely look out for that.

One question a lot of people have is would I keep in touch. I would, I think, get their contact information, and perhaps chat once in a while, but I am not looking for an ongoing relationship, but just to try to accomplish my three main goals.

What have I done so far to search and what has happened until now?

At first I wasn't going to do anything at all. I was really hesitant about searching for a number of reasons, including the sheer improbability of finding anything, the high emotional and monetary cost, and the fact that my decision did not just affect me but could hurt people I love. I just wanted to explore my hometown. But Willa argued that we might as well try, since we are putting in all of this effort to visit the area. She argued that in some ways, this was our last chance.

So, as you know, we decided to make a simple poster depicting our story, and share both a Chinese and English version on Chinese social media. The hope was to have the

story spread as widely as possible in hopes that it would reach someone with information who could come forward. I've also made an individual poster that I plan on posting in Zhenjiang, the city of my adoption, in Jiangsu Province, where we will also visit together.

The response I got was so overwhelming! Many many friends that saw either the Facebook or the Chinese social media posts kindly offered to share on their social media in China. And this was invaluable since a lot of my friends both are and know important people in China. One Chinese friend in particular helped forward my story to reporters in the local area. Soon, it was reaching more than just my two followers. And it was spreading around the Jiangsu area.

Just that night, we had a friend of ours say that they received the poster from their friend who said that they heard it from a friend of a friend. It's hard to say the exact extent that it spread, but we think it reached the people it needed to. Willa found her foster family in less than 24 hours.

One thing that I didn't expect from sharing my story was the amount of media attention. I didn't know how sought after these stories are and I suppose how much of an interest there is in these sorts of stories.

The first lead was from the local Zhenjiang newspaper, who had encouraged people with information to come forward. Before long, someone came forward, calling the reporter with supposed information about me. It was a middle-aged man who claimed he was a friend of my birth parents. I could not believe that there could be developments when I first heard this. And the detail! He sure spun a good yarn. He claimed that my birth parents were migrant workers from Huai an, who were of the family name Chen. He claimed that I had older sister, but also, get this, an identical twin sister who was 27 minutes older than me. He said my name was Chen Huijuan, and that he was involved in the process of giving me up. He said it was due to economic difficulties that I was given up. Lastly he said that my birth parents didn't want to see me, but that he would meet with me.

This seemed suspect for a number of reasons, not the least that it was a middle aged man trying to meet with me and claiming that the family did not want to meet, therefore not having to produce any real evidence. Still though, because of the emotional nature of the search and the sensational nature of the twin aspect, it was hard not to get excited.

I was confused then when another newspaper came up with another lead. The second lead was the Nanjing newspaper, who did some digging of their own. By tracking down the hospital where I was presumably born (how exactly they got that information I'll have to ask when I get there), they found a family who had a child at that exact date and time and who had given that child up. The mother claimed to have written my note [Charlotte was found with a note that said "This child's birthday is as follows: August 5th 1994 at 9:30 AM." She included this information on the poster she initially shared on social media in the U.S. and China. Later, in China, she learned that attached to this note was

a small slip of paper with the name of the hospital and a vaccination record]. The father claimed to have left me at that doorstep. The reporter was convinced that this was my birth family and promptly published that I had found my birth family and had me Skype with them. I was a little bit upset that she jumped to such conclusions, and made them public, therefore cutting off any further searching, even though we were not even close to certain these were actually my birth parents. Still though, I appreciate her hard work combing through all of those records in the hospital and police station, and I do understand the work of a journalist. I think she was able to access files and places that I would not have been able to alone, so there are upsides and downsides to having reporters involved in helping.

It turns out that the first was probably a scam – which shows how careful I have to be in situations like these.

But the second one it is still unclear. I have been conversing with the girl who may possibly be my birth sister, and she has sent me some pictures. I cannot post them here for privacy reasons – they have asked me to keep them as far out of the media as possible since they just want to lead an ordinary life out of the spotlight, and I have to do my part to respect these wishes. However, people who have seen photos say: well, I wouldn't say wow that looks so much like Charlotte, but at the same time I wouldn't rule them out. But you really can't tell from photos. My mom warns me to be guarded and careful before I get final confirmation of DNA test, and I understand this. Even if they were my birth parents, the fact is that they are still strangers to me. Which is weird.

<p>In my time in Zhenjiang, I've agreed to meet with them in a public place with many people present, but I don't plan to open myself up until I have DNA confirmation. I plan to do preliminary DNA tests in China, but these results would only be a step forward, not final confirmation. We want to undergo our own test, through 23andMe, which unfortunately will take months. With the preliminary test, if the results come out positive, then the family has agreed to bring their extended family to Zhenjiang to meet me. If the results haven't come out yet, the two of them will still come out to meet me. I've been in contact with the sister and the mother through WeChat. Either way, we will see what clues and information we can find when we are back there in Zhenjiang. Perhaps some digging around myself at the local police stations and hospitals will yield answers. You never know.

The other thing is that I heard that these potential parents heard about the first lead, and they were kind of confused, so I had to do some explaining, without implying to them that I was sure they themselves were my birth parents.

The media has been trying to contact me lately, but I've been feeling tired, and also now perhaps a little bit hesitant about moving forward with them because I've seen with Willa how families seem wary of the media. I don't want to bring unnecessary burden or bother to them.

I've learned that media can be helpful, but can also be very messy in searching for birth parents. Upsides and downsides, like most things!

UPDATE SIX 7/23/16:

Willa writes: I have already learned so much...about Xinjiang, my foster family, and my first two years.

When I first made contact with my foster family, I wasn't sure what my next steps would be as far as my search. I didn't think I could handle much more, finding and meeting them was already a lot. They had so many plans for me, and even if I could, I wasn't sure I wanted to know or involve any more people who were connected to my past. However, now that I have so much new information it has actually just led me to more questions. I'm okay with whatever happens as far as the birth family search, but I'm going to try and do a little more investigating.

My foster family says they will help me search for my birth family, but I'm not entirely sure what they can do. It was, however their, idea for me to leave a DNA sample, and they have been really great at answering my questions. There have been a few confusing things, but so far I don't really think they know anything specific about my birth family. I think I will try to leave a DNA sample in case someone ends up coming forward, and maybe put a few of my posters around Altay, as well as continue asking as many questions as I can.

As this video mentions, apparently there was a note left with me on the doorstep (the doorway in the background is where I was found). I need to ask about this again, but for some reason my foster family doesn't have the note. I think they said they gave it to the government, along with other baby pictures, which would mean they might be in my file. However, my file wasn't at the Altay SWI. They said it's in Urumqi. Hopefully, I can locate it when we go back to Urumqi.

As far as next steps...if possible I'd really like to see the note. I think we may also go to the hospital and see if they have any records for a baby born on July 21st...but my foster mom says she doesn't think I was born in a hospital. It's also very possible that I was born in one of the nearby villages.

The photo shows where I was found.

UPDATE FIVE 7/22/16, EVENING, Willa writes:

We are still in Hemu, headed for Kanas Lake, where we will stay tonight. We are mushroom picking with my foster parents and brother. We started the day with a big breakfast prepared by my foster father and his colleagues, who work in forestry preservation (I think). They made the foods we especially liked at dinner last night. We were able to eat our first full meal last night. We hadn't been able to eat much before that because of the jet lag. The photo shows where we stayed last night in Hemu.

UPDATE THREE/FOUR 7/22/16, Willa writes:

On our way to Lake Kanas! Hemu Village for the night.

Background: We were born on opposite sides of China and grew up on opposite coasts in the United States. This summer we've joined forces to search for our birthparents. We left for China on Sunday, July 17, 2016. Follow our journey here on Our China Stories.

UPDATE TWO 7/21/16, Willa writes:

We celebrated my 22nd birthday, and we've been in the news.

We got some sleep last night, but we are still pretty exhausted. We just took a nap. Off to a birthday party in a few.... Today we went to my finding spot, the old SWI, the current SWI, and then ordered a cake and went dress shopping. My foster mom bought us both dresses.

We've also been in the local newspaper. [Article translated by Our China Stories Shanshan Zhang].

Headline: California girls arrived at Urumqi to search for birth parents, by Jiangyan YU

Meizhen Li and Jiangwen Zhou flew to Urumqi, embarking on a journey of searching for their birth parents in China. At the airport they were welcomed by Meizhen's foster parents in China. The foster mother, Biyun Jiang, read Meizhen's search message on July 12th on one colleague's WeChat posts. The foster mother immediately recognized Meizhen in the picture posted on the search message. In the photo, Willa was standing beside the foster mother's two sons. The foster family will show Meizhen around her birthplace and help her look for her birth parents. The journalist will record Meizhen's journey with her foster parents, but it will be Meizhen's decision whether to make it public.

On a night twenty-two years ago, Meizhen, four days after birth, was found left at the door of her foster parents. With two sons, the couple were very happy to have a daughter. But having two sons, they were not qualified for adopting Meizhen, and registering her Hukou in their household. Since there was no orphanage nearby, the welfare bureau allowed the couple to raise Meizhen at home. So Meizhen lived in their home until she was 21 months old when the welfare bureau came and said an American couple would like to adopt Meizhen. The news brought tremendous pain to the foster mother.

"I had been her mother for almost two years. How could I want to give her up? But if I keep her, she cannot get Hukou, which means she cannot go to school..."

Soon the welfare bureau staff took Meizhen to Urumqi for adoption by an American couple.

UPDATE ONE 7/19/16:

We landed in Beijing on Monday and met up with Willa's foster family! Here is our first update, written on the flight to Xinjiang Province and sent by Willa via WeChat:

Greetings from China! We arrived in Beijing, and successfully found each other in the airport! We spent the night near the hotel and are now on our flight to Urumqi, Xinjiang province. We're excited to heading to a more rural area! In Urumqi we will meet Willa's foster aunt, who is going to help us get to our hotel. We were a bit hesitant to let them be involved in our travel plans, but they have ultimately been super helpful.

Tomorrow we will travel to Altay, which will take about eight hours. Apparently there was an article in the Xinjiang newspaper about my search. The headline of one the articles is "American girl from California who was left 22 years ago is returning to Altay to search for relatives." However, at this point, we are hoping to stay away from the media, unless my foster family recommends otherwise.

My SWI director emailed us back and says we can visit on Friday. I'm not sure what to expect in Altay, except that there will be a birthday party. My foster brother kept asking if it was okay for them to host a party to welcome me back and celebrate my birthday. I'm somewhat overwhelmed by this idea, but didn't want to be rude so we agreed. However, Charlotte is looking forward to this. She says she likes birthday parties!

This photo was taken Tuesday morning by my foster aunt at the Urumqi airport right after arrival.

If you're catching up, here is more about us, our friendship and our decision to search together for our birth families...

We met in 2013 on the Half the Sky (One Sky) and China's Children International (CCI) joint Summer Adoptee Volunteer Trip to the China Care Home, in Beijing. We were working with orphans who had come to the Home for pre and post operative care, and, at the same time, taking part in adoptee discussion and journaling activities. We are both active in CCI. Charlotte is a co-founder.

Here, in this first post, we tell you how a bit about ourselves, how this trip came to be and how powerful a tool social media proved to be even before we've set off!

Willa

I was born on July 14, 1994 (possibly July 21) in Altay, Xinjiang Province. I was adopted in April 1996 and grew up in Ukiah, California. I am currently attending the University of California Davis as a Communication major, with minors in Global and International Studies and Psychology.

I absolutely love living in California and grew up in a small town with an amazing, loving family. I have had the privilege of many travel experiences, but I knew my next trip needed to be something meaningful. I've always known I would go back to China, but, recently, connecting with other international adoptees at UC Davis sparked the idea of making it a reality. I felt like this was the time, possibly my last free summer as I will soon be graduating. I want to emphasize that this search is not because I feel there is something missing in my life. I am at peace with my adoption story, something I know many struggle with. Being ready to take this on has to do with knowing that I have and will always have the support and love of my family and the communities I am part of.

This is something that I feel very fortunate to be able to say. I'm also continuously thankful for everything that Charlotte has done for trip as well as the adoptee community as a whole. I'd say we make a pretty awesome team, and I'm excited to see what's in store.

Charlotte

On the opposite side of China, I was born in Zhenjiang city, Jiangsu Province, on August 5, 1994. I was adopted at 5 months old and grew up, happily, near Boston. I am a rising senior at Yale University, majoring in East Asian Studies with a focus on Chinese history. I have long been fascinated with China and the Chinese language, and have studied Mandarin for more than 11 years.

I hoped that maybe one day I might be able to apply my language skills to a birth parent search, but while the desire had always been there, it had been a rather vague notion until very recently. Through working extensively with the Chinese adoptee community through my position as co-president of China's Children International, one of the first organizations created by and for Chinese adoptees, I have been inspired by stories of other girls who have forged the path in birth parent searching. I began to realize that I would be disappointed if I never at least tried. I feel extremely lucky to be able to undertake a search this summer with Willa and with the immense support of my loving family.

Preparing for our trip

When we first met, we could never have predicted that three years later we would be embarking together on a journey back to China to search for our roots.

We kept in touch, though, and in March 2016 we began discussing the possibility of traveling in China together. We were both open and excited to see each other's provinces. Our first step was to get in contact with our SWIs, which felt like a big deal. Willa had no idea if hers still existed, or how it would be possible to get in contact with them. With some help from a friend, she learned that the SWI had moved three times and that living there were mostly elderly; and no children. Via email, the current director invited her to come back for a visit.

Charlotte had an old email contact of her orphanage director, but it was out of date. She was only able to get in contact after a local Zhenjiang contact went, in person, to get the updated email.

After we made contact with our SWIs, the idea of returning back to see our files and speak with people who potentially could know more about our pasts seemed a lot more real. Our next step was to further confirm the trip with many Skype meetings (including with our families) to hammer out some logistics, apply for visas, and book our international flights.

Even though we'd made it this far, we still had not decided what exactly we hoped to achieve in our travels. We had been playing with the idea of searching for birth parents since the beginning, but we had skirted around the topic and still did not have any concrete plans. Neither of us have ever had the burning need to find someone

biologically related, nor completely feel like it is even possible. On the other hand, we were acutely aware of the many families trying to search. Through the adoptee community, we have learned so much from the experiences of others, the approaches other adoptees and families have taken, the negative and positive feedback they have received, and the varying lengths of time people spend searching. It can take years. It can be unsuccessful over and over again. It seemed pointless to try. At the same time, we both wanted to do something. We wanted to be able to say we had hopefully opened a door for communication if anyone was ever looking for us. We discussed creating posters and leaving them in our hometowns. With so much else going on in our lives, from trip preparations to being college students, we hesitated devoting time and energy to something so ambiguous.

What's happened so far

There is no right way to search. But, we knew we needed to take into consideration the many factors that play into international adoption. We began reaching out in Adoptee Facebook groups, compiling advice and researching. Here's what happened next:

On July 5, we started to talk about using social media as a tool for our search. We aren't experts on birth parents searching or how to use social media in China, especially, so we decided to pause to think about our approach.

On July 8, we designed our joint poster. The headline reads: "Two Chinese Adoptees from Opposite Sides of China Return to their Hometowns to Search for Answers."

We shared it on Chinese social media platforms, WeChat (微信), QQ, and Sina Weibo (微博) We began from sharing from our own personal accounts. The response we received from close friends was enthusiastic, and many of our friends graciously asked many of their contacts and friends to share our story. In addition, we also asked any friends who might have their own Chinese social media accounts to share and encourage shares from their own accounts. In this way, our poster began to spread on the Internet.

Within hours, one of our friends from Beijing was receiving the poster from an outside source, saying that they got it from a friend of a friend. While of course there were some people who were confused as to why we even wanted to search for families who left us in the first place, the reception that we received from netizens was overwhelmingly positive - we were touched by how many people stepped forward offering to help or sending their support.

We were approached by a number of media outlets in China, both local and national, who were interested in reporting on our story. We aren't sure what to think about this or how to proceed, so we are doing some research and thinking it over.

Willa's foster family, notified by a Chinese friend about a post she had seen, contacted Willa! We've had our first success before even leaving the United States. We talk about

how all this feels in our audio interview. First, Charlotte interviews Willa and then Willa interviews Charlotte.

What's in store?

Sharing our story has already forced us to confront many questions that have always been there, but didn't feel immediate until now. Is there actually a possibility that we will find our birth parents? What will we do if that happens? How will we feel if one of us finds what she is looking for but the other does not? Is there a possibility that our search will affect our birth parents in negative ways? What happens when this is all over? What do we hope to get out of this trip?

And what, ultimately, are we searching for?

We know that we very well may encounter developments that we could not have prepared for. At the same time, we also expect that it is possible that we will not find anything we did not already know. We could return with our hands as empty as when we started. Still, even if we do not find our birth parents, will we have gained nothing at all?

It is with many unanswered questions and open possibilities that we set off for China. It is both scary and exciting to not know what will unfold. We look forward to documenting our developing story here. More to come from China....

We began sharing our story on July 15, 2016, two days before leaving on our birth parent search trip to China. In the homepage photo, Willa is in pink, Charlotte in white.

两位在美国领养的中国孩子回国寻根的希望

我们的名字是 Charlotte 和 Willa 而我们在美国被领养的中国孩子。虽然我们是在中国的两边出生的,也在美国的两岸成长的,但2013年我们是在半边天基金会举办的北京志愿者活动互相认识的。今年夏天,我们要一起回国寻根。
我们的联系方式有我们的电邮 ccwk2016@qq.com 还有我们的QQ号码 477976586.

新疆维吾尔自治区, 阿勒泰市



我的名字是李美珍,快22岁了。我现在在加州大学戴维斯分校读书。我1996年4月被我的美国父母领养的而我在加州成长了。1994年7月当我才一个星期大的时候,我是在新疆维吾尔自治区阿勒泰市解放路阿勒泰地区建筑公司被抛弃的。被捡拾的21个月之后,我好像住了几个抚养家庭(上面的照片),也住了阿勒泰社会福利院。我现在在找以前照顾我的抚养家庭,我的亲生父母,还有关于我家庭背景的其他信息。



江苏省, 镇江市



我们在找我们亲生父母的原因在于我们想让他们知道我们现在很幸福,很健康。我们也想多了解我们的家庭背景,我们生命最开始的那一段。我们的美国父母非常支持我们寻根的努力,还希望我们亲生父母能体会到他们因为能领养我们而感到十分感恩。寻根的旅途也许会很难,很痛苦,但是我们还是觉得尽量寻找属于我们的信息非常重要。这样,我们才能填满我们生命中的一些空隙,安心地把我们生命的故事继续写下去。

加我们的微信



我的名字叫周江雯,今年8月5日是我22岁的生日。我是在江苏省,镇江市因为被抛弃而被捡拾的,有个纸条上面写着“小孩出生时间年月日如下:出生于1994年8月5日上午9时半。”被捡拾之后我在镇江市儿童福利院待了五个月,1995年1月被我美国父母领养的,在美国麻州长大的。我今年在美国耶鲁大学上大四。我希望能找到我的亲生父母是为了想安慰他们的忧虑,让他们看我在美国有多么的幸福,这样他们就不用继续为我担心。

The poster Charlotte (left) and Willa (right) put out on social media in China to start their birth parent search.



Charlotte (in black) and Willa (in blue) in China during their birth parent search

Video of Willa meeting her foster parents for the first time:

<https://youtu.be/cU-oZXVXS3E>

Charlotte, who speaks Mandarin, talks with Willa's foster mother and gets some questions answered: <https://youtu.be/ayfM1hkHwXY>

Charlotte and Willa sent a video on Day 5 of their search:

<https://youtu.be/leMRwAK9LhA>

Video of Charlotte getting her first DNA test after finding potential birth parents. Charlotte and Willa's birth parent search had become the subject of news accounts by this point: <https://youtu.be/wMZXuncvZY>