



OUR CHINA STORIES

我们的中国故事

Foxweldon, Ming

Adoptee

Seattle

Adoption place/date: Kunming (Yunnan)

Adoption date: November 1994

Age at adoption: 3.5 years

Hello! My full name is Bai Yi Min (白宜民) Mershon Blasek Foxweldon and I am almost 25 years old.

I've a long story with my name, as it is long. The three names in the front are the names I came with when I was adopted. However as you can see, my adoptive parents "heard" my name as Bai Yi Ming, so they just assumed that it was Ming, when in fact it was Yi Min. A one letter difference changed the way I perceived them, and my name's importance, even if it was given to me by the orphanage. I found all this out more than 10 years after my adoption.

I've two middle names, Mershon (Mom) and Blasek (Pop), and my last name, Foxweldon, which is my adoptive parents' last names combined. The multiple names have contributed to my identity as an adoptee. I feel very mixed about my name, yet there's a feeling of pride too. It's not a straight line of simplicity.

Beginning

I was adopted from the Kunming Children's Welfare Institute, in Yunnan Province in 1994. I was met by my adoptive parents. Pop, (according to him, "dad" was too popular so he preferred we call him Pop - and Mom). I was asked to give them cookies as a gesture of welcome. From what I was told, the caretakers asked me to do this and acknowledge my new adoptive parents. It was a nerve-wracking experience, during which I believe a part of myself died. I think I froze even though I committed to the actions being asked of me.

Since this happened so long ago I can't exactly articulate such a complex concept. However, as I've grown older I've learned through various sources about how trauma is experienced. I don't have much knowledge about trauma, however I do believe that the multiple transitions I experienced, from meeting my new parents, being driven from place to place (whether it was the notary's office, the examination room for a physical, and, of course, the big trip across the Pacific Ocean), certainly left an impact on my well being. I think various things that my adoptive parents have reminded me about, such as

getting motion sickness in almost every moving vehicle and that being a symbol of “shame” or “embarrassment” on family vacations, really signified how much trauma isn’t just the result of one symptom or experience, but one of many.

I know that I was almost “quiet” yet, when I warmed up to people, i.e. my Pop, I would babble in Chinese. Once I learned English I was quite vocal, and loved singing, and being engaged with others. I was a mixed bag of high energy, truth seeking, determination, and skepticism, to name a few.

Early Struggles

I can recall feeling confused and afraid either because of being uprooted or when reminded of memories from my past. I know from those instances I couldn’t always pinpoint how I felt, but with some contemplation was I able to connect the dots. An example would be the times I fought with my Mom, and the times she lost her cool. I can say that those experiences were painful, not only physically, but emotionally. Later in life I was able to travel to China and eventually learned of the types of abuse I experienced at the orphanage, and it all clicked. Being restrained by some caretakers, being slapped from crying, it all made sense. Did knowing this make me happy? Not really. Rather, relieved. I know I’m not a professional when it comes to human interactions/dynamics, but I know I can put two and two together.

I was born with Congenital Talipes Equinovarus or in short, Club Foot (feet), which made it difficult to walk, much less stand. My feet were turned inward. If I hadn’t received surgeries in both China and the U.S., I would not have been as mobile as I am today.

I had complicated feelings about these surgeries, what they meant to me. As I grew older I learned so much of what transforming from a “disabled” person to an “able-bodied” person meant. People said how “lucky” I was to have adoptive parents who invested in not only my adoption but ensuring I was taken care of health-wise. I can point to many examples of feeling very isolated in my thoughts about this condition. The concept of gratefulness was drilled into my brain, but it didn’t yield the results my adoptive parents wanted/demanded. It went to show their inability to see me as an individual who could hurt/feel pain, because they were concerned about themselves, their reputation. I can recall many times I would complain about pain in my legs/feet after surgery, and many times it was acknowledged. However, it transformed later on as “petty complaints” when I was hurt/insulted by what someone said to me. These kinds of scenarios played out in various ways, only creating a wall between my parents and other family members.

I was known by many as “brave,” “strong,” a “survivor” as my adoptive mom once put it. She has said countless times how I’m a survivor, because I’ve endured so much through my adoption. It gives me conflicting thoughts/feelings. I don’t/can’t accept that as a title, because frankly I don’t want pity from anyone. I never wanted that. However, despite my protests, I was given sympathy by many, whether it was health -related, or just the mere idea of adoption being brought up. It was constant.

Siblings

Upon arriving in the U.S., I met my older sister, who is now 30. She is my parents' biological child. I also met my younger brother, who is now 24 and was adopted from Peru when he was one-month-old. He was adopted before me, which makes the family dynamics quite unique. (Mind you, not something I would condone). He had had two years with my sister, so their relationship even to the present day is still pretty strong. As for my relationship with either sibling, it's rather complex.

The relationship I had with my sister was, well, unique. I felt as I grew up and learned to think for myself that she treated me more like a "doll" and someone to admire from afar, because I was so "different." I know there were times we were "typical" sisters, however in retrospect I didn't feel a strong connection or trust with her. I felt it was an interesting dynamic to work with two siblings who bonded over two years and there I was, plopped, right in the center.

Living in new places

My adoptive parents didn't want us to miss out on being exposed to other cultures, so they chose Costa Rica as a place to move. For six months we lived there, studied at an immersion school, and explored the Pacific Coast for vacations. My adoptive Pop would split his time in Costa Rica and the U.S. in order to support the rest of the family. Then my adoptive parents chose to make the drastic decision to move to the East Coast, because they were tired of suburban life. My Pop also wanted to open up his own practice to continue with his profession, oral surgery. I spent the majority of my childhood in New Hampshire and Vermont. I was raised in a predominantly white city, in the small New England town, Keene, New Hampshire.

From the moment I came to the U.S., I was adored by many, and that was great to a point. However, as I became more aware of that, I felt a bit put on the spot. That was a theme in my growing up, and it definitely paved the way to confusion. There were plenty of misunderstandings, especially in family-orientated situations, which led to one too many yelling matches. I think being blunt about this because without the ability to speak for myself I don't think I would be who I am today, outspoken and determined to be heard. As an adoptee, I've learned that my story is like many others, but also unique. I have my good days, when I take pride in my history, but there are times I feel so discouraged and sad about how I came to be me. But I don't feel that's any different from anyone who has experienced any difficulties in life, whether adopted or not. It's a part of life. Other times I'm reminded: You're the only one here who's adopted, and who's different.

I think the impression I got from my upbringing was to be smart, driven, independent, competent, persistent, polite, just to name a few. I felt at times that put a lot of pressure on my well being and my security as a person. There were certainly times I felt like breaking down, when I felt I couldn't move forward. In fact, I have broken down in the arms of those whom I've trusted and loved, but sometimes it feels like it's not something one can escape from. I do feel my trust issues, as much as I'd like to deny it, stem mainly from my abandonment. I try and roll with the punches life gives me, but sometimes I find myself wandering, lost and confused as to what to do next. It's almost at times as if I can't move, even if I'm going through the motions.

As stated in one of my favorite adoption movies, *Somewhere Between*, Adoption is with you....no matter how much you want to run from it.... From what I understood, you have to face adoption, and will be forced to face it, whether it's a comment from a stranger's mouth, or your very own adoptive family that says something that alienates you from the rest. It's a fact of life, that, yes, can over time really eat away at one's self-esteem. However, I try my best to seek out those who will understand me, but at times it can feel like it's few and far between.

College

I always wanted to return to China. I asked many times while growing up and my adoptive parents always said: "We'll need to see when the time is right." However, I came to know with time and many other global adventures, it seemed I would never go. Then I came to the realization upon graduating high school that my parents hoped I could find a college that would have Chinese language courses, and ultimately I could travel abroad through a study abroad program. Fortunately, I was able to find a school through my research, the University of Vermont, that had a program in Kunming, the city I was adopted from.

In 2009, I graduated high school, and was on my way to the University of Vermont. I was very anxious to attend. I would be officially enrolled in Chinese classes, as opposed to taking courses in the summer, or just a class here and there. I was psyched to start something new and actually engage with others who showed an interest in learning Chinese, the culture, history, politics and whatever was related to my motherland. My first semester went well, and I progressed nicely. I was able to experience various professors' methods of teaching, as my program allowed a two- year contract with a few professors from China to teach. I got to engage with them at Friday Tea Hour as well as in class. It was another way to be immersed. There was even a program through the Residential department where I and others could live in what was known as Chinese House. There were activities associated with the country, cultural field trips. I stayed for a full year, and then chose to proceed to other programs in my later college years. My first impression of Chinese House gave me a sense of community. However, I soon discovered that like many programs that are small, it can yield a diverse response which ultimately led to my decision to change.

Returning to China

Junior year arrived and I was preparing for the Study Abroad program. I had two years of Chinese language (Mandarin), under my belt. However, I wasn't confident in my qualifications or sure that I would be accepted. However, sure enough, I was encouraged by my peers and professors to join, so I applied! I experienced various hurdles, especially ones my peers would not have experienced. I dealt with Visa issues, the Chinese Consulate arguing about my identity, and my paperwork needing edit upon edit to confirm that I was, in fact, legit. It was a frustrating and sometimes agonizing experience that I do not wish upon anyone - adopted or not. I learned so much from this application process.

Overall, my six months abroad was very eye-opening, heartwarming, and challenging. I persevered in my studies, discovered a lot about myself, learned about my homeland, and became a stronger person. I was also able to travel to other parts of Asia, connect with friends, and gain a better understanding of that part of the world. I was fortunate to have connected with those who I have contact with, and for that I'm thankful! </p>

Birth parent search

Towards the end of my trip, I chose to do a birth family search without my adoptive parents' input/approval, which added another facet to our complex relationship. I wanted to do so because I felt it was personal and very important to my journey of self-discovery. I also wanted to "prove" to others I could do this without needing people's approval.

I contacted a few teachers from my Chinese university and was able to connect with a reporter from Yunnan TV, (Provincial TV), and from there I was able to launch the search. In a nutshell, I was able to meet with one of the head reporters/directors of Yunnan TV, since she recognized me from the first interview and recalled her time working on a project at the Kunming Children's Social Welfare Institute (KCSWI). She remembered me as a young toddler at the orphanage. The following days were a blur of school work, recording the broadcast and spending time with friends. Within a few days, I was told by that very teacher that a family recognized me on TV and wanted to meet me. I was able to meet them, and be introduced to all members. First I met my "uncle" and then my "father." Following those two, I met my "mother" and my younger "sister" and "brother." According to the story I was told I resembled my brother. It was a surreal experience being surrounded by people who were possibly my biological family. I was able to spend an evening with them, enjoy a meal served with the one "Western" food, French fries. I was so touched by the experience, but sadly I had to leave for home since it was getting late. I was able to meet many members of the family, and through my translator, a police officer from a station in Kunming, was I able to understand what was going on. I had a journalist with me, so it was a help to have that support. I returned home after a long drive and had to snap back to reality, my studies. The days flew by and I was notified by my professor that I was to do a DNA test at the Forensic Center. I learned that I would have to pay and the family was struggling to find a way to pay for themselves. However, given the exposure, I was notified that a well-known food manufacturing company stepped in saying they would pay for my and the potential birth family's DNA tests. I was again, touched by their offer, and there we proceeded to do the tests. Meanwhile, Yunnan TV was doing more interviews with others, to get more exposure about my search. I recall one of their recordings showed the reporters going to the hospital where I had most of my surgeries trying to find any file about me. They came up empty handed. Another segment showed the reporter calling the main volunteer who spent a lot of his time with me while I was at the orphanage, asking about my early life there. Sadly, he wasn't much help in knowing when I arrived to the orphanage, or other details. All of this experience was a blur, and I can say I'm glad I jumped in feet first, advocated for myself, and met many great and compassionate individuals.

No DNA match

I was able to do the DNA test, and my potential birth father did it a few days later. However, they had to have my birth mother do the test another day, because of her work in the market. They filmed me getting the results at the center, and there I learned they were in fact not a match. The reporter asked me whether I would give up on my search, and my response, "No, I will keep trying."

After hearing the news, I put on a face for the TV world to see that I wasn't going to be emotional about my results, however when I was home with my roommate I think I bawled. I had so badly wanted things to work. Though I knew from the first day meeting them that they weren't my birth family, I had hope. The other aspect of the story I found interesting was the supposed place where I was placed happened to be a cemetery. I recall taking photos of the experience, and pondering, as we passed the cemetery,

"Might this be the place?"

Lastly, I recall the heartfelt moments my "birth" father gave me a goodbye hug, and how he wished that I was his daughter. As his token of this love, he gave me a glass bracelet. I knew he wasn't well-off so to receive this kind gesture of care I was very moved. Unfortunately, I didn't get their contact information, so there's no way I can contact them. Alas, I had to return to reality and get my mindset set on the future, my future.

It's been six years of searching and I have no interest in giving up. However, I have had my hiatuses that gave me opportunities to think about my next steps and what I will do next. My hope is whoever is interested in searching will not feel alone in this experience, because by sharing stories can we all learn about what worked, what didn't, and of course we can learn about ourselves in such experiences as these. That's my hope. The places I have lived: Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1994-1996 (6 month stint in Costa Rica); Keene, New Hampshire (1997-2015); Burlington, Vermont (2009-2013); Renton, Washington. Today my parents and brother live in New Hampshire, my sister lives in Arizona and I live near Seattle.



Ming Foxweldon