



OUR CHINA STORIES

我们的中国故事

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Adoptive Parent

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Daughter's Adoption place: Guizhou Province, Zhenyuan Social Welfare Institute

Adoption date: March 25, 2005

Age at adoption: 2 years old.

This story may be a bit different from the typical “feel-good” story of a child adopted from China but I feel it is important to share nonetheless.

Once you read my story, you will understand why I choose to use a pseudonym here and also why I am keeping our family, including our 12-year-old daughter from China, anonymous. I assume there are people in my family, including our daughter, who may prefer not to be so public with our story nor know all the details of our story. In the past, I have shared my concerns about our daughter's adoption on other online forums. To protect the privacy of my family members, I have never used our daughter's name or even the first initial of her first name. I do not post any pictures or use my children's names on any public forum linked to me. I never changed my name when I married and I am hoping this protects my daughter and other family members' privacy.

My daughter was born in 2003. Initially, we were told by our adoption agency that our daughter was in the orphanage at the Zhenyuan SWI in Guizhou Province. After another family with a referral from the same SWI requested additional medical information about their child, we were told that the children were in foster care. After I adopted my daughter, I got a lead on the snail mail address of the foster mother. I learned that my daughter had been in foster care from the time she was “found,” until May 25, 2005, the day we adopted her. My daughter's finding ad and abandonment statement both say she was found at 4 months. The foster mother says my daughter was a week or two old, at best.

It didn't escape me that 2005 was the peak year for international adoptions to the U.S. from China (see U.S. State Department statistics). My daughter came from a fairly rural town, in a fairly rural province, Zhenyuan County in Guizhou Province. I have heard some people say that Guizhou is one of the poorest provinces in China. I believe that poverty comes into play as to why my daughter was relinquished. We now live in the East Coast of the U.S.

I knew absolutely nothing about China or international adoption from China when we started the adoption process in December 2003. I had our first child at age 41. We looked into adoption because of fertility problems I encountered while trying to conceive our second child when I was 43. We had neighbors who had adopted from China so when we started to explore our choices, they were the first people we contacted. We quickly made the decision to adopt, as we wanted our two children to be close in age. The lies I encountered during the adoption process started almost from the beginning. At first they were so small and subtle that I didn't even acknowledge them as lies. As years went by and I investigated my daughter's background in China, the lies became bigger and more disturbing. The first big lie I encountered occurred shortly after our adoption. I was able to contact our daughter's Chinese foster mother. I had sent a package of photos and gifts to the SWI during the weeks prior to travel. On adoption day, while my daughter was screaming and crying in my arms, someone gave me a large manila envelope. The next morning while my daughter was sleeping, I happened to look at the manila envelope and realized it was my own handwriting and it was the package I had sent. The SWI was returning some of the items: the stuffed animal, the disposable camera and my photo album. I found a small note folded up in the last sleeve of the album – three lines of Chinese and three lines of broken English. It included an address in my daughter's hometown. I showed the note to my guide, who explained that the writer was probably the foster mother and that she wanted me to write to her at the address she provided.

I mailed the foster mother a copy of the abandonment statement, the official document all adoptive parents receive that tells the story of where and how their child was found. I asked her if she thought the statement was true. Her reply was that she did not believe the details of the abandonment statement, but when I asked her what she believed was true about my daughter's "abandonment," she answered that she did not know.

One day in 2008 I was discussing international adoption with a Chinese friend who didn't know much about it. I mentioned the term "finding ad." These announcements are published in local Chinese newspapers, and sometimes include photos of "found" babies and are ostensibly a way of giving birth parents an opportunity to come forward and reclaim children who will be placed for adoption. Other people feel finding ads are merely a formality to transfer custody of a child to the SWI, in preparation for the child to be internationally adopted. I showed my friend my daughter's ad, which also included nine other children. I had received a copy of the newspaper finding ad from the guide who helped us and the other adoptive families when we adopted three years earlier in 2005, but only my daughter's ad was translated into English. I never knew what the other nine ads said and I never thought to get them translated. There was only one sentence written about each child. I remember my friend standing in my kitchen, reading the ten little ads over and over and over again as I thought to myself, "Why is she taking so long to read ten little ads?" Finally she asked me if I knew what these other nine ads said.

I replied, "No, I can't read Chinese."

"I don't think I believe any of these ads," she said, explaining that the information about these ten children was so similar, it was not, in her opinion, to be believed.

I then asked her to translate the other nine ads. After I read her translations, I absolutely understood what she saw, and I absolutely agreed with her.

In my mind, the abandonment of a child should be a random event, but the ads lacked the randomness I would expect. There was so much clustering of birth dates, abandonment dates, age of abandonment and abandonment locations that either all ten Chinese birth moms did the same or very similar things, or these ads were fabricated. Obviously, I believed the latter. All but one child was born between July and September 2003, with one child born in February 2004. All the children were supposedly found in either January (eight children) or February (two children) of 2004. All the children except one were between 4-7 months of age at "abandonment," with one child being three weeks old. All ten children were abandoned at general government-related locations, either the SWI (four children) or one of three township government buildings (six children). It was at this point that my heart broke and I realized there was something seriously wrong with this SWI.

I was confused, very confused. Why would the SWI fabricate finding ad information for all ten children? I am the type of person who can't just "let go" of things that don't make sense. I dwell. I want to make sense of something that doesn't make any sense. I got very little help from other adoptive parents. I wanted to compare my daughter's finding ad information and those of the other nine girls to children from the same SWI, who were adopted both before and after my daughter. I was trying to see if this clustering of information was a habit for this SWI. When I posted my concerns on the Guizhou adoption Yahoo group back in 2008 and asked other adoptive parents to share their child's finding ad information privately with me, no one responded. Instead, I got a lot of backlash from other adoptive parents. I learned real quickly not to share my thoughts on the Yahoo groups. I came to realize that the reason why most people lie is to cover something up. So what was the SWI trying to cover up?

In 2009 I got my answer.

In January 2009, Brian Stuy, whose Utah-based organization, Research-china.org, helps adoptive parents of Chinese children explore their children's origins, offered a new service called the Birth Family Search Analysis. He obtained all the finding ads of a particular SWI and analyzed them for unusual trends. He also offered his opinion on about the chance for a successful birth parent search. I jumped at the opportunity. If other adoptive parents wouldn't share their children's finding ad information, at least I could get Brian's analysis. It included a post he had come across on an online Chinese forum from a man who had been born and raised in my daughter's town. He was complaining that family planning in Zhenyuan, had seized three children from his relatives. These girls were born about 3-8 months after my daughter. I showed the link Brian provided to my Chinese friend. She verified what Brian said and offered to contact the man, whose post included an email address and a cell number. She did. The man got Chinese reporters involved. The resulting news scandal in July 2009 documented family planning seizures in my daughter's town.

According to these news reports, family planning officials seized over-quota children and took them to the SWI for international adoption. Interestingly, these seizures started one year after the SWI received approval from the Chinese government agency that issues certification to participate in the international adoption program. They also seemed to target poor people, who couldn't pay the over-quota fines imposed for violating the One Child policy. Zhenyuan wasn't the only SWI that got caught doing this. A group of poor farmers in Shaoyang, Hunan Province were complaining about the very same thing. News stories I read in the Los Angeles Times and in Caixin, a Chinese investigative news site, indicated that the children were born in similar years and therefore adopted during the peak years of international adoption from China. A graph of yearly adoptions from China to the U.S. that I found on the website johnstonsarchive.net says it all. The line for adoptions from China to the U.S. goes up and up and up until about 2005-2006 and then plummets. This graph never made sense to me. If abandonments are random events, it stands to reason that they would be stable over time, or, at best, a wavy horizontal line, not shooting up and then down. If one looks at U.S. adoptions from Korea, for instance, one sees a fairly horizontal line.

I also never bought any of the reasons some adoptive parents gave to explain the number of adoptions from China first skyrocketing and then plummeting, such as the Chinese economy affecting the number of abandonments, the Olympics and China tightening the requirements for international adoption. The only thing that made sense to me is that over the years, since China started international adoption in the 1990's, SWIs became increasingly creative in getting children in their custody. All the SWIs "wanted a piece of the action" for financial gain since international families are required to make a cash contribution to Chinese orphanages of \$5,000 (\$3,000 a few years ago) when they adopt. When news reports finally revealed the Hunan trafficking scandal in 2005, the whole thing imploded and adoptions dropped precipitously, especially of healthy girls.

In the end, I do believe I was told one big lie. Yes, there are probably some abandonments but I believe many of our daughters wound up in the SWI for other reasons. I believe that some SWIs provided financial incentives to their employees and others to get children in their custody. I believe that some children internationally adopted were trafficked from one province to another and between SWIs within a province. I believe that family planning seizures and coercions put birth families in impossible situations, forcing parents to choose between keeping their children or paying heavy fines. I believe China's household registration system keeps birth parents in the grip of their local governments. Without the household registration card known as the hukou, no child can get health care or an education, a fact that forces birth parents to relinquish so-called over-quota children born outside the One Child policy. So what is one's moral responsibility, in general, if she believes fraud was possibly involved in her child's adoption or that her child may have been coerced from her or his birth parents? My answer is this: If my child had been lost or kidnapped or coerced from me by my

government and there was someone half a world away who knew something about the whereabouts of my child, I would want her to speak up and share what she knows. I believe it is my responsibility to try and learn the truth about my daughter's past. I believe it is my responsibility to try and locate my daughter's birth family and find out if she was truly abandoned. If she was coerced from her birth parents, I believe it is my responsibility to encourage my daughter, in any way I can, to have a relationship with them (which knowing my daughter, will be difficult). At minimum, her Chinese parents deserve to know where she is living and how she is doing. I cannot and would not return my daughter to them because I do not believe it is in her best interest. But if her Chinese parents have been greatly wronged, I feel it is my responsibility to help them. I will do all of this because I can and they cannot. I will do all of this because that is how I would want to be treated by another parent.

Figure 1 is 10 finding ads, published in March 6, 2004, in the Guizhou Dushibao:

Birth date	Abandonment date	Age at aband.	Location
5/2003	1/5/2004	4 mos.(or 5 mos)	Govt. building in Yang
10/2003	1/10/2004	6 mos.	Soc. Act. Office, Yang
25/2003	1/15/2004	5 mos.	Grounds of SWI, Zhenyuan
25/2003	1/15/2004	6 mos.	Govt. building, Dupin
10/2003	1/18/2004	5 mos.	Grounds of SWI, Zhenyuan
5/2003	1/21/2004	6 mos.	Govt. building, Dupin
1/2004	1/21/2004	3 wks.	Grounds of SWI, Zhenyuan
1/2003	1/25/2004	5 mos.	Grounds of SWI, Zhenyuan
5/2003	2/5/2004	6 mos.	Soc. Act. Office, Yang
7/2003	2/8/2004	7 mos.	Govt. building, Yang

Photo: An anonymous finding chart Robin Bell offers to prove her point about lack of randomness in abandonments.

