

Preparing for a Homeland Visit:

Returning to China with Your Adopted Child

The following article has been prepared by Dr. Jane Liedtke, CEO and Founder, Our Chinese Daughters Foundation. OCDF is a non-profit Foundation in support of adoptive families since 1995. OCDF focuses on the needs of single-parent families and couples, and primarily serves the adoptive community by bringing Chinese Culture to children adopted from China. See www.ocdf.org and OCDF China Tours : www.ocdf.org/camp.htm. Since 1996 OCDF has offered Culture Camp programs for adoptive families – first at Illinois State University and then in China in conjunction with China International Travel Service. In 1998 Dr. Liedtke moved to China so that her daughter could experience her language and culture first-hand.

Culture Tour or Adoption Roots?

Families with children adopted internationally now have a better understanding of the importance of giving their child a multi-cultural context for their lives and a fuller understanding of the tools needed to deal with issues of adoption. We base this on years of research and experience with multi-racial adoptions in America, and emerging research and documentation from the Korean adoptive community on their experiences growing up as adoptees from Asia.

There are really two areas to be concerned with and we don't always need to focus on the two together. In fact, sometimes it is healthy to approach them separately. First, your child was born in a different country and culture; race, culture, and ethnicity is what they bring to your family, making your family more multi-cultural and multi-national. A German-American family adopting a Chinese child is no longer solely a German-American or "American" family. They now are also a family with Chinese heritage and culture. When everyone in the family thinks of themselves as sharing that Chinese heritage and culture, the adopted child will have a very supportive and healthy environment. This helps them be themselves and desire to learn more about the country of their birth. Second,

your child is adopted and there are issues related to being adopted that are separate from cultural heritage. Sometimes adoption conditions/circumstances are based in societal and cultural practices abroad but we should not force the two together all the time. The child needs to form a positive identity about their birth country AND a positive identity about being adopted. Developmentally, children may approach one without thinking about the other or be “ready” to deal with one before they are “ready” to deal with the other.

Preventative Medicine or Building the “Toolbox”

I frequently refer to the practice of traveling with children to their birth country to learn about their culture and heritage as “preventative medicine”. The entire experience creates a “toolbox” for your child. Travel itself is as an educational experience for children and a valuable means for creating dialog and learning about culture and adoption. Exploring your child’s birth country while they are elementary school age sends them a signal that their birth country is important to your family. This is a very different message than attending a once a year cultural heritage day at a special holiday. The early travel experience allows the child to have information to share with their peers at school about where they are from. This is different than reading books, seeing movies, and being an observer of life that is far away from their daily reality. They need to be a participant in their culture and see it, touch it, smell it. Then as they encounter questions about themselves or are asked by peers, or perhaps even teased – they will have a host of things to say about being from that country based on their own personal experiences.

Through their birth country visit, children begin to add more to their toolbox and to the variety of tools and strategies that they have for dealing with what life will throw in their way. Building the cultural toolbox, just like learning a foreign language, is best done when the child has a natural exploratory advantage – the early developmental stages. This is to avoid the resistance that may come as children get older and have more questions than they have answers for, or when the questions are more complex than their toolbox of experiences can resolve. So, the “travel” toolbox gives them the context, the visual images, the experiences, and the *confidence* to handle new questions. If their toolbox is limited to what we tell them, such as their adoption story, or a video on “Big Bird in China” or “Big Bird in Japan”, we are limiting their ability to function and not providing them experiential tools – seeing is believing! Life in China is not like Big Bird in China. Big Bird gets to see famous places in China but Big Bird does not deal with societal issues, modern life and traditional culture – and how they mix together. Children are very, very perceptive and

they take in the environment even if they don't use all the information at that very moment.

The most important thing a child returning to China (or to any birth country) can come home with is being in love with their toolbox – liking their country of birth and feeling good about their experience there. It does not mean that everything in the toolbox will be perfect, positive images or experiences, but they will be real and they will be “theirs” and not something someone else told them.

Use Strategies of Intercultural Understanding

Approach cultural issues from the positive perspective. What are the similarities between American life and life in XYZ country/culture? Don't make it about right and wrong. “I can't believe they don't have western toilets here!” exclaimed one adoptive mom upon arrival at a Chinese rural farm. Her child meanwhile hears that there is something wrong with a culture that uses a system that doesn't require a person to be in physical contact with a toilet. Was that the message the mother intended for her child? As an adoptive parent please think before YOU speak and act! A response that points out the difference but does not imply there is something wrong would be: “Isn't it interesting how this toilet is different from ours at home?” “Let's find out why they are designed this way.” Differences in culture should not be heard by the child as being “bad” unless perhaps they are differences that create a harmful situation or unsafe condition. Even then, take care in how you approach it. This doesn't mean you can't be who you are (your personality, your beliefs and your preferences) but you are now forming models for your child. We must create a focus for our children that will help them embrace culture and accept differences as being ok. If you can model for the child intercultural understanding and create opportunities for your child to experience different cultures then they will accept differences and learn to adapt to them. They may even decide they don't like something but it will be based on their experience and an understanding versus through your filters.

Examples:

For many years my own mother would not come to China with me on a trip despite me offering to bring her with many groups and individual treks. Her mindset was that she didn't like Chinese food so therefore she could not visit China. She would even announce to all far and wide how she didn't like Chinese food (luckily this was prior to my adopting Emily and she had not done this in front of her). After Emily and I moved to China she finally came to visit us (actually came to see her granddaughter, Emily!). I had told her about

McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Dominos Pizza that delivered, A&W Rootbeer, TGIFridays, Scholtsky's Deli, and every other American food establishment in Beijing in order to bribe her to come. Upon arrival I didn't take her to any of these places to eat – conveniently they were “inconvenient” to our daily schedule. As such, she had to try Chinese food. Ok, I'll admit it – I forced it on her! She was amazed at how much she enjoyed it and was willing to try a wide variety of dishes. I have always been rather independent and luckily explored at a young age places throughout the world. My mother didn't have such opportunities and it limited her ability to make decisions about her travels and people of other nationalities. That scenario is not uncommon for her generation, and her toolbox now is so different than it was before.

Not long ago I encountered an adoptive Mom who told me that she didn't eat Chinese food and neither did her daughter (from China), so she told me that when they decide to come to China they would pack a suitcase of food with enough peanut butter for the entire trip. I explained that it wasn't necessary to do so and that I was sure she would discover a wide variety of foods available during our meals, and surely something would be suitable. Likewise, I told her of the array of western food and grocery stores selling peanut butter. This was not about allergies mind you – it was about mind-set. I couldn't help but think that the child likely had no experience with Chinese food to know whether or not she really liked it AND with her mom toting peanut butter with them to China, would get the message reinforced that there is something wrong with eating Chinese food.

Your own reactions and interactions with people locally tell a child a lot about your “thinking” globally. Try to have interchanges with your child to explore issues of diversity, poverty, lifestyles, foods, and religions. These dialogs add tools to their “toolbox” as well. When we returned to live in China in 1998 I was concerned that my daughter's experience could be one of culture shock. I decided to bring her on a 3-week trip at age 5 about 2 months prior to the move. We traveled to Beijing and took a side trip to the beach at Beidaihe. Emily was frequently amazed, and sometimes shocked at the really unusual sights she saw. I decided to play a game with her while riding in the taxi: identify those things that are similar and those things that are different. The list of similarities was long and the differences came down to a few items that struck her more prominently than others: traffic, bicycles everywhere, so many restaurants, lots of people, and it's dirtier. These were things about being in a different city and not about race, culture, or ethnicity. Her list of similarities was longer and emphasized interactions – people say hello, people are nice to me,

kids play in the park, etc. While she was 5 at the time and I didn't expect much from this, she didn't leave that trip thinking that moving to China was going to be a terrible thing. She was willing and eager to do so, and now only misses the occasional trek to Toys R Us and her backyard swing set. I believe her successful transition to life in China is a function of differences being seen as just "something that is different", not "something that is bad". That said, I am not without my faults and there are days when the China lifestyle creates a meltdown. I believe she accepts that too as part of the struggle to accept things that are very, very different, and sees how hard we work through cultural challenges to have positive experiences.

Returning to Your Child's Birth Country

Why to go and when to go?

Returning to the country of your child's birth is not the same as returning to see a child's orphanage and adoption city. Returning to travel and to explore being a multi-cultural family, seeing sights, enjoying foods, learning cultural traditions and forming family experiences within the country is very important to your child's sense of self-esteem. Their acceptance that they are from a culture and race different from yours (and that it's okay) is an important step in their development of their self-image.

The decision to travel to the birth county should be a family decision. It should be discussed and understood by all. It should be because the family wants to learn about the country and not just the adult who wants the child to learn; it is not just "for the child," but "for the family."

But kids vary, parents vary, the stories the kids have learned about China vary, the emphasis placed on the orphanage versus on being Chinese varies. So there's not one size fits all response to "when" to go. The "why" to go is simple – the child may always wonder if there is something you are hiding from them if they don't see their birth country for themselves. They may not even realize that you can't afford to go or that it is difficult to make time for the trip. Of course if these things are the real reason you can't go then your child needs to hear this truth too.

Using China again as the example: if someone says to your child, or they hear on TV that "people are poor in China" the child may think all people are poor in China. If someone says "people eat rats in China" the child may believe there is something wrong with where they are from, versus discovering that the Chinese

culture is very efficient and innovative when it comes to food and that different foods are believed to provide special nourishment for different organs in the body. The “being there” experience is so powerful that it is impossible to describe the impact a positive experience with the birth country can have. The child can say: “I did see some farmers living in older style traditional homes in the countryside but they ate well and had more rooms to live in than the people in the city.” Or, “While in China I saw a wide range of housing and lifestyles, from worker’s housing to new apartments and houses.”

There are, however, clusters by age in terms of how children react to being in their birth country. My responses are based on families coming to China with their children over the last 5 years – both through group tours and independent families who have visited with us while they were in China.

Age:

We have had children ages 2.5 through 14 attend our culture camp programs with their parents. Most of the adoptive children have been ages 4 to 10. The 2.5 to 8 year olds have a very different experience than those 9 and over who are adopted (NON-adoptees 9 and older have positive experiences similar to the 2.5 to 8 year olds). Something happens at age 9 that complicates coming to the birth country and exacerbates the extra expectations of dealing with being adopted. Prior to age 9, the children are like sponges and willing to absorb any experience thrown their way. They will climb, hike, listen to Chinese traditional music, fan dance, eat Chinese food, try pit toilets-- you name it! They are very flexible and willing to do it all.

From 9 years old and on there is an attitude - something we observed to be an initial rejection of everything that is Chinese: "Oh, China is so dirty, I am glad I don't live here", and "I can't wait to eat at McDonalds". For several days the child can't quite believe that they are from a place that is sooooo different from what they imagined it to be. So it takes a few days to get the older child "into it". They end up having a great time but the transition is slower. I would caution all parents that returning to China requires discussion, and preparation of the child and adults.

Many people have focused on traveling for culture first at ages 4 to 7, and then returning home to prepare for the orphanage visit at age 9, but not much later. All parents that have come have reported they are glad they brought their child at an early age, and are glad they didn't wait until teen years, which some people had first thought they would do. Families who visited the orphanage

reported it was a mixed experience - some kids were happy with it and ready, some didn't really seem overly troubled or interested, and some were in shock as a result (ill-prepared by parents is what I observed, or the child had some previous trauma at the orphanage and didn't wish to return - as was the case for one adoptee who had been adopted as an older child).

Not everyone can afford to come back often, so I believe people need to prioritize a trip before the age of 9 if they can afford to do so. Whether it's a group tour or an individual program, it's better done early. Some families have said that traveling as a group, while not their normal mode of family travel, was good because the girls were all in the same situation. While experiencing China, they had other kids to play with, had programs and activities that would not be available as solo family travelers, and had an opportunity to exchange adoption information and questions with each other in a very healthy way. As adults we overhear them chatting at the back of the bus, and it is very interesting to listen to.

Visiting Your Child's Orphanage - Being Prepared

Who wants to visit and why?

Families usually have some concerns about bringing their child back to their orphanage and adoption city. Recently an adoptive dad asked if there was any chance that his children would encounter their birthparents. He was very concerned about this and was worried that his children would be traumatized by this event. He was also likely worried that he too would not be able to handle such a situation.

One child I know of actually thought perhaps she was going to see her birthmother and was preparing in her mind how she would tell her parents that she could live with her birthmother one year and then the next year, etc. The scenario was in the mind of the child but it had not entered the parent's wildest imagination that their child was thinking this until after they traveled and visited her orphanage and she shared it with them.

Examine who wants to visit the orphanage/adoption city and why. Parents often want to return because it is the place where they received their wonderful child - a very positive feeling about a place that "gave" a precious gift to them. However, for the child the time in the orphanage is a different thing. Some children were in foster care and some in conditions that were less than perfect.

Be sure you are returning to the orphanage because your child is ready to go there and not because you feel *you* need to go there. Focus on whether or not your child is ready for the visit and do not force a child to visit their orphanage. Preparation is important and the child should feel like they have an option – that they can visit their birth county without visiting their orphanage or they can make the decision to visit.

Summary of our observations:

1. Children do better going to their orphanage after having a sightseeing tour or cultural camp program in China as they have a chance to gradually acclimate to China and are not as shocked by the initial visit to the orphanage.

2. Children and parents both need preparation so that the trip to the orphanage is not about "taking something home" as it was the first time but rather "giving something back" - a way for the child to give something so that she realizes she has done something for those kids who were not yet adopted. An educational program, books or toys for the kids, or medical items like vitamins all help in that process.

3. Realistic expectations of what they will see, do and experience, both physically and emotionally. Be prepared to **not** visit the orphanage if your child does not wish to go at this time. Do not force the situation on them because it's a place that you as the parent wish to see - it does not mean your child will want to or needs to (it's very much a developmental process). We've had parents take their kids back and also many parents who treat trip #1 back to China as a family vacation about culture and then afterwards discuss with the child whether or not they wish to visit their orphanage on trip #2. Children actually say "no" more often than you realize.

4. Age of child will dictate whether or not major meetings should be held with adoption officials at the orphanage with the child present. Sometimes documents are presented from files that will be disturbing to the child if she is not prepared to hear about them or see them. Think about this ahead of time and if your goal is to check out her file you might figure out whether or not to do that independent of the child being present.

5. Make the return visit more about seeing their adoption city versus the orphanage - don't over glorify this place as "Mecca" as not all children will react positively. Those who are enthusiastic and interested deserve the opportunity to experience it all full-tilt if that's what works for them. All kids are different.

6. Age to return: younger is better for return trips to China, with or without the orphanage visit. If it's possible to do cultural travel between the ages of 6 to 8, a lot of preventative medicine happens. The child gets the context of China without being forced into the orphanage scene, and they fall in love with China and being Chinese--which is more important than having a positive connection to their orphanage. They need a positive connection to their culture and people for their life-long self-worth. The fact that they were from their particular orphanage is about the process of adoption (in some cases the process of chance) as many children are not actually from the place where they were institutionalized.

7. From ages 9 onward the kids that come to China arrive with a decidedly American attitude about everything, more resistant to change and less willing to be flexible and try new things. They notice the dirt with some sense of embarrassment, and they notice the pit toilets not for their novelty as the younger kids do but for their inconvenience. They see everything negative about China first and then gradually get the positive. The younger kids see the positive and might notice, but not be too terribly bothered by, the negative. My constant approach is to try to get kids into the positive mode early on.

8. Many children adopted from China only experience Chinese holidays as a means of understanding their culture and don't know anything about China except Panda bears and the Great Wall. When they see millions of people, see dusty, dirty cities, discover unfamiliar foods, and various living conditions, they are rather put off by all this – after all, they are Chinese too. So, it's good for them to discover all this and then have fun; how else will they ever be able to understand conditions that cause a country to have a one-child policy if they don't see and experience society? Likewise, when we present Chinese culture in the USA, we omit the socially unacceptable aspects of it (paternalism, for example). Also, we rarely have our children engaged in activities with homeless and poor people in America, so poverty is often something new to the kids who come to Culture Camp in China. I spend a lot of time talking about inner city America on the bus before I talk about inner city Beijing. For example – “just like in Chicago where many poorer families would live in high-rise buildings provided by the government, in China people live in government provided housing that looks quite similar on the outside. In fact, some of this housing can be very nice on the inside and the families may be middle class and not poor by Chinese standards.” Why should America be good and China bad? We want children to see something and say - wow that's similar or gee that's different-- and ask

“why is that the case?”—and get to the analysis mode not just observation. We focus a lot on developmental education through this experience.

Internationally adopted children need a positive connection to their birth culture and people for their life-long self-worth. The positive, hands-on experience of homeland travel can help a child stock her personal toolbox, and provide a lasting foundation for further journeys.

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