

What's in an Orphanage File? Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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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.

Answers to the following questions are based on the status of orphanage visits in 2004. OCDF is not responsible for government regulations and situations that may prevent a family from visiting their orphanage - just so you remember, we don't make the rules.

Who can visit an orphanage?

Parents at the time they adopt their child are no longer allowed to visit their orphanage. In many cases over the years, it was common practice to not visit an orphanage at the time of adoption - perhaps remote location, conditions, or the mere fact that the location had no suitable hotels prevented many families from seeing their child's orphanage. Now, almost universally, this is the case - no visits at the time of adoption. The few exceptions are just that, exceptions. This is also subject to change like everything within a developing country.

However, there are no formal regulations that prevent families from returning to their child's orphanage at a later time. Some provinces control the process more than others, requiring orphanage and provincial approval. In general, it is possible to arrange and most orphanages are very cooperative (although some directors are curious as to why you'd want to bring your child back!). Families should expect to obtain prior approval for their orphanage visit.

Persons other than the adoptive family and their immediate relatives are usually not allowed to visit orphanage facilities unless they are approved by the orphanage and provincial authorities in advance of the visit. This is for everyone's benefit as you wish to have the ability to visit the orphanage in the future and you don't want someone unrelated to the orphanage visiting and ruining it for others - the media for example can influence greatly the prospect of future visits if some aspect of the visit is taken out of context or conditions not be ideal by western standards.

How do I/we gain approval to visit my/our child's orphanage?

There are many ways this can be arranged - OCDF can arrange this for you if you are participating in an OCDF China Tour, either as part of your tour program such as a Reunion Tour OR as an add-on to group or individual family tour.

Your adoption agency can make the contacts for you or you can contact the orphanage on your own. There are three potential issues in doing this that we wish to make you aware of. First, your adoption agency wishes to keep their ability to adopt children from any given orphanage a possibility for their families waiting to adopt. They are aware that adopting families can't visit their orphanage at the time of adoption. Sometimes they consider this to be the case for returning families so they may not be as willing to assist. Some adoption agencies regularly have families returning to their orphanage and are willing/able to assist. Often rumors exist online about this entire process - "this orphanage is not open" "this orphanage has never had anyone return" and the like. Actually, we rarely have a situation where an orphanage director or provincial civil affairs will say "no."

The second issue is that any adoption agency will feel it's necessary to work through the CCAA (China Center for Adoption Affairs) since they are required to work with CCAA for all adoptions. CCAA however, is not the decision-making body with regards to what provinces and orphanage directors determine is allowed/not allowed in their facilities. They are like the IRS, they process the paperwork based on government regulations relative to the legal process of adoption. Post-adoption visits are not covered in this. Thus, involving CCAA may be an unnecessary step in the process. You can use CCAA to arrange an orphanage visit but they will not approve all orphanages for visitation. At least that has been our experience in working with them. When we first asked them to process visits for us only 50% of the orphanages were approved to visit. Since then, OCDF has been able to gain access to 98% of the orphanages requested at the time families wished to visit (one family was asked to delay their visit by 6 months due to a new facility being built and another was told they could visit but not tour the rooms where the babies were).

Third, if you contact your orphanage on your own you will need to be sure to send any requests in Chinese which will require translation services provided on your end. You can't logically expect the orphanage to employ translators for the purpose of enabling families to have a return visit there. That's just not what those folks at the orphanage should be spending their money and resources on (resources are for the children in their care and caring for them is their responsibility). You may be lucky and hear back from the director of the orphanage, or you may hear nothing (sometimes this is the case). You can imagine just how much work and paperwork it would be if a large percentage of families returned with their children. This is why we at OCDF decided to offer this as a service. It wasn't because this was our goal or mission but rather, we wanted to make the process easy for parents and easy on the orphanages since our staff can easily make the arrangements and have those arrangements coincide with any travel we have planned for you.

OCDF charges only a modest fee for this service: \$50.00. This includes translation of your orphanage request form into Chinese, calling the orphanage director to gain pre-approval for visit, contact with provincial authorities to process request (phone and fax), reconfirm visit with orphanage director, schedule interpreter (cost for interpreter time is extra), and communicate with the adoptive family. We have established very positive relationships with the orphanage directors and provincial authorities and have gained their trust as a result of being very careful about what parent expectations are and arranging positive visits for everyone involved.

Can we really visit a remote orphanage location?

Yes, you can as long as the community where the orphanage is located is approved for foreigners to visit (based on conditions in the community to support foreigners to stay there - hotels and hospitals for example). Even if it is not one of the cities open to foreigners in China, it is possible to request through the appropriate authorities for a visit to the community.

What is a typical orphanage visit like?

Families often have different goals for their orphanage visit. A family might be curious about their child's orphanage and would like their child to see where they once lived. Sometimes a child has some adoption-related issues and the parents are hoping to help resolve these through the visit. And some parents would like to find out more information for their child about their biological family hoping that perhaps the orphanage can shed some light on this or provide more information.

Most families will schedule a 2-4 day visit to the community where their child was adopted and/or including the community where their orphanage was located. This may include the provincial capital and another city, or may be just one location. So length of time is really dependent on how far apart these two places are (a provincial capital being a transportation hub in many instances - train or air flights).

Since some remote orphanages are not reachable by plane or even by train, families will need to be flexible in the length of time they plan to travel and the conditions under which they and their family will travel. Trying to use the "best available" services is usually wise as you want your child to have a positive experience going to their orphanage. This does not mean you need 5-star everything, but surely you don't want conditions to be intolerable by family members either. You may or may not need assistance in your travel - local guides or interpreters. **Consider having an interpreter for your orphanage visit as this should not be something an orphanage should be expected to provide.**

Day 1 - finish your in-country sightseeing tour and fly/train to provincial capital or nearest transportation hub. Stay over night at a hotel suitable for your family's needs.

Day 2 - morning visit to orphanage if you are already in that city.

Day 3 - local sightseeing, perhaps take the orphanage director shopping or revisit the orphanage. Perhaps locate an abandonment site should that be your goal. Maybe take older children on an outing from the orphanage. This is the day you connect your child better to the community relative to the orphanage. Maybe visit the local school where children from the orphanage attend.

Day 4 - either stay on an additional day or depart and continue traveling to your city of departure from China. We recommend that the orphanage visit be at the end of your tour so that your child knows you will be returning "home" thereafter.

At the orphanage itself you will be welcomed by the orphanage director and taken to a reception room. You may be offered tea or bottled water. At this time you should give any gifts that you have brought for the orphanage and caregivers. Do not expect gifts to be opened while you are there. If you elect to give money to the orphanage, it is appropriate to ask for a receipt (Fa Piao).

The orphanage staff present will ooohhh and aaaaahhhh over how tall your child is, how pretty, how smart, etc. and you will thank them for helping you receive this wonderful child. They will ask questions about schooling and her/his grades, what life is like in America, does she/he speak Chinese, etc. Then at an appropriate time they will take you for a tour of the facilities. This is often emotionally difficult for parents so do be prepared for this. Children may or may not be nervous and you should check along the way be sure that she/he really wants to be there and wants to continue. It is common to visit a variety of rooms in the orphanage but certainly not every room. Usually (but not always) you will be able to see the room where your

child lived. Do prepare your child for seeing children who are not doing well physically or situations that may not be like normal child-care in the US (such as split pants and no diapers, one worker to many many kids, etc.).

Any project you wish to do while there, should be done at this time - such as giving developmental toys to the children. This may include some activity with children on-site. If a major project is planned then you will do this later that day or on the next day (like putting up posters or child-oriented wall paper borders in rooms).

After the visit through the orphanage the return to the greeting room should be anticipated. This is when you can ask more questions about your child's time there. Ask to see the orphanage file if you wish. We suggest you ask for a photocopy of the file and have your interpreter help you with it's contents. Expecting the orphanage director to review the file with you page by page may be unrealistic as they may not wish to discuss certain aspects of your child's situation relative to abandonment. Also and very important, we believe, is that you consider whether or not your child should be present at the time of this discussion about the file. It may be the case that you want to share at some later time what the contents of the file was - at an age-appropriate time and maybe even a more appropriate place. Still, you should obtain a photocopy for your records.

We suggest that families host the orphanage director for a lunch at a local restaurant - this is not expensive and it allows you to further your relationship with the orphanage and show respect for the orphanage director having spent a considerable amount of the work-day with your family. The average cost is 400 RMB (\$50.00).

Many families have requested to buy something for the orphanage or make arrangements for children to attend school. This should be done in the afternoon. The visit usually ends with a promise to return again by the family and a welcome to do so by the orphanage director and staff.

Can we meet our child's special caregiver or foster family?

In most cases the answer is "yes" although many orphanages do not wish to be involved in arranging this. If you have the name of a caregiver or foster family it is easier for OCDF to help you arrange a family meeting. In some cases the meeting will be at the orphanage location while in other instances you may visit the foster family at their home or a caregiver may come to visit you at your hotel. Families wishing to see caregivers should be understanding of the situation for these people in that the decision is being made for this aspect of your visit by someone other than the caregiver. The more information you have the better, but we have found people from photos or other clues as well.

Can my child hold the babies at the orphanage?

Yes, that is often something that returning children wish to do when they visit the orphanage. As long as your child is healthy and the children are healthy, the orphanage will allow this.

What's in the orphanage file and can we have a copy of it?

There are three files relative to your child's adoption. The first is at your adoption agency and you have already provided them and they have provided you with the content of this file in the past (adoption papers, home study, referral information). The second file is at CCAA (adoption papers sent to CCAA and referral). The third and most important of all is at the orphanage itself. This file includes the following:

1. Police report and certificate of abandonment. The police report will include where/when the child was found and by whom. Any conditions relative to this event would be included.
2. Finding Ad (a copy of the advertisement used to determine if your child's birth family wished to claim her/him).
3. Referral information including medical report.
4. Any notes or documents left with the child at the time of finding.
5. Copies of your child's adoption papers.

Because there may be sensitive information in the file, we remind parents that returning to the hotel with their interpreter to review the information without the orphanage director and child present may yield more "connections" than when all eyes are watching/present.

What have people learned from their child's orphanage file?

The police report (abandonment location) and any notes in the file seem to be the most sought after information. Some parents have learned for the first time exactly where and when their child was found and who found the child. There are sometimes notes with children's birth dates or notes from someone in the family (mother/father/grandparents) providing birth date or a message asking anyone who finds the child to take good care of her/him. Sometimes it is possible to follow the information or even some of the clues to lead to further information about the child.

Some families have discovered that their child is not the age that they were told she/he was - alternate birth date and age. For children it can be upsetting to discover that they have been celebrating the "wrong" birthday all these years. It's best to have a plan for the information you will discover. If you suddenly discover that your child is not the age you thought or is really from another province, don't overreact but accept that this is the situation and move on. Be positive with explaining this to your child: "Oh sweetheart, isn't it great that we can now celebrate two birthdays - your China birthday and your American birthday" or "How would you like to have two days to celebrate" or "Let's keep your birthday as it is unless you would prefer the new birth date" "Which option would you like?" Kids are pretty honest and will let you know their preference. Honor it.

Another reason we caution families to do this in private without their child present is that the interpreter will be able to discuss with you the abandonment information in the file and you can determine together whether or not it is feasible to visit the location. You can then decide and inform your child based on what information is age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for them. You may elect to visit the abandonment site on your own without your child or you may decide to go as a family. Your interpreter can tell you more about what the conditions will be like there. Sometimes the site is remote, a village far from the city or one that requires taking a van or 4-wheel drive vehicle and then walking for a long distance (30-40 min. in two cases we recently had). Sometimes the parent's initial euphoria at finding out this information is so intense that they forget how going to such a location might impact their child.

Please don't neglect to think ahead!

Ask yourself these 12 important questions:

1. What will you see at the abandonment site?
2. What will conditions in a remote village be like or even a crowded department store or train station?
3. How will people react to a foreigner being there?

4. And, what if we are able to discover even more information - such as who/where the birth family is?? Are you ready for that? Really ready? Is your child at their age/maturity/understanding of the situation?
5. How will this visit impact the future of your family?
6. If you were to meet the birthparents of your child how would you communicate with them (beyond the interpreter you have along that day)?
7. What relationship do you think would be realistic of each family, each having a right to their own privacy? Do they have this right? Do you as well?
8. Remember that their decision to abandon their child was against the law. Had they kept the child they would also have violated the law in China. The act of abandonment is also a violation of the law. Did they abandon with the intent of giving someone else a child who was childless? Can you invade their lives?
9. Will you want to put your child's birthparents into a position of being revealed to the authorities?
10. What role will your child have with respect to her/his sibling(s) in China should there be one or more brothers/sisters in China?
11. Will you expect your child to have a relationship with them and they with her/him? What if your child doesn't want to do so? What if the siblings in China refuse?
12. How would a situation like that impact your relationship with your child?

I share this with you and ask you to role-play either in your mind as a single parent or with your spouse/partner as a couple. Think about the fact that when you visit China or even an orphanage location, it is a place that you can return to in the future to clarify or help your child see/learn more. Each time you can add value should you feel you need to. Some things are better left for later on when a child is old enough to put the entire context of adoption/abandonment/China together. Most adults can't do this without a lot of experience and education related to China, how can we expect children to do so all in one visit?

Can we locate and visit our child's abandonment site?

Many people have accomplished this, some with their children and some on their own. Often places are easy to locate - a hospital, a train station, the police station. Sometimes the locations are very remote and to travel there will require great fortitude and determination (some flexibility and willingness to rough it as well!).

Is there a chance that our child's birthparents will be at the orphanage or adoption city when we visit there?

No, it's highly unlikely. Since the orphanage does not know the family nor their whereabouts, they will not be able to contact them to tell them you are coming to China and/or visiting the orphanage. It is unreasonable to expect that the orphanage will know their whereabouts and impossible for a birth family to know you will be traveling to China.

How do we find our child's birthparents if that's our goal?

Such goals need to be very pragmatic and realistic - what is actually likely to happen? Can you readily find birthparents? No, of course not. Therefore, be sure you don't promise your child something you can't deliver on thus causing them to be disappointed in you as their parent(s). Remember that young children see parents as being able to solve all problems, making hurts go away, making them feel secure and full of warmth.

If we promise them something like finding their birthparents that we know is nearly impossible to deliver on, we are setting them up for great disappointment and ourselves for

great failure (not to mention years of agony). It will be the rare family who is able to make connections such that their child's birth family can be located.

Should a national registry be established in the future, it does not mean that a family will seek the child they gave up or wish to be found.

If your long-term goal is finding birthparents then your short-term goal should be gathering data (do not expect that while your child is young you will make this incredible connection to birthparents and siblings). Your child's possible siblings may not even know that your child exists. Therefore, when you travel to China, start with gaining the information in an orphanage file. Check with the local police department where the report was written to determine if any additional information exists. Locate the person who found your child to see what they may know. From there it is anyone's guess what can or will happen. For some people this search has been successful in locating the person who found the child, in some cases the family and home where the child was placed on a doorstep, and in that needle in a haystack chance - the one in a million chance- there has been a family locate the birthparents of their child. I can happen but no family should enter into a return trip to China with the feeling that they or their child are "entitled to have this information" and meet the birthparents. This is not a way to gain success in China. Patience and good fortune are better predictors of success than urgency, expectations, or an attitude of entitlement.

How can I best prepare my child for this visit?

1. Talk talk talk talk talk talk! What will they see, what will they do, how will they feel about it PLUS all of the what ifs.
2. Create a project that you can work on together over a period of time so that you often have the opportunity to discuss China and adoption issues. Make sure that project has a defined outcome - collecting vitamins at school or church/synagogue to donate to the orphanage. Some activity where your child will need to articulate to others what she/he is doing and why.

Suggestions:

- a. Collect vitamins from school, church, synagogue, clubs, organizations.
 - b. Collect from stores/shops developmental toys for children, books, music tapes, CDs, tape/CD player, posters, artwork, wallpaper borders - basically environmental improvement items. Make posters and art for the children's rooms. Collect artwork at school from various classes.
 - c. Have a bake sale or a penny drive to raise money to purchase items for the orphanage (either in US or in China). Later we will suggest items that may be needed by most orphanages.
 - d. Have a neighborhood toy garage sale (collecting items and selling them to raise money for this purpose).
 - e. Be creative - ask your child what they wish to do to "give something back" to the children in China.
3. Prepare a journal for trip planning and preparation. Select categories that will be needed - preparing for the trip, packing, telling others about our trip, taking things to the orphanage, things we need to learn about before the trip, what we will do on our trip, what we will eat on our trip to China, how I feel about going to China, do I want to visit my orphanage and why/why not, what do I want to learn from my trip to China, etc. A child can write/prepare their feelings/emotions about the return to China from a very systematic way so you can pinpoint and determine not only if there are any issues but where the source/cause of those issues are. This can be in writing, through a series of images/drawings/collages, etc. By using

creativity and some structure (guided learning/exploration) you will be able to do your detective work as a parent.

4. The best preparation begins with parents being prepared themselves - prepared to participate in helping the child up-front and willing to do so, prepared to share tough information that may have not yet been discussed, prepared to allay fears and resolve worries that the child may have, prepared to seek professional assistance should your child have issues that you can't handle or don't know how to do so (or have failed in resolving), prepared to get very involved throughout the child's tour program so that she/he sees your dedication to her/his culture and homeland, prepared to be positive with regard to life and experiences in China (no matter how different, unusual or adverse the situation might be), and prepared to share your emotions with your child so that she/he sees that this is a shared experience within the family.

5. Create a small photo album or scrapbook to bring to the orphanage to leave with the caregivers there to see and learn about your child's life.

6. Create a long-term connection to the orphanage if that's something important to your family. One way to do so is to sponsor an older child's local public school education. By paying her/his annual tuition and fees, the child will be able to go to school like other children in the community. Supporting their school supplies (or sending them) and school uniform, helps the child feel like a normal child in the classroom. For your child this may help to lessen the guilt sometimes felt about not being chosen or "what would have happened to me?" questions.

Should we give money to the orphanage?

It is our suggestion that you spend your money wisely and a cash donation, though much needed by the orphanage, is not a secure donation when given directly to the orphanage. There are many ways you can be sure your contributions "count" and are used in ways needed by the children in the institution. Should you give money to an orphanage, please ask for a receipt - called a "fapiao" in Chinese.

Obviously there are many organizations that solicit funds in support of Chinese orphans and these are all very worthy of your contributions even if you can't designate your child's orphanage, it may be that another orphanage is in greater need because they aren't part of the international adoption system. In China there are over 500 orphanages that are not part of the international adoption program. Many are in desperate condition and a small amount of funds to them goes much much farther. Consider the FCC National Appeal, Amity Foundation, Half the Sky Foundation, Philip Hayden Foundation, Hope Foster Home, and many many other fine organizations who can guarantee you that your cash contribution directly helps children in need.

If you are sure you wish to contribute something to your child's orphanage consider bringing things they need and donating them to the orphanage or purchase them in China while your child is present to assist you in doing so. Make it her/his gift to the orphanage and have your child engaged in the decision-making process taking as much ownership as is possible for her/his age.

What should we give to the orphanage?

Suggestions from previous participants in our program and real needs expressed by the orphanage directors when asked:

1. Developmental toys for children.
2. Medical supplies - thermometers (in degrees C), vitamins, droppers (with ml), skin medications, children's fever medications, etc.

3. Music (tapes or CDs of children's music with battery-operated tape/CD player or a 220V unit bought in China).
4. Posters and children's artwork or wallpaper border with children's scenes.
5. Art supplies - coloring books, crayons, markers.
6. School supplies - pencils, chalk, pads of paper or small notebooks, rulers, erasers, etc.
7. A computer for the children to use - a desktop computer in China costs around \$500-600.00

What special things have people done in lieu of giving money?

1. Families have taken the orphanage director shopping and bought for the orphanage something they needed: refrigerator, air conditioner, clothing, beds, medical supplies, strollers, walkers, etc.
2. Sponsor a child to attend elementary school - Families have gone with the orphanage director and a child selected by the orphanage to a local school and enrolled the child in school by paying the annual tuition on behalf of the child and making arrangements for school supplies and clothing for the child.
3. Sponsor a child for needed surgery - cleft surgery for example that will help her/him in the future increase their chances of adoption.
4. Sponsor a child in foster care at a foster home receiving children from the orphanage - such as Hope Foster Home or LangFang Children's Village.
5. Help the orphanage raise funds to purchase a van.
6. Arrange for caregivers to receive infant/child first aid training.
7. Support a doctor or specialist to visit the ill children at the orphanage.

Should we take gifts for the caregivers?

If you have a special caregiver you wish to give a gift to, it should be done off-grounds from the orphanage as the orphanage is a government place of employment and employees are not supposed to accept gifts. In doing so they are put on the spot. We suggest you have something consumable like candy or American Ginseng and give them that during any meeting in the orphanage. Then if you wish to give something more personal you should arrange for the person to come to your hotel.

Suggestions:

1. Candy
2. Flowers or plant (can buy nearby your hotel)
3. American Ginseng
4. Local products from the state/province where you are from - nuts or dried fruits, jelly, etc.
5. Adoption jewelry
6. A selection of flower seeds

Please do not give cash as they can get into trouble accepting this as it may be seen as a bribe of some sorts even when it isn't that at all.

Can we stay at the orphanage versus a hotel?

No, these institutions are not set-up for overnight foreign visitors and are not allowed to house foreigners. Some can gain special permission for government supported groups and projects but for the most part when we ask orphanage directors on behalf of families they say "no". Also remember that the caregivers and directors will feel responsible for you when you are there and

that means they can't go home to their families, have a normal life, nor get some much-needed rest.

Orphanages that have foreigner-run sections or organizations with adjacent orphanages where foreign staff is employed have more flexibility. Still, they too are busy and care should be taken when making such requests. We suggest you really examine what your goals are in this regard and consider the lives and situations of those who work at these institutions. Would you go to visit the medicaid supported nursing home where your grandmother used to be and ask them to let you stay overnight there? Of course not. While yes, this is different, it's not that different when it comes to the lives of those who work there and the arrangements are more problematic.

Can we spend time visiting the orphanage every day for several days?

Most orphanage directors will say "yes" to a request for more than one visit but not all will. You should offer a reason why you believe this is important for your child when making such a request. They are busy people with a lot to accomplish if they are going to improve the conditions for children in their institutions. A few hours to a half-day is very reasonable for a visit. A second follow-up visit is also acceptable to most orphanages. When people ask to stay longer then there should be some real project or activity or program that has been established with the institution and also approved by the provincial authorities. It is the rare institution that says, well sure come whenever you wish - have the full run of the place. Since we don't expect "full run of the place" at hospitals or social welfare institutions in North America, why should we expect to do so in China?

Some people have asked us to help them do projects like painting and build things and these situations ALL require government approval - it's government property. There are groups like church teens, Eagle Scout projects, Girl Scouts, etc. coming to China to volunteer in orphanages. Programs like the Half the Sky Foundation's orphanage build projects and Nanny/Caregiver programs are supported by high levels within the Ministry of Civil Affairs and CCAA which enables them to gain access. Still they must get approval for each project and each location. To be successful in China in these situations you must be considerate of the local situation and give people a real sense of and priority for local control. That means your request may first be answered with "no". A "no" in China can often be changed into a maybe or a "yes" but that is highly dependent on who is the decision-maker and the RISK involved.

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