HAPPY HERE
Stories of Ten Chinese Adoptees
On Identity, Acculturation, and Choosing a Home

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INTRODUCTION

Discovering China and Finding a Story:

Lena and Me

I remember walking by a statue on Shamian Island that made us both halt in our escape from the rain. There was a woman violinist with a line of children in her wake, each clinging to the bronze “clothes” of the person in front of them (Figure 1). Out of the five children, only one was definitively a girl, and it was her Lena was busy studying from beside me. Before our tour guide yelled for us to keep moving, I remember looking at the sculptured Chinese girl and being struck by the same thing that had always struck me about Lena: her smile.

Figure 1. A sculpture of children being led by a western playing the violin on Shamian Island, Guangzhou, China. Photo by Hailey Elder, June 2009.
In June 2009, Lena and I joined a group of our all-female high school classmates on a short trip to southern China. We were selling Canadian products to schools in Guangdong province for an economics class, touring major cities such as Guangzhou and Hong Kong along the way. The adorably petite and effervescent Lena was both my class partner and roommate during the trip, and it was her first time in China since she had been taken from her orphanage by a Canadian couple when she was less than one year old. At this point, I had known Lena for one year, and though she was well aware of my deep-rooted interest in China, she rarely spoke of her adoption with me. It was not until we shared that moment on Guangzhou’s Shamian Island – a historical area built in the colonial European period that now acts as a waiting station for foreign families adopting children from the area – that I saw a glimpse of the heritage Lena and so many other young Chinese women in America had yet to discover, as well as the story they had yet to tell.

From 1987 to 2012, over 80,000 young girls were adopted from China into American families (Sharp 2012). Commonly referred to as “missing” (Young and Lavey 2003, Ebenstein 2010), “abandoned” (Johnson 1993, 1998, 2004; Evans 2000), and “lost” (Evans 2000, Myers 2004), these are daughters born and given up in favor of sons, one of the many repercussions of China’s controversial Planned Birth Policy (commonly referred to in the west as the One-Child Policy). Past research on the subject focuses primarily on the adoptive parents, their journeys to China, and China’s growing gender imbalance. What has yet to be told are the stories of the daughters themselves, the majority of whom were born in the mid-1990s and are therefore just now coming of age, and just now beginning to contemplate what it means to be a Chinese adoptee. Many, like Lena, have returned to China, leading me – a student of China and a friend of adoptees – to ask the questions: what are China’s “lost girls” searching to find? Do they identify at all with the country that gave them life but that also let them go? Are they resentful? Are they accepting? Could they perhaps act as important bridges to link the eastern and western worlds? My research addresses these questions by shedding light on the stories of ten adopted Chinese daughters. It is written in a way that I hope is both thoughtful and
sensitive, out of respect for the women I interviewed. These are individualized tales of discovery, both for them and for me.

My interest in China stems from a love of animals, though it has grown into a fascination with identity. I blame a panda named Hua Mei for bringing me to China for the first time at the mere age of twelve, but I blame Lena for making me search for connection in the strange land. I am a white girl born in the United States who considers Asia her home. Lena is the opposite, born with Asian skin but living an American life. We graduated from high school together in Montreal four years ago, but when I contacted Lena in the hopes of catching up and speaking about this project, she replied to my email with a litany of exclamation points. This is typical of Lena. I have always thought that if I had been abandoned by my birth family because of a policy that had forced them to give me up, I would harbor serious anger toward that policy’s government. Lena, however, is one of the happiest and most genuinely optimistic people I have ever met, so I never expected any anger from her.

During our interview (in which we spend most of the hour and a half reminiscing over school memories and gossiping about our ex-classmates), I ask Lena what our trip to China meant to her. “Oh my gosh,” she gushes, “it was one of the best experiences of my life. We had so much fun!” She goes on to summarize nearly every day of our trip, using descriptors like “cool,” “amazing,” and “impressive.” Lena’s French Canadian parents, like those of many adoptees, always encouraged her to embrace her Chinese culture. It was their persuasion that convinced Lena to enroll in a Mandarin language class at our school, where she and I first officially met. But after years’ worth of classes, Lena still only feigned interest in China. Her parents suggested that she watch Chinese films, but she preferred American television. Today, Lena studies Information Technology and dreams of eventually leaving Quebec for the U.S., but she cannot imagine pursuing a career in China, telling me, “[China’s] there for fun, for a vacation, to explore different things. But for the long term, never.”

Although Lena has no plans to fully embrace her ethnicity, it will always be a part of her. Similarly to the way I will never completely blend in to the Chinese society, no matter how fluent my Mandarin becomes, Lena cannot hide from her own skin. Even
when going to eat in Montreal’s Chinatown, Lena often gets approached by Chinese speakers who assume she can understand them. She is quick to correct them, responding in fast French or English and apologizing for her “ignorance.” Luckily, Montreal is a diverse enough community that most people Lena meets are willing to accept her as she comes. If, however, someone were to inquire about her nationality, she would say, “I identify myself as Canadian, very Canadian. Not at all Chinese. That’s misleading.” Then she would laugh and the person who asked would surely be swept away by her smile. That is the real Lena: kind, never offensive, and perpetually happy.

Following that trip to China in 2009, I started reading up on Chinese adoption, losing myself in adoptive mother Karin Evans’s memoir, Lost Daughters of China. I cried for the nation of women who were “cultivated to suffer” (Anchee Min in the foreword of Evans 2000) and for the adopted girls who had no way of ever finding their birth parents. I knew how special Lena was, but I also knew that she had a whole community of “sisters” — other adopted daughters of China — who would all see something different when looking at that sculpture of Chinese children that struck us both in Guangzhou. Every adoptee is unique, and now many of them are grown. As Evans writes at the end of her introduction, “the next story is theirs to tell.”
LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the literature regarding the topic of “lost girls” was written when the pattern of abandonment was just emerging in China, from 1980 to 2000. Over the course of these decades, between 8.5 and 12.8 million fewer females were born than was expected of normal sex ratios (Cai and Lavey 2003). It is agreed amongst scholars that this gender imbalance can be causally linked to the Planned Birth Policy and discriminatory behavior of parents who preferred that their only child be a son (Cai and Lavey 2003, Ebenstein 2010, Johnson 1993, Johnson 2004, Miller-Loessi et al. 2001). Even as government policies became more flexible in rural areas in China, the problem continued (Johnson 1993), and it wasn’t until the late 1990s that the population of girls began to slowly revive (Johnson 1998). The research from this time focuses primarily on the reasoning behind said abandonment and its link to the controversial policy. What is more difficult to find is information on the consequences of the adopted girls, and what it meant for them to go from abandoned Chinese to western Chinese.

Two popular (and therefore possibly exaggerated) pieces of media surrounding this topic focus more on the social and psychological aspects of the abandonment and adoption than do the scholarly articles. The first is the memoir The Lost Daughters of China, written by American mother of two abandoned Chinese girls, Karin Evans (2000). Her account is personal and therefore filled with far more questions than facts, and as she says, “No statement can apply to every community, no statistics can account for every lost child. Once the human heart is involved, the mystery grows ever deeper.” (Evans 2000). As Evans set out on her journey to China to adopt her first daughter, she made it a priority to learn as much as she could about the country her child was coming from so that she could later teach her daughters about their double identity. Adoption agencies at the time were doing the same, and in 2008 so-called “homeland trips” started to be offered by agencies as well as commercial travel ventures and even the Chinese government. These trips sponsor adoptees and families to visit China and their orphanages in order to “search
for their missing past.” Today, Evans’ daughters are nearly twenty years old, and “the next story is theirs to tell.” (Evans 2000)

The second source of media comes from a National Geographic film hosted by famous Chinese-American Lisa Ling, called “China’s Lost Girls” (Myers 2004). Throughout the film, Ling discusses the lost girl phenomenon and follows American families through the process of adopting lost girls, similar to Evans’ own family. Only one adopted child is featured in and interviewed for the film – Marissa Hall, then only four years old and traveling to China with her adopted family to pick up her new sister. Both this film and Evans’s memoir manage to approach this topic from a qualitative lens, but the works were completed too early to examine the true repercussions of the adopted Chinese.

More recent works on the subject include Jenny Bowen’s 2014 memoir, Wish You Happy Forever: What China’s Orphans Taught Me About Moving Mountains. Once a Hollywood screenwriter, Bowen’s life course changed drastically when she adopted her two daughters from China. Seeing the Chinese orphans she was unable to help be left behind caused Bowen to start a foundation called Half the Sky that works with Chinese orphanages to improve infrastructure and care. Like Evans, Bowen writes creatively about her personal experiences, but she does not write from the perspective of either of her now teenage daughters. Half the Sky has been extremely successful in China, particularly in its large Child Welfare Institutions, but unfortunately when I contacted the organization hoping to speak with Bowen about her work and her story, I was told to stick to the material in her book (Bowen 2014).

The work most similar to my research is a low-budget documentary made by the producer of award-winning film Whale Rider (2002), Linda Goldstein Knowlton. The film titled Somewhere Between (2012), funded by Kickstarter, focuses on four adopted Chinese girls and their experience being transracial adoptees in the United States. The girls interviewed for the film were between the ages of 13 and 15 at the time and, as Knowlton explains, “Every girl has a different experience, and different feelings.” (Evans 2008) However, we know from the heavily cited journal article by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett that the stage of “emerging adulthood” does not even begin until the age of 18 in the United States, adulthood truly setting in at about 25 years old for the average American
Thus, Knowlton’s film, while qualitative and told from the perspective of the adoptees themselves, is still unable to answer the questions I am asking in my own research: questions of true identity and career plans, questions that only begin to be answered during said “emerging adulthood” stage.

In the hopes of filling this void in the literature on China’s “lost girls,” I set out to illuminate the story of my generation of Chinese adoptees (i.e. around the age of 20) in the fall of 2014. At the time, I was studying abroad in Shanghai, China, and required to complete a capstone research project as part of my study abroad program. Already interested in this subject, and having befriended three Chinese adoptees who were abroad in my same program, I wrote the stories of Honor, Kendall, and Liz. I was astounded by how different they each were, though all clearly interested enough in their Chinese heritage to study abroad there, and so I knew that this research deserved to be expanded.

My research aims to illuminate the story Evans proposes should come next: that is, the story of the lost girls themselves. With various opportunities to return to China during their childhood – whether on organized homeland trips, to adopt a sister, or simply out of their own desire – these girls are now not only fully grown, but also fully aware of where they come from. Previous research implies that the incredible number of girls “lost” from China should have implications for the girls themselves as well as for the country they may or may not choose to be a part of, and the research I have completed investigates these implications from a sociological standpoint. It is also presented in a highly sensitive literary journalism format, out of respect for the women interviewed as well as the global sisterhood of Chinese-born adoptees. This research paper is their story, and I hope to do it justice.
METHODOLOGY

Questions of identity are personal and center on individual opinion and/or emotion rather than statistical behavior. As such, this research has been conducted with the use of in-depth interviews of ten American and Canadian adoptees from China (Table 1). All of said adoptees are female, between the ages of 18 and 21, and are students currently enrolled in a college or university. The adoptees differ, however, in their upbringings – two were raised by single mothers and two by same-sex couples; five live on the east coast, two in the Midwest, two in California; seven have fellow adopted siblings, four with sisters from China, while three have siblings who are their parents’ biological children, and two have no siblings; etc. – which contributes to their differing journeys and emotions regarding their adoption. The ten women also differ in their Mandarin speaking levels – all were given opportunities to learn the language at some point in their lives, but only four continue to study it today – that is both indicative and influencing of their interest in China.

Table 1. All ten informants are listed (in order of appearance within paper) alongside their corresponding age, the state or province they grew up in, the Chinese province in which they were born and adopted from, and their current school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Home State/Province</th>
<th>Chinese Province</th>
<th>Current University/College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>Université du Québec à Montréal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>Colby College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>Smith College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Anhui</td>
<td>University of Massachusetts Amherst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>Occidental College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendall</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Guangxi</td>
<td>Iowa State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arden</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Jiangsu</td>
<td>Colgate University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Anhui</td>
<td>Allegheny College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabel</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Zhejiang</td>
<td>Smith College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Anhui</td>
<td>Boston College</td>
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Interviews focus on individual stories and include three major topics: background (both Chinese birth and American childhood), connection to China and life there if visited (including past trips and future plans), and identity (from the informant’s own perspective as well as the perceived perspective of the local American and Chinese populations). I interviewed a total of ten informants, three while studying abroad in Shanghai during the fall semester of 2014 and seven over the summer of 2015. I used a snowball method to find and contact informants, establishing trust quickly through mutual friends and contacts – Lena I knew from high school; Honor, Kendall, and Liz I met while abroad in Shanghai; Margaret, Catherine, and Quinn were referrals from Liz; Annabel was a referral from Margaret; Jasmine was a family friend; Arden I met in college. Five of the interviews were conducted in person, three (Honor, Kendall, and Liz) in Shanghai and two (Annabel and Jasmine) in California. Four (Lena, though we had previously met in person, Margaret, Catherine, and Quinn) were conducted over Skype, and one (Arden, though we had previously met in person) over phone.

My research is approved by the Institutional Review Board for the involvement of human participants. Maintaining anonymity of subjects was of the utmost importance, so I have been careful to protect these women’s identities with the use of pseudonyms. The primary limitation in my research is personal bias. My age (20) and gender (female) helped to make me approachable, and I was careful to only interview women with whom I already had a connection. However, it is impossible to analyze personalized accounts or stories without providing my own insights, and thus my own bias. Because I am also not trained in the fields of journalism or psychology, I took the opportunity to consult in person with three professional psychologists from the Bay Area – Ciele Jupé, PhD and family counselor; Benina Gould, PhD and family counselor who adopted her own daughter from Tibet; and Casi Kushel, LMFT specializing in adoption, with two adopted children of her own – to discuss issues related to adoption. Their counsel is referenced throughout the paper in support of the interviews with adoptees.

In an effort to consolidate this work, eight out of the ten adoptees interviewed have been grouped into pairs for the analysis section of this paper. With the exception of the
two women written of in the introduction and conclusion – Lena and Liz, respectively – the adoptees are grouped based on the subjects that are spoken of most thoroughly in their interviews, or based on the way they speak in said interviews. Thus, the first section focuses on family and religion, subjects that were spoken of in depth by the pairing featured, Honor and Margaret. Second are Catherine and Jasmine in a discussion on what it means to be American; third are Kendall and Arden in a discussion on what it means to be Chinese. Finally, the last analysis section focuses on two of the more eloquent and mature speakers, Quinn and Annabel, for the topic reaching past the label of “adoptee.”
For Honor, family is everything. Her wardrobe is equipped with loose, patterned pants and a form-fitting olive-toned jacket that remind me of her: understated and quiet, but never just thrown together. Honor and I are studying abroad in the same program in Shanghai, and we have shared a few days together exploring the city before we meet up in a brand new café to discuss her story. Because we are the only customers in said café, one of the baristas offers us food samples throughout the interview, and it is a testament to Honor’s unswerving faith that she tries every disgusting morsel that is brought to our table.

Although I initially worried about interviewing Honor because of how timid she is in daily life, I had no need to. Honor is open to more than just new foods. She asks me questions about the research I am doing and speculates about the mysteries of her birth right alongside me. According to her orphanage in Jiangxi Province, Honor was three months old when she was adopted. Upon seeing a doctor in the U.S., her parents were informed that she was in fact no older than four weeks, and Honor and I ponder over her close family connection bearing any relation to the early bond she formed with her mother. Her parents had a vested interest in China before the adoption process even began, having lived in Nanjing in the 1980s. Their interest was only deepened with Honor, and three years after adopting her they returned to the same province to adopt a second daughter.

The family of four moved around the eastern United States before settling in New Jersey. Religion was an important part of Honor’s Christian upbringing, but her parents were also determined to take their daughters to events hosted by “Families with Children from China” groups and weekend-long Chinese adoptee summer camps. Honor says that, at most of these meet-ups, she would stay close to her mother and was hesitant to make new friends. Everything Honor loves is somehow connected to her adoptive parents, from the outdoors – which her family would explore on road trips through the country’s national parks – to China itself, where Honor’s aunt and uncle now work as missionaries.
and where Honor returned to for the first time since birth to adopt her sister and for the second time on a homeland visit. It is the latter trip that Honor actually remembers, though she describes her orphanage as “just a building,” claiming, “I didn’t feel like I had any connection to the place.” Five years post-trip, Honor decided to renovate her soured memories of China by studying abroad there.

Like her thoughts on the orphanage, Honor tells me that she does not feel much of a connection to the people she has met in China over the past three months. The largest barrier for her seems to be her devotion to the faith she grew up with. She regularly goes to church in Shanghai, though even in this metropolitan Chinese city, services are private to the foreign expatriate community, with English-read sermons and pastors from Illinois who “tell stories about growing up in the corn fields.” Not a single Chinese is allowed in, and at college campuses religious student groups are few and far between. “You just don’t meet a lot of Chinese Christians,” says Honor, “so there’s no one I’ve met that I’m like, ‘you understand me.’”

These same difficulties appear to stretch across religions. Margaret Louise Piper, a rising junior at Smith College and a Chinese adoptee I talk with via Skype, is personable and outgoing. She is thrilled to introduce herself to me as a “Jewsian,” or a Jewish Asian. Margaret admits that she probably spent more of her childhood in the local temple than at home, yet she had to endure more than the average micro-aggression when traveling to Israel for Birthright. “It was a great experience,” she says of the trip, “but that was my first real time where I realized that people are really racist.” Margaret, like Honor, has always identified more with her faith than with her ethnicity, but upon first impression strangers only see the latter, and sometimes they are unwilling to ever see the former. “Are you sure you’re Jewish?” fellow teenagers would ask Margaret during Birthright, not convinced by her Red Socks cap that she did in fact come from a Yankee family in Massachusetts. “[Some] people were [there] to get a free trip to Israel but had never had their bar or bap mitzvah, had never been to Hebrew school, had never got confirmed, never participated in a Jewish Youth Group,” Margaret tells me, adding, “I was president for two years, for goodness sake! I was the ultimate Jewish girl, and some people who were not at all were there and never got questioned. Look at that irony.”
In the same way that religion is part of one’s identity, it also parallels identity in the barriers that are built around it. Religion is often directly related to race, and though it became clear to me early on in this project that identity is just as much about choice as it is about birth, it can never be solely defined by either. This is why many adoptive parents, including a mother psychologist with whom I consulted for this research, choose to convert to the religion of their adopted child’s birthplace. The Gould family had always been interested in Buddhism, so when they rescued a Tibetan orphan from a refugee camp in India, they decided one way of bonding with their daughter was to become Buddhist themselves. Dr. Gould informs me that she was very sensitive to the wishes of the Tibetan community, who rarely allow adoption and whose culture is one of the most spiritual in the world. Her daughter, however (now in her mid-20s), does not feel a strong connection to Buddhism, further proving the point that religion, just like identity and just like family, is not always built from DNA.

“Adoption is just sometimes how families are made,” says Margaret. “It doesn’t mean they’re any less family-like than yours.” Margaret is particularly versed in the art of family making; her mother was adopted, she has a younger brother from Cambodia, her parents are in the midst of adopting a young American girl they’ve fostered for two years, and Margaret herself is already considering the idea of one day adopting. Her family may not look like a family, but they all share a similar sense of humor, sarcasm, and sass. In fact, joking about their different races is a daily routine in Margaret’s house, and the laughs keep coming when the few “Jewsians” in her youth group get together for their annual photo-shoot. “I don’t think it’ll ever bother me that I don’t look like my parents,” Margaret says confidently. “What bothers me is what people initially think when they see me.”

I am able to witness Honor being bothered in the same way during our semester in Shanghai. While walking on the street the morning of our interview, a woman from Anhui is fascinated by Honor because she can somehow tell that, like this stranger feels in Shanghai, Honor does not quite fit in. On the metro, an older Chinese man becomes confused when Honor speaks perfect English in front of him. He asks her if she is Chinese, and when she responds with intermediate-level Mandarin, he is shocked that she cannot
fluently speak her “mother tongue.” It is in these situations that Honor’s shyness returns, a symptom of feeling disconnected from her true family.

“I feel like my family is as close as any biological family. It’s easy… But there are ways that I’m completely different from both my parents, and maybe that’s my birth parents,” Honor says to me in our interview as she takes a sip of some purple liquid whose ingredients we are unsure of. Honor is as curious as she is opinionated; in other words, more than she lets on. Next semester, she will be based in a much less-populated and hectic Chinese city than Shanghai, and she hopes that this will make her feel more comfortable in befriending locals, but she does still plan on going to church there.

Margaret agrees that being Jewish will always be a priority for her, and I have a feeling that her religion has also contributed to the development of her magnanimous heart. When I ask about her plans for the future, she is unsure what career she wants to pursue, but she does tell me that, “No matter what I do, I want to help people,” and that maybe some day she will give back to the orphanages that saved her life. Honor, too, has beautiful goals to work in non-profit, join the Peace Corps, or at least travel as much as she possibly can (starting with the RV road trip she and her family will be taking around New Zealand over the Christmas holidays).

When I ask Honor if she would consider living in China for a few years at some point in her life, she thinks she would, but she is not sure that she could ever fully integrate into Chinese society. “It would always feel very weird,” she tells me.

“Like this food?” I ask, pointing to the incredibly dense and barely touched piece of cheesecake sitting between us.

She laughs and says, “Exactly. Weird like this food.”

It is not surprising that, for both Honor and Margaret, religiousness shows little evidence of heritability. This has been found before in quantitative studies of religious influence in adolescents (Bradshaw and Ellison 2008, Koenig et al. 2009). Though both wonder about their birth parents, these adopted women are, for the most part, uninterested in their nature. Nurture and family is everything to them, and their faith is simply a component of the rich lives with which they have been blessed.
All American Girls:
Catherine and Jasmine

Catherine was found in a basket. Her orphanage – the Hefei Children’s Welfare Institute in Anhui province, one of China’s largest orphanages and a longtime beneficiary of Half the Sky’s second Children’s Center – claims to have found Catherine in a basket outside a department store. Four years later and nearly 800 miles away in the central city of Chongqing, Catherine’s little brother was found in a basket inside a restaurant. Two years after that, their sister was found in a basket out front of the Yangzhou train station. Is it serendipitous that the abandoned children who would later become siblings were all found in the same manner, or is this just a commonly used story given to adopting parents across China’s orphanages? Catherine chooses to believe the former, when she even gives her adoption any thought. The fact is that it matters not how the orphanages find (or are forced to take) Chinese babies; what matters is that the babies are not given to the orphanages, thus their biological parents are never documented. The only trace Catherine will ever have of her biological mother is that hypothetical basket.

I meet Catherine for the first time during our Skype interview. At first glance she seems calm, casual, and – for lack of a better word – tomboyish. She is about as stereotypically American as a twenty-one year old woman can be in the modern-day United States: easygoing, athletic, independent, and (almost) fluent in Spanish. She wears a red tank top and speaks in disjointed sentences complete with broken clauses like, “blah blah blah” and, “it’s whatever.” When I ask her what kind of hobbies she had growing up in suburban Massachusetts, she confirms my suspicions by answering, “I did soccer and gymnastics, tried basketball, had swimming lessons, we skied as a family, all that stuff.” She is refreshingly modest about both her athletic and language abilities, even while her face lights up when referencing her U Mass Amherst soccer team or the semester she spent studying abroad on the Spanish island, Palma de Mallorca. What started as a need to get away ended up being some of the best months of her life. Catherine having took a risk to go abroad somewhere completely foreign to her, but she made the most out of every minute. “I knew zero Spanish going in, so that was kind of difficult, but I learned,”
she says of the semester. “I went to Chinese school [for years] when I was younger... and I can talk and understand more Spanish than Chinese.”

Another adoptee I meet at a café in California echoes Catherine’s interests. Jasmine is my youngest informant, freshly eighteen and anxious to begin her first semester of college this fall. She has lived a privileged life in the Bay Area, going to a Montessori elementary school and a private high school in San Francisco, with a family house in Hawaii and a love of travel that stems from experience. Jasmine has just returned from a weekend trip to Seattle when I sit down with her to discuss her adoption. Her hectic and impressive lifestyle initially intimidates me, at least until I learn how easygoing Jasmine really is. She is intuitive and inquisitive throughout our conversation, asking me in detail about my own travels before telling me about the incredible month she spent in Costa Rica last summer and her passion for languages. When I ask her if she is fluent in Spanish, she replies, “Oh, heck no!” and we go on to chat and laugh for well over an hour.

I find myself forgetting that Jasmine was born in China at multiple points during the interview, especially when she talks about her experiences on different sports teams growing up, from tennis, to swimming, to dance, to tae kwon do. “I need to do sports,” she says in the middle of taking a breath. “If I didn’t do anything active, I wouldn’t even be able to do homework.”

That is not to say that Jasmine’s love for competition does not seep into her schoolwork. She admits that, as an all-around student with no idea how she will ever focus in just one area, she always wanted to be the best. It may be for this reason that Jasmine was part of her school’s “Asian group” of friends.

“So, you had an ‘Asian group’?” I ask her.

“Yeah,” says Jasmine. “I don’t know why! I’m obviously Asian, but I don’t feel Asian. I don’t even eat Asian food.”

We both laugh at this proclamation at the time, but in retrospect I actually think that Jasmine’s taste buds are very telling of her underlying disinterest in China. Food and commensality are integral to almost every different culture, and Jasmine’s preference for Mexican food over the spices of her heritage say a lot about what she feels internally connected to. I speak with Dr. Gould about this as well, and she tells me that the one part
of the Tibetan culture her daughter ever embraced or even enjoyed was its food, having a unique proclivity for yak jerky.

Though food does not come up in my conversation with Catherine, she too has always had an unusual amount of Asian friends. This is arguably more natural for Catherine than Jasmine, considering that the former grew up in an Asian-American household. Her adoptive father is Chinese and she has two younger siblings adopted from China. Her mother is the only fully white member of the family, with one biological son (who is half-Chinese because of Catherine’s father) to whom she gave birth before adopting. I cannot stop myself from asking about Catherine’s younger brother, as I have never heard of healthy boys being given up for adoption in China in the 1990s. “Yeah, we were kind of lucky with him,” says Catherine of her younger brother, “I think they said at first something was wrong with him… but he turned out perfectly normal. So we were lucky to get a boy.”

The way Catherine says that word – “lucky” – is, to me, so reminiscent of Chinese thinking. After all, it is the nationwide preference for sons that has led to so many adopted daughters coming from China. In rural China – a society that is still based in agriculture and that therefore values and desperately needs manual labor – families do everything they can to ensure they will have a son. Sometimes this means aborting or abandoning infant girls. Those girls who are later adopted by Americans should never have to experience such sexism again… theoretically. Gender inequality is, however, still prevalent in the western world. We still call athletic girls “tomboys” and daughters like Catherine still feel inferior to their brothers.

During most of my interview with her, Catherine is quiet and distant. She disclaims early on that she is not all that close with her family, which I am careful not to press her about. But toward the end of the hour, she asks me, “Do any of the people you’ve talked to [for this project] have a birth child sibling as well as adopted siblings?”

I tell her that, yes, two other adoptees I’ve talked with have had siblings biological to their parents.

“I was just wondering,” Catherine says afterward, and for a moment I think that is the last I will hear of this topic. Then, after a long pause, she looks down and says, “I
know when I was younger, my parents [thought] that I was the bad child because I would always fight with them, and I would always tell them, ‘You favor my older brother’… I didn’t know if there were any other people who felt like that. I think my parents favor my older brother because he’s theirs.” I do not know exactly how to reply when Catherine tells me this, and before I can she brushes it off and changes the subject.

I think about Catherine during my interview with Jasmine, when the latter says that she is an only child. Lucky, I think, forgetting that Jasmine’s family has had their own struggles with prejudice. A single-sex couple adopted Jasmine, but only one of her two moms was permitted by the Chinese government to legally adopt the baby. China has yet to recognize same-sex marriages, and Jasmine has grown up having to explain her situation to people who do not understand either her different skin tone or her lack of a father. Both she and Catherine say that in their younger years they were very “anti-China,” simply because, as Catherine puts it, “It’s really annoying to explain my whole life story to everyone when they ask.”

The explanations are getting easier as the women grow older. Rather than invite confusion by introducing themselves as American, Catherine and Jasmine simply state upfront that they were adopted from China. That does not mean, however, that either of them feels Chinese. “I just want to be American,” says Jasmine after explaining that even her Asian-American friends could never understand what it is like to grow up the way that she has.

As for one day going to China? Jasmine’s moms have made the opportunity available, but Jasmine is not interested. “This is my culture,” she says, looking around the large café filled with a healthy distribution of Latinos, whites, blacks, and Asians. “I never felt connected to [China]. It was just a place to visit, but so is, like, Italy.”

Catherine, on the other hand, did visit China on a homeland trip with her younger siblings, but she says, “Even when I went to China, I didn’t care.” Seven years following the trip, Catherine does like the idea of going back and appreciating China more than she did the first time. That may be a long way off, though, considering Catherine’s current focus on her career.
While Jasmine has yet to declare a major, Catherine has plans to put her hospitality major to use by joining a manager-in-training program at a hotel chain after graduating from college this spring. I enjoy seeing Catherine excited about the prospect of hospitality taking her anywhere, and I understand that her disinterest in China and adoption does not necessarily come from a place of anger. “I don’t care about my adoption because I’m happy here,” she says, and I believe her.

I also believe Jasmine when she explains, “I don’t care enough to be angry... I’m here and I have this life. I’m just happy.”

There is something to be said for adoptees who seek happiness independently from their heritage or ethnic culture. Chinese adoptees are unique even amongst transracial adoptees, because they have no way of ever finding their birth parents. The choice not to dwell on an unattainable past seems like a healthy one. It is sometimes best to accept the hand that has been dealt to you, just like it is sometimes best to believe in the intangible connection between all of China’s babies in baskets.
Another approach to dealing with the acculturation felt as a Chinese adoptee is the exact opposite of the one Catherine and Jasmine choose. Instead of remaining American, one could become Chinese.

This would surely be the route preferred by the Chinese government. The purveyor of the Planned Birth Policy has yet to solve the policy’s most serious ramification: the gender imbalance. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that Mainland China has 34 million more males than females (2014), roughly equivalent to the population of all of Canada. This poses all sorts of problems for China, including increased violence seen from permanently unmarried men. It would make sense then that China would happily endorse and subsidize “homeland trips” that pay for Chinese adoptees and their families to visit China and, in many cases, the adoptee’s orphanage. Lotus Travel, an agency that boasts the greatest numbers of annual adoption trips, has brought 14,000 families of adoptees back to China since 1995. Just imagine how many more eligible women the Chinese men would have to marry if all of China’s “lost daughters” came home for good!

Such a scenario is very improbable, but for certain adoptees, moving to China one day is not out of the question. In the fall semester of my Shanghai abroad program, which had about 45 students, Kendall was something of a mystery. Most of us who arrived in this very foreign, very large Chinese city felt scared and uncomfortable in the new environment for weeks (if not months) to come. Kendall, however, fit right in. While other international students stuck to each other like glue, Kendall preferred to explore on her own, making local friends, finding her own internship at a clean energy non-profit organization, and stocking her phone with Chinese character flashcards and Korean dramas for long metro rides. The fact that Kendall – being an adoptee – looked Chinese made her ability to blend in that much easier.

So used to the homogenous society that even she sometimes stares when she sees a foreigner, Kendall tells me in her interview that, “Even though I’m American, because I look Chinese I’m accepted as an insider to this culture… I just feel comfortable here. I can
go out, do anything that I would do in the States, and feel comfortable. And I could live here full time if my family was here."

And it seems as though her family is the only thing stopping Kendall from embracing her Chinese heritage in full force. Interested in working for a company with Chinese ties so that she could use her language skills and travel back and forth between the countries, Kendall says that she would be hesitant to work in China full-time because of her mother and sisters. Her mother’s story is another way that Kendall differs from other adoptees. Kendall was found at a wine factory in the Guangxi Autonomous Region of China, brought to Nanning’s largest orphanage and later moved to the smaller Mother’s Love Orphanage before entering the foster care system. One of seven children in her own family, Kendall’s mom was 40 years old when she traveled alone to China for the first time to pick up her daughter. Little did she know, the process would be so smooth and so worthwhile that she would return three more times before literally building her Iowa home from scratch, with the help of her four girls.

The presence of Kendall’s sisters – along with that of an exchange student from China who lived with the family for a year when Kendall was in elementary school – gave her mother reason to learn about Chinese culture herself so that she could teach her daughters about their common heritage. Kendall attended adoptee meet-ups in her state, celebrated Chinese New Year with her family, read articles about the Zhuang minority that she may have come from, learned Mandarin as early as freshman year of high school, and spent an entire summer at adopted kids’ camp. While at camp, she could not understand why some children wished to hide their adoptee heritage. “My mom did an amazing thing,” Kendall says proudly to me during the interview. “It was never something that was looked down upon.”

Arden is the only other woman I speak with who was adopted from China by a single mother. I know Arden from college, having met her when we both signed up for a school-sponsored abroad program to Kunming, which was later canceled. Both of us found our way to China, anyway, Arden enrolling in one program in Shanghai and me in another. Before Arden came to Colgate University and declared herself a Chinese major, she (like Kendall) was living in the Midwest with her mom and younger sister, also
adopted from China. “We’ve always lived in Minnesota, always gone to the same school,” Arden tells me over the phone this summer. “In general, [I’ve had] a pretty stable life.”

The only bump in the road came when Arden and her sister were put in Chinese school, which they hated. Arden quickly switched back to the American education system, but continued to take Chinese as early as middle school. I remember Arden being in Colgate’s Advanced Mandarin class in her first year, and I wonder if her mother’s encouragement to learn the language was what made it form such a lasting impression on Arden. “My mom was actually really, really good about that,” says Arden. “She wanted our culture to be a part of our lives, not in a forced way, but just in a really supportive, educational way.” Arden’s mother took her and her sister to the Peking opera when it came to town and set up plenty of meetings with their “Chinese cousins,” but for the most part, Arden did not want anything to do with her culture when she was young.

When Arden was first brought to Minnesota, the state was 94.4% white; in 2010, when Arden was a sophomore in high school, it was still 85.3% white (Historical Census Statistics). Arden was made fun of for her slanted eyes by kids in her predominately white elementary school and white neighborhood. The confidence Arden lost from the racial bullying is summed up in a single sentence when she tells me, “One Christmas I asked Santa if I could have blonde hair and blue eyes, and my mom told me that was the saddest thing she’d ever heard.” Arden’s social life improved in high school, when she met with and grew close to other Asians and adoptees, but she still hesitates to say that she is completely comfortable in her own skin. “You know,” she says, “western culture promotes images of white as being the ideal look, and it was really cool for me to go to Shanghai with all these Americans who thought that China was really interesting, because most of the people I hang out with don’t feel that way.” White happens to also be the ideal image in most of Asia, but at least in China Arden can feel normal.

Kendall seems to have known that she would fit in in China before she even arrived. Introverted, imaginative, and analytical, Kendall enjoys being by herself, and says that, “I came to China because I wanted to blend in, because I didn’t want to stick out like a sore thumb… It wasn’t like I didn’t fit in in the U.S., but I was always aware that I wasn’t like my other friends.” She knew few Asians and even fewer Chinese growing up in Iowa,
and says she, “really likes to watch Korean dramas, because there are people on the screen who look like me.” When living with the exchange student (who was age sixteen at the time, while Kendall was only eight), Kendall would listen to the girl’s phone conversations and marvel at her Mandarin. Kendall was lucky enough to visit China three times before studying abroad there, and even stopped on the island of Hainan on her way to Shanghai. There, she stayed with the exchange student from her youth while teaching herself Chinese and practicing it with the local beach-goers.

The effort that I watch Kendall put in to both her studies and her own assimilation during her year in China (she left for Hainan in June 2014 and departed from Shanghai after two semesters there in May 2015, without even coming home for the winter holiday) convince me that a large part of her is in fact inherently Chinese. For centuries, the Chinese have been known for their work ethic, from taxing manual labor in the rural provinces to long hours of business in commercial centers. Chinese people are the epitome of industrious, and they are competitive, too. Competition is a necessity thanks to the country’s incredibly large population. Students fight for standing starting in kindergarten, and although Kendall is not outwardly competitive herself, I can tell that growing up in a single-parent household with multiple siblings has taught Kendall how to work for her dreams. She earned a prestigious scholarship in order to study abroad for a full year, and while in China she proves her worth through consistently excellent performance. In our second semester, an influx of Asian-American students join the program, some of them originally from China, and it is an incredible sight to finally witness Kendall putting her flashcards aside in favor of new friends and karaoke.

The same can be said for Arden, whose proper pronunciation of the word “Shanghai” makes me grin every time I hear her say it. Arden has an immense respect for China and for its people, in large part due to her positive experience abroad. She was adopted from the city of Yangzhou, just a three-hour drive from Shanghai. Knowing that she would regret not visiting, Arden made her own homeland trip during her semester abroad. With the help of one of her program’s teachers, she was able to make contacts that would show her around Yangzhou and take her to her orphanage so that they could translate if needed. “Chinese people are so hospitable and willing to do so much for you,”
Elder 25

says Arden, remembering the lengths these strangers went to help her. She toured both her orphanage and the temple where she’d been found, describing the experience as “surreal” even though the orphanage has clearly changed dramatically since she was there. “I wasn’t really emotionally moved by it, per se,” she tells me, adding, “I think the most emotional thing for me – it’s going to sound really weird – was seeing my American mom’s signature on all of my documents.”

This does not sound weird to me. By the time I interview Arden, I have talked with nearly all of the other adoptees discussed in this paper, so I know how close the majority of them are with their adoptive families. Like the trip I took with Lena to Guangzhou, Arden was also able to visit Nanjing, the city her mother stayed in with her while they waited for Arden’s passport to be issued. “I went to the hotel that my mom picked me up at,” says Arden, “and it was actually probably more important to me than going to the orphanage. It was kind of the first place I met my mom.” And like Kendall, Arden finds it hard to imagine leaving the States permanently when her mother is there. “I also can’t do squatty-potties, I really can’t,” she adds when I ask if she would consider pursuing a career in China.

Neither Kendall nor Arden knows exactly why they are so interested in China when other adoptees are not. Both have single mothers, both have Chinese sisters, both grew up in white communities in the Midwest, and both have worked hard to be able to now speak beautiful Chinese. Those may be patterns, or they may just be coincidental parallels. One thing, however, I feel certain of: China cannot make their “lost daughters” become Chinese. That choice is up to the daughters.
Eloquence, Maturity, and Grace:
Quinn and Annabel

A long road tests the strength of a horse.
-Chinese proverb

The horse is one of twelve animals associated with the Chinese Zodiac. People born in the Year of the Horse are said to be stubborn, straightforward, and loyal. They would rather help others achieve success than aspire to their own greatness. Quinn, though not technically born in the Year of the Horse, has always had a fondness for horses, and it does not take me long to see that she bears some similarities to the characteristics seen in the animals she rides. Quinn reaches out to me after a friend tells her about my project, and when I meet her over Skype she blazes through my questions with succinct and thoughtful answers. Within forty-five minutes, the list of questions I always ask has been covered, so I decide to dive a little deeper than I normally would. Something about Quinn makes me feel like I can ask her anything and she will somehow provide an eloquent response. She reminds me of my mother, who used to be a jumper and who named me after her favorite racehorse.

Quinn has been horseback riding since she was ten years old. Her life has always been built around the sport, and she hopes that it will continue to be. What she has yet to determine is how she will make money doing so, an all-around frightening reality for the English major with a Creative Non-Fiction emphasis. When I speak with her, Quinn is just beginning the process of looking into graduate schools with MFA programs, hoping to go into travel writing after falling in love with the subject during a class trip to Greece with her small Pennsylvania college’s writing department. English, however, does not run in Quinn’s family. She was raised as an only child by her adoptive parents, both scientists, which may explain why she is so well spoken. Her father worked with post-doctorate students from China, which gave him the idea to adopt from the country. For most of her life, Quinn took after her parents, taking AP sciences in high school and planning to major in Chemistry before a creative writing class she took freshman year won her over.
Another self-proclaimed nerd in the group of adoptees I interview is Annabel. A friend of Margaret’s from Smith, Annabel could easily be labeled as the stereotypical independent and headstrong thinker bred from an all-women’s college, but when I meet her in her hometown of Sacramento, California, I learn that she is so much more than meets the eye. Annabel makes the trip into town easy for me by insisting that we meet at the Starbuck’s closest to the Amtrak station, an idea made all the more brilliant when the temperature in the city that day reaches a searing 106°F. The heat does not appear to affect Annabel’s energy, though, as she walks into the café wearing a bright red dress, introducing herself and warning me about her bad memory before we have even sat down. Throughout the interview Annabel is chatty, answering most of my questions without any prompting, and when she apologizes for talking too much I assure her that it is a relief for me to have to do so little work. Transcribing her interview proves to be more difficult, her speech fast and filled with circular rambles such as, “When I was younger, I was a nerd. I really liked school, and I still do. I really liked reading, I didn’t like sports, I wasn’t good at sports.”

Still, I make the effort to record Annabel’s exact words, because her story deserves to be heard directly from her. In the midst of answering a question about the adoption process, Annabel pulls out a map on her iPhone to show me the province – Zhejiang – that she came from, all while telling me about the woman who adopted her there, someone Annabel does not call “mom” but rather Patricia. “She adopted me,” says Annabel without pause, “and then she actually ended up getting diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer’s, which is dementia, so when she was in her mid-40s, when I was four, I actually was removed from her care. Then I was [eventually] adopted by her best friend, who I now consider my mom.” I later hear about the legal side of Annabel’s story by one of the psychologists I talk with, Dr. Jupé, who heard about the case back in 1998 when courts were undecided on what to do with the child. With the help of Annabel and Dr. Jupé, I familiarize myself with both the personal and legal aspects of Annabel’s circumstance.

Annabel was adopted at four months old by Patty. Patty was with a woman named Eve when she adopted Annabel, but (like what happened with Jasmine’s two moms) the
couple was only able to adopt under Patty’s name. The couple later separated, though they remained close. Patty kept Annabel and started developing signs of dementia when Annabel was four, using Post-it notes to remember things and forgetting to feed Annabel. Patty told a therapist what was going on, and the therapist was mandated to report the case to social services. Annabel was then put into the foster care system. Eve wanted to take the child whom she still considered to be her daughter, but the courts refused to grant her the right to adopt. Instead, Eve was eventually given guardianship of Annabel and has had her ever since. Patty was put into intensive care. “So, [Patty] was in assisted living for the majority of my life,” Annabel explains to me, “and I would visit her and see her regularly. She started off with the ability to talk and with more physical movement, but as the years passed she lost her ability to speak and eat. She deteriorated over the time period, so my memories of her are mainly of that stage in her life, which is obviously the worst stage to remember.” Patty was in assisted living for fourteen years. She died in November, 2014.

“It’s crazy, I just found the original court documents talking about transferring me from Patty to foster care to [Eve]. I’m actually in the [foster care] system,” Annabel tells me when talking about her summer job. She is volunteering at Child Protective Services, testing out her interest in one day becoming a social worker. An Economics and Psychology double major heading to the London School of Economics for study abroad this fall, Annabel has always been interested in human behavior, but suspects her career will veer more toward international relations and political work. She says of social work, “I’ve quickly realized I don’t want to do that. Which is good. It’s helpful.” I ask Annabel if she thinks her interest in psychology stems from her personal experience with an Alzheimer’s patient, and she could easily see that it might. It may also have been influenced by issues of identity Annabel struggled with growing up.

In high school, Annabel did her large-scale “sophomore project” on the Planned Birth Policy. It was the first time she had shown much concern for China, an interest that was tarnished when she presented her research in front of the school. “I was in the library, it was all dark, tons of people were there, and at the end I asked for questions,” Annabel tells me. “And someone, kind of a friend, raised her hand and asked Why did your mom
give you up?” Impressively, Annabel found a way to answer the question without retaliation, understanding even when she was in high school that, “high schoolers are stupid.”

Quinn too has been asked many an awkward question. Her personal favorite is the classic, “Who are your real parents?” Asked primarily by classmates in middle and high school, Quinn exclaims, “That’s always a fun question. After a while, you [start to] flip the questions and answer in a way that makes [the asker] really uncomfortable – which is what I do and I have a lot of fun with it – because you can’t let it get to you. It is what it is.” Quinn has learned how to handle these situations from experience, and has had more time to think about her “real parents” than Annabel has.

Out of the adoptees I speak with, Quinn is the only one to have actively looked for her birth parents. She has been back to China twice since her adoption, both for homeland trips to visit her orphanage, once with her parents and once with another adoptee (Liz, featured in this paper’s conclusion). The large orphanage in Hefei had no paperwork to give Quinn on the first visit, and on the second visit she did not ask. By then, she had already given up on the possibility of learning anything about her birth parents, and was only even going to China again to support her friend.

Quinn has no interest in working in China, but she does believe that it is her responsibility to accept her ethnicity. She tells me about a book she read for a class called The Woman Warrior (Kingston 1978). It was written by Maxine Hong Kingston, a woman born in the United States who challenged what it meant to be Asian-American, going so far as to identify herself as “American-Chinese.” Quinn identifies as Chinese-American because she was born in China, but says that, “It’s not about either dichotomy. [Kingston] is living in the hyphenated space between.” In many ways, so is Quinn. So are all the other adopted daughters of China. Identity is an outfit of layers; every piece is important, from those that are seen on the surface to those that are hidden underneath. This is why I agree with Quinn when she says, “I think you have to accept at least part of [being Chinese]… because even looking in the mirror, you can’t ignore it.”

There is a class at Smith College called “Culture, Ethnicity, and Mental Health” that both Margaret and Annabel took in their sophomore year. Annabel says that after taking
the class, she started thinking a lot about acculturation. Taking the class made her realize for the first time that she really was Asian, but she was also not Asian. “I wrote an essay about identity for the class and it was actually really interesting, because when I was growing up I always had the sense that I would marry a white guy… but actually, my first boyfriend, who I’m dating now, is Indian.”

Annabel has always been open to other cultures, having traveled to a different country nearly every year with Eve when she was young. She was an avid reader of myriad fantastical worlds and now is slightly obsessed with a Netflix series called “Sense8,” which connects eight multifaceted characters from completely different parts of the world and deals openly with issues of prejudice, identity, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. Simply put, Annabel thinks about more than just China. She has had to grow up quickly, saying:

> When you see someone with a terminal disease, I think it gives you a really different understanding of life. Even if I didn’t completely understand it when I was younger and visiting [Patty], looking back on it I can definitely say that a lot of the things that might have been a burden to me – like maybe a struggle with identity regarding my Chinese heritage, and when I was younger I had a huge imagination and always wondered what my parents might have looked like – I think, in a way, that was really diminished.

Annabel seems to think that dealing with her adoption has merely been delayed, and that she will have to address it one day. I disagree. I think that Annabel has actually moved past her heritage. She has no need to search for a missing past because she has enough of one already. She has created her own identity, and the only thing left for consideration is her future.

There is a Chinese proverb that typically reads, “A long road tests the strength of the horse.” When translated fully, however, it can be expanded to, “As a long road tests the strength of a horse, so time reveals a person’s heart.” Maturity takes time, experience, even pain, but it also takes letting go. Quinn and Annabel have already become more than adoptees, more than Chinese, and more than American. They are not lost, nor are they angry. They are where they are and, as Quinn is pleased to say, “I’m happy here.”
CONCLUSION
The Search for Happiness:
Liz and Me

Liz is the first informant I speak with, back in Shanghai in November 2014, and yet the lasting impression our discussion leaves on me drives her to be the final adoptee I write about. Liz and I studied abroad in the same program but took completely different classes from each other, so when we meet up at a Mexican restaurant near our apartments for her interview, all I know about the Economics major from Boston College is that she is kind, athletic, and eager to please. The first two attributes are easy to see, but the third is harder, and it is only because of the way Liz will always ask how someone is doing before they can ask her that I know just how fiercely she seeks approval.

Throughout the dinner, Liz gradually opens up with me. She admits that she is somewhat in denial of her past, and speculates that this may have to do with her parents’ divorce. Liz was in her early teens at the time, and she and her two younger brothers lived primarily with their mother following the split. From the way Liz talks about her father – face downcast, tone bitter – I can tell that she holds some resentment toward him, especially when she relates the divorce to her abandonment as a baby. “When you’re young and you don’t make a bond with someone, or your bonds are broken,” she says, “it’s hard to put yourself out there emotionally.”

Liz’s roommate in Shanghai is convinced that Liz herself is broken. A Psychology major, the roommate spends what sounds like the majority of her free time abroad making Liz take personality tests and asking her to talk about her difficult past. “Maybe [your inability to be forthcoming with your emotions] has to do with you being abandoned as a baby and then your dad abandoning you,” Liz’s roommate tells her. This particular statement strikes a chord with me, and not only because I have always loved to analyze myself through personality tests.

My own parents divorced when I was three years old. The divorce itself was not difficult for me, as I was too young to understand what was happening, but the aftermath has affected me my entire life. I grew up separated from my brother, me living with our
mom and him with our dad, and while our mother made sure to keep her son in our lives, my father did not do the same for me. When I turned eighteen, I made the decision to cut my biological father out of my life completely, and I have not spoken to him since.

It is Quinn who first suggests to me that sharing my story here will make this project stronger. I am finally convinced that Quinn is right once I have transcribed all of the interviews and realize what I am most surprised by after speaking with these ten women. I expected, even hoped to a certain degree, that the adoptees would feel rejected by China. I expected them to feel the way my father made me feel, but of course no one could feel that way toward an entire country. No one could feel that way when she has lived a life so full of love, like these ten women have. I am just beginning to understand this, just as I am currently in the process of being adopted by my stepfather.

When I started this research last October, I wanted to answer the question: are China’s “lost girls” found? I did not come up with an answer, instead discovering that every “lost girl” is an individual, too unique and too human to be constricted to either term “lost” or “found.” Now, after speaking with seven more women, I am even surer of this conclusion. I have come across further patterns now that could be proven statistically relevant with more informants. For example, religion appears to help bond informants with their adoptive families, proficiency in the Mandarin language appears to increase adoptees’ interest and comfort level in China, it seems that none of the women identifies as solely Chinese or American and instead somewhere in between, and so on. These comparisons, however, do not seem fair to propose when, as Knowlton says about the teenage adoptees she speaks with for her documentary, there is simply, “One amazing kid after another.” (Evans 2008) I have yet to meet a Chinese adoptee who could ever be deemed “broken” or “suffering.” Perhaps this is because of China’s detailed screening process in selecting adoptive parents, or because my personal network of friends is reflective of my own privileged upbringing, or possibly because these women have something to be grateful for.

Confusion, particularly in regards to identity, is just part of the growing process. I struggle with it the same way that my informants do. In fact, Liz and I joke rather crudely about how we would describe ourselves if asked. She says that she and her brother
(adopted from Korea) would always call themselves “Twinkies” or “bananas,” yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I, on the other hand, am a delicious Chinese breakfast bun (baozi) with a creamy egg filling, white on the outside and yellow on the inside.

Liz talks this way throughout the interview, and I cannot help but encourage her. She describes her family as a “hodge-podge of Asian and white.” She grew up in suburban Massachusetts with two younger brothers – the middle adopted from Korea, the youngest biological to their parents. In an effort to make their youngest son feel more connected to his siblings, Liz’s parents gave her white brother an Asian name. That was the extent of any Asian assimilation their parents forced on the kids, leaving Liz to now, “feel like a failure of an Asian because I can’t speak Mandarin.” She started to learn the language when she chose to add it to her business portfolio by studying abroad, and she makes giant strides in her learning over the two semesters she spends in China (fall in Shanghai, spring in Beijing). In January, she joins life-long friend and “Chinese cousin” Quinn on a homeland trip to their orphanage in Anhui province, and Liz is astounded to find the building no longer filled with healthy little girls, but rather disabled little boys.

China claims that there are 567,000 orphans in the country today, though outside groups say 1 million (Barber 2014). Of those orphans, 98% have disabilities (Vanderklippe 2014). This is obviously a dramatic change from the “lost daughters” of the 1990s, proving that the Planned Birth Policy is still affecting the world’s largest nation, and that there will always be more research to be done on the subject. I could expand my own research by speaking to adopted boys next, or to the mothers who are being forced to give up their children, or just to more adopted women as they grow ever older. Identity is, after all, constantly changing, with every new experience that one has.

With my adoption, I am also becoming a Canadian citizen. I have considered myself Canadian for the past six years of my life, but even some of my closest friends have corrected me when I have introduced myself as anything other than American. Liz is met with far more difficult challenges than this when she studies in China. What bothers her is not that she looks too much like the Chinese there and cannot translate when the locals expect her to; it is that she does not look enough like the foreigners. One day, I walk alongside Liz on a street in Yangpu District and pass by a fellow Caucasian. Though I and
this other “non-Chinese” have never actually met, we instinctively nod and smile, as if our shared ethnicity somehow bonds us together. Liz mentions that she too will feel excited when passing by a foreigner on the street, but the foreigner will never feel that back. “Oh, look, our people are here! But they don’t see it that way,” she thinks aloud to me, speaking for adoptees as well as American-born Chinese (ABCs). It feels wrong to Liz that she should have to explain her nationality to locals when someone like me is not required to do the same, and she sometimes feels lonely because of it.

“Where you come from is everything in China,” says Liz near the end of our interview. In China, citizens are discouraged from migrating outside their home city with documents issued from provincial governments called hukou’s, an ingenious measure put into place to help prevent overcrowding in the cities. The hukou has also caused Chinese people to preciously value their place of birth. Over this past year, I have learned to view the system as yet another method of Chinese censorship, because unlike the Chinese, I have the power to choose where I come from. I can choose to be Canadian even though I was born in the United States, and Liz can choose to be American even though she was born in China.

Over the hour and a half that Liz and I discuss her adoption and her life in the U.S. and China, she has already stopped seeking my approval. I think for a moment that perhaps Liz – who I now know is as funny as she is kind and as artistic as she is athletic – did not come to China to please anyone but herself. Liz is not bitter, resentful, or rejected. She did not come to China in search of a missing past, and she does not leave China in search of an undetermined future. She is simply learning to live in the present, and to be happy here, wherever that “here” may be.

Me too, Liz. Me too.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Barber, Glen. “Number of orphans in China nears one million.” The Denver Post. 2 April 2014.


APPENDIX

Photos of Us

Figure 2 (above). Lena outside our hotel in Jiangmen, China. Photo by Hailey Elder, June 2009.

Figure 3 (above, from left to right). Kendall, Honor, and me on a bus to Chongming Island, outside Shanghai, China. Photo by Honor, October 2014.

Figure 4 (right, from left to right). Honor, me, and Honor’s roommate in Qibao, Shanghai, China. Photo by Honor, October 2014.
Figure 5 (left). Kendall (right) with her mother and sister. Iowa.

Figure 6 (below, left). Arden (right) with her sister. Minnesota, 2015.

Figure 7 (below, right). Quinn at a horse show.
Figure 8 (above). Liz (left) and Quinn (right) at the Great Wall of China. January 2015.

Figure 9 (right). Liz (left) with her brothers. Massachusetts.

Figure 10 (above). Liz, 1 year old, with her grandfather. Massachusetts 1995.