

Following the red thread

BECOMING HONG MEI'S MOTHER

By Joanna Briscoe

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THE CHINESE HAVE A SAYING: “AN INVISIBLE red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.”

My husband and I stood in a Communist Party municipal room. I had waited seven long years to be part of a scene that has played out thousands of times in the last fifteen years that the Chinese government has allowed foreign adoptions. I staked out a spot next to an outside window, hoping to catch the first glimpse of our new daughter when she arrived by car in the parking lot.

Many of my family and friends back home thought we had lost our minds. We were in our mid-40s with four biological children, the oldest already an adult. Why in the world were we starting all over again? I told them it's because of a feeling. For seven years, my daughter's red thread had been working its magic from the premortal world, securing a place in our family. First there was my desire for another daughter. Then it seemed that everywhere I looked, there were little Chinese girls. I knew my youngest daughter would be born not of my womb, but in my heart.

We had gone about our adoption differently than do most families. Typically an adopting family will complete paperwork and then wait eighteen months or more for Chinese government officials to select a baby. We, however, wanted to adopt a “waiting child,” a child who is older or has special needs. The process is much faster since the child's files are

ready, but often these children have spina bifida, a cleft palate or lip, hepatitis, or other conditions.

On the morning the waiting child list was released, I did not anticipate how unnatural the process of choosing a child would feel. After all, how often are parents allowed to choose their children? At precisely 10 a.m., I tried to log onto the adoption agency's website, but for some reason, the server kept rejecting my attempts. After forty-five extremely frustrating minutes, I was finally able to access the “waiting child” page.

As soon as a child is matched with a prospective parent, the child's file goes off active status; several children's files were already being reviewed. With great trepidation, I frantically searched through twenty-five files, praying that if my child's picture were on that page, I would recognize her and make the correct choice—though I also knew that the adoption agency and the People's Republic of China would make the final decision.

Quickly I reviewed the pictures and read a brief description of each girl. My stomach was on a roller coaster ride as I quickly selected five girls who met our criteria. With each one, I wondered, “Is this my daughter?” When I viewed the picture of the youngest girl, my heart leapt. She was incredibly beautiful. I immediately chastised myself. It was not fair to want a child just because she was beautiful.

I submitted a form that said we would like to review the file of any one of the five older girls, secretly hoping for the beautiful little one. My selection process lasted less than five minutes. Realizing that I had just made a choice that could be eternal, my stomach headed into the biggest loop-de-loop of all. I ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Later that day, a social worker called to tell us that the agency felt Hong Mei would fit well with our family. You couldn't wipe the smile off my face. She was the beautiful little girl! I like to say now that my mother spirit had recognized her baby.

The information the agency faxed over included a few



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pictures of our beautiful new daughter dressed in traditional padded clothes with split pants. She looked up at the camera, passive and forlorn, but the report from her caretaker told us that she was “a handful.” I have no idea what criteria were used to match us with Hong Mei, but we were in love.

Because Hong Mei’s adoption was to be expedited, we had only a short amount of time to fill out an enormous amount of paperwork, which, along with adoption fees, took over our lives. Before we received final approval, my husband Mike, our oldest son, and I had to undergo extensive background checks. Mike even had to fess up that his mug shot and fingerprints were on file at a police station because of an expired driver’s license. We had to dig up copies of birth and marriage certificates and get physical examinations to show that everyone was legal and healthy. Then we had to get every page of the huge adoption packet notarized and certified by the county, state, federal, and Chinese governments. Not to mention the paperwork for travel visas and Hong Mei’s immigrant status.

But when the process threatened to overwhelm me, I just looked at the picture of Hong Mei taped to the refrigerator, and her dear little face was enough to remind me she was definitely worth all this trouble.

Finally, we were notified that we would pick up Hong Mei in China in exactly three weeks. Ecstatic, we careened into a whirlwind of preparation.

MIKE AND I flew to LA and then to Beijing via Guangzhou, where we joined the forty-four other families involved with our agency. The next day, even though we were all on pins and needles about our adoptions, our group went sightseeing in Beijing. Though I was suffering from jet lag, it was still breathtaking to see Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City where David O. McKay had dedicated China for the preaching of the gospel, and the Great Wall.

The following day, we met two other families to board a plane that took us to Hong Mei’s hometown. I had the same feeling just prior to giving birth to my older children: fear

mingled with excitement.

Early the next morning, we boarded a van with two other couples and traveled a short distance to the government building. Our small group was the first of a stream of families who would pick up their new children that day. Inside we saw a line of caregivers called Nannies or Aunties sitting on chairs holding babies in their laps. Moments after entering the large conference room, the two other couples were presented with their new, two-year-old daughters.

For forty-five minutes, we watched as the room filled with people receiving their children and then emptied out briefly before the swell began again. Orphanage caretakers carried in babies and toddlers. Some of them wailed in confusion and fear; others were nonplussed by the strangers around them and showed no emotion. But several friendly little ones smiled at the first sight of their new parents.

The sacred joy in that room was overwhelming. The Spirit was more palpable than I have ever felt in any temple of the Lord or any other place. Surely the angels rejoiced that day as many of Heavenly Father’s precious children were given the gift of family.

Then a call came that Hong Mei was in the house. A group of people standing near the door parted as a small, confident little three-year-old girl sauntered in. Her hair was cut short and styled in tight pigtails; her eyes were big in her thin face. She wore a green Minnie Mouse outfit and carried a large red backpack. She looked just like a

photo we had seen of her the previous summer. I would have recognized her face anywhere in China. She trotted up to us calling us Mama and Baba. I held out a doll we had brought to win her love. She took the doll and immediately began to undress it just like any good little Mama. I scooped her up in my arms; we signed a few forms and headed out the door to our new life.

Our little daughter was happy until we got to our hotel. But when we closed the door to our room, it was as if a door had closed on Hong Mei’s previous world. She burst into tears, calling for “Grandma,” her principal caretaker at the orphanage. We tried to cheer her up with food and toys, but her tears did not subside for the rest of the day. Her skin was dry and paper-thin. I took out the lotion I had packed and



gently removed one shoe and sock. With the lotion, I massaged each little toe. Eagerly she took off her other shoe, and I massaged her other toes and foot. Eventually I was able to lull her into an exhausted sleep. But the next morning, she awoke and looked around, realizing she was still in her new world, and the tears began again.

Hong Mei dressed herself in the clothes she came with, bravely shouldered her backpack and defiantly demanded to be returned to Grandma. Those first few days were difficult, but the outbursts grew shorter and less frequent as time passed. However, Hong Mei developed a strong aversion to that hotel room, and for the sake of our sanity, we ended up spending very little time there. We were required to stay in Hong Mei's city for almost a week, waiting for her passport, so we had time to get familiar with the area, an industrial city of about two million people.

On one of our free days, we visited her orphanage. As a gift, we brought along sixty-five pairs of warm pajamas for older children. From the street, the building was attractive, but the living conditions inside were dismal. The orphanage had no heating or cooling. There was also a definite lack of seasonable clothes, food, toys, and attention. Forever seared into my mind are the images of babies with expressionless faces strapped into little brown chairs with openings for them to defecate through. Flies crawled on the babies' scabby faces and flew around their heads. Our guide translated for us, telling the nannies and the director how much we loved Hong Mei. Our visit was short because, as our guide explained, the director and a nanny were busy with a dying baby, debating if it would survive a drive to the hospital.

China has more than 2,000 orphanages spread throughout the provinces of China. Approximately 200 of them are involved in international adoptions. When they are born, Chinese babies are often healthy in body and spirit. Chinese women usually do not smoke or drink, so their unborn babies are rarely exposed to alcohol, illegal drugs, or nicotine. The sparse diet of the Chinese people is healthy, and babies are likely to be breast-fed.

SOMETIMES I REMEMBER that my joy is at the expense of another mother's pain. The Chinese have a saying that a private sorrow of this magnitude is like a "broken arm hidden in a sleeve." For this reason, I pray for Hong Mei's birth mother—that somehow the Holy Spirit will be able to comfort her and assure her that Hong Mei lives, is safe, and is dearly loved.

Doubtless a red thread also runs between Hong Mei's birth mother and me, though most likely we will not connect until we meet at the other side of the veil. When we do, I will tell her that I thought often of her courage in not aborting Hong Mei or allowing her to be killed at birth as so many unwanted girls are. I will thank her for enduring this burden of uncertainty.

However, I wasn't much of a mother in China. Having experienced over and over the loss of women in her life, Hong

Mei was understandably reluctant to bond with me. During our entire stay (nearly two weeks), Hong Mei would go only to Mike (Baba). Mama was something akin to stinky cheese. My efforts to bond with her were met with biting, pinching and hitting. But I knew this might be part of the attachment process, so I tried to wait it out patiently. Bless Mike's heart, he packed that baby in his arms everywhere we went, fed her, dressed her, and got her to sleep.

While avoiding the hotel room, Hong Mei, verbal even for a three-year-old, would talk at length with anyone passing by. Usually her conversation partner would give me a funny look afterward. We didn't know what she was saying until someone who spoke Chinese and English explained to us that she was telling people, "This is Baba [pointing to Mike]. I love Baba, and Baba loves me. This is Mama [pointing to me]. I do not love Mama, and Mama does not love me." Then she would launch into a litany of crimes that I had committed, such as dressing her in ugly clothes and not feeding or holding her.

Not until we arrived at the Marriott in Los Angeles did I finally win the trust and love of my little girl. While her beloved Baba was in the shower, I said to Hong Mei, "Mama ai ee (loves) Hong Mei. Hong Mei ai ee Mama?" She nodded her dear little head and threw her arms around my neck. Since that day, we have been best friends. Eighteen months later, as I reflect on our journey, mere words cannot adequately describe our China experience. It is a testimony to me that God in all His power and loving-kindness was able to bring our family together from across the world, overcoming barriers of culture, language, and even politics to bring our daughter Hong Mei into the loving arms of her forever family.

If you are thinking about adopting, try this: ask God where in the great big world your child is. Then open your heart and mind to the possibility that your child is not in the United States, not with LDS Social Services, not even your own color. Who knows, maybe an invisible red thread stretches between you and a child in China.



Three-year-old Hong Mei just a few minutes after meeting her new parents.



 IN HSIN CHU

Stronger than gravity, the wind
 is a constant gale, or so it seems
 in late summer and early fall
 when not only paper and leaves,
 but street signs rattle and strain
 against hot air, and small children
 in light weight clothes
 almost ascend into the sky
 like stars blown free
 from the city's bright web of lights.

What is invisible makes itself
 manifest in miracles, letters from home
 disappear only to surface again
 plastered against the chain link fence
 two towns away. Rain moves horizontally
 as if writing itself into the wind,
 a palimpsest of salt and storm,
 the coding of factories and sweat.

What messages it brings,
 I cannot read or comprehend.
 My shirts yellowed with sun and iron water,
 their own unraveling codex of love
 and loss, and the secret names
 of post office faces I can't recall from graves.

I lean back into it and bike slowly,
 trying to travel in a straight line
 as if I were light, or merely its memory,
 passing through the dark.

—NEIL AITKEN

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