

## Thoughts on the Search for the Birth Parents

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Before I venture to offer my thoughts on the birth parents search, a word of caution must be in order: what you are going to read is *my* thoughts about an area that mostly remains an uncharted territory, inviting much guesswork. I have been privileged to talk with dozens of birth parents in China (three of whom were profiled in "Long Wait For Home"), and to work on a project that documents three teenagers' searches for their birth parents. While there are a host of issues concerning the searches, I would like to address a few in the form of questions and answers.

### *Who and where are the birth parents?*

There isn't really anything that is peculiar about the birth parents. I mean they are all ordinary folks, having pretty much the same dream and humanity as we all do: to live a decent life and raise a good family. The difference is that they are less fortunate and that they have to make heart-breaking decisions to part with their child or children. Like all of us, they are caring, and have a strong sense of morality. I have never entertained the thought that relinquishing a child is an act of relinquishing love. To me, it is simply against human nature—regardless of race, culture, or religion—for anyone not to love his/her child or children. As I am writing at this moment, I see so typical the distorted faces of birth parents, yearning for information about their lost children and suffering from the anguish of unrequited love. Last summer in Xiamen, I met a woman whose daughter had been adopted by an American family. She convinced me that the sole purpose of her desire to re-connect with her daughter was to know whether she was taken good care of and whether she was doing OK. Of course, there are birth parents that walk away from their babies without thinking much about them afterwards. But they are never in the majority, and this happens in all cultures and societies.

As we all know, due to closed adoptions and other reasons, chances for adoptive families to find their children's birth parents in China are extremely small. Generally speaking, most birth parents are from the rural areas where as a tradition, a son is expected to not only carry the family name, but, more importantly, also take the filial responsibility of raising his aged parents who enjoy no benefits of any kind upon retirement from the land. At the time when a couple decided to relinquish a baby, they could be farmers back home in a village or migrant workers in a city. Today—after several or many years in most cases—the village couple could still be living in the same village but might as well have left for city jobs. Conversely, the migrant couple could still be working on various humble jobs in the same city, but more likely, might have since moved to different urban centers. Of course, the couple might have returned to their land.

In the absence of traceable information, coupled by unprecedented mobility of Chinese farmers displaced by the economic reform, searches for birth parents become extremely complex and unpredictable. It *appears* that, 1) if a child is adopted from an orphanage in a county or district that typically attracts very little outside labor force, there is a higher possibility that the birth parents be from the same area (e.g., the county, a

neighboring county, and an adjacent province), and; 2) if a child is adopted from an orphanage in a major city, particularly in a coastal city where there is always an influx of migrant workers, it is more conceivable that the birth parents come from a different province—we are talking about any province such as Sichuan, Hunan, Jiangxi, and so forth.

*Will the birth parents be willing to come out? And will they be prosecuted?*

Understandably, Chinese adopted parents usually do not want their children to be connected with the birth parents. Many birth parents, however, would like to re-connect with the children they relinquished or had to relinquish. All in all, between the adoptive parents and the birth parents, there hasn't been much effort in reaching out toward each other. Nonetheless, in recent years, an increasing number of adoptees in China have been active in searching for their birth parents. It is equally understandable that many birth families are reluctant to come forward for different reasons. For instance, they might be afraid of the perceived interruption to their new and "peaceful" life, particularly if the birth parents have formed new families. When it comes to international adoption, more birth parents *appear* to be more willing to come forward. In contrast to what the media might have conveyed, most Chinese people harbor an amicable feeling toward Americans and U.S. society. They figure it must be out of genuine love that so many foreign families come to China to adopt. From a pragmatic point of view, it is a good thing to build such a relationship with an American family. In the dozen instances in which U.S. and European families connect with their children's birth parents, the relationships have reciprocated with adoptive children fostering a stronger connection with their roots while the birth families gaining emotional and/or financial support from the adoptive families. In some cases, the birth parents are quite admired in their local communities. For instance, an adoptive family in the Netherlands was able to provide much-needed support to the siblings of the adoptive child, and to set up a scholarship fund for poor kids in a school in the birth parents' hometown.

There is also a widespread view in the U.S. adoptive community that the searches might cause trouble to the birth parents. From a Western legal point of view, this is a justified concern: since under the Chinese law, abandoning a child is illegal, parents could be prosecuted if they came forward, making their abandonment known. This is actually not true. So far, I haven't heard of a single documented case of prosecution on birth parents for abandoning a child. A good case in point is the Xu family profiled in "Long Wait For Home." Their experience was part of a media "frenzy" in China a few years ago—at one point CCTV alone had four crews do the story simultaneously for different channels. In all the interviews, Mr. Xu and his wife would detail the cruel punishment they had received from birth-control officials. These punishments included tearing down their house, forcing them to leave their hometown, and not allowing them to deliver their baby in a hospital. Usually, the topic involving birth control and its associated punishments is quite a sensitive matter. The Xu family has received no reprisal from the government. It might be explained by the Chinese saying: *fa bu ze zhong*, which means "Law does not apply when there are countless offenders."

*What is the Government's reaction?*

The term "government" can be quite loose. Let's for the time being equate it with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and its local bureaus at the provincial, prefecture, and county levels. At this point, we don't know the official position, since there hasn't been a systematic "search-for-birth-parents" movement that would prompt anticipated governmental reactions. From what I understand, the Chinese Government would not welcome such a "movement." The search process ultimately leads to a scrutiny of all possible information provided and/or withheld by orphanages that would clearly make the program and China look bad. We are talking about documents being doctored, children being taken away forcibly from birth parents by birth-control officials, and babies being kidnapped and sold to orphanages. These instances, however rare among all the adoptions, would have made the children ineligible for adoptions according to relevant international adoption laws, and at the same time, could add fuel to the accusation of human rights violations in China. Let's imagine one scenario: a couple of years ago, the Chinese Government and consequently the rest of the world were shocked that one orphanage open for international adoption in Hunan Province had been purchasing babies from traffickers, who ostensibly snatched babies in public in nearby cities in Guangdong. It was estimated that several hundreds had been adopted by families in the West. Today, the Chinese bereft parents are still frantically looking for their lost children. What would happen if, through the search process conducted by an American family, it turned out that the adopted child happened to be among those stolen and sold by traffickers?

Currently, it *appears* that without the direct intervention of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, different provinces respond differently to the birth parents searches. Some provincial civil affairs officials are more supportive and co-operative, or at least, they "look the other way," without either jeopardizing their job by being accused of helping adoptive families in their searches or taking the risk of angering adoptive families by not allowing them to do the searches. In contrast, other provincial civil affairs officials are much more nervous and worried. During a recent trip to China in the birth parents search, a U.S. family found itself in an awkward situation: they were followed by one of the top officials from the provincial civil affairs bureau. While the official diplomatically praised the family for bringing the child back to her roots, he stated explicitly that it is against the law to search for birth parents. He also threatened that unauthorized searches for birth parents could lead to "dire consequences," which include not providing any "unnecessary" information in future referrals, not offering more assistance when American families requested to visit orphanages, and so on. Through personal and informal conversations with the official, I got the impression that his bureau was aware of a wide range of adoption processes that would clearly be interpreted as "in violation of the Hague Convention."

It might also be helpful to dwell a little bit on the nature of Chinese media. It is true that all media organizations are still government-owned, serving theoretically as the Party's "mouth organ." Since the Ministry of Civil Affairs and its local bureaus are part of the government, one would think that in their reportage, the media would abide by "policies" or "regulations" made by civil affairs departments. This is not the case. In

fact, the civil affairs department, which doesn't have much leverage or "policing" power, is among the weakest branch in the government hierarchy. This can help explain an interesting phenomenon in China: many Chinese media (e.g., magazines, newspapers, and television stations) are interested in covering stories about searches—these stories typically receive good readership/viewership because they often have a human-interest angle and involve foreign families—even though the civil affairs officials are quite upset, accusing the media of "being politically incorrect."

*What are the benefits and risks associated with the search?*

There is a plethora of literature on the role of birth parents in the adoptees' identity formation. The findings remain inconclusive: many scholars argue that the adoptees, without information of birth parents, often have a harder time to develop identities than their peers do; many others, however, suggest that with or without information on the birth parents does not lead to a significant difference in the identity formation. These two "opposing" views based on rigorous scientific studies might explain two "paths" of identity formation, complementing one with the other: it might well be that some kids need critical information of their birth parents while others don't.

Based on my research on the subject of identity formation and interactions with numerous adoptive families, I subscribe to the view that it is extremely important for adoptive parents to understand their children—what and where their needs are. Once you are convinced that the search for the birth parents would be an indispensable component in the life of your child, your best option is to prepare and make a plan of action. I don't know whether there is ever a moment that one can truly feel fully prepared. It is not only to prepare for the unknown, but also to prepare for the mental toughness for the unknown. Sometimes, it is easy to rationally think about what lies ahead, but it is quite a different matter to thrust into a totally new situation, in which emotions could run high and could have a life on their own, leaving the individuals feeling out of control.

Moreover, unexpected and yet challenging issues might arise that further complicate the search process and disturb the emotional equilibrium. Here is an example: for so many years, you tell your child that her birthday is on this particular day because it is based on a note allegedly left by her birth parents. However, during the search process, you find that there was no such a note and that the information on the referral was fabricated. And for so many years, you have let your child believe that her birth parents loved her and she was never "abandoned" in a strict sense. However, during the research process, you find out that there was another Chinese family that had adopted her and later indeed abandoned her... And you don't know how to trust this adoptive family with the discrepancies and changing accounts and at the same time, your child get entangled in an emotional bonding that you feel is not quite safe or healthy.

*My "misleading" suggestions on the search*

If you do decide to search for your child's birth parents, I would suggest two things: First, set "low" expectations. Regardless how "promising" the leads you have in your hands are, it is still extremely difficult to find the birth parents. You might want to

expand the goal of the search: instead of framing it as a search for the birth parents, it could be more meaningful and realistic to treat the experience as a cultural immersion and an opportunity for your child to connect with her roots—and indeed your family's roots. In this way, your search would never fail, because once you set your foot on China, they are inescapably connected with the roots, which are in your breath, in your touch, in your sight, and in every moment you interact with the environment.

Secondly, use your resources wisely. Instead of being frustrated over the distance between you and the birthplace of your child, you might find that you already have a connection "in your backyard": With so many Chinese students coming to the United States, it is quite possible that you find someone who hails from the same township, county, or province of your child's birthplace. You might want to contact the Chinese Students Association of a major university in your vicinity. And if there is a sizeable Chinese community where you live, you could also seek assistance there. China is a society that is run on "interpersonal connections"; Chinese students who study in the United States are considered "successful" and they usually have good connections or networks through their former classmates and relatives back in China.