

# Families with Children from China

## Austin, Texas Chapter

Fall Newsletter

October, 2017



## President's Note

This year is going by fast. This is kind of disheartening for me when I realize how fast (too fast) our kids are growing up. I don't want to miss one of their growing phases, or even see it speed by. One consolation: Our FCC community has been able to get together often this year for activities: the Summer Swim party, the T-Bar-M Retreat, the Michael Hsu event, the Back to China talk (and swim), the Abby Hu fundraising performance last weekend, and our celebration of the Autumn Moon Festival this last Sunday.

Thanks to all of you for your flexibility and willingness to pitch in when we get together, to pick up the slack where necessary, and help even if you didn't sign up for a formal role. We have such a good group of people in our organization: the only thing we are lacking is numbers and a growing FCC membership. I hope we can all brainstorm ways to get the word out to other families about FCC's resources. Both the tangible resources: the group connection to Chinese culture, the knowledge base of the trickier aspects to living in families like ours. But also the intangible: the sharing and just being together, knowing we—parents and kids alike—are understood when we are around each other.

Thanks to all for the great participation in FCC events. I look forward to more community with you.

Tom Hurt  
President FCC-Austin

## In This Issue:

Back to China . . . . .	2
What Are our Kids up to? . . . . .	3
Connect with Us . . . . .	3
Family Retreat at T-Bar-M . . . . .	4
Notes from a Stressed-Out Mom . . . . .	5
Book Reviews . . . . .	6
Family Focus . . . . .	7
Michael Hsu Event at P. Terry's . . . . .	8
An Evening with Abby Hu & Friends . . . . .	9



# Back to China

By Jena Heath and Clay Robison

The first thing we should say about our family's trip to China in June is that our daughter, Caroline, 11, has written about it herself in [letsgovisitchina.wordpress.com](http://letsgovisitchina.wordpress.com). If you would like an adoptee's view of a first trip back, which we highly recommend getting, of course, give it a read!

The second thing we should say is that there are many ways to return to China. Our initial plan was to do a Heritage Tour. These tours are designed for returning adoptees to experience China and often include a visit to their orphanages. The deposit was paid and travel plans were underway when the possibility of joining Anderson High School Mandarin teacher Kelly Long on the annual trip she takes with students was presented to us. Long invited the fourth and fifth graders in the AISD Mandarin Immersion program, based at Doss Elementary School, to join her this year. Four families—all from fifth grade—said yes. We traveled from June 6–21 with the other Doss kids and their moms, and with 16 high school students, one high school mom, Doss Principal Janna Griffin, and Mandarin Immersion teacher Connie Soong. Clay refers to the trip as “international subway diplomacy” since we quickly learned that Mrs. Long was serious when she said we would not be experiencing China through tour bus windows. The older kids lived with host families; the younger kids and their parents stayed in hotels and youth hostels.

For several years now, Mrs. Long has been organizing these summer excursions to give her high school students an opportunity to practice their Chinese language skills in

a real-life, person-on-the-street setting. We all paid our own way, but Mrs. Long organized, booked and led the two-week, five-city trip. The trip included a few chartered bus rides and visits to tourist attractions such as the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, but it wasn't really a vacation. This was a moving classroom for the students, and a lot of physical exercise for students, educators and parents.

We scrambled up and down subway staircases and escalators, jumped on public buses and hoofed our way (with the kids asking directions—in Mandarin—and generally leading us the whole time) to attractions in Shanghai, Changzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing and Beijing. Armed with the binders Mrs. Long had assembled for them (in Mandarin), the students completed “amazing races”—lessons dressed up as fun, low-stakes competitions—ordered our meals, bought our high-speed train tickets and regularly asked astonished strangers for directions. The four fifth graders spent three days attending a wonderful elementary school in Changzhou while the older kids attended high school across the street. Caroline remains connected with a friend she made at school. She and Timmy write to each other using the free messaging app, WeChat. Caroline writes in Chinese and Timmy, eager to practice his impressive language skills, responds in English.

This was Caroline's first return to the country of her birth since we adopted her as a 2-year-old in 2008. She was nervous about the trip before we left, concerned that her Chinese wouldn't be strong enough. That fear was soon put to rest. Any efforts she



*Caroline at the Great Wall*

and the other kids made to speak Mandarin were met with surprise and delight throughout the trip. More importantly, it soon became clear that for Caroline to be back in the country of her birth, surrounded by people who looked like her, meant the world to her. She had not been enthusiastic about a Heritage Tour. She had no desire to visit her orphanage or finding place, and so we had been hesitant about proceeding that way for fear of forcing an experience she didn't quite feel ready for. This school trip, an extension of her everyday life, allowed Caroline to experience the culture of her birth in a less direct way, one that didn't make her adoption the centerpiece of the experience. We departed from the group a couple of times for visits with family friends from Shanghai and Xi'an, and we had dinner with American expat friends who live in Beijing. For some children, this kind of trip may be a good way to experience China for the first time. If so, there are excellent resources for planning travel to China, whether or not you speak Mandarin.

*Continued on next page*



*Continued from previous page*

For us, the trip represented a way to support Caroline as she matures and grapples with questions of identity, and as she continues her Mandarin language studies (her favorite subject) at Murchison Middle School. We were also struck by the intense changes in China in the nine years since we were first there. Young couples shepherding toddlers were expecting second children. Affluent city dwellers in Changzhou and

Beijing strolled along walking teacup puppies on fancy leashes—a sure sign of China’s growing affluence. Keeping in touch with home was also much easier than it had been the first time. We used WeChat (ask family and friends to download it) and we each downloaded a VPN to our iPhones, allowing us to post to Facebook and Instagram. It is unclear how easy social media access will remain when new Chinese government regulations limiting VPN use go into effect next year, however.

In July, we gathered at Lake Texoma on the Texas-Oklahoma border for our regular reunion with our travel families. As it happened, two of Caroline’s fellow adoptees also traveled to China this summer, both on Heritage Tours. Caroline was eager to hear about their experiences and to share her own. Who knows? We might be planning another trip, this one different from our Mandarin Immersion adventure, in the not-too-distant future. ❖

## What Are our Kids up to?



**From Nelda Bullis:** After enjoying a summer filled with fun, friends, slime and camp, Elaina, 8, is ready to start third grade.

**From Gaylynn Clevenger:** We have a new exchange student staying with us. Amy (Jiaxun Zheng) is from Shenyang in Liaoning province. “She is awesome and fitting into our family very well. Last night I came downstairs and the four kids were having an origami contest. So cool!” Pictured here are Qincy, 13, and Amy, 17.



**From Alan Greenberg:** Claire finished freshman year at McCallum and did well. She was on the swim team, and she continued to swim in summer league on the JCC Piranhas, where her relay team set club records for both freestyle and medley relays. We took an eight-day trip to Oxford and London in early June, and her comment about Oxford: “I like the vibe here.” Her highlights in London were the London Eye and a bike tour of the Thames.



## Connect with Us!

Below is a list of opportunities to connect with fellow FCC members on a regular basis.

### Book Club

This group is open to all Moms and meets at a restaurant monthly to discuss the current book. We enjoy a wide variety of literature. For information, please contact Abby Turner at: [abbyo814@icloud.com](mailto:abbyo814@icloud.com).

### Mom’s Night Out

On the last Wednesday of each month, adoptive moms meet for dinner at various restaurants for a night out. For information contact Abby Turner at: [abbyo814@icloud.com](mailto:abbyo814@icloud.com). ❖

### UT China Care Playgroup

Playgroup is typically held at the Dell Jewish Community Center from 2–4.

Upcoming playdates:  
10/15, 10/29, 11/12, and 12/02

If you are interested in joining or have questions, please email us at [pg.utchinacare@gmail.com](mailto:pg.utchinacare@gmail.com). We welcome new families and are always happy to see new faces! ❖

# Family Retreat at T-Bar-M

By Tom Hurt

The FCC Austin Family Camp was a great success this year, as it has been every year we have done it. For our family, the yearly trip is unique: getting to unwind a bit from our busy lives on a rare (for us grown-ups) sleep over with our FCC Austin compatriots. Where else can you feel that particular FCC community bond even with an unrecognizable, passing figure in the night—while you are heading to the camp bath, dop kit underarm?

On Saturday, we enjoyed seeing our kids run around without streets and cars and crosswalks in the way, and watched them swing and climb walls. We all shared good food and operated commercial ovens and steaming dish-blasters, played board games and did s'mores.

But this year we had an additional, special treat in Jena Heath's presentation: her sharing her research, and insights, on the searches by some international adoptees for their First Families. I just want to say how valuable I thought Jena's talk was, and what a broadening discussion ensued from it. I found her talk to be another useful light to point towards, and try to understand, the experience of our own children. A reminder for me, again, that our children deal with a profoundly different existence than I will ever fully understand. And the setting again—away from the city, away from our daily lives—made it even more meaningful to me. I was enriched by the talk, have heard nothing but good about it from others, and I want to thank Jena again for doing it. (See below for resources that Jena shared that supplement her talk.)

Finally, I want to thank Carrie van der Wal for the countless hours she spent organizing this trip (as well as many previous ones). And thanks to Hans van der Wal and the kids, Dianne Harwood, Kathleen McDonagh,

and others who did so much coordination and footwork to make this year's camp so fun and successful. On behalf of all of us who were there that weekend, we are grateful to you.

Resources from Jena Heath's talk on Saturday, April 29, 2017:

## Books

- *One Child*, by Wall Street Journal reporter, Mei Fong
- *Mei-Ling Hopgood: Lucky Girl*, a memoir by a Taiwanese adoptee who found her first family when she wasn't looking!
- *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption and Orphanage Care in China*, and *China's Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption and the Human Costs of the One Child Policy*, both by Hampshire College Professor and adoptive parent, Kay Ann Johnson.
- *Outsourced Children: Orphanage Care and Adoption in Globalizing China*, by Leslie K. Wang.

## Published Article

**Brenda Cotter's column** in *The Boston Globe*. Brenda is Charlotte Cotter's mother and is also an adoptee. She writes about what it was like to experience her daughter's reunion with her first family.

## Groups & Organizations

- **China's Children International**: A group by and for adoptees. This group was founded by Charlotte Cotter, whose story you heard at my presentation, and Laney Allison, who is from Austin. CCI has a very active Facebook group (parents can join, but they should be circumspect about doing anything other than commenting).
- **Research-China.org**: Brian and Lan Stuy's Salt Lake City-based range of services for adoptees and adoptive parents. Brian and Lan have three teenage daughters and are limiting the searching they do on behalf



of families, but they can provide a range of resources, including researching the adoption narrative in your documents for accuracy and more information. Here is a recent article that includes [Research-China.org](http://Research-China.org).

Check out the **new site**, too, for [Research-China.org](http://Research-China.org). It includes more information about Brian (including a video interview). As I mentioned, his outspoken views about corruption in the adoption system have made him a bit of a lightning rod at times, but who I have found him to be an excellent resource both in my early years as an adoptive parent and, later, in my work on this project.

## Facebook Groups about First Family Searching

- **Journey Across Forever**: Birth search group for adoptive parents only. Closed group. 1,159 members.
- **Family Ties — China (Birth Family Search)**: Adoptees and adoptive parents who are searching for first families. Closed group. 1,210 members.
- **China Search Network**: Building a database of birth families trying to locate their children. Closed group. 1,154 members.

## Facebook Group about China and Adoption

**Our China Stories**: Updates on the project and postings about adoption and culture in China. Also on Instagram and Twitter. ❖



# Notes from a Stressed-Out Mom

By Christine DeVries

I love being a mom to Sara and Tessa. It is the most challenging and rewarding endeavor of my life. This year I have come to realize that I am much more stressed-out than I thought. I have the life I've dreamt of and worked towards for so many years—a wonderful husband, two amazing daughters, work that is flexible and less than full time. My cup overflows. But I find that I am frequently worn out, sick and over-extended, which makes for little enjoyment of my overflowing cup. I frequently need a **RESET** button. While I have a long way to go before achieving a truly balanced existence (perhaps that's what retirement is?), I am getting better at identifying some things that help.

Utilizing the “tactical pause,” as my husband calls it. I love saying yes, being involved, doing things, getting out of the house, social and school opportunities. But now I'm practicing pausing before I answer. While I would have loved to join a neighbor and her kids for a swim play-date, I paused at the invitation, then declined, acknowledging that my family and I needed a less busy day at home. At 5 a.m. on a Saturday morn, as I reflect on that pause,

the wisdom of this is abundantly apparent. Now I can plan a nap this afternoon! Which leads me to...

Good sleep begets good sleep. I rarely allow the girls to budge from their early bedtime, even though it rubs against the grain of others' schedules and social events. Likewise, I am learning to honor my own needs and head to bed early. Also, I no longer care where anyone in my house sleeps—what matters, is that we sleep. Tessa now comes down to sleep at the foot of our bed in the middle of every night as Sara, her previous roommate, was ready to be in her own room. For me, at least once a week, I find an empty couch or bed for a less disturbed sleep. I am happier when rested.

Exercise begets lots of good things. Earlier this year I bought myself a treadmill, and I'm using it! This is one of the nicest things I've done for myself in a long time. For the first time since being a mom, I am regularly exercising. What I have discovered is that this time can be used to let myriads of thoughts and frustrations cycle through my head. I've also discovered that I love listening to audio books when I exercise. I've never found the time to read regularly, but now am devouring parenting books, book club books, and even children's books that Sara is reading. And, the more I exercise, the more I want to exercise.

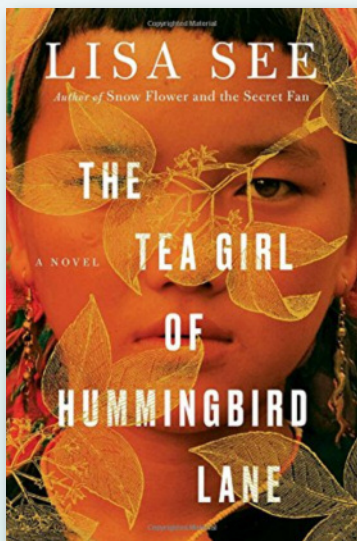
Asking for what I need or want. While I frequently prompt the girls to ask if they need a hug or food, it is harder for me to remember to ask for what I need. I recently asked Doug to bake a sweet potato for me as he was home that day. I have been on a restricted diet and often don't know what to eat. That simple request resulted in me feeling truly taken care of. Wow! I also recently had the idea (while on the treadmill) of asking Doug's mom to come visit from New Mexico so Doug and I could have a weekend away. To our surprise, she said yes! This fall we will have our first weekend away in seven years of parenting! Another wow! Oh, and did I mention I'm asking for a nap this afternoon?

Finally, I'm exploring the concept of “good enough.” My tendency is to exceed my goals at work; perhaps just meeting my goals (and not going to work early if it is not really necessary) is good enough. I'd love to listen to all of the books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series that Sara is reading, but perhaps listening to half of them is good enough. Perhaps then I'll have a chance to become a little more aware of my needs and even find the button that says: **RESET**. ❖

# Book Reviews

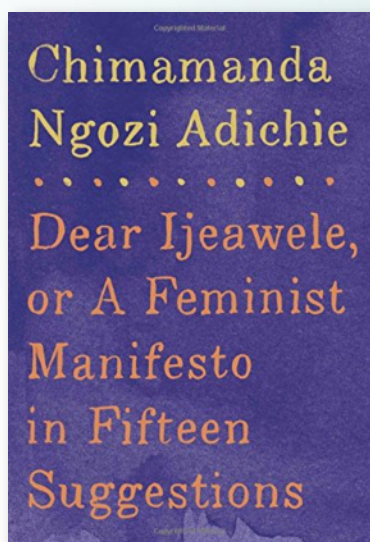
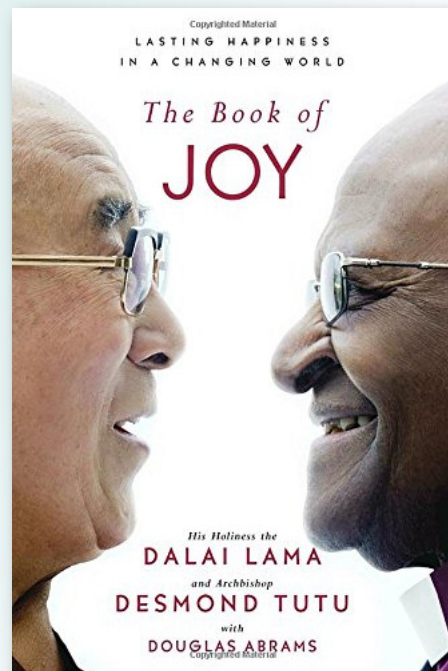
By Abby Turner

*The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* paints an unforgettable story of a little-known region and its minority people. See explores the lives of a Chinese birthmother and her daughter who has been adopted by an American couple. Li-yan and her family farm tea. There is ritual and routine for the Chinese ethnic minority, the Akha, whose world will soon change. Li-yan has a baby outside of wedlock; rather than stand by tradition, she wraps her daughter in a blanket, with a tea cake hidden in her swaddling, and abandons her in the nearest city. Despite Haley's happy home life, she wonders about her origins, while Li-yan longs for her lost daughter. They both search for and find answers in the tea that answers



in the tea that has shaped their family's destiny for generations. It felt like a must read for me and for my adult daughter. I truly enjoyed it.

The second is, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. This has been another affirming read. It is about conversations between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and The Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They are both 80 and are both considered among the highest authorities of Buddhism and Christianity. They discuss joy and happiness in a very difficult world. I found it both enlightening and familiarly comforting. Spoiler alert—compassion and love are key. ❖



I have two other books to recommend that are not specifically adoption- or China-related. The first is, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This is Adiche's letter to a friend on how to raise her daughter as a feminist. It is so clear and well thought-out. I really felt moved and inspired to be a better person for all. If you are a woman, or are raising a woman or just know a woman, you should read this.



# Family Focus: The Harwoods

By Dianne Harwood

“Alison assured us that she was going to have a brother. When we saw a photo of Shen Xiaozi, we knew...”

—Dianne Harwood

John and I met on a blind date, and a little over a year later, we were married. In 2005, we adopted our daughter Alison from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. We were terrified, but she was an easy baby. Bright, bubbly, cuddly and cute... she made us a family. A year later, we started the

paperwork to adopt again. John and I assumed we would have another daughter, but Alison assured us that she was going to have a brother. When we saw a photo of Shen Xiaozi, we knew we had found our second child. Sure enough, Alison was going to have a brother. Our kids are two years apart.

This year, Alison will start eighth grade and Xiaozi, now Joshua, will start sixth grade. We can't believe how time has flown. Our family grows stronger by the day. John works as an IT manager for IBM. I am working at a preschool and tutoring after school. Alison, still bright, bubbly, cuddly and cute, attends the magnet program at Fulmore Middle School. She has been dancing with April Rain for eight years. She sings in choir, participates in theater and orchestra, and is fascinated with how things work, what makes things move, how things are put together. Joshua is my easy child. Organized, even-tempered, funny, big-hearted, and adorable, he will start at Bailey Middle School. He is going to be in the band. He plays flag football, and believes he will walk on with the New England Patriots when he is older. Who are we to know whether or not that dream is achievable? Look at how far he's already come! Time has flown since we first started that huge stack of paperwork in 2004. We can't wait to see what the next few years bring. ❖



FCC board member Dianne Harwood, with John, Alison, and Joshua.



# Michael Hsu Event at P. Terry's



By Tom Hurt

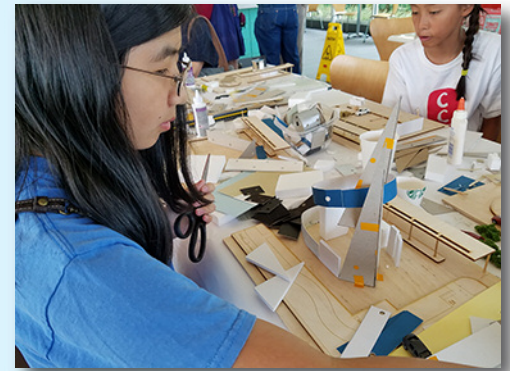
Thanks to all who participated in what turned out to be a fun event! Our esteemed local celebrity architect, Michael Hsu, seemed genuinely to enjoy getting to know FCC Austin and sharing some of his story with us. He also remarked on the enthusiasm of our kids: how they—within a blink of us finishing the presentation part of the program and setting out the model materials and glue—took over the project, and pretty much the whole P. Terry's with their mad flurry of creation. Each worktable became a chaotic, bustling city of P. Terry's burger sites, sticks, tape, foam-core and glue, 1/8"=1' scale cars and human figures.

With this event I got to indulge my belief that grown-up architects, and perhaps most other grown-ups, like to play like kids. They like to invent places and scenarios not very different from the ones they may have invented when they played as kids. My hope was: suggest to the kids that to be a good grown-up architect like Michael Hsu, it is important to tap into one's kid-self, and to value one's own playfulness, imagination and uniqueness. Also important: find ways to practice putting things together. If one wants to pursue designing things, either as hobby or profession, it is good to build stuff, make models, make a mess, make mistakes, edit, revise, and keep going. Kids are pretty good at this. I wanted to



Most importantly, I'm glad the kids got to meet a star architect of our community, who also was born in China, who on his business card, and business shingle, displays his family's Chinese characters. Michael is a true talent, and he is also a gifted firm leader and businessperson; these latter skills allow him to successfully implement his designs: no small feat for an architect. ❖

let them know that Michael and I encourage them to put the computer away for a while, and glue some real stuff together. By doing that they can see their creations take shape—in an imperfect and messy world—not just those already mostly formed by a computer program or gaming world, with some set of predetermined outcomes.





# An Evening with Abby Hu & Friends



## Benefit Concert on Behalf of FCC-Austin

Abby Hu, a very talented high school student and master guzheng artist, put together a fabulous, well-attended show at the Asian American Cultural Center on the evening of September 17th as a special benefit for FCC Austin and raised over \$3,000 on our behalf! She invited featured artists to join her, including other talented guzheng artists, musicians, dancers, and singers, including choreographer Diana Wang of the Austin Dance Project.

Noteworthy: She won the American Protégé International Competition and recently performed at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Abby has performed for FCC Austin in the past, admires our organization, and genuinely wishes to see our organization continue to prosper. Thank you, Abby! ❖