

**Homecoming and the Making of Friends:  
Travelling to One's Birthcountry<sup>1</sup>**  
Mary Watkins

I have three daughters adopted from Brazil, India, and China. Since their arrival I have always assumed we would travel back to their birthcountries to help knit together with their home in America the sights, sounds, smells, stories and memories of the place and culture where each of their lives began. I have harbored a profound sense that they will never be able to put together some of the pieces of their complex identity and history without such an odyssey. So I have been trying to interest them in travelling back to their birthcountries since they were small, reminding them that I am ready to go with them when they are.

My eldest daughter, after saying for three years she wouldn't go if she needed shots, decided as a young teen that she would travel to Brazil with me if I could get some of her friends who are adopted from her hometown in Northeast Brazil to go with us. When I sadly failed in enlisting them and their families, she lost interest. On another occasion I was asked to teach in my Indian daughter's hometown of Pune when she was eight. We made all the arrangements for her to accompany me, and then she decided she would rather stay home. I was disappointed, but respected her sense of hesitation.

So it was my youngest, my 9-year-old, who first took me up on the standing offer to travel to her birthcountry, China. She appeared to have no hesitation, and greeted the possible adventure with eagerness and curiosity. As I began to research ways to travel to China, I found out about a Chinese culture tour offered through Our Chinese Daughters Foundation, designed for Chinese adopted daughters of American families. We signed on eagerly. I was glad she would be with other adoptive families so she would not feel too odd walking around in China with her freckle-faced, long-nosed mom. I was also relieved that the group we would be travelling with would be supportive and matter-of-fact about adoption, not seeing our family as exotic or treating us with undue curiosity. The trip would include other children, and the pace and sites would be kid-friendly.

While all of this was indeed to the good, it was not the most important part. Several days into the trip the young girls took over

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the back of the bus. With our large parental ears we began to catch snippets of animated conversation. "So how old were you when you were abandoned?" "Where were you left?" "Do you know who found you?" "Did your birthmother leave a note with you?" "Do you know your real birthdate?" "What province are you from?" "Did you have a fostermother?" "Do you know about the one-child policy?" "Do you think the fines for having a second child are *that* big?" "Do kids tease you at school?" "Do they do that funny Chinese/Japanese eye-thing?" "I hate it when they do that, don't you?" "What do you do when they do that to you?" "We are all from China, but we each look so different!" It was not having the answers to the questions that seemed to matter most; it was engaging the questions with each other.

In other words, these young girls, ages four to nine, were quickly forming friendships where aspects of their adoption and family experience could be shared with each other. I felt relieved listening to them--feeling at the same moment their intense need for such sharing with their adopted Chinese American peers, and the sweet satisfaction of this need to share these experiences and their thoughts about them .

These spontaneous moments of sharing were interspersed with swimming, hutong tours, bowling, endless popsicles, the Great Wall, visits to Chinese elementary schools, a cruise down the Li River, acrobats, Taoist monasteries, street markets, and lots of white rice with soy sauce. Visiting West Lake in Hangzhou early in the morning they saw the beauty of thousands of Chinese peacefully exercising together before work: Tai Chi, aikido, sword dancing, ballroom dancing! Their eyes feasted on the multiple statues of deities in the temples. They enjoyed the gentle guidance of Chinese adults who helped them with their chopsticks, bowling strategies, yuan change, and questions. Each girl lived into the tour with great energy and curiosity, devouring both similarities to and differences from her present home.

On parting it was clear that they enjoyed China, wanted to return to visit, were glad they lived in America, and were eager to maintain connection with each other once back home. It was also clear that some of the children had felt viscerally the difficulties their birthfamilies may have faced in China. With their child eyes they could see people struggling long distances on their bicycles in the oppressive heat. They could see the laundry hanging out the dilapidated apartment windows in Beijing. They saw small four room dwellings where three generations lived. They watched quietly out the bus windows as the city gave way to more primitive and

poor conditions in the countryside. They saw the polluted waterways, and understood the challenge of remaining healthy without clean water. Several visited their orphanages and saw the bleak baby rooms, the many toddlers and children with disabilities waiting for families. They heard the adults talking about the Cultural Revolution and Mao. Although I don't think they understood much of China's recent traumatic history, they got a sense that China has indeed been through immense, difficult, and often, tragic changes. They saw the almost ecstatic look in several older women's eyes who communicated with "thumbs up" hand gestures how glad they were to see these Chinese daughters loved by and happy in their families.

I am clearer now why my Brazilian born teenage daughter will only go back to Brazil if her Brazilian American friends come. It is they who took the same journey as she, who are searching for the answers to similar questions as she, with whom even without answers there is that sense of intimacy that comes with living the same questions. When I got back I wrote to her friends' families again...maybe next summer. My middle daughter born in India just smiles, shakes her head at me, and says she prefers home.

### **"Experiencing Where You Were Born" An Interview with Lily Rosenthal, Age 9**

Mom[Mary Watkins]: Lily, what are some of the things you learned in China?

Lily: First, there are a lot of poor people in China. They have to work *really* hard...like the people we saw working in the silk factory. In many factories people don't make very much money. In some factories it is almost 90% women doing the work and they may make as little as 100 yuan a month, \$16.

There are also a lot of beggars. You feel so badly for them, that you give them some money. Some street sellers say, "One dollar, one dollar" to get your attention so that you will buy

something from them. Then when you go to buy it, it isn't really \$1.00!

It was VERY hot in China! Hong Kong swimming pools are hot like huge bathtubs. Hong Kong used to be British, that is why people drive on the left side of the road. I didn't see any beggars in Hong Kong. It seemed like everyone had at least a little bit of money.

Mom: What else did you learn?

Lily: I learned that Mao did good things and bad things for the Chinese people. By making people share their land, he made sure there is now enough food for everyone. He taught the Chinese not to be wasteful. A bad thing he did is that he told people to not take the time to have lawns and flowers because it was a waste of time and money.

I also learned that the Chinese drink a lot of tea! They sometimes spit out their tea leaves! One thing that is really terrible is that they don't seem to have foil wrapped chicken...that is my favorite Chinese food back home.

Mom: That *was* surprising! What else?

Lily: A long time ago parents of girls would take a hammer and break their arches so their feet could be bound and be small. They thought this would help them find a better husband. We saw several older Chinese women who must have had their feet bound when they were young.

Chinese people have dark hair. Many have brown hair...like me!

Mom: What are some of your funniest memories of your trip?

Lily: I made a funny nickname for my friend, Hope: Hopa-lopa-mopa-chopa.

Also I had a dream while I was there where I was putting mosquito repellent on my chopsticks! [laughter]

Remember in Beijing when I was going to the pool? I slipped in the shallow pool where people wash their feet and I got all wet! Oh, also in Qingdao, do you remember when my friend's bathing suit came untied in the pool?

Mom: Did you learn anything about adoption during your trip?

Lily: People in China can only have one baby in a family, because the government thinks there are too many people. A lot of people started adopting from China in the early 1990's. They were careful not to make boo-boo's, so that China would keep allowing people to adopt.

Mom: You mean like when we were told not to bring our other children to pick you up, since most Chinese only have one child?

Lily: Yes.

Mom: What about the trip mattered the most to you?

Lily: **My friends!**...I also like the squat toilets. Whenever you squatted, you didn't have to put your butt on a wet seat! [laughter]

Mom: What was the most amazing thing about China?

Lily: The beautiful roofs and ceilings! They were very colorful. I loved the bright, bright colors!

Mom: What did the trip make you feel about adoption?

Lily: It made me feel I was lucky to be adopted by a very good family. If I were still in a foster family or orphanage, I wouldn't have gotten to see all the different places in China and all the other places I have been to in my whole life.

Mom: What did you learn about the Chinese people?

Lily: They are just like me, and it is really cool to see people just like you! They've got the same eyes and similar faces to mine. Sometimes in America children make fun of Chinese eyes, but, you know, the way they scrunch up their faces doesn't even look like Chinese eyes!

Even though I was a little shy when people came up to me and started speaking Chinese, assuming incorrectly that I would understand them, it made me feel like I was living in China and that people *wanted* to speak to me!

Mom: Why should parents take their adopted kids back to their birthcountry?

Lily: So they can see where they used to live...instead of just getting used to where they live now. You should go to see the people who are just like you. You get to see all the fascinating places surrounding where you used to live. I loved going to China, and I want to go again...with you and my friends!

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The night after Lily read through this interview she had a dream: "I am climbing the Great Wall with my Chinese friends *and* my summer camp friends. When we got to the top we were in the crown of the Statue of Liberty on top of the Great Wall! We were half on land, and half on water!" This is a beautiful image for the kind of rich and complex sense of identity our bicultural children are weaving.