Returning to China with Your Adopted Child

by Dr. Jane Liedtke

Introduction

Families with children adopted internationally now have a better understanding of the importance of giving their child a multi-cultural context for their lives and a full understanding/tools to deal with issues of adoption. We base this on years of research and experience with multi-racial adoptions in America and emerging research/documentation on the part of the Korean adoptive community about their experiences growing up being “adopted from Asia”.

There are really two areas to be concerned with, and we don’t always need to focus on the two together. In fact, sometimes it is healthy to approach them separately. First, your child was born in a different country and culture. And, that race, culture, ethnicity is what they bring to your family making your family more multi-cultural/multi-national. A German-American family adopting a Chinese child is no longer solely a German-American or “American” family. They now are also a family with Chinese heritage and culture. When everyone in the family thinks of themselves as sharing that Chinese heritage and culture, the adopted child will have a very supportive and healthy environment. This helps them be themselves and desire to learn more about the country of their birth. Second, your child is adopted and there are issues related to being adopted that are separate from cultural heritage. Sometimes adoption conditions/circumstances are based in societal and cultural practices abroad, but we should not force the two together all the time. The child needs to form a positive identity about their birth country AND a positive identity about being adopted.

Developmentally, children may approach one without thinking about the other or be “ready” to deal with one before they are “ready” to deal with the other.

Preventative Medicine or Building the “Toolbox”

Often I have referred to the practice of traveling with children to their birth country to learn about their culture and heritage as “preventative medicine” or the experience as creating a “toolbox” for your child. Travel as an educational experience for children is a valuable means for creating dialog and learning about culture and adoption. Exploring your child’s birth country while they are of elementary school age sends them a signal that their birth country is important to your family. This is a very different message than attending once a year a cultural heritage day at a special holiday.

The early travel experience allows the child to have information to share with their peers at school about where they are from. This is different from reading books, seeing movies, and being an observer of life that is far away from their daily reality. They need to be a participant in their culture and see it, touch it, smell it. Then as they encounter questions about themselves or are asked by peers, or perhaps even teased – they will have a host of things to say about being from that country based on their own personal experiences.

Through their birth country visit children begin to add more to their toolbox and the variety of tools and variety of strategies they have for dealing with what life will throw in their way is the key. Building the cultural toolbox, just like learning a foreign language, is best done when the child has that natural exploratory advantage – early developmental stages. This is to avoid the resistance that may come as children get older and have more questions than they have answers for or the questions are more complex than their toolbox of experiences can resolve. So, the toolbox gives them the context, the visual images, the experiences, and the confidence to handle new questions. If their toolbox is limited to what we tell them, such as their adoption story, or a video on “Big Bird in China” or “Mulan” we are limiting their ability to function and we are not providing them experiential tools – seeing is believing!
Life in China not like Big Bird in China. Big Bird gets to see famous places in China but Big Bird does not deal with societal issues, modern life and traditional culture – and how they mix together. Children are very very perceptive and they take in the environment even if they don’t use all the information at that very moment.

The most important thing a child returning to China (or to any birth country) can come home with is being in love with their toolbox – liking their country of birth and feeling good about their experience there. It does not mean that everything in the toolbox will be perfect positive images or experiences, but they will be real and they will be “theirs” and not something someone else told them.

Use Strategies of Intercultural Understanding

Approach cultural issues from the positive perspective. What are the similarities between American life and life in XYZ country/culture? Don’t make it about right and wrong. “I can’t believe they don’t have western toilets here!” exclaimed one adoptive mom upon arrival at a Chinese rural farm. Her child meanwhile hears that there is something wrong with a culture that uses a system that doesn’t require a person to be in physical contact with a toilet. Was that the message the child was sent? Is that the lesson they were taught?

For many years my own mother would not come to China with me on a trip despite me offering to bring her with me with many groups and individual treks. Her mindset was that she didn’t like Chinese food so therefore she could not visit China. She would even announce to all far and wide how she didn’t like Chinese food (luckily this was prior to my adopting Emily and she had not done this in front of her). After Emily and I moved to China she finally came to visit us (actually came to see her granddaughter, Emily). I had told her about McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Dominos Pizza that delivered, A&W Rootbeer, TGI Fridays, Scholt’sky’s Deli, and every other American food establishment in Beijing in order to bribe her to come. Upon arrival I didn’t have to offer any of these places to eat – conveniently they were “inconvenient” to our daily schedule. As such, she had to try Chinese food. Ok, I’ll admit it – I forced it on her! She was amazed at how much she enjoyed it and was willing to try a wide variety of dishes. I have always been rather independent and luckily explored at a young age places throughout the world. My mother didn’t have such opportunities and it limited her ability to make decisions about her travels and about people in the world. Her toolbox now is so different than it was before. That scenario is not uncommon for her generation. BUT…..

Not long ago I encountered an adoptive Mom who told me that she didn’t eat Chinese food and neither did her daughter (from China). She told me that when they decide to come to China they will pack a suitcase of food – like enough peanut butter for the entire trip. I explained that it wasn’t necessary to do so that I was sure she would discover a wide variety of foods available during our meals and surely something would be suitable. Like-wise, I told her of the array of western food and grocery stores selling peanut butter. This was not about allergies mind you – it was about mindset. I asked questions about her daughter and she said that her daughter, like her, didn’t like Chinese food. I couldn’t help but think that the child likely had no experience with Chinese food to know whether or not she really liked it AND with her mom telling her not to eat them with China to go in to get the message reinforced that there is something wrong with eating Chinese food or being Chinese.

Your own reactions and interactions with people locally tell a child a lot about your “thinking” globally. Try to have interchanges with your child to explore issues of diversity, poverty, lifestyles, foods, and religions. These dialogues add tools to their “toolbox” with which they can live in China in 1998 I was concerned that the experience for Emily could be one of culture shock despite having had culture camp in the USA, friends who were adopted from China, Chinese friends in our community of Bloomington Normal, eating Chinese food most of the time, and my frequent trips to China (and the books, the videos, etc etc). I decided to bring her on a 3-week trip at age 5 about 2 months prior to the move. We traveled to Beijing and took a side trip to the beach at Beidaihe. Emily immediately was looking everywhere a little bit amazed, maybe shocked at times if she saw something really unusual. I decided to play a game with her while riding in the taxi each time we went somewhere – identify those things that are similar and those things that are different. The list of similarities was long and the differences came down to a few items that struck her as more prominent than others: traffic, bicycles everywhere, so many restaurants, lots of people, and it’s dirtier. These were things about being in a different city and not about race, culture, or ethnicity. Her list of similarities was longer and emphasized interactions – people say hello, people are nice to me, kids play in the park, etc. While she was 5 at the time and I didn’t expect much from this, she didn’t leave that trip thinking that moving to China was going to be a terrible thing. She was willing and eager to do so. For much of our time here the only things she misses are the occasional trek to Toys R Us and her backyard swing set. I believe her successful transition to life in China to be a function of the differences being seen as just something that is different, not something that is bad. That said, I am not without my faults and days when the China lifestyle creates a meltdown. I believe she accepts that too as part of the struggle to accept things that are very very different and sees how hard we work through cultural challenges to have positive experiences.

Returning to Your Child’s Birth Country

Kids vary, parents vary, the stories kids learned about China vary, the emphasis placed on the orphanage versus on being Chinese varies, etc etc etc. So there’s not one size fits all response to when to travel back to China.

There are, however, clusters by age in terms of how children react to being in their birth country. My responses are based on 100+ families coming to China with their children over the last 5 years – both through group tours and independent families who have visited with A Bright Moon China Tours while they were in China.

First, by age…

We have had children ages 2.5 thru 14 at our culture camp programs with their parents over the years. Most of the adoptive children have been ages 4-10. The 2.5 thru 8 year olds have a very different experience than those 9/10 and over who are adopted. Those 9/10 and over siblings who come to culture camp seem to have the same experience as the 2.5 thru 8 year old adoptees. Something happens at age nine or ten that is very interesting, but I suspect a family trip to Texas might reveal this same difference in behavior except that the child is going to their birth country and there are expectations of dealing with being adopted from that country. Prior to age 9 the children are like sponges willing to absorb any experience thrown their way, climb, hike, listen to Chinese traditional music, fan dance, eat Chinese food 24/7, try pit toilets, you name it! They are very flexible and willing to do it all.

From 9 or 10 years of age on there is an attitude – something we observed to be one of initial rejection of everything that is Chinese, “Oh, China is so dirty I am glad I don’t live here”, and “I can’t wait to eat at McDonalds”, etc etc. For several days the child can’t quite believe that they are from this place that is sooooo different from what they imagined it to be. So it takes a few days to get the older child “into it”. They end up having a great time but the transition is slower. I would caution all parents that returning to China
Visiting Your Child’s Orphanage Being Prepared

Who wants to visit and why?

Families usually have some concerns about bringing their child(ren) back to their orphanage and adoption city. Recently an adoptive dad asked if there was any chance that his children would encounter their birthparents. He was very concerned about this and was worried that his children would be traumatized by this event. He was also likely worried that he too would not be able to handle such a situation.

One child I know of actually thought she was going to see her birthmother and was preparing in her mind how she would tell her parents that she could live with her birthmother one year and then the next year, etc. The scenario was in the mind of the child but it had not entered the parent’s wildest imagination that their child was thinking this until after they traveled and visited their orphanage and she shared it with them. Over the years we’ve discovered this is not a unique response. Many children think or dream about this.

Examine who wants to visit the orphanage/adoption city and why. Parents often want to return because it is the place where they received their wonderful child - a very positive feeling about a place that “gave” a precious gift - experiencing China, they had kids to play with, they had programs and activities that would not be available as an individual family traveling, and the girls interchange their adoption information and questions with each other in a very healthy way. We often overhear them chatting at the back of the bus - it is very interesting to listen to.

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3. Children and parents both need preparation so that the trip to the orphanage is not about “taking something home” as it was the first time, but rather “giving something back” - a way for the child to give something so that she realizes she has done something for those kids who were not yet adopted (and thus not as lucky as she will realize she is). Some educational program, gifts for the kids - books/toys, or medical items like vitamins all help in that process.

4. Have realistic expectations of what they will see, do, and experience both physically and emotionally. Be prepared to not visit the orphanage if your child does not wish to go at this time. Do not force the situation on them because it’s a place that you as the parent wishes to see - it does not mean your child will want to or needs to (it’s very much a developmental process). We’ve had parents take their kids back and many parents who treat trip #1 back to China as a family vacation about culture and then afterwards discuss with the child whether or not they wish to visit their orphanage on trip #2. Children actually say “no” often.

5. Age of child will dictate whether or not major meetings should be held with adoption officials at the orphanage with the child present. Sometimes documents are presented from files that will be disturbing to the child if she is not prepared to hear about them or see them. Think about this ahead of time and if your goal is to check out her file you might figure out whether or not to do that independent of the child being present.

6. Make the return visit more about seeing their adoption city versus the orphanage - don’t over glorify this place as not all children will react positively - those who are enthusiastic and interested deserve the opportunity to experience it all if that’s what works for them. All kids are different.

7. Age to return - younger is better for return trips to China with or without the orphanage visit. If it’s possible to do something between ages 6-8 - a lot of preventative medicine happens - the child gets the context of China without being forced into the orphanage scene yet and they fall in love with China and being Chinese which is more important than having a positive connection to their orphanage. They need for their life-long self-worth a positive connection to their culture and people. The fact that they were from their particular orphanage is about the process of adoption (in some cases the process of chance) - many children are not actually from the place where they were institutionalized.

8. From ages 9 onward the kids that come to China arrive with a decidedly American attitude about everything, more resistant to change and less willing to be flexible and try new things. They notice the dirt with some sense of embarrassment, they notice the pit toilets, not for their novelty as the younger kids do, but for their inconvenience, etc etc. They see everything negative about China first and then gradually get the positive. The younger kids see the positive and might notice, but not be too terribly bothered by the negative. A constant approach is to try to get kids into the positive mode early on.

9. Many children adopted from China only experience Chinese holidays as a means of understanding their culture and don’t know anything about China except Panda bears and the Great Wall. You can imagine when they see millions of people, see dusty & dirty cities, discover unfamiliar foods, and various living conditions that they are rather put off by all of this – after all, they are Chinese too. So, it’s good for them to discover all this and also have fun - how else will they ever be able to understand conditions that cause a country to have a one-child policy if they don’t see and experience society. Likewise, in the US and Canada when we present Chinese culture we omit the socially unacceptable aspects of it like the paternalism. Also, we rarely have our kids engaged

Here’s what we’ve found thus far from observations:

1. Children do better going to their orphanage after having a sightseeing tour or cultural camp program in China because they have a chance to gradually acclimate to China and are not as shocked by the initial visit to the orphanage.

2. Traveling with other children and even with peers also adopted from China helps them have others their age to experience China with and relate to. Support from other children adopted from China should not be undervalued.

3. Children and parents both need preparation so that the trip to the orphanage is not about “taking something home” as it was the first time, but rather “giving something back” - a way for the child to give something so that she realizes she has done something for those kids who were not yet adopted (and thus not as lucky as she will realize she is). Some educational program, gifts for the kids - books/toys, or medical items like vitamins all help in that process.

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in activities with homeless and poor people in America so poverty is often something new to the kids who return to China. I spend a lot of time talking about inner city America on the bus before I talk about inner city Beijing. For example – “just like in Chicago where many poorer families would live in high-rise buildings provided by the government, in China people live in government-provided housing for the very poor. If you are not poor by Chinese standards – you cannot live in these areas.” Why should America be good and China bad? We want children to see something and say “wow that’s similar or gee that’s different” – and ask “why is that the case?”

Who can visit an orphanage?

Parents, at the time they adopt their child, are no longer allowed to visit their orphanage. In many cases over the years, it was common practice to not visit an orphanage at the time of adoption - perhaps remote location, conditions, or the mere fact that the location had no suitable hotels prevented many families from seeing their child’s orphanage. Now, almost universally, this is the case - no visits at the time of adoption. The few exceptions are just that, exceptions. This is also subject to change like anything within a developing country.

However, there are no formal regulations that prevent families from returning to their child’s orphanage at a later time. Some provinces control the process more than others, requiring orphanage and provincial approval. In general, it is possible to arrange and most orphanages are very cooperative (although some directories are not always as helpful as they should be when requesting visiting information for your child). However, the process is complex and involves multiple levels of provincial and provincial approval.

Can we really visit a remote orphanage location?

Yes, you can as long as the community where the orphanage is located is approved for foreigners to visit (based on conditions in the community to support foreigners to stay there - hotels and hospitals for example). Even if it is not one of the cities open to foreigners in China, it is possible to arrange the proper visit for your child by contacting the local authorities.

What is a typical orphanage visit like?

Families often have different goals for their orphanage visit. A family might be curious about their child’s orphanage and would like their child to see where they once lived. Sometimes a child has some adoption-related issues and the parents are hoping to help resolve these through the visit. And some parents would like to find out more information for their child about their biological family. Maybe the orphanage can shed some light on this or provide more information.

Most families will schedule a 2-4 day visit to the community where their child was adopted and/or included in the community where their orphanage was located. This may include the provincial capital and another city, or may be just one location. So length of time is really dependent on how far apart these two places are (a provincial capital being a transportation hub in many instances - train or air flights).

Since some remote orphanages are not reachable by plane or train, families will need to be flexible in the length of time they plan to travel and the conditions under which they and their family will travel. Trying to use the “best available” service is usually wise as you want your child to go to China with a positive experience going to their orphanage. This does not mean you need 5-star everything, but surely you don’t want conditions to be intolerable by family members either. You may or may not need assistance from travel - travel operators, travel guides, or interpreters. Consider having an interpreter for your orphanage visit as this should not be something an orphanage is expected to provide.
this time - such as giving developmental toys to the children. This may include some activity with children on-site. If a major project is planned then you will do this later that day or the next day (like putting up posters or child-oriented wall paper borders in rooms).

After the visit through the orphanage the return to the greeting room should be anticipated. This is when you can ask more questions about your child's time there. Ask to see the orphanage file if you wish. We suggest you ask for a photocopy of the file and have your interpreter help you with it's contents. Expecting the orphanage director to review the file with you page by page my be unrealistic as they may not wish to discuss certain aspects of your child's situation relative to abandonment. Also, and very important, we believe, is that you consider whether or not your child should be present at the time of the discussion about the file. It may be the case that you want to share at some later time what the contents of the file was - at an age-appropriate time and maybe even a more appropriate place. Still, you should obtain a photocopy for your record.

We suggest that families host the orphanage director for a lunch at a local restaurant - this is not expensive and it allows you to further your relationship with the orphanage and show respect for the orphanage director having spent a consider- able amount of the work-day with your family. The average cost is $400 RMB ($190).

Many families have requested to buy something for the or- phanage or make arrangements for children to attend school. This should be done in the afternoon. The visit usually ends with a promise to return again by the family and a welcome to do so by the orphanage director and staff.

Can we meet our child's special caregiver or foster family?

In most cases the answer is “yes” although many orphanages do not wish to be involved in arranging this. If you have the name of a caregiver or foster family it is easier for A Bright Moon to help you arrange a family meeting. In some cases the meeting will be at the orphanage location while in other in- stances you may visit the foster family at their home or a care- giver may come to visit you at your hotel. Families wishing to see caregivers should be understanding of the situation for these people in that the decision is being made for this aspect of your visit by someone other than the caregiver. The more information you have the better, but we have found people from photos or other clues as well.

Can my child hold the babies at the orphanage?

Yes, that is often something that returning children wish to do when they visit the orphanage. As long as your child is healthy and the children are healthy, the orphanage will allow this.

What's in the orphanage file and can we have a copy of it?

There are three files relative to your child’s adoption. The first is at your adoption agency and you have already provided them and they have provided you with the content of this file in the past (adoption papers, home study, referral informa- tion). The second file is at CCAA (adoption papers and referral). The third and most impor- tant of all is at the orphanage itself. This file includes the fol- lowing:

2. The police report will include where/when the child was found and by whom. Any conditions relative to this event would be noted.
3. Finding Ad (a copy of the adver- tisement used to determine if your child's birth family wished to claim her/him).
4. Referral information including medical report.
5. Any notes or documents left with the child at the time of finding.
6. Copies of your child's adoption papers.

Because there may be sensitive information in the file, we remind parents that returning to the hotel with their interpreter to review the information without the orphanage director and child present may yield more "connec- tions" than when all eyes are watching/present.

What have people learned from their child's or- phanage file?

The police report (abandonment location) and any notes in the file seem to be the most sought after information. Some parents have learned for the first time exactly where and when their child was found and who found the child. There are some- times notes with children's birthdates or notes from someone in the family (mother/father/grandparents) providing birthdate or a message asking anyone who finds the child to take good care of her/him. Sometimes it is possible to get informa- tion or even some of the clues to lead to further information about the child.

Some families have discovered that their child is not the age that they were told she/he was - alternating birthdate and age. For children this can be upsetting to discover that they have been celebrating the “wrong” birthday all these years. It’s best to have a plan for the information you will discover. If you sud- denly discover that your child is not the age you thought or is really from another province, don’t over react but accept that this is the situation and move on. Be positive as you explain this to your child: “Oh sweetheart, isn’t it great that we can now celebrate two birthdays - your China birthday and your American birthday” or “How would you like to have two days to celebrate?” or “Let’s keep your birthday as it is unless you would prefer the new birthdate” “Which option would you like?” Kids are pretty honest and will let you know their prefer- ence. Honor it.

Another reason we caution families to do this in private with- out their child present is that the interpreter will be able to discuss with you the abandonment information in the file and you can determine together whether or not it is feasible to visit the location. You can then decide and inform your child based on what information is age-appropriate or developmen- tally appropriate for them. You may elect to visit the abandon- ment site on your own without your child or you may decide to go as a family. Your interpreter can tell you more about what the conditions will be like there. Sometimes the site is remote, a village far from the city or one that requires taking a van or 4-wheeler vehicle and then walking for a long dis- tance (30-40 min. in two cases we recently had). Sometimes the parent's initial euphoria at finding out this information is so intense that they forget how going to such a location might impact their child.

Please do not neglect to think ahead!

Ask yourself these 12 important questions:

1. What will you see at the abandonment site?
2. What will conditions in a remote village be like or even a crowded department store or train station?
3. How will people react to a foreigner being there?
4. And, what if we are able to discover even more information - such as who/where the birth family is? Are you ready for that?
5. Really ready? Is your child at their age/maturity/understand- ing of the situation?
6. How will this visit impact the future of your family?
7. If you were to meet the birthparents of your child how would you communicate with them (beyond the interpreter you have along that day)?
8. What relationship do you think would be realistic of each family, each having a right to their own privacy? Do they have this right? Do you as well?
9. Remember that their decision to abandon their child was against the law. Had they kept the child they would also have violated the law in China. The act of abandonment is also a violation of the law. Did they abandon with the intent of giv- ing someone else a child who was childless? Can you invade their lives?
10. What role will your child have with respect to her/his sibling(s) in China should there be one or more brothers/sisters in China?
11. Will you expect your child to have a relationship with them and they with her/him? What if your child doesn’t want to do so? What if the siblings in China refuse?
12. How would a situation like that impact your relationship with your child?

I share this with you and ask you to role play either in your mind as a single parent or with your spouse/partner as a couple. Think about the fact that when you visit China or even an orphanage location, it is a place that you can return to in the future to clarify or help your child see/learn more. Each time you can add value should you feel you need to. Some things are better left for later on when a child is old enough to put the entire context of adoption/abandonment/China together. Most adults can’t do this without a lot of experience and education related to China, how can we expect children to do so all in one visit?

Can we locate and visit our child’s abandonment site?

Many people have accomplished this, some with their chil- dren and some on their own. Often places are easy to locate - a hospital, a train station, the police station. Sometimes the locations are very remote and to travel there will require great fortitude and determination (some flexibility and willingness to rough it as well!).

Is there a chance that our child’s birthparents will be at the orphanage or adoption city when we visit there?

No, it's highly unlikely. Since the orphanage does not know the family nor their whereabouts, they will not be able to con- tact them to tell them you are coming to China and/or visiting the orphanage. It is unreasonable to expect that the orphan- age will know their whereabouts and im- possible for a birthfamily to know you will be traveling to China.

How do we find our child's birth- parents if that's our goal?

Such goals need to be very pragmatic and realistic - what is actually likely to
happen? Can you readily find birthparents? No, of course not. Therefore, be sure you don’t promise your child something you can’t deliver on thus causing them to be disappointed in you and as their parent(s). Remember that young children see parents as being able to solve all problems, making hurts go away, making them feel secure and full of warmth.

If we promise them something like finding their birthparents that we know is nearly impossible to deliver on, we are setting them up for great disappointment and ourselves for great failure (not to mention years of agony). It will be the rare family who is able to make connections such that their child’s birth family can be located.

Should a national registry be established in the future, it does not mean that a family will seek the child they gave up or wish to be found.

If your long-term goal is finding birthparents then your short-term goal should be gathering data (do not expect that while your child is young you will make this incredible connection to birthparents and siblings). Your child’s possible siblings may not even know that your child exists. Therefore, when you travel to China, start with gaining the information in an orphanage file. Check with the local police department where the report was written to determine if any additional information exists. Locate the person who found your child to see what they may know. From there it is anyone’s guess what can or will happen. For some people this search has been successful in locating the person who found the child, in some cases the family and home where the child was placed on a doorstep, and in that needle in a haystack chance - the one in a million chance - there has been a family locate the birthparents of their child. It can happen but no family should enter into a return trip to China with the feeling that they or their child are “entitled to have this information” and meet the birthparents. This is not a way to gain success in China. Patience and good fortune are better predictors of success than urgency, expectations, or an attitude of entitlement.

How can I best prepare my child for this visit?

1. Talk talk talk talk talk talk! What will they see, what will they do, how will they feel about it PLUS all of the “what ifs”.
2. Create a project that you can work on together over a period of time so that you often have the opportunity to discuss China and adoption issues. Make sure that project has a defined outcome - collecting vitamins at school or church/synagogue to donate to the orphanage. Some activity where your child will need to articulate to others what she/he is doing and why.

Suggestions:

a. Collect vitamins from school, church, synagogue, clubs, or organizations.


c. Have a bake sale or a penny drive to raise money to purchase items for the orphanage (either in US or in China). Later we will suggest items that may be needed by most orphanages.

d. Have a neighborhood toy garage sale (collecting items and selling them to raise money for this purpose).

e. Be creative - ask your child what they wish to do to “give something back” to the children in China.

3. Prepare a journal for trip planning and preparation. Select categories that will be needed - preparing for the trip, packing, telling others about our trip, taking things to the orphanage, things we need to learn about before the trip, what we will do on our trip, what we will eat on our trip to China, how I feel about going to China, do I want to visit my orphanage and why/why not, what do I want to learn from my trip to China, etc. A child can write/ prepare their feelings/emotions about the return to China from a very systematic way so you can pinpoint and determine not only if there are any issues but where the source/cause of those issues are. This can be in writing, through a series of images/drawings/collages, etc. By using creativity and some structure (guided learning/exploration) you will be able to do your detective work as a parent.

4. The best preparation begins with parents being prepared themselves - prepared to participate in helping the child up-front and willing to do so, prepared to share thorough information that may have not yet been discussed, prepared to allay fears and resolve worries that the child may have, prepared to seek professional assistance should your child have issues that you can’t handle or don’t know how to do so (or have failed in resolving), prepared to let the child be very involved throughout the children tour program so that she/he sees your dedication to her/his culture and homeland, prepared to be positive with regard to life and experiences in China (no matter how different, unusual or adverse the situation might be), and prepared to share your emotions with your child so that she/he sees that this is a shared experience within the family.

5. Create a small photo album or scrapbook to bring to the orphanage if that’s something important to your family. One way to do so is to sponsor an older child’s local public school education. By paying her/his annual tuition and fees, the child will be able to go to school like other children in the community. Supporting their school supplies (or sending them) and school uniform, helps the child feel like a normal child in the classroom. For your child this may help to lessen the guilt sometimes felt about not being chosen or “what would have happened to me?” questions.

Should we give money to the orphanage?

It is our suggestion that you spend your money wisely and a cash donation, though much needed by the orphanage, is not a secure donation when given directly to the orphanage. There are many ways you can do so but you must ensure that contributions “count” and are used in ways needed by the children in the institution. Should you give money to an orphanage, please ask for a receipt - called a “fapiao” in Chinese.

Obviously there are many organizations that solicit funds in support of Chinese orphans and these are all very worthy of your contributions even if you can’t designate your child’s orphanage, it may be that another orphanage is in greater need because they aren’t part of the international adoption system. In China there are over 900 orphanages that are not part of the international adoption program. Many are in desperate condition and a small amount of funds to them goes much much farther. Consider the FCC National Appeal, Amity Foundation, Half the Sky Foundation, Philip Hayden Foundation, Hope Foster Home, and many other fine organizations who can guarantee you that your cash contribution directly helps children in need.

If you are sure you wish to contribute something to your child’s orphanage consider bringing things they need and donating them to the orphanage or purchase them in China while your child is present to assist you in doing so. Make it her/his gift to the orphanage and have your child engaged in the decision-making process taking as much ownership as is possible for her/his age.

What should we give to the orphanage?

Suggestions from previous participants in our program and real needs expressed by the orphanage directors when asked: 1. Developmental toys for children.

2. Medical supplies - thermometers (in degrees C), vitamins, droppers (with ml), skin medications, children’s fever medications, etc.

3. Music (tapes or CDs of children’s music with battery-operated tape/CD player or a 220V unit bought in China).

4. Posters and children’s artwork or wallpaper border with children’s scenes.

5. Art supplies - coloring books, crayons, markers.

6. School supplies - pencils, chalk, pads of paper, small notebooks, rulers, erasers, etc.

7. A computer for the children to use - a desktop computer is China costs around $500-6000.

What special things have people done in lieu of giving money?

1. Families have taken the orphanage director shopping and bought for the orphanage something they needed like a refrigerator, air conditioner, clothing, beds, medical supplies, strollers, walkers, etc.

2. Sponsor a child to attend elementary school.

3. Families have gone with the orphanage director and a child selected by the orphanage to a local school and enrolled the child in school by paying the annual tuition on behalf of the child and making arrangements for school supplies and clothing for the child.


5. Sponsor a child for foster care at a foster home receiving children from the orphanage - such as Hope Foster Home or LangFang Children’s Village.

6. Help the orphanage raise funds to purchase a van.

7. Arrange for caregivers to receive infant/child first aid training.

8. Support a doctor or specialist to visit the ill children at the orphanage.

Should we take gifts for the caregivers?

If you have a special caregiver you wish to give a gift to, it should be done off-grounds from the orphanage as the orphanage is a government place of employment and employees are not supposed to accept gifts. In doing so they are put on the spot. We suggest you have something consumable like candy or American Ginseng and give them that during any meeting in the orphanage. Then if you wish to give something more personal you should arrange for the person to come to your hotel.

Suggestions:

1. Candy

2. Flowers or plant (can buy nearby your hotel)

3. American Ginseng

4. Local products from the state/province where you are from - nuts or dried fruits, jelly, etc.

5. Adoption jewelry

6. A selection of flower seeds

Please do not give cash as they can get into trouble accepting this as it may be seen as a bribe of some sorts even when it isn’t that at all.
Can we stay at the orphanage versus a hotel?

No, these institutions are not set-up for overnight foreign visitors and are not allowed to house foreigners. Some can gain special permission for government supported groups and projects but for the most part when we ask orphanage directors on behalf of families they say “no”. Also remember that the caregivers and directors will feel responsible for you when you are there and that means they can’t go home to their families, have a normal life, nor get some much-needed rest.

Orphanages that have foreigner-run sections or organizations with adjacent orphanages where foreign staff is employed have more flexibility. Still, they too are busy and care should be taken when making such requests. We suggest you really examine what your goals are in this regard and consider the lives and situations of those who work at these institutions. Would you go to visit the medicare supported nursing home where your grandmother used to be and ask them to let you stay overnight there? Of course not. While yes, this is different, it’s not that different when it comes to the lives of those who work there and the arrangements are more problematic.

Can we spend time visiting the orphanage every day for several days?

Most orphanage directors will say “yes” to a request for more than one visit, but not all will. You should offer a reason why you believe this is important for your child when making such a request. They are busy people with a lot to accomplish if they are going to improve the conditions for children in their institutions. A few hours to a half-day is very reasonable for a visit. A second follow-up visit is also acceptable to most orphanages. When people ask to stay longer then there should be some real project or activity or program that has been established with the institution and also approved by the provincial authorities. It is the rare institution that says, “well sure come whenever you wish - have the full run of the place”. Since we don’t expect “full run of the place” at hospitals or social welfare institutions in North America, why should we expect to do so in China? Some people have asked us to help them do projects like painting and build things and these situations ALL require government approval - it’s government property. There are groups like church teens, Eagle Scout projects, Girl Scout Troops, etc. coming to China to volunteer in orphanages. Programs like the Half the Sky Foundation’s orphanage build projects and Nanny/Caregiver programs are supported by high levels within the Ministry of Civil Affairs and CCAA which enables them to gain access. Still they must get approval for each project and each location. To be successful in China in these situations you must be considerate of the local situation and give people a real sense of and priority for local control. That means your request may first be answered with “no”. A “no” in China can often be changed into a maybe or a “yes” but that is highly dependent on who is the decision-maker and the RISK involved.

You have come from afar,
We welcome you and invite you to partake of our food, our kindness and protection.

Before you fly again with the birds to distant mountains.

Zaieenasi, a Xinjiang woman

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