

The Changing Face of Adoption from China

By Beth Smith

Twenty years ago, the need for international adoption from China was both clear and compelling. In the previous decade, the number of abandoned children had grown by the thousands – largely as an unintended consequence of China’s one-child policy, imposed in 1979 to curb population growth. Facing fines and other consequences if they failed to comply, many impoverished families felt compelled to abandon children they could not support and that would not in time support the family. As sons traditionally provide the sole means of retirement support in Chinese culture, parents primarily abandoned girls – or children with physical disabilities.

As news of this crisis spread, families throughout the world began opening their hearts – and homes – to “China’s lost girls.” Between 2002 and 2006, over 30,000 children from China joined adoptive families overseas. Most of these children were girls. Most of them were infants. And most had no known health conditions.

This is no longer the typical profile of children joining families through adoption from China.

Not just healthy infant girls

In the past five years, the face of international adoption from China has dramatically changed. Although the need for adoptive families remains strong and compelling, many new families considering adopting from China still believe that China’s orphanages are overwhelmed with abandoned infant girls. In truth, most of the children now living in China’s social welfare system have special medical or developmental conditions, or are older. And as families are often surprised to learn, many of them are also boys.

As Director of Adoption Services for Holt International these past thirteen years, I have had the great responsibility of guiding both Holt and the families we work with through this evolving process of adoption from China. I have also had the extraordinary opportunity to watch as families embrace these changing needs – and lovingly welcome older children and children with special healthcare needs into their homes. Most first-time adoptive families do not approach Holt with the intention of adopting a child with a cleft lip and palate, or a clubfoot, or an extra finger on each hand. But today, well over 90 percent of the children coming home to families from China – through Holt and across all agencies – have some degree of special need.



Picture courtesy of Holt International

Factors supporting the increase in special needs adoptions

Many changes in China – most of them positive – have caused this gradual shift in international adoption. At the heart of these changes is a cultural shift in attitudes toward girls. Although many families in rural areas still traditionally prefer boys, rapid urbanization in China has led to more modern views about girls. China’s growing economy has also given families greater resources to care for their children. As a result, more families in China are choosing to

raise girls, and fewer healthy children overall are relinquished for adoption. China's growing economy has also helped spur rapid growth in domestic adoption. Holt has long advocated for in-country adoption, and we are happy to see families in China embrace it.

Between 2005 and 2007, tens of thousands of families throughout the world applied to adopt from China. The process slowed, referral times increased, and after the China Center for Children's Welfare and Adoption (CCCWA) announced stricter guidelines in May 2007, families rushed to beat the deadline – completing and submitting dossiers en masse. Those hoping to adopt a healthy infant girl faced an even longer wait. By 2007, what was once typically a 7-to-9-month wait for a referral continued to lengthen by the minute. Today, the estimated timeframe to adopt a young child from China with no known health conditions stands at well over five years and growing.

Although many families found themselves stuck in a lengthening process, this burst of interest in adopting from China eventually resulted in one great outcome: thousands of children have joined loving, permanent families. Children who once waited longer than others to find families – children with special healthcare needs, older children, and boys – are now first in line for adoption from China.

Changes in the matching process

In the past, the CCCWA was responsible for matching all children to families. But given the shifting profile of children in need of families, the CCCWA began partnering with select placement agencies to expedite the adoption of children with certain medical and developmental conditions. (Non-special needs children are still matched in China by the CCCWA.) These agencies, including Holt, began encouraging families waiting in the standard process to consider adopting a child with a relatively minor

condition – such as a cleft lip, a minor heart condition, or clubfoot. Periodically, the CCCWA releases a new list of children available for home-finding. Because this list is available to many agencies, agencies quickly “lock in” children that are a potential match for their families. As it is often nighttime in the U.S. when China posts the new list of available children, children are usually matched to families overnight!

Now that agencies are responsible for matching children with special needs to families, all prospective families must indicate the profile of child they are open to considering – including age, gender and medical condition. Good agencies encourage parents to carefully consider the profile of child they feel comfortable parenting to help the agency make the best match possible – for both parent and child.

Re-thinking the label of “special needs”

A common misperception among families is that most children with “special needs” are severely disabled and will require very involved, lifelong care. In truth, over 85% of the children Holt places from China have minor, manageable or correctable – even, sometimes, self-correcting – conditions. One family we matched in 2010, the McBrides, returned from China to discover that their son's minor, correctable problem could be cured with an inexpensive, over-the-counter medication. Like so many families, they



Picture courtesy of Holt International

were excited to share with us how well their son was doing – describing him eight months after coming home as “completely healthy, and exceeding averages for his age in every area of development from language to social skills.” Although initially apprehensive about adopting through the special needs process, they now serve as a mentor family to other prospective adoptive families.

Even families whose children require surgery or physical therapy are often pleasantly surprised to discover how inconsequential many of these “special needs” can be, once corrected. The Rees family is one that comes to mind. In 2008, we matched them with a little girl who had an extra toe on each foot. After coming home, she required surgery to correct her condition – and afterward wore casts on both legs. The surgery was tough, and they were happy to get it behind them. But now, their daughter is thriving – “gifted,” even. “Never in our wildest dreams did we even entertain any thoughts that our child would be exceptional,” they wrote in a recent update.

Of course, other families who have accepted special needs referrals have found that the special need was more difficult to manage than expected. Agencies generally encourage families to consult an international adoption physician before accepting a referral to understand the range of potential outcomes associated with each medical condition. Every child is different, and some conditions will require more extensive care once home. It is crucial that parents educate themselves about the different conditions. We help support that effort by putting them in contact with physicians and “mentor families” who have adopted children with a condition they’re considering. Our staff in China can also follow-up on any questions families may have about a particular child. Ultimately, we want families to feel informed and prepared to care for the child they’re matched with. Once families are home with their child, agen-

cies typically provide post-placement services to ensure they receive the follow-up support they need.

I could go on and on about families who entered the process with one expectation, and ended up coming home with a child who completely changed their perception of “special needs.” Many families who adopted before are returning to adopt through the special needs process – often for older children or children with more involved needs. Now more experienced, many feel more confident in what they can manage. Or they feel inspired to adopt again after traveling to China and seeing children who are still waiting.

In 2010, the Kolb family adopted two older boys from China – one about to age out of eligibility for international adoption. They already had four adopted sons at home, but the Kolbs fit what these two boys from China needed – experienced adoptive parents who had parented past their ages. The Kolbs exemplify the wonderful families who are finding that they have more love to give, and offering it to children who might otherwise never find a family.

It has warmed my heart to see how families have embraced these recent changes in adoption from China. To see families shift their vision from a “little girl with pigtails” to a 2-year-old boy with a cleft lip or an infant with a heart condition, and report back eight months later that they’re completely in love with their child, is truly amazing. I look forward to a day when the families applying to adopt a child with special needs outnumber the children now eligible for adoption.

Beth Smith is the China Director of Adoption Services for Holt International. Families interested in learning more about the types of children currently available for adoption can visit www.holtinternational.org and click “Adoption Webinars” to register for a free informational webinar.