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NORTHEAST

Lessons in Chinese

A Couple From West Hartford Reached Out To China To Give A Child A Home. They Had No Idea What They'd Started.

January 23, 2005
By SUJATA SRINIVASAN

On a beautiful spring morning in Hangzhou, China, a small group of Americans laden with baby bags and diapers maneuvered through a flood of bicycles to get to the registrar's office. In a few hours, they would walk out of that cramped little building as parents. Ria Van Hoof and her husband, Dana Gordon, were a part of that group.

Despite being on a plane for more than 15 hours the day before, they had been up in their hotel since 5 a. m., unable to sleep. The couple filled out their adoption paperwork and sat down in two tall chairs set around a massive oval table in an otherwise tiny, Spartan room. A strict-looking registrar sat at the head, the group scattered around him, waiting.

Finally, a rickety blue bus jaunted down the dusty road and pulled up, sputtering, in front of the building. The expectant parents piled onto the balcony. "The babies are here! The babies are here," everyone exclaimed excitedly, recalls Ria. Somewhere there, in a swathe of blankets in the arms of her ayi from the orphanage in nearby Xiaoshan, was baby Maia, 7½ months old.

After the ayis, "aunties" or caregivers, had entered the waiting room, the registrar handed Ria and Dana a bundle with chubby cheeks. "She looked like the Michelin Man. All I could do as I held her was smile. But Dana was crying," Ria says. She handed the baby to him. He stood frozen. "Relax!" she told him. "You're not going to break her!" Gingerly, he opened his arms and held his daughter for the first time. "And just like that, you're a parent," Dana recalls in awe, snapping his fingers.

The baby, their baby, was every inch as cute as she was in the out-of-focus thumb-sized photograph the couple had received six weeks earlier. "It was love at first sight. You look at that photograph and give your child a personality. She had the biggest cheeks, dark

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eyes and a bunch of black hair. Just adorable!" recalls Ria.

The process took under nine months. Throughout, Ria was filled with fear and uncertainty. "You know, there is that anxiety until they put that baby in your arms. There are times you worry whether they will really give her to you," she says. Then, after the initial euphoria of holding their baby for the first time, Ria began to worry again. "Will she like me, will she accept me?" she asked.

Ten years later on a New England autumn morning, the trees are drenched in bright sunlight and the Sunday morning air is crisp. The Gordons live in a white colonial house on a quiet street in West Hartford, and today is the culmination of months of my tagging along with the family and getting to know them. Past the manicured lawn and mini-basketball hoop, Tasha, a gorgeous Samoyed, is curled up at the door. "It's a mess," Dana warns, pointing at the sunny living room. School bags and books lie scattered on the hardwood floor. I plop onto the inviting, dark blue leather couch, and survey the familiar scene. In a glass curio case to my right is a statue of the laughing Buddha. Next to it is a crackled green porcelain plate with a brown dog in the center, which the couple purchased in Hangzhou - Maia was born in the Year of the Dog. Around the fireplace are steps made of mirrors. The shiny ledges hold more mementos from China - a shadow painting of a berry tree, porcelain dolls and a set of exquisite hand-painted perfume bottles.

Dana offers to make tea. We drink slowly in silence, but the quiet is interrupted by music from a flute, wafting down from a nearby room. "What are you playing, Maia?" I call out. She steps outside, a slender waif with a shock of black hair and sparkling eyes. "It's a tune from `Ella Enchanted,'" she says. "I don't have the notes, so I'm playing from my head. Are you talking about adoption again?" She asks, all in one breath. When I nod yes, she remarks, "Well, it's very easy. Just fill out a bunch of paperwork and get a baby!"

Dana rolls his eyes and Ria laughs. "When she was very young, around the age of 2, we started discussing her adoption. We talked about babies growing inside mommies' tummies and how she hadn't grown inside my tummy, but inside her China mother's tummy. Her story is a part of her," says Ria.

Maia has her worries. Often, she ponders how she will look when she grows up, since she does not know who her birth parents are or how they look. When she was 4, Maia thought her hair would turn blonde like Ria's. Now, she worries over bra size. "I'll probably look like my birth mom when I grow up. Since I'm really skinny, I think that my birth mom is also skinny, you know, all over."

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Diversity is a family trait. Ria, 51, is Dutch; Dana, 44, is American. She's Catholic. He's Jewish.

"I think I'm Chinese-American-Dutch, half Jewish, half Christian," Maia Jin Ying Gordon announces.

"When someone asks me if she is my real mom, I tell them she is real, you can touch her and feel her!" Maia says. "But she adopted me, so she's my adoptive mom. She is my forever mom."

Prior to adopting Maia, the couple were living in Denver, where Ria was a physiotherapist in private practice and Dana had a marketing job at Seagram Company Ltd. The two had met in California through Dana's sister and hit it off right away, backpacking in Yosemite National Park for their first date. A year later, in 1989, Dana's job took them to Denver, and two years later, they were married. With money to spend, the couple vacationed in Europe, Hawaii, Mexico and the United States. They knew then that Ria could not bear a child. "I was 25 when I had to have a hysterectomy. It happened at a time when I didn't want children. So by the time I started thinking about kids, years later, I was so used to the idea that it had become a non-issue," she said.

Dana, too, was unperturbed. "I always wanted kids, but knew when I married Ria that we couldn't have any. And that was fine with me. I loved Ria, and kids weren't the only reason I was marrying her," he said.

Then Ria happened upon an article in the Denver Post on the plight of girl babies in China, and how they were being abandoned. She had turned 40 and had just lost her mother. "I looked at my job and thought to myself, 'What am I doing here? I need more meaning to life,'" she says.

Ria was unable to get the article out of her mind. "The feminist in me was upset," she recalls. For the next few days, she walked around with a growing sense of urgency inside her. Then, out the blue, she asked Dana what he thought about adopting a baby girl from China.

"Sure!" he had responded right away.

"Don't you want to think about it?" she had asked.

"No, I don't. I think it's wonderful."

"And that's how we started," recalls Ria, "from one little newspaper article."

Ria had considered adoption earlier. After seeing a news feature on television on the plight of orphans in Romania after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu, she said to Dana, "Well, maybe we can adopt one child and give her a better life." The couple, however, had not been married long enough to qualify. Subsequently, one of Dana's cousins, who ran a domestic adoption

agency, offered to help. "But private American adoption did not sit well with me, because I felt it was a competition between adoptive parents, as to whom the birth mother will pick," Ria says.

What did sit well was having Maia home. Ria switched to working weekends. "It was much more adventurous to be a parent," she discovered. "You never know what's next, each day is different."

The couple soon realized it might have been wiser to read baby books instead of adoption books. They also discovered that Maia was a high-need baby who had learned that if she made a ruckus, Ria or Dana would immediately show up and attend to her.

As they watched Maia grow, it occurred to the Gordons that they didn't want her to be an only child. She must have a sibling to turn to someday, just as Ria had, after her parents had passed away. "We are older parents and may pass away when Maia is in her early 30s. We didn't want her to be alone. An only child is a lonely child," Ria says.

And so they started the adoption process for a second child and received AiLin's photo. The baby stared into the lens and her hair stood right up. Maia was delighted. "Baby, baby," she exclaimed.

Ria traveled alone to Zhanjiang in 1996, while Dana stayed home and took care of Maia. She went directly to the orphanage, where AiLin's foster mother had brought her. But the handover did not go smoothly. AiLin was attached to her foster mother and burst into tears when Ria first held her. The foster mother, who was also crying, took the baby back and quieted her, but when she handed her back to Ria, AiLin started screaming again. Finally, Ria placed the screaming baby in a sling and carried her back to the hotel room. In the sling, AiLin stopped crying, as long as she looked outward; but the moment she turned her face toward Ria, she started screaming again. "I was at my wit's end," says Ria. "This baby did not like me! She absolutely did not like me!"

Back in their hotel room that evening, mother and daughter had some visitors - a man and two women Chinese officials who planted themselves onto chairs, waiting politely. None spoke any English, and the translator had not yet arrived. Ria was flustered. There were baby clothes spread all over the bed as she paced around the room pacifying AiLin, who continued to scream.

"There were the officials, and I was trying to calm the baby down. But the baby was not calming down! They were kind of concerned, as if I was not doing the right thing." What Ria did not know at the time was that the officials continued to sit there and nod not because they disapproved of her mothering skills, but because they hadn't received their donation to the orphanage

yet - a step necessary to complete the adoption. Finally, the translator showed up and helped to clear the air. Exhausted with exercising her startlingly loud vocal cords, AiLin curled up and went to sleep.

When the officials left with the translator, a drained Ria fell asleep as well. In the middle of the night, a persistent kicking awakened her. "I opened my eyes and there was AiLin, looking at me with the most beautiful smile! We clicked from then on." But the baby was not entirely comfortable. "She was 6 months old and had always seen people with dark hair. My Caucasian face did not make sense to her. I looked, smelled and sounded different," says Ria.

Back in Denver, it took several months for AiLin to adjust. "The early photos show her just screaming and crying; she had night terrors till the age of 2," says Ria. The family went into a state of chaos for the first six months. "Everything gets out of synchronization. You have to get used to the child and the child has to get used to you," says Dana.

Gradually, AiLin started to bond, and the girls grew very attached.

Both started questioning their adoption from early on. When Maia was 7, she asked Ria why her birth parents had given her up.

"I don't know, Maia," Ria had told her, explaining several possibilities. Perhaps her birth parents had wanted a boy; perhaps she was the second child and they did not want another baby; or perhaps her mother had been unmarried and was not ready to raise a child.

"Maia took it. For her, not knowing seemed to be OK," says Ria. But AiLin was more contemplative. Last year, she came up to Ria and said, "Mom, I want to go to China." She wanted to find her birth mother.

"You know AiLin, when you get older I will be glad to help you with this," Ria told her. "I want you to know, though, that it is illegal in China, as it is anywhere in the world, to abandon one's children. However, your mother made the decision to do that and it will be very difficult to find her."

But AiLin continues to pray every night in the hope of meeting her birth mother someday. "I hope she is thinking of me and missing me," she says, softly.

And this, says Ria, is the harsh reality of adoption. It's about giving up one's birth parents, country and culture. While all adopted children go through such feelings, every child deals with it differently, Ria explains.

"That is who AiLin is. She has a birth family and an adopted family. It is very hard for an 8-year-old to understand that we won't find her birth family, that she will probably never know who her mother is. That's

heartbreaking for a child. She has a big loss," says Ria.

The couple's life changed again when Dana's father passed away. They moved to Connecticut in 1997 so Dana could take over his father's dry cleaning shop in West Hartford.

While the family was still settling in their new home, Ria, by now a full-time mom and homemaker, chanced upon the poem "The Waiting Child" on rainbowkids.com by Debbie Bodie, an adoptive mother. The poem is about a toddler who watches, year after year, a woman returning to her orphanage to adopt babies. The toddler longs to be chosen by the woman, too, but wonders if she would ever want an older child like her, since most people preferred to take home infants. "This poem just gets to me every time," says Ria. Dana feels the same way. "Even now, I cannot read it without crying," he admits.

And that is how Lani, then 3, became a Gordon. The entire family went to Shaoguan in 2000 to bring the toddler home. The trip was Maia and AiLin's first visit back to their birth country. "It was strange being around so many people who looked like me," says Maia. When they entered Lani's orphanage, however, Maia became deeply disturbed and ran out of the room, crying. Dana followed her outside and held her, as they stood together, watching the beautiful blue mountains on the horizon. "For some reason, the smell of potties, diapers and unwashed babies just got into her," he says.

Maia remembers the incident and the stench of the orphanage. "I didn't want my parents to touch me because they were touching the babies. It was scary to see all these kids not taking showers as I do. I felt sorry, since they didn't have parents to take care of them," she says.

That night, Lani refused to take off her new squeaky shoes and Sesame Street backpack, even before going to bed. She went to sleep crying, holding Maia's hand.

The next few months were turbulent. Lani was not used to a male disciplinary figure and burst into tears every time she saw Dana. "I had a very tough time," he says. Like AiLin, Lani cried herself to sleep, but not with AiLin's booming vocal cords. "Lani could cry, and you would never hear a sound. She still occasionally does that, and it's scary to watch," says Ria. The child was upset by something as simple as Dana trying to brush her teeth. "We saw a lot of regression in Lani for the first three or four weeks because she felt that her security was displaced," Ria says.

Lani refused to go to Dana, and the situation stressed Maia and AiLin, who ignored the toddler for a whole year. "Lani demanded all of my attention, and it became a huge issue for Maia and AiLin - a struggle

for who could sit on mom's lap. They did not like her," she says.

Ironically, Lani was comfortable with all men but Dana. "That was scary. At the mall she would walk off with any man that just smiled at her," says Ria, explaining how at the orphanage, Lani was used to the husbands of caregivers who played with the kids sometimes. "But she wasn't used to a father figure yet. This was typical older-child behavior; she would go to strangers, but not Dana."

Initially, the couple had to ask well-meaning friends not to hug or pick up Lani when they visited. "We had to make clear to her that hugs were only for family," says Ria.

She admits it took about three weeks to bring Maia into her heart, but it took a whole year for Lani. "All of a sudden, you realize that you love this child as much as you love the others. But it takes time. ... It's easy when you adopt an infant, because in most people, a baby brings out one's nurturing instincts. That's hard with an older-child adoption."

Determined to bond with Lani, Dana picked up the crying child one day and drove to a McDonald's. And there, over a huge plate of fries, they bonded. "Just like that," says Dana. "She was a french fry kid."

But their troubles were not over. Although Lani was of pre-school age, the school did not accept her because of language difficulties. The child spoke no English, but knew some words in her native Cantonese. Ria and Dana had taken lessons in Mandarin for nearly two years; but they did not know any Cantonese. They could not communicate. Ria would point to pictures and say what they meant in English. "Bedtime," she'd repeat. Lani was quick to pick up visual cues, and soon she understood what the pictures meant. But most of all, she saw what her siblings did, and followed. If they went upstairs, she went upstairs. If they brushed their teeth, she brushed hers, too.

But her language development problems persisted. Even today, she struggles with word retrieval, cannot remember the usage of a particular word, and has difficulties in completing sentences. Lani's problems are typical in older-child adoptions, Ria says, because she had to learn another language at an age when she had not yet mastered her native language.

After Lani had settled in, Ria's attention was caught by a story on the Internet about a Chinese boy from Guilin, who had been put up for re-adoption by an American family in New York after his adoptive mother had fallen very ill. The Gordons decided to adopt him, and two years ago, on Father's Day, they all went to New York and drove him home in their newly acquired minivan.

The girls were thrilled. "It made it easier in some

respects because he was not one more girl - he was a different species altogether," laughs Ria. Initially, J.J., now 9, found it difficult to integrate because he had been placed several times with different families within the United States and could not bring himself to trust people.

"It felt like he was walking on the edge of the family, not a part of it," says Ria. J.J.'s bonding process still continues, and it's obvious he adores Ria. "Mom, you're the best," he'd say, hugging her tight when she cooked his favorite food, which was Chinese. "He just belongs here. But as with an older-child adoption, it took much longer (for him to settle down.) It really does take two years until you feel you're a family once again," says Ria. She explains how Maia and J.J. fight a lot, but will play if no one is looking. "There is an underlying relationship they're not willing to own up to, yet," she says.

Soon J.J. realized he was outnumbered three to one, and began asking for a brother. "Four kids are plenty," said Dana, firmly. Still, they could not ignore J.J.'s persistent request and arranged for 16-year-old Chaio-Wei Wu, an exchange student from Taiwan, to live with them. Chaio-Wei arrived in August with his tennis racket and viola case, looking forward to being "big brother" to J.J. "I have two sisters in Taiwan, so it's nice to have a brother," he says.

J.J. agrees heartily. "I wanted a brother because life with three sisters was only a little good. But life with Chaio-Wei is very, very good." The girls cut in and say, "Booooo," teasingly. J.J. stalls for a second, and continues bravely, "He sleeps in my room and we listen to CDs together."

Chaio-Wei attends high school in West Hartford and will complete a full year before heading back to Taiwan. Meanwhile, he shares a bright blue room with a bunk bed, wooden desk and shelves with J.J.

Back in the living room, J.J. runs up and wants to know if he can play with his PlayStation.

"Did you practice your Chinese with Chaio-Wei?" asks Dana.

"Yes," J.J. nods.

"Was he happy with your pronunciation?" Ria prods.

"No," J.J. replies, sheepishly.

"Then you must do it again," says Dana.

As J.J. runs off, Ria tells me he had spoken Chinese until age 6, but speaks very little now because adopted children eventually lose their native language. And that is something the couple is trying hard to avoid. Still, they let the children choose what they want to do. After attending a Chinese camp, J.J. asked to

go to a language school. His siblings chose not to because classes were held every Sunday - not an appealing proposition for the girls.

On a recent Sunday morning, Ria sat knitting a sweater in the back row of a Chinese language class at Trinity College. Dana, Chaio-Wei, and the girls had gone apple picking. Glancing at the children in the front, and the adults in the two back rows, J.J.'s teacher encouraged the class to participate. "I want everyone to say the rhymes with me," she said. Soon the kids and their parents were clapping and chanting in Chinese. Next, the teacher pulled out a jump rope and the kids took turns skipping while singing traditional songs just as kids do in China. At the end of the class, she handed out homework and J.J. started getting ready for his next class. Ria gave him some cookies and chips as we walked to the Chinese calligraphy class, where J.J. showed me how to write his name, Jay Zeng Rhong Gordon. "Rhong means glory," he says.

Ria says the children's lives are American. "But I want them to know that there is a rich and beautiful culture that is theirs. I don't want them to think that Chinese culture is better than any other culture. I just want them to know that they have a culture, because it would be an impoverished life if one did not know one's birth culture."

At the Chinese Culture Camp at the Learning Corridor in Hartford, Maia, observing my embarrassing struggle with the Chinese yo-yo, taught me a little trick. "Balance it before you yo-yo it," she said solemnly. But the corners of her mouth twitched and her eyes were bursting with laughter. Maia's tongue-in-cheek was delivered with a deadpan expression, very similar to her dad Dana. He admits that in this case, nurture won over nature. "Sure, I can't look at my kids and say, 'There, that's Uncle Jimmy again!' The genetics are just not there. There is no ancestry." He pauses, and jokes with the same deadpan expression, "That's not such a bad thing. I don't have very good genes!"

Occasionally, when AiLin puts her booming vocal cords to use, Ria will announce with exasperation, "Child, I don't know where your parents came from, but you have a strong voice!" AiLin is comfortable with comments like these. Says Ria, "There are things you get from your parents. Your voice you get from your parents." But AiLin has taken on quite a few traits from her adoptive mom as well. Both are introspective and practical. AiLin often ponders and reflects over her adoption, hoping that some day, she will meet her birth mother. Ria too, when consumed by a strong idea or emotion - like adoption - reflects, and then acts upon it.

Lani, however, is in the process of picking up traits from both Ria and Dana, whose company she prefers over her siblings'.

The couple hasn't, as yet, found similarities between themselves and J.J. - a fact that deters neither. J.J. seems to be a shy and quixotic little guy bravely carving out his territory amidst three girls, who delight in teasing him.

Never big on organized religion, the Gordons started celebrating festivals and made rituals out of Christmas and Hanukkah for the children's sake. They buy new clothes on Chinese New Year and take the kids to a traditional Chinese feast on the Moon festival. Dana works six days a week in his store, coaches soccer three nights a week and is the co-president of the PTO. The only luxury he has given up, he claims, is golf. "You have 18 years to spend time with them and make your mark on them. I can play golf later," he says with a shrug. Ria's schedule is busy, too, with Maia's flute lessons, AiLin and J.J.'s violin lessons and a host of other activities. Also, to help the children deal with adoption issues, the couple periodically takes them to CASEY Family Services in Hartford, where they share their thoughts and feelings with children from similar backgrounds.

Do they ever regret giving up their old life?

"No," say Ria and Dana together. "That was possibly the easiest part. Sure, there are days when I feel I didn't have to deal with that third child, or fourth child. But it's always worth the trouble," she says.

The lifestyle change has reduced their income. "We had a lot of savings that we spent on our first and second adoptions - travel expenses and government fees in the U.S. and China. By the third adoption, we didn't have enough money, so we paid the agency in stages," Ria says. While the couple received an adoption tax credit for Lani and J.J. in the year they were adopted, which covered the expenses, all other expenses to date were borne entirely by the couple. "There is no (financial) support for international adoptions," Ria says.

Ria admits she occasionally misses not having money. "When we were just the two of us, we bought two airline tickets. Now we're buying six! Our summer vacation is very cheap. Every year we go to one rundown resort near Lake George with other adoptive families," she laughs. And this year, Ria taught Maia to buy clothes on sale.

People sometimes ask the couple about the negative side of adoption. "There isn't any," responds Dana. "The negative side of adoption is like the negative side of raising children. You don't treat them any differently, they're just your kids. What's the negative side of being parents?"

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