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FEATURE

Parenting: Red Diaper Brigade

They were adopted from orphanages in the Chinese countryside. The challenge for their parents is to bring these girls up as New Yorkers while keeping them in touch with their former culture.

By [Steve Fishman](#)

In the hotel room in southern China, the orphanage director pointed in the direction of Roberta Ferdschneider, a curly-haired woman who sat on a bed, hands folded patiently in her lap. She smiled what she thought was her most welcoming smile as the director, a sweet man, introduced her to his 2-year-old charge, Wu Pei Yue. "Mama!" he said, pointing. "Mama!"

It was the middle of winter. Wu Pei Yue had been driven a couple of hours in from the countryside wearing four pairs of pants, two shirts, two sweaters, a knit jacket, a hat with cat ears -- every stitch of clothing she owned. She had red, chapped cheeks; fine, poorly cropped hair; and a face distorted by screams.

Roberta had begun the adoption process eighteen months before, and six weeks ago, the FedEx man had brought to her office a one-inch-by-one-inch photo of the future Juliette Ferdschneider. Roberta, single and almost 50, had converted the guest room in her Brooklyn apartment to a child's room -- she'd had the ceiling wallpapered to look like a blue sky with clouds. She'd read up on attachment theory.

There was also lots of maternal gear to get. She bought a lightweight stroller at Toys 'R' Us, the one on Union Square -- it was packed on the plane with the bottles and diapers (in a couple of different sizes, since she didn't really know how big her baby would be). She was bringing pink-purple shoes in two sizes, a polarfleece coat, pajamas. She'd packed a medical kit with syringes and antibiotics. She was prepared for all the exigencies, she'd told herself -- except one. Her daughter-to-be, Wu Pei Yue, a name Roberta couldn't pronounce, broke into sobs at the sight of her. "Juliette" -- as Roberta called her child from the start -- "wanted no part of me," Roberta quickly surmised.

After all this time, Roberta was a little heartbroken. And yet in some unexplainable way, Roberta found she loved her fitful daughter-to-be at first sight. "I knew in my heart of hearts her tears were a good thing," said Roberta. "I was having the big gain, she the big loss." She set out to win over this angry child. Communicate, she told herself, however she could.

The next morning, when Juliette sat down by the hotel-room door, as if waiting for the orphanage director to return, Roberta sat with her. She touched Juliette's new shoes -- both pairs had been too big, but Juliette seemed to like them

anyhow. Roberta offered Juliette a set of stacking cups she'd brought, probably the first toys she'd owned. Then, in the hotel room in southern China, Roberta started singing -- it was easier than talking -- any song she could remember. She sang "If I Fell," by the Beatles, and "Eensy Weensy Spider."

By the end of the second day, a transformation had occurred. The former Wu Pei Yue needed to have Roberta in her sight every moment. "I strapped her into the stroller" -- she'd never been in a stroller -- "and wheeled it next to the bathtub just so I could take a shower," said Roberta.

Walk into any Upper West Side playground or Park Slope day-care center, or visit a pre-k or a play group in the Village or Chelsea, and you're likely to spot Chinese girls -- almost all the orphans are girls -- with white parents. "I was sitting in a park one day on the Upper West Side and my Chinese daughter was playing in the sandbox with another little Chinese girl," recalled one parent. "I looked over for the other girl's parents. It was so surprising. They were Chinese. 'Oh,' I recall thinking, 'I guess that can happen.' "

By the end of last year, some 19,000 young Chinese girls had been taken by American parents. It's a pretty good guess that the largest number has ended up somewhere in the New York area, with people like Roberta Ferdschneider. Most plunked down \$15,000 or \$20,000 and boarded a plane to China, traveling in groups whose members quickly picked one another out by the stroller without the kid. After they picked up their little girls out in the countryside -- most were likely the children of peasants -- they headed, almost every one of them, to the same hotel, the five-star White Swan next to the American consulate, where'd they'd get their papers. Sometimes the hotel had a couple of floors of new parents with new daughters. The parents traded diapers and information, wondering all the while the same things that Roberta pondered: Would it click? A Chinese child, a white Jewish mother? Or Italian? Or Irish?

"Couldn't you get a white child?" one adoptive parent's father had bluntly asked. It was a thoughtless question. And yet every adopting parent wondered if ties of blood, of race, of ethnicity, of looks, of history -- all the traditional elements of family identity -- really would matter. And if they didn't, then what would it take to conjure up an identity for this new New Yorker, a Juliette-to-be, for this "mishmash of a family," as one adoptive parent put it?

The girls were, of course, New Yorkers, baptized as Catholics or Protestants or, as in Juliette's case, probably headed for bat mitzvahs, and as such fit snugly into other identities. (A joke among adoptive parents is that Jewish women are raising a whole generation of Chinese girls. Sometimes it seems that way. Last year, Roberta took Juliette to a Passover seder with three adopted Chinese girls -- all Jewish.)

Yet the children were unmistakably Chinese, too; it was a fact you couldn't get around. Many of these parents are taking this circumstance as a mission, raising their kids in full recognition of their faraway origins. There are, in these lives, Chinese nannies, Chinese schools, Chinese summer camps, trips to Chinatown, and play groups with children just like themselves. It's an ambitious undertaking, one that's not only about bringing up a child but also about educating and changing themselves.

The choices these New Yorkers are making now flow out of ones they'd bypassed earlier. They were generally late bloomers, certainly when it came to families. Many had been career-centered. They'd dawdled on their way to parenthood -- sometimes until biological families were out of the question. "I was like that T-shirt that says oops! i forgot to have a baby," says trend-spotter Faith Popcorn, founder of the consulting firm Brain Reserve, who was in her late forties by the time she got the baby urge. ("Adopting is a trend," she says.)

China, as if intending to appeal to just this group, preferred "mature" parents for its orphans -- until two years ago you

had to be at least 35; now it's 30. What's more, while other countries ruled out singles, the Chinese government welcomed them. And also, importantly, China had babies in abundance. To control its burgeoning population, China limited most families to one child, a limit that's enforced with stiff fines. Since Chinese families preferred boys -- boys would support parents in their old age, it was said -- girls were selectively aborted, occasionally left to die, or abandoned at bus stops or police stations or public parks. While Chinese demographers already had begun to ponder another problem -- a surfeit of bachelors -- Chinese orphanages filled up with girls, perhaps several hundred thousand of them.

Roberta Ferdschneider, meanwhile, had been drifting. One day a friend offhandedly told Roberta, "You should be a mother." She had sometimes thought so herself. She was the type to take care of people, to make them feel at ease, but she hadn't found a suitable partner till she was almost 40. Still, her boyfriend didn't particularly want a child, and by the time they'd started trying, she couldn't get pregnant. "For years," she said, "I contemplated the meaningless of my life." Soon, though, Roberta found herself typing a question into an Internet bulletin board: *I'm 48, can I adopt?* Who knew exactly what prompted her. She stared at the screen.

Someone wrote back, suggesting she look into adopting a Chinese girl.

Now, though, the question had become more complicated: How should she and her new daughter go about becoming a Chinese-American family? Like every Chinese girl, Juliette came with a Certificate of Abandonment, an official document which simply said she'd been found in a village and the People's Government took her to an orphanage. When she was 3, Juliette had one day insisted to Roberta, "We have to go to China today. I know I can find my Chinese mommy." Roberta simply told her the truth -- there was no way of finding her parents -- which Juliette seemed to take in stride.

Still, it was a troubling issue. After her first day at school, one daughter asked her father how people knew she was Chinese, since she hadn't told them. Perhaps their daughters wouldn't be so interested later on, but many parents struggled with how to treat this difference at the heart of their families. "Some people say they just want to be a 'normal' family and ignore the way their family was formed," says Elizabeth St. Clair, who is general counsel to New York City's Health and Hospitals Corporation. "They don't want to emphasize the Chineseness of their kids. But I have this little feeling that all of us in my family have to participate together. And since skin color or culture is important in America, we have to make an effort to honor theirs."

Many families -- St. Clair's included -- initiate the process of honoring their kids' Chineseness by keeping part of their daughter's Chinese name. Georgica Swan Pond Rose Petal Qi Xin Popcorn was the name Faith Popcorn assembled for her daughter, though she calls her "g.g." (spelling it lowercase, like e.e. cummings, as she explained). And Andrea Annunziato, an interactive media developer at AIG, called her daughter Nikki Rose Liu Xingping Annunziato. Roberta's daughter was Juliette Peiyue Ferdschneider -- a Hebrew name would soon be coming. "They made the name 'Whoopi Goldberg' seem mundane," laughed Susan Caughman, an early adopter and now publisher of *Adoptive Families* magazine.

In many of these families, the most coveted information may be the name of a bilingual nanny: Mandarin-English. Richard Shulberg's wife had managed to find Mary Huang via somebody's cousin. Eventually Mary would take care of a group of four adopted Chinese girls. Sarah Shulberg was one; Roberta's Juliette was another. "Mary was exactly what Nina needed," said Ann Finneran, parent of another one of Mary's charges. "She'd take her and hold her and hug her and say 'I love you' in Chinese and in English."

In fact, Mary Huang wasn't exactly bilingual -- her English was far from perfect -- but she was terrific with the kids. The girls called her *yiyi*, which in Mary's explanation meant "Mommy's older sister."

Juliette already understood Mandarin and spoke a little -- it was either Mandarin or baby talk, Roberta said. Mary cooked for them and set them to playing games. She brought them to the library and the playground. Sarah didn't really like her Chinese name, but sometimes Mary called her Sar Wah Wah, which Mary told her meant "I love you very much." And Juliette was called by her Chinese nickname Pei Pei. Mary is, said Roberta, "a combination grandmother and Mary Poppins."

Some parents decided they, too, would like to speak Chinese -- for their children, if nothing else. "I would love to learn Mandarin" is the kind of thing you can hear parents say on the Upper West Side these days. Paula Grande, 51 years old, actually took two courses. "I don't have enough years left to learn to read and write," she concluded. All the while, of course, her adorable 6-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Youjing Streeter, who also studied, delighted in correcting her pronunciation.

Still, in New York, there are lots of other things Chinese to participate in. There is Chinatown, for instance. Robyn Stein, managing director of Pro-Media Public Relations, liked to wheel her daughter through the narrow streets near Mott and Bayard. In supermarkets, older Chinese women stopped her, bent over the stroller, and tried to strike up a conversation. Stein laughed, "My daughter thought she was from Chinatown for a while."

For Chinese New Year, the Chinatown community reached out. Roberta helped organize a group of 30 adoptive families to join the annual parade that winds through Chinatown. Each kid carried a little sign with her name in Chinese and her province of origin. A couple wore traditional Chinese outfits. The parents carried a flag that said adopted Chinese children knowing their heritage. "People from the province where my daughter was born gave us a hug," said David Youtz, an assistant director at the Asia Society, father of Sophie, and one of the few parents who speaks Chinese. There were t'ai chi schools and kung fu schools marching and the kids loved it -- in part because they got to march in front of a giant paper dragon of a martial-arts troupe, though, as Roberta said, "The parents liked it more."

"We're thinking of a float next year," Roberta said.

In many ways, however, Chinatown still feels like a foreign place. Perhaps because of this barrier, a new English-friendly Chinese culture -- one designed for these eager new families -- has been springing up. A lot of it is coordinated by an organization of adoptive families -- Families with Children from China, or FCC, as it's known. It's now a nationwide confederation of more than 90 chapters, but it was started half a dozen years ago by a few families holding potluck dinners on the Upper West Side.

The volunteer group devotes part of its resources to bringing Chinese culture to adoptive families. They sponsor celebrations for Chinese holidays, like the New Year and the Autumn Moon Festival, as well as for Chinese Culture Day, a celebration they made up to honor families just like themselves. Now all across the city there are enthusiastic Chinese-holiday celebrations, sometimes even more enthusiastic than those in China. "We have visitors from China who after going to an adoptive parent's home say they haven't seen so many New Year's decorations in all their lives," said Kay Johnson, an adoptive parent and Asian Studies professor at Hampshire College.

"They like to do everything the Chinese do," says Xiaoning Wang, from Beijing, and now Park Slope. "I was impressed and moved." Wang, who has an entrepreneurial bent, saw an opportunity. After bumping into white women with Chinese babies, she formed ChinaSprout.com, which provides Chinese products -- her shelves are lined with books, tapes, silk dresses slit up the side, Chinese provincial maps, panda-bear backpacks -- and cultural information for families who have adopted from China.

It's possible to wonder if, in all this excitement over a new culture, there's also a kind of pressure, maybe a particularly New York kind of pressure. Do some families feel they have to do Chinese things, and do them really Chinese?

"A lot of adoptive families say you must take Chinese lessons by the time your child is 2, or 3 at the latest," said one parent. "And you have to start Chinese dance classes certainly by 3. Or else you're going to get comments, especially if you don't show up for Chinese New Year."

The **Little Red School House**, the progressive school in the West Village, started a Mandarin-language summer camp two years ago -- and before it expanded, there was a waiting list. ("I couldn't get my daughter in last year," lamented one mother.) And **Little Red**, along with St. Luke's, offers after-school enrichment classes in Mandarin as well. All these activities are led by Jennifer Lee, who seems to have pioneered many of these forays into Chinese culture for kids without Chinese parents in part, she says, because of what she's noticed. "Not looking like their parents bothers some kids," she explained. "Some feel ashamed of being Chinese."

Here was a parent's biggest fear. It touched just the point where a parent felt least qualified to help. How, after all, could a Caucasian parent help her Chinese kid appreciate her Chineseness? The results might be years off, and yet the experience of a child in psychic pain is a terrible thing.

Jennifer Lee had already noticed a tendency. "Some of the kids don't want to emphasize their Chineseness," she said. In this instance, she figured she had an advantage in getting through to these mixed families: "I don't look like everybody else." Jennifer is part Chinese and part African-American, among other things (she looks kind of Hispanic, though she's not). Jennifer had always identified with the Chinese side of her family -- she hardly knew her father -- and was stunned when people wouldn't believe that the Chinese woman next to her was her mother. "It was very hurtful," she explained. And she saw the same kind of hurt at work in her classroom. There were kids who started out silent, refusing to participate when Chinese was spoken.

Outside New York, the issue of a girl's Chineseness doesn't always seem so pressing. One adoptive New Yorker had traveled to China with a dozen families from around the country. After adopting, they kept in touch. "The other families don't take Chinese lessons, they don't worry about taking Chinese dance classes, they don't go out for Chinese food," she said.

What was the right emphasis? No one could say. This particular familial alignment hadn't existed in any numbers before. A sense of fitting in, of belonging, seems a delicate act. Maybe, they worry, emphasizing their Chineseness works against those things. "It's a difficult issue. To the degree you emphasize Chinese, you're not really part of the family," said Nancy Reale, a professor at NYU with an adopted daughter. "Are you raising somebody who will always be different from you? Or are you raising a New Yorker like you?"

"The watershed is school," explained Elizabeth St. Clair. There are dual-language schools, mainly in Chinatown, where the kids learn Chinese. "How much of that did I feel comfortable with? How much did I want my family to be marginal to my kids' school experience?" asked St. Clair, who said, "I wanted us to be a more normal part of the mix. I decided on a neighborhood school."

Roberta, though, leaned the other way. Juliette had started off a Mandarin-speaker, and her mother would like her to continue. "I want her to be a citizen of the world," Roberta sometimes said.

Some people warned her that she'd lose context in the mainstream world. "I want Juliette to be confident inside her skin" was her response. She didn't think Juliette would lose touch with mass culture, the one she sees on TV all the time. "I like

that my child will be comfortable around Chinese people," she said.

Juliette attends Red Apple Child Development Center, a nursery school in Chinatown, and has her sights set on Shuang Wen, a new public school -- P. S. 184, housed inside P. S. 134 -- on the edge of Chinatown. Sarah Shulberg, Sar Wah Wah from Juliette's old play group, is already enrolled. So is the daughter of Paula Grande, who left work so she could be active in her child's upbringing. She's now co-president of Shuang Wen's PTA. The school has 110 students -- 100 of them Chinese, including five adopted girls with non-Chinese parents. Half the day is taught in English, half in Mandarin. The children actually use different names, morning and afternoon.

Paula's daughter seems to use a variety of names. At roll call, for instance, she's Elizabeth Streeter. In the afternoon, during the Chinese session, she's Ma Youjing. In the Chinese style, Ma, her Chinese family name comes first, though, of course, she doesn't really know her Chinese family name. Ma is the name assigned to everyone from her orphanage -- in fact, there's another adopted girl in the school from the same orphanage and thus with the same name. At home, Paula and her husband call her Youjing, which Paula pronounces the American way, *You Jing*, and which her teachers, using the correct pronunciation, say *Yojing*, with a long *o*. (Paula feels that "Yo Jing" sounds a little slangy.)

The children don't seem to mind all this switching back and forth -- it's the parents who have trouble keeping up. And the rising competence in Chinese can leave parents feeling a bit out of it, especially with homework. When Chinese homework reaches the kitchen table, Paula, despite the couple of courses she took in Mandarin, has little idea what's going on. "Sometimes I sit with a dictionary," she said, but usually that proves impossible. "The characters look like chicken scratch," she confided. The school ran workshops for parents in Paula's predicament. Still, she said, "sometimes parents can feel estranged."

Before they left China, many adoptive parents spent a few days pushing their lightweight strollers through the streets. Wherever they went, older Chinese women bent over to pull up the infants' socks and fluff the strangely thin polarfleece, checking that the infants were warm enough.

Then, invariably, the older women said two words, possibly the only two they knew in English. "Lucky girl. Lucky girl."

Was it true? Even back home, neighbors sometimes congratulated you on being such a generous soul. Some of these children could have died if they hadn't been adopted. They sometimes lived several to a crib. They might have had too little attention, too little sunlight, too little food. Some got rickets. Some had flattened heads from lying so long on their backs. "Olivia's head seemed caved in in the back," said Angela Calamia. "She had boils all over her body, fever, a glazed look in her eyes."

The adoption agency was so concerned it felt compelled to ask: Did she want to trade her child in for another?

"This was my baby. It was as if I gave birth to her," Calamia said. "I would never have taken another child."

Calamia's daughter, now 2, is as healthy as any American child. And yet if you ask these parents, they bristle at the lucky-girl stuff. "You see these kids playing together and you can think, Yeah, there are lots in the orphanages who aren't adopted," says Sarah's father, Richard Shulberg, who co-produces "The Secret Museum of the Air" for WFMU. "But these kids also represent the needs of parents to create a family, parents who couldn't create a family any other way. We're the lucky ones."

And in fact, it was more than a family they'd ended up with. In the end, the kids gave the parents, really, a sense of belonging. "The decision to adopt from China was the best thing I've ever done," says Roberta. "I love being a mother."

In many cases, family life has proven transformative. "I reached out and made lots of friends, and had a social life centered around my circle of China-adoption friends," says Roberta. Suddenly her calendar bristled with play dates. Meg Tolan, an attorney for the New York Stock Exchange, organized a single-parents group. Elizabeth St. Clair always brought her two adopted Chinese kids, who became best friends with Meg's two. Now, most Saturday nights, they have dinner together.

Sometimes Richie Shulberg, Roberta's friend, imagined them ten years from now, as adolescent girls. They'd be in a Chinese gang, but a nice one. They'd be called the Mei Meis, which he says means "little sisters." Sarah Shulberg would be in it, and of course Juliette Ferdschneider would, too -- they'd been friends from their nanny days. They'll wear pink satin jackets bearing the name of their province of origin. "Dad, I need \$300 for the Mei Meis," Richie imagined his daughter saying.

For Roberta, these new families have become her whole life. She'd worked as a typesetter, as a manager at a hospital. She's now assistant director of China Seas, an adoption program. When she goes to dinner with people who are thinking about adopting, she takes them to Chinatown and brings Juliette. "She is our best advertisement for China adoption," says Roberta. Juliette eats a few noodles and then, once she's comfortable with people, climbs into their laps, plays with their hair, puts her chubby arms around their necks, as Roberta explains that it's not so hard, really, to be a family.

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