Hopes on hold; Is this the end of adoption from China?

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Byline: Shelley Page
Column: Shelley Page
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The Chinese government's "matching room" is both mythic and mystical in the lives of adopting families. It is the secretive chamber where the yearnings of would-be moms and dads from around the world are filed in neat dossiers stacked high, awaiting scrutiny from the bureaucrats who pair parents with orphans.

Each couple's folder is filled with sorrow, longing, hope and information so personal they might not share it with their closest friends: fingerprints, police checks, details about whether they were spanked as a child, whether they plan to spank their child; confessions about depression or marital strife or credit card debt; and, in many cases, revelations about health problems, fertility treatments and multiple miscarriages. Even weight -- the obese need no longer apply -- is now relevant when adopting from China.

When a file reaches the top of the pile, a "matcher" contemplates the intimate details of a couple's life before pairing them with a waiting orphan. Modern-day lore has it that Chinese officials match would-be parents with exactly the right baby, so somehow hotheads with a competitive streak can end up with one kind-hearted yet volatile drama queen and an intense bookworm gymnast, as was the case when we adopted two daughters from China.

For most of the past decade, the matching room was cramped and dingy, documents heaped in every corner. But now, with fees paid by thousands of adopting parents, it is housed in a glass building where files are stored in gleaming metal cabinets and computers handle the matching, which was formerly done by hand.

Earlier this year, I was allowed a rare visit to this room with a Canadian charity for which I volunteer. While there, I met the man who, in September 1999 -- a little more than eight years ago -- matched our file with the quiet and watchful six-month-old infant with rose-petal lips who would grow into our gymnast. He, of course, didn't remember my daughter's file, but we posed for a scrapbook photo anyway. I was all emotion, he was all business.

I also watched a "matcher" as she peered at the photographs of two Canadians -- a solemn-looking, would-be mother and father, both white -- on one half of her computer screen. On the other half, the heart-shaped face of an eight-month-old baby. With a few clicks of a mouse, it was official. Whether by fate or chance or simply bureaucracy, these three were now one.

That couple was lucky, if, as some adoption officials suggest, the end of Chinese adoption is near, a red sun slipping below the horizon.

During our visit, officials for the China Centre of Adoption Affairs confirmed what, at that time, was a rumour. The number of couples hoping for a baby now so dramatically exceeds the available abandoned infants that it could take at least three years, if not more, to adopt. Officials said there were an almost insurmountable 25,000 files -- including 600 Canadians -- waiting to be matched with Chinese orphans.

Since my visit, the situation for adoptive parents has worsened. With each passing week, China matches fewer babies to foreign couples. Some months only 400 referrals are sent out worldwide -- compared to 1,000 just a year before. And it seems likely it could take five years or longer to match waiting couples with infants. Growing wait times are reflected in the operations of the world's adoption agencies, some of which no longer accept files from people wishing to adopt from China.

Many desperate couples are wondering where all the babies went. While families like mine, with our two daughters from China, could soon be reminders of a time when China's population control policies and traditional preference for boys led to the abandonment of thousands of baby girls, many of whom ended up in the farthest corners of the world. And if China is no longer a viable option for would-be adoptive parents, it means one more avenue for the childless has turned into a dead end.

Martha Maslen, executive director of Children's Bridge International Adoption Consultants, the country's largest adoption agency, says the future of the China program is uncertain. "We just don't know. It may speed up or it may close, or it may compress or shrink or become entirely a 'special needs' program," says

Maslen, describing a situation in which western parents one day may only adopt Chinese children with cleft palates, heart defects or other birth defects.

The Ottawa-based non-profit agency has facilitated almost 2,500 adoptions of Chinese children in Canada, including mine. After completing a record 328 adoptions from China in 2003, Children's Bridge has facilitated fewer adoptions each year. In 2006, just 164 couples adopted through the agency. With 2007 coming to a close, only 143 adoptions have been completed.

If this decline of about 30 per cent per year continues, by 2011 only 25 Canadian parents will adopt a Chinese baby through Children's Bridge.

Those at the bottom of the huge pile at the China Centre of Adoption Affairs will still be waiting.

"China is definitely at a juncture," says adoptive parent and researcher Brian Stuy, who runs the Utah-based Research

China.org, which gathers and scrutinizes hard-to-get information about China's adoption program. "I'm not optimistic regarding the future of China's program." Stuy predicts by the end of 2008, China will have to stop the adoption of healthy children.

It's impossible to see the piles of dossiers in the matching room and not feel angst for the parenting hopes stuck there like embryos that won't implant.

For years, my husband and I have hosted childless couples in our living room to share information about adoption. They meet our daughters and turn the pages of our photo albums, while we answer their anxious questions.

They tell us how they went through months, more often years, of unsuccessful attempts to give birth to a child, all the while holding in their hearts the idea of adopting a little Chinese girl.

Some of these couples went on to adopt, others have files caught in China. Nurseries set up long ago feature empty cribs at the ready, or else have been turned back into offices or guest bedrooms. All are struggling to understand what is happening in China.

Chat groups are rife with waiting parents who speculate the Chinese are warehousing infants who remain out of reach of the adoption process, perhaps because China doesn't want the world to see babies leaving en masse prior to next year's Olympics.

Others blame the slowdown on the Hunan baby smuggling scandal of 2005, when news reports exposed the trafficking and sale of infants to several orphanages, that then made them available to foreign families. China stopped processing new infants in Hunan province from January through mid-April 2006 -- right around the time the slowdown began. Perhaps, this theory suggests, the files are undergoing greater scrutiny, which has slowed the process.

Still others -- and this is the Chinese government's position -- say there are simply fewer babies abandoned in China. It may be because more Chinese families are keeping their girls or that domestic adoption in that country is increasing.

If it's because more families are keeping the girls, this becomes a bittersweet story: Good news for China's baby girls, heartbreaking for western parents struggling to form a family and facing increasingly limited options at home and around the world.

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Those of us who have adopted from China -- or anywhere on this planet -- have always known our happiness is at the expense of someone else's loss; that Chinese government population control policies, combined with a traditional preference for boys, have wrecked families and destroyed lives in that county, while we end up the beneficiaries.

The notorious one-child policy that began in 1979 was the brainchild of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and is still in force to some degree. Deng believed curbing population growth could create prosperity.

It's not clear if Deng and his mandarins foresaw the result: The worst boy-to-girl ratio in the world, with an estimated two million girls erased from the population each year. First, the infants were drowned, suffocated or abandoned in fields and, later, aborted as ultrasound technology became more available. Orphanages filled up as baby girls were left on doorsteps, in markets, on roadsides. In 1991, China reformed its adoption laws and opened its orphanages to the world, offering these infants up for adoption.

That these girls were welcomed whole-heartedly by thousands of would-be parents should not be a surprise. As Maslen says, "the stars aligned exactly with what the majority of parents want." Unlike biological couples the world over, the majority of whom want a boy, more than 85 per cent of adoptive parents want a girl, says Maslen.

During that first year, only one Chinese baby went to a family using the fledgling Children's Bridge adoption agency, 61 babies went to Americans. In 2006, about 13,000 Chinese children, mostly infants, left that country for North America or Europe.

Before the one-child policy, roughly the same number of boys to girls were born each year in China. With each passing year, census data shows the gap between boys and girls has widened. Now, in some central provinces where the desire for boys is strongest, the ratio is 132 boys to 100 girls. For second-born children, it's 152 boys to 100 girls.

There has been a long-standing controversy over what has caused this increasing gap between boys and girls. Last month, demographer Shuzhuo Li, of the prestigious Institute for Population and Development Studies in Xi'an, China, published a report showing sex-selective abortion -- rather than female infanticide or underreporting of female births, as has been suspected -- is behind the dramatic rise in China's sex ratio at birth. His report was sponsored by the United Nations Population Fund.

Li analysed much of the research on missing girls. One 2001 study showed that almost half of women living in a rural county in central China had used ultrasound to determine the sex of a fetus, and nine out of 10 female fetuses in second pregnancies resulted in abortion -- if the couple's first child was a girl.

In a 2005 study, researchers interviewed women from another village and also showed that if a fetus was found to be female, and that fetus had a sister, "it will almost absolutely end up with abortion." The majority of women interviewed knew aborting female fetuses would mean their sons would probably not have anyone to marry, but they didn't seem to care.

The consequences of the profound population imbalance are already seen, as millions of men face a future without marriage. The situation is exacerbating the growing problem of sexual trafficking, but also threatens regional stability. As Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer recently wrote in their provocative book Bare Branches, a reference to branches of a family tree that will never bear fruit, surplus male populations in a region often result in violence -- through robbing, rioting and militarization.

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I have always struggled with how to explain these "lost girls" of China to my growing daughters. Throughout the world, mothers in dire economic circumstances frequently find themselves unable to care for their children. These singular acts of abandonment or of "creating an adoption plan," as we call it in the west, often make sense. But when an entire people chooses boys first, it becomes more challenging to explain. We are left to explain both the one-child policy, as well as why girls are considered second-class citizens. Neither explanation is that comforting to a little girl.

Statistics alone seem to illustrate a culture that disdains them. And certainly there is ample evidence, best captured in the ancient Book of Songs (1000-700 B.C.):

When a son is born,
Let him sleep on the bed,
Clothe him with fine clothes,
And give him jade to play...
When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground,
Wrap her in common wrappings,
And give broken tiles to play...

Yet, despite the stories of not-so-long ago forced foot binding, and more current abuse and neglect, to be in that country as a new western parent with a small Chinese baby girl strapped to your chest is to be embraced by almost everyone. Strangers pat us on the back, or pinch our daughters' cheeks, giving us toothy grins of good luck and stern warnings to take good care of our precious cargo. The so-called Clothing Police, a pack of well-meaning grannies, roam the streets of almost any Chinese city looking for inept westerners to tutor, pulling and tugging at our daughters' snowsuits to make sure they are thick and covering the right amount of skin.

These are the memories we share with our daughters, careful to explain that there is love for girls. But in a country of desperate people, giving birth to a boy is a guarantee of old-age security. Girls marry and disappear into their husband's families. Boys remain behind.

If my family ever received harsh treatment from the Chinese because of our daughters, it seemed to be born of resentment or regret. Once, on a visit to Shanghai, we entered a closing restaurant looking for dinner. The owner took one look and hissed at us to leave. We were starving, so I pressed for an explanation. My rough translation of her harsh words: "How dare you take our daughters, and two of them, at that." The

pained, perhaps wounded, look on her face made me think she might have given up a baby girl. Why could we have two daughters, when she didn't have that luxury?

In China, it's easy to see girls are missing, whether visiting a park in Beijing where every grandparent seems to be taking care of a fat, over-dressed little boy, or while touring a village where packs of teenage boys roam together.

Taking stock of what this attitude has cost the country, when combined with the oppressive one-child policy, has become a preoccupation of demographers, government officials and adoptive parents. Maslen calls it the "push pull of the heart," which for would-be parents means wanting the best for these girls, while knowing it means another avenue to form a family may be closing.

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Decent homes were replaced by windowless shacks, well-dressed people by the ragged, in scuffed shoes with cracked soles. Business people became farmers working the reddish earth behind water buffalo pulling rusty machinery. The white van carrying my delegation moved away from Wuhan, an industrial hub with a population of 10 million, farther into Yangxin, one of the poorest counties in Hubei province.

Just a day after visiting the matching room, our destination was Yangxin Orphanage to make a gift of computers to nine teenage orphans who -- despite the odds -- had just started college.

Hubei is made up almost entirely of Han Chinese or Mandarin Chinese, the dominant ethnic group in China, where the preference for boys is highest. When the one-child policy took effect three decades ago, girls started to disappear at an alarming rate. The imbalance is now estimated to be 128.08 boys for every 100 girls.

As we drove, a provincial adoption official attempted to explain why 25,000 files were waiting to be matched back in Beijing. It had nothing to do with the baby trafficking scandal or the Olympics. That rumour started in part because South Korea closed its adoption program for several months before and after the 1988 Seoul Olympics because it didn't want the world focusing on the situation. Chinese officials have told adoption agencies, such as Children's Bridge, that there may be some delays around the time of the Olympics, but only because of a shortage of flights and affordable hotel rooms.

Instead, the adoption official said, more families are keeping their girls, and as a result, since 2004, one-third fewer babies are abandoned each year.

This decrease has been noticed by researcher Brian Stuy, who tracks "finding ads." Finding ads, more formally known as abandonment notices, are placed in newspapers by the orphanages in a bid to locate family before the infants can be put up for adoption. In almost every province Stuy monitors, he has noticed a decrease in the ads.

I asked researcher Shuzhuo Li what he thought accounted for the decline in abandonments, and he speculated -- via e-mail from China -- that it was probably a combination of both the wide-spread practice of sex-selective abortion and China's aggressive attempts to encourage families to keep their girls.

The Hubei government, like those elsewhere in China, has campaigned hard against the so-called "Two Illegalities," sex identification and sex-selective abortion. Fetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion are illegal -- although difficult to enforce with back-alley clinics and mobile ultrasound machines reportedly common and inexpensive.

The official I spoke to explained that families are being encouraged to keep their girls through "Care for Girls," a pilot project that started in 2000 to elevate the position of females within society. The program offers families cash incentives and free education while punishing those who offer or use sex-selective abortion. Dictums like "men and women are born equal" and "Daughters are also descendants," were added to school textbooks.

Within three years of the program's start in Chaohu, the sex ratio at birth had decreased to 114 to 100 in 2002, from 125 to 100 in 1999. In July of last year China launched Care for Girls countrywide, and predicts the sex ratio at birth will decrease until it reaches a normal level by 2016.

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When we arrived in Yangxin, we were ushered into a chilly government building to meet the nine teenage orphans, boys and girls. We posed for pictures in front of the new Chinese-made computers, then toured their spartan rooms, covered with posters of Chinese singing stars. The dozen or so babies cared for by the orphanage were in foster care in the surrounding neighbourhood.

We walked a short distance through winding mud roads to one home, with an earthen floor, where we saw two children with extremely limited functioning sitting in wooden boxes with holes cut in the middle -- a combination potty and saucer chair. The director of the orphanage, MaMa Zhang, asked us to help raise

money to repair the heart of one child in foster care. None of the babies in this orphanage were designated for international adoption.

At lunch, I sat between two teenaged girls who would challenge my assumptions about the fate of orphan girls.

Dong Xiao Qing, 18, explained that when she was a girl she would gaze at the sky and dream of one day taking flight. She now studies "air aviation" in Wuhan and hopes to become a flight attendant. Defiantly, she told me she'd never been on an airplane. In China, most flights happen only in the imagination.

"This doesn't mean that one day I won't fly," Xiao Qing added.

When she was nine her father was killed. Her mother, paralysed from the neck down, couldn't take care of her. She came to live at the orphanage. A few years ago, MaMa Zhang sent her to live in a foster family. "She wanted me to know what having a family feels like."

Growing up without parents, Xiao Qing was often told she wouldn't have many opportunities. Earning her way to college, she proved doubters wrong.

Sitting at my other elbow was He Yun. After her father died, her mother ran away from home. Yun's brother tried to care for her, but he was only 14. Yun, who desperately wanted to study, began walking 10 kilometres in each direction to attend classes in a nearby village.

It was difficult, but she kept up her marks, impressing teachers and local officials. Word of the very determined girl reached MaMa Zhang.

When Yun was nine, MaMa Zhang brought her to the orphanage. She is now studying to be a nurse. "Maybe if my father had medical care he would not have died," she said. Both Xiao Qing and Yun look forward to their futures.

I had always been told that orphans who are not adopted would be lured away by pimps or else find work in sweatshops. And while that is probably frequently the case, it's not the rule.

My assumptions have also been challenged by Shuzhuo Li's report, which showed that the illiteracy rate for females in China has declined rapidly, dropping to 8.2 per cent in 2004 from 13.9 per cent in 1995, while there are now as many girls as boys enrolled in primary school.

Each time I visit China, I find something I don't quite expect. There is more wealth and opportunities, and in some places, orphan girls don't need clothing or food, but rather new computers.

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For people hoping to form a family through international adoption, the changing situation in China must be sobering information to absorb.

Maslen, who is retiring from Children's Bridge after 11 years as executive director, says people must alter their expectations. "They can no longer expect to get a healthy, Chinese baby girl. They will have to adjust their expectations on gender, age, health and race."

While most people want to adopt girls, the vast majority of children waiting for parents are boys.

"I think everybody starting out would love a healthy newborn," says Maslen. "But reality says there are not going to be enough healthy infant girls in the world to satisfy the needs of adoptive parents, so if you want to parent you will need to decide what you can manage."

For a long time, people only wanted to adopt a baby from Canada, but then that became more difficult. When Maslen started in 1986 as a social worker facilitating domestic adoptions, there were more than 1,000 private adoptions in Ontario each year, and most couples received a healthy baby within a year, two years at most. But in 1990, domestic private adoptions slowed dramatically. In 2007, there will be fewer than 200 private adoptions in Ontario. Birth parents, particularly single moms, now parent their babies.

That doesn't mean there aren't children to adopt in Canada. However, he or she is likely not the dreamed-of baby, but instead is a five- or six-year-old from a troubled background.

Maslen is cautious about predicting the future of the China program. "We hesitate to make it sound better or worse than it might turn out to be."

In the meantime, China must figure out what to do with all of the waiting would-be parents. "If a wait is longer than two years, is that a viable program?" asks Maslen.

Stuy says the Chinese government was slow to understand just how many people want to adopt. "The waves kept coming," he said, so they tried to stem the flow.

In May, China further limited who could adopt, imposing restrictions on health status, weight, age and marital status.

Sandra Miller, of Portland's Associated Services for International Adoption, says about 25 per cent fewer couples are seeking to adopt from China because of the restrictions. She also says her agency is used to

adjusting to the changing rules of the China program. When her agency opened in 1995, it served gay and lesbian couples, and then later singles. These days, only heterosexual couples are allowed to adopt.
She doesn't tell inquiring couples it will take five years, but instead tells them what the current wait is for those who submitted their dossiers in 2006, before the profound slowdown. Couples going to China this month to meet their infants will have waited 23 months from the time their file was sent until they received their referral.
"I have heard some people say if you start the process today it's five years, and when you do the math I can see that, but we just don't know what the future holds." She says dramatically fewer couples from the United States are sending dossiers to China and she expects this will eventually lead to shorter wait times -- once the current 25,000 files are cleared. She tells people to take a second look at domestic adoption, and consider it as a possibility.
Stuy doubts the new restrictions will decrease the demand to a workable number when the number of babies being abandoned is declining.
He believes China must halt the adoption of healthy babies to foreigners, primarily because there are Chinese couples who want to adopt and can't. In 2006, Stuy hired a childless Chinese woman, who had been approved to adopt domestically yet couldn't get a child, to approach dozens of orphanages in China. "Ninety-two per cent said, 'No thank you, we can't help.'" Most orphanage directors prefer international adoptions because foreigners are required to make large donations -- $3,000 U.S. -- to orphanages, he speculates.
"This is an ethical problem," he says, adding that foreign couples should not be allowed to adopt China's healthy kids when Chinese couples cannot.
Instead, he thinks foreigners should adopt the so-called special needs infants -- the ones with birth marks or cleft palates -- who frequently end up in the orphanages. He thinks these children will be embraced by westerners.
Maslen thinks this may be happening already, "We were told that one month recently, more special needs adoptions were completed than non-special needs."
For adoptive parents, it's always been a case of adjusting one's expectations to what is possible. And what is possible seems increasingly limited.
There is some hope that orphanages in provinces long closed to international adoption may open. But Stuy and Maslen don't know if this might change the situation much.
As Stuy has said, there just aren't as many orphans in China as many people have believed. Last year, a study sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing Normal University, and Britain's Save the Children Foundation showed that the vast majority of orphaned children, some 450,000, live with relatives, while only 69,000 children -- half of whom have special needs -- live in orphanages. It didn't say how many of these orphans were babies. Odds are, not many.
When we went to China in 1999 it was because we'd heard there were "millions of baby girls" in orphanages in need of parents.
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"The doors are slamming for adoptive parents. I hear them slamming. There are only so many places to go in the world," says Maslen.
And then what?
"When the doors start to close, you as a couple or family ask, what is our goal? If our goal is to be parents, then we have to open all the doors there are to open. If you have in mind that you only want to parent a Chinese baby girl and you can't shake it, then you won't be comfortable adopting from Africa or anywhere else. You have to be completely comfortable in your decision or your child will pay the price."
Miller agrees. "I encourage people to carefully weigh what are the negotiables and non-negotiables in adoption." She thinks the face of international adoption is changing. "I don't want to be overly negative, but I think fewer children will be available for the short term," she says.
Russia emerged from a moratorium on international adoption with a new emphasis on domestic adoption. South Korea's program, once huge, is mostly domestic. Vietnam's program was closed for five years while corruption was investigated, and although it is open again, the process is difficult and wait times are growing. Guatemala, off limits to Canadians, but the second-most popular country for Americans to adopt from after China, will suspend adoptions at the beginning of January. That program is haunted by allegations of corruption. Meanwhile, the 5,000 families that have been matched with -- and, in some cases even met -- their children-to-be have no idea if the adoptions will be completed.
Some predict the future is in Africa, where millions of orphaned and abandoned children need homes.

Children's Bridge is carving out new programs in Ethiopia and South Africa. But many African countries don't support international adoption and those that do, don't always have reliable procedures in place. A French aid group was recently accused of attempting to abduct 103 children from Chad and Sudan. The group Zoe's Arc claimed the children were orphans from Sudan's conflict-torn western Darfur region, but most of these children were found to still have parents.

The sad irony is there are an estimated 142 million orphans in the world. Yet, it's not on any government's agenda to try to lobby the governments of developing countries to make their orphans available.

As Maslen says, "It's not the job of the developing world to supply the developed world with children. If we lobby them, we look self-serving." Still, she believes governments could do more to help these children find homes.

"We have to stop being so insular and narrow. The global community needs to look at adoption as a good thing," she adds. When economics and social policies change, as they have in North America, South Korea and apparently now in China, adoption may no longer be needed.

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As the face of international adoption changes, I struggle to create a narrative that explains how my girls became part of the largest single-gender diaspora in history. I am so grateful to China for sharing its children, and I convey this to my girls. Yet, it's not easy to explain how a culture failed to understand the value of its girls.

I also often wonder what I would do today if I was just beginning the adoption process. If I wasn't sure at the beginning of this journey, I know now that my capacity for love is huge. It doesn't matter who you parent, only that you parent with an open mind and an open heart.