

## FEATURE

Spanning the Cultural Bridge

# Molly and Me in China: On Building a Chinese-American Family

by Jean MacLeod

I am haunted by images of China. They float vividly through my jet-lagged dreams - part of me is still in China, my sleeping brain tries to convince me, and China dances with heavy feet through my head in the middle of the night. When I am fully awake it is easier to put my latest trip to China aside - in a pile with postcards, souvenirs, and an unfinished journal. I have two children, two cats, a job, a husband and a house to occupy my thoughts. There is no time to dwell in that other, recent world; my mornings do not begin with Tibetan chants but with the equally forceful vocalizations of a three year old who wants to wear her party shoes to the beach.

I took my nine-year-old daughter, Molly, on a 17-day tour of Beijing, Chengde, Beidaihe, Tianjin, and Xian. We traveled with a hardy group of parents and their Chinese-born adoptive daughters. The girls ages ranged from two to seven so Molly was definitely the Jie-Jie (big sister), a role she plays

at home with love, generosity and a sense of humor. Dr. Jane Liedtke, founder of Our Chinese Daughters Foundation, adoptive Mom, and working resident of Beijing, created the five city tour as a China Culture Camp for adoptive families.

My three-year-old Chinese-born daughter was not ready for a trip of this magnitude and stayed home with Dad. Molly, my biological daughter who three years ago announced she was "half Chinese by adoption", was at a perfect age to begin to process the wild dichotomies of her sister's Homeland, and it's powerful, invisible influence over our own family.

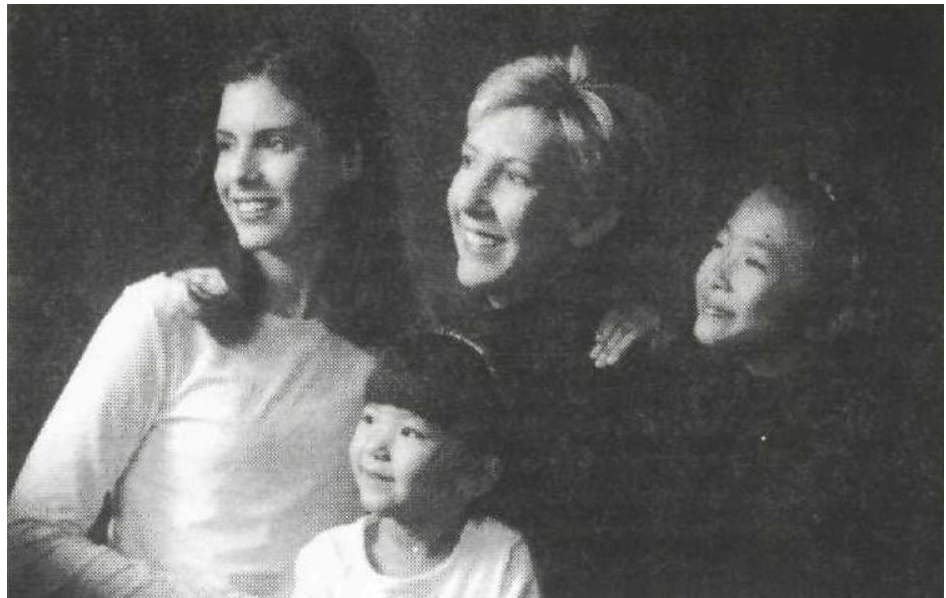
Not much, other than survival, is black or white in China. The daily sensory overload provided many opportunities to discuss the "two sides to every situation" with my maturing daughter. "So, is Communism good or bad?"

*Jean MacLeod  
and daughters:*

*Molly, 14 (left)*

*Lily, 8 (right)  
Nanchang,  
Jiangxi*

*Hanna, 5 (front)  
Feixi,  
Anhui*



Molly asked me one day in Beijing, after a look at Tiananmen<sup>^</sup> Square. "Well," I paused, "Communism is good because it gave most Chinese people a better standard of living and kept millions from starvation. And Communism is not-so-good because it forbids many freedoms we take for granted, like free speech."

Molly's relevant questions were not answered by a textbook in a school classroom, or even by me fumbling for an explanation. She had the in-your-face answer of thousands of living, breathing Chinese who appeared very happy with a different lifestyle and system of government. Again and again we saw the richness and vitality of real life in China prevail over our American conceptions of what is essential for a good life.

In the Hutongs, the ancient-style family dwellings centered on a courtyard and community, we met an elderly woman, proud of her tiny two-room home. The Hutongs are being destroyed to make way for modern high-rise apartments, with the gains of dependable heat and running water, and the losses of family ties and life-long friends. The woman we met was a survivor, maybe even a closet capitalist (she was very pleased to see our group!), and I reassured Molly that Hutong or not, spirit prevails.

Molly and I learned there is no safety net in China (other than our western faces and American money). We took our lives in our hands crossing traffic in a country where pedestrians have no right-of-way, and every driver owns all of the road. We surged for trains and planes with the rest of the citizens instead of forming our usual orderly queue. We managed not to fall off the Great Wall despite the lack of signs warning tourists of danger, company liability, and cardiac restrictions. We do not even realize how comfortably reliant we are on our government to take care of us or watch out for us until we are in a country that cannot do so.

We were in China just long enough to have the initial culture shock wear off, and to become accustomed to and at home with surface cultural differences, big and small. We were

amazed by the variety of Popsicle flavors (rice with fig, or prune with nuts), we were enchanted by the [t'ai chi] and ballroom dancing practiced by residents in city parks and public spaces. We were repelled by the noisy habit of public spitting. Squat toilets were conquered and eventually even appreciated! We mastered chopsticks, and became aware of the etiquette involved with dining from "lazy-Susan tables". It is not always easy living on a learning curve, but it is exhilarating.

We became confident using very simple, polite Chinese phrases, and armed with these and a calculator, even came to enjoy the art of bargaining. A successful purchase leaves both the seller and the buyer satisfied, a friend in China told me. This requires confidence, guts, and good will. Molly became a practiced shopping pro, with a short wave of her hand and "[tai gui la]" ("too expensive") coming easily from her mouth. She bargained sincerely, but was not above using a wistful "poor me-sweet child" expression to get what she really wanted. "No, no, no," said one distracted vendor to Molly's final offer, "but I am so sorry!"

Dr. Liedtke's inspired itinerary often took us to cities, restaurants and marketplaces where Molly and I were definitely in the minority as Anglo/Westerners. Molly was a special draw. As a tall, fair-skinned, green-eyed child she was a frequent target of attention. At the Panda Pavilion of the Beijing Zoo, she was twice approached by Chinese families asking polite permission to take her photograph with their child. Both times Molly immediately kneeled next to the Chinese preschooler and gave her best smile. Other citizens, usually forceful older ladies, were not as gentle with their approach. One grabbed Molly at the Forbidden City and aggressively propelled her unwillingly toward a friend with a camera. After running reconnaissance I explained their behavior to her, and emphasized my permission for Molly to be as assertive as necessary the next time she was uncomfortable. The attention, although always lavishly complimentary, was surprisingly tiresome.

"It feels funny being the 'different' one, doesn't it?" I commented. "Yes!" my daughter admitted fervently. "This is how your sister feels every day of her life, living where we live in the United States," I said. That's all I had to say. Molly understood.

I had thought, at the beginning of our trip, that Molly might be disappointed by the real, gritty China, versus the Disney Mulan depiction. There is still plenty of ancient beauty to be found in the [Middle Kingdom], but it may be next door to a Pizza Hut. I wanted Molly to be able to see beyond the growing pains of a society racing to catch up, to the optimism and pride and life of a culture influenced by thousands of years of history. As Bill Holmes said in his book of China essays "Coming Home Crazy"(1990): "What I saw was courage and beauty, not poverty and despair." "I miss Daddy and Lily," my daughter told me as we were packing to go home. "But I don't want to leave!" I think, like Bill Holmes, that Molly had seen the beauty, too.

I have been home long enough now that my jet-lagged dream-life is back to normal and sleep is undisturbed. The imminence of Culture Camp has receded in the activities of everyday life. Every now and then something occurs that reminds Molly and me of a shared moment in China. We smile wordlessly at each other. Molly handled a very foreign world with grace and maturity, and I am reminded by her smile how proud I am of my daughter for embracing her sister's heritage.

My family's adoption of our youngest child made us a Chinese-American family. We are the new hybrid version Chinese-American family, part of a wave of 14,000 Chinese adoptions in the United States in the last seven years. My husband and I and our oldest daughter are Caucasian. My youngest is ethnically Asian. Our family's international adoption has changed the color of our family for generations to come.

We intend to celebrate the spirit of the Chinese people and the country that gave us all a tremendous gift.

"Tell us how you are bringing Chinese culture and traditions into your family," bids an article in the Families with Children from China - New York newsletter. My family will be visiting China, I will answer. We will bring chunks of her home in our hearts. Piece by piece we will work to understand this other, very different culture, and maybe if we are lucky, our children will be comfortable with a foot in both of the worlds, by birth and adoption, they claim as their own.

*This article was first published in 1999. Jean MacLeod is now the Director of OCDF Institute, part of Our Chinese Daughter's Foundation [HYPERLINK www.ocdf.org](http://www.ocdf.org). OCDF works to support the children who have been adopted from China, and to introduce China's culture to families world-wide.*

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*"Jean MacLeod is the Director of Our Chinese Daughter's Foundation-Institute ([www.ocdf.org](http://www.ocdf.org)). Her recent book "At Home in this World" has been a wonderful addition to the understanding of adoption, helping children and parents take a new look at the process through the voice of the adoptee. Jean has held leadership roles in the PCC-Metro Detroit chapter and has been instrumental in promoting adoption parenting awareness through her workshops and seminars. Jean now coordinates OCDF's outreach to the adoption community - speaking engagements, workshops, seminars, OCDF events, and pre-adoption programs, in addition, Jean works with FCC groups, reunion/orphanage groups/lists, adoption agencies, and Chinese Schools to develop customized programs and OCDF China Tours for their members. She is mother to three daughters, two of whom were adopted from China. A graduate of Western Michigan University, Jean holds a degree in English and is working on her Master's Degree in Library Science. She has traveled extensively throughout the globe in her prior career within the transportation/tourism industry, and is at home in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan. Email Jean at; [Jean@ocdf.org](mailto:Jean@ocdf.org)"*