

## *Finding Tong Zijuan With Always and Forever*

Our daughter was adopted in 1995 from Tongling Welfare Institute. She was two years old, a disgruntled toddler who wondered who these foreigners were and why they were taking her away from her home, her friends and the people who cared for her. She indicated her displeasure by frowning at us the whole time we were in China. Once in Philadelphia, however, she quickly settled into her new environment. She learned that those two strangers would do anything for her. She had a bedroom all to herself, pets that she could boss around, and adoring friends and family who catered to her.

We named her Lia and kept her Chinese name, Zi Juan as her middle name. Like many adoptive parents, we wanted to ensure that Lia had a sense of her heritage, to know her history and where she came from. But, growing up, Lia was not interested in Chinese lessons. She didn't care for cultural exhibits and rolled her eyes when we mentioned history. "I'm American. I don't need to learn Chinese", she would say. Or when we would bring up the idea of visiting China, "I'd rather go to some place with a beach." And while she occasionally asked about her birth parents, her interest centered more on genetics than on a real desire to "connect" with them. She rarely asked about the orphanage and when she did, it was to joke about wearing split pants.

We never pressured her. We knew that she had to be the one to initiate the conversation. And so, when she started her senior year in high school and started to ask questions about her early years, "Could I find my birthparents?" and "Do I have siblings?", we knew the time was right. Concurrent with her interest was her senior year-end project. Before graduation, students were given off three weeks in May to "come up with an essential question, explore and learn". We talked about several options and finally she declared, "I want to volunteer in my orphanage. I want to help the kids there. I want to see what a typical day is like." At age 18, Lia would return to Tongling.

Of course we began to make plans and through a friend of a friend made arrangements to visit Tongling Welfare Institute and volunteer with the children. All seemed to be going smoothly until one month before we were scheduled to leave Philadelphia my "contact" person in China disappeared. Repeated attempts at calling and emailing proved fruitless and it became clear that our trip was in jeopardy. I frantically searched the internet looking for tour groups and adoption organizations for help. Most said it was too late. Some offered a volunteer position at another orphanage. One offered volunteering with pandas! No, we wanted to work with children and we wanted to go to her "home orphanage", Tongling.

Just when I was about to give up, Michael Han, Executive Director of Always and Forever contacted me. He acknowledged that while it was short notice, he would try. He returned my emails and calls promptly and after several days of scanning documents and forms, I got the email I was hoping for, "This is it..All is proceeding as planned." You can imagine my relief! From there, everything went according to Always and Forever's itinerary. From the time we were picked up by our interpreter and guide, Carol Wu and our driver, Mr. Wu (no relation), we were able to relax in their most capable hands!

The Tongling Children's Welfare Institute is a well-maintained large complex. We met with the Director and saw Lia's file. In it were two pictures of her that we had never seen before. We had lunch with the Director and some of her staff and then visited the site of Lia's "finding"-the gate to a residential community. We walked around the community and Lia had a chance to see perhaps an alternate reality—where she could have grown up, had someone from the community taken her in instead of turning her over to the police.

We learned the origin of Chinese name. When we adopted her, someone in China told us that Zi Juan meant “pretty face”. So we went with that. But the Director told us that was not the case. The Director who had given Lia her name was very fond of her. She named Lia after a famous Chinese love story concerning two lovers who were kept apart by fate. When Lia was brought in to the orphanage, she imagined that Lia was the child of these two star-crossed lovers and although they loved her, they had to give her up. Zi Juan, is a combination of the two lovers’ names. How much better than “pretty face” is that!

The next two days, we worked with special needs children. They were between ages 4 and 7 and all had different issues, some physical and some developmental but all were excited to have us and eager to learn. All of them craved attention and all of them wanted to be held and carried. In the morning, with the help of Carol, we taught colors and numbers using m&m's. After the lesson, we let them eat those tasty “teaching tools”. On the second day, once they had a taste of m&m’s, we had to teach a lot faster! Each day we left at 11:30 and like everyone in China had a nap and lunch. We were back with the kids by 2:30 p.m. and I taught hula to the kids AND the adults (they couldn’t resist joining in). And while I was hesitant at first, because some of the kids had physical handicaps, they all enthusiastically joined me. I will never forget the feeling of dancing with them. It was like dancing with angels.



One afternoon we went to the orphanage and there was a news crew and a journalist. They interviewed Lia and I for a news program. She was the oldest girl to return and the first to volunteer at the orphanage. A government official, Mr. Gao presented Lia with a bronze statue of four children that represents Tongling. He spoke about her being a returning daughter of Tongling and thanked her for her service.

This trip would have been different if we had initiated it instead of Lia. Clearly, if we had visited China much earlier, it would have been for our benefit, not hers. She wasn’t ready. I am glad that we waited until she said, “I want to work in *my* orphanage”. She loved being with the kids. She could see herself in them and how she might have spent her first two years. She learned that even though resources are limited the people at the Tongling Orphanage love the children and care for them the best they can. And finally, all on her own, she came to understand and respect her Chinese heritage. Lia is still very much an American teenager, but this trip allowed her to discover Tong Zi Juan.

The trip was more than I imagined or hoped for. Michael Han, Carol Wu and “Mr.” Wu (we never got his first name ☺) were with us every step of the way. Just as I will never forget the kids in the orphanage, I will never forget or be able to thank them enough for making this life-changing trip possible.



**Lia Being Interviewed at Tongling Welfare Institute by the Local Chinese Media**