"Not only an evocative memoir on East–West adoption but also a bridge to East–West understanding of human rights in China." —AMY TAN

Abandoned Girls, Their Journey to America, and the Search for a Missing Past

THE LOST DAUGHTERS OF CHINA

KARIN EVANS

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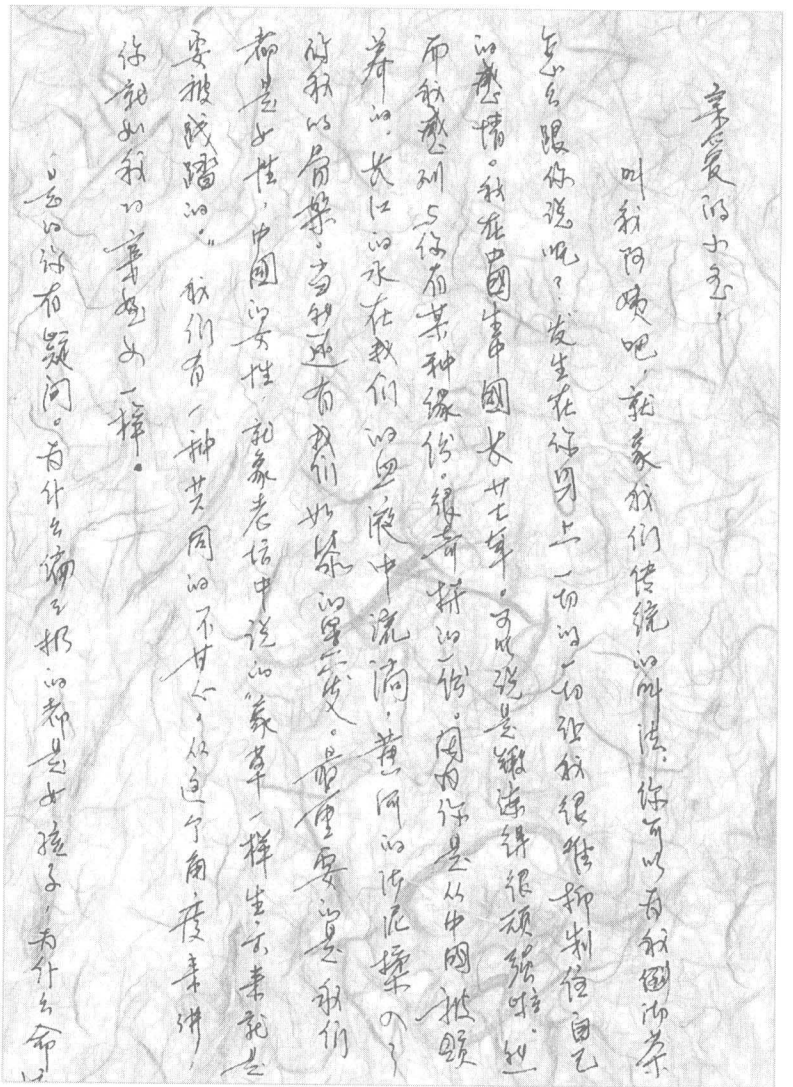
For all lost children, everywhere.



Calligraphy by Anchee Min

A Letter to All the Lost Daughters of China

—Anchee Min

Call me Aha-yi, aunt. I am introducing myself to you the way we do in China. You may have the honor to serve me tea.

How would I begin? I don't get emotional easily. I lived in China for twenty-seven years; life has toughened me up, and yet I must confess that I am deeply moved by this book. For a strange reason I feel connected to you, orphans adopted from China. The Yangtze River runs in our blood, and the time dust of the yellow-earth culture frames our bones. The straight lacquer black hair. Yes, we share a lot. Most important, we are all females, Chinese females, the kind an old saying describes as "grass born to be stepped on."

We are in the battle together. You are my nieces.

Aunts in China are mean, at least mine are. It is because they are obligated to tell you the truth. It's their role in the family. They tell the naked truth to their nieces and nephews. Parents and grandparents spoil the children because they would do anything to avoid hurting their feelings. But aunts are expected to

care for the children in a different way. And now, if you don't mind, I will perform my duty.

Let's start with the whys. Why is it the girls who are lost? Don't take it personally. Please understand that Chinese women are cultivated to suffer. Giving away a daughter to someone, a childless sibling or a great aunt who is in need of caring, was considered a virtue. Girls were presents, companions, kitchen-hands, bed-mates, baby-making machines. Also, the tradition makes a mother feel ashamed for not being able to produce a son. China is an agricultural country where hard labor is a means of survival—a man can carry three hundred pounds of soil while a woman a hundred fifty. See my point?

When I was about five, my mother was pitied every time we went out. It was because she had three daughters. "Look, a string of crabs!" My mother didn't feel sorry for herself. Despite the fact that she finally gave birth to my brother, she and my father made me the family's favorite. "On purpose," my father confessed later on. "I don't want you to get any idea that girls are no good. And I don't want your brother to get any idea that he is better because he is a boy." Well, my parents are educators while the majority of the countrymen are peasants.

In 1995 I was in China helping launch a movement called "Mothers, Save Your Daughters." It started with a report in a paper called *China's Communist Youth League.* It was an in-depth study. There was a story about a couple who murdered five of their infant daughters in the hope of gaining a son. The news shattered me to the point that I didn't want to return to America. I wanted to help promote education in rural areas. I believe that if only that couple had had education the killing wouldn't have happened. They were peasants and illiterate; they were not in touch with their consciences.

There are struggles of course. How can a mother not after she carried you months in her body? You might be the result of her hesitation. She couldn't do it; her heart opposed her and her hands shook. So she thought of an alternative. If a child is strong enough to endure, she might escape her fate.

Each of your birth mothers was not sure, but she wanted to do her best for you for the last time. She might have traveled as far as her money allowed her, to a richer area and a busier market where she would lay you down and hide you inside lotus roots or celery leaves. I am sure she would watch from a distance, hiding herself behind a crowd or in a bush. There she would experience a kind of death. She would suffer until someone picked you up and yelled. She would try, try hard not to answer the call—*Whose child?*—not to run toward you. She would bite her lips until they bled. For her you will forever be a "broken arm hidden in her sleeve."

"Many women break their nerves that way," one foster mother I spoke with in Anhui province told me. "There are nutty-looking women who sneak around my house from time to time trying to locate the daughters they abandoned. They don't say anything. No questions. They just wander around like ghosts. I tell them that it's no good to linger on the pain. Let the past be gone. These children are going to live."

Oh, how I wish your Chinese birth mothers could read this book. They would be comforted, relieved, and released from nightmares that haunt them. As a woman who grew up in China, I identify with their despair, the despair of being deprived of understanding.

I believe that I have said enough. I couldn't say it any other way. Forgive me. The hope is that you are in America and you are loved. You are in control of creating your own future. I wish you all the best.

Contents

Introduction

Suddenly they are everywhere, the little girls from China. Found forsaken in their homeland, whisked out of orphanages by American parents, they are growing up across the United States. In the New York metropolitan area, there are now more than a thousand of these adopted daughters, riding in their strollers through the American Museum of Natural History or vacationing in the Hamptons. In Los Angeles, they are building castles at the beach. In Chicago, they are ice-skating. In Atlanta, Georgia, alone, there are now several hundred households with daughters from China.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Portland, Oregon, and Houston, Texas, more little girls from China are growing up. In the San Francisco Bay Area (local count around one thousand), they are gathering at a fancy Chinese restaurant to observe the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, wandering outside to gaze at the moon and honor the memory of their birth parents. A Chinese-born girl from Guangdong province is growing up in Ohio's Amish country. In one admittedly unusual family in the deep South, an

American woman *and* her fifty-four-year-old mother traveled to China together and each came home with a Chinese daughter. One small Boulder, Colorado, resident, a toddler from Nanchang, China, attends University of Colorado football games dressed as a miniature cheerleader. In the audience of a Barney concert, the camera zeroes in on a blond mother and her dark-haired daughter from China.

By now the children—daughters of couples, single mothers, a few single fathers—form a substantial subculture of small immigrants, a kind of nationwide sisterhood. Some are part of a larger Chinese-American community, others find themselves the only Asian child in a small Midwestern or southern town. Daughters from China are also growing up in Sweden, Ireland, England, Spain, and Canada. It's not surprising that just about everybody I meet these days has a friend or a friend of a friend who has adopted, or is about to adopt, a little girl from China.

In an average month now, some three hundred fifty small girls are flown across the Pacific to begin new lives in the United States. As of this writing, more than eighteen thousand[1] children, all born in China, nearly all of them girls, have been carried out of Chinese orphanages and brought to this country. They are growing up as the daughters of teachers and football players, novelists and political consultants, film actors and physicians, full-time moms and full-time dads. By the end of this year, some three thousand to four thousand more Chinese girls will have made the journey from China to the United States.

In Berkeley, California, as I write this, my own daughter, Kelly Xiao Yu, born in the Pearl River Delta of southern China to parents who left no traces, is dancing around the living room to the strains of reggae music. Three years ago my husband and

I joined this subculture of East-West families when we traveled to southern China, walked into a social welfare home for children, and were handed an astonishingly beautiful year-old baby.

With that meeting, we became participants in a major cross-cultural story of the 1990s, part of a trend that is becoming increasingly common—a human interaction in which people journey halfway across the globe in search of a child, where the lives of lost girls in a struggling Asian country are linked with the lives of prosperous parents from the West in a fateful moment of bureaucratic matchmaking. It's a phenomenon that spans the gaps of distance, culture, race, language, economics, and heritage. It is a tale of twentieth-century cultures mixing with each other in an unprecedented way.

For adopting parents, the trip to China will come after roughly a year's worth of paperwork and official scrutiny—by agencies within the United States and the People's Republic of China—plus the investment of considerable time and money. This culminates, if all goes well, in a "referral"—by which applicants' bulging dossiers are matched with a Chinese child. With the match, the adopting parents will be given the sparest information about their new daughter: a small photograph perhaps, a guess at a birth date, a few vital statistics (height, weight, cursory medical assessment), and a name, chosen, usually, by the orphanage.

For Americans picking up babies in the social welfare institutions of China, this particular avenue of international adoption often represents a final miracle, after the frustrations of infertility, unsuccessful medical intervention, perhaps, or the forbidding costs of domestic adoption. For the orphaned girls of China, international adoption offers a way out of the institution, a chance at a new life—but life in a culture vastly different from

the land of their birth. The children themselves will have chosen none of this, of course. A Chinese government bureau, in combination with foreign adoption workers, will have placed their fates in the hands of American strangers.

The fact that China can provide so many foreign parents with children, nearly every one of them a daughter, is a reflection of a darker reality. The world's most populous nation, desperate to keep its numbers down, has in the past decade become a nation of lost daughters. A confluence of harsh realities—the Chinese government's strict population policy introduced in 1980, the culture's traditional reliance on sons, plus untold hardships and emotionally wrenching circumstances known only to a birth mother—will have forced these little girls from their families. The children who are placed with adopting families represent only a tiny fraction of those found abandoned throughout the country—or those missing altogether.

Most of these children will have no known histories to look into, should they ever want to trace their pasts. Their birth parents leave little information, if any. For all the benefits of adoption into a loving family in the West, there is a loss of roots each small girl must deal with as she grows into adulthood, coming of age halfway across the globe, having lost the thread that might someday lead her back.

As prospective international parents, my husband and I tried to prepare ourselves. We sought all the help we could—the insights of other adoptive parents, the support of friends and family. Yet how could we possibly be prepared for the life ahead, for the unknown terrain, and most important, for the eventual feelings about all this from our daughter herself? Although I feel ex-

tremely fortunate to be able to share my life with my own adopted child, I also feel a great sadness when I think of the possible confusion and sense of loss she and the other daughters of China may feel when they are of an age and an inclination to want to know where they came from, and why, and from whom. What would all this mean in a dozen years, say, when our little girl from China is a teenager, living in a household in California with blue-eyed Caucasian parents, wondering what had gone on in the land of her birth?

Someday, I knew, I would need to tell my daughter what I could about life in China in the time she was born. I had a duty to understand what I'd been part of, but I approached the subject cautiously, aware that I was no China scholar, nor even a neutral observer. Still, I wanted to learn what might have led to that moment in an orphanage when I first looked into the eyes of a beautiful child who'd wound up—until that instant—with no family of her own. I wanted to know what conditions could explain the thousands of bundles found lying alone in railroad stations and school buildings and along roadways all over China. I wanted to know what had happened in the lives of the mothers in that country that had led them to such desperate acts. What cultural, political, and social forces had made China a uniquely difficult place for this generation of female infants?

This book began as an inquiry into those questions, an exploration of this particular intersection between American and Chinese history. As a parent and as a journalist, I wanted to know what life had been like for my child's mother, and what my daughter's future might have held had she stayed in China. I wanted to understand what life was likely to be like for the generation of adopted Chinese girls growing up in the United States. There was an important untold story here, a considerable

human drama involving tens of thousands of children, an equal number of Chinese mothers, and a growing community of East-West families.

For the world at large, this book is an attempt to fill in the blank spaces in a profound human exchange. For my daughter, it's an attempt to tackle as many of the unanswered questions as possible, so that one day she will know something about the times in which she was born and the culture from which she came.

The causes and conditions are enormously complex. As I have talked with people and worked my way through the available information, I have felt increasingly like the blind people in the old Chinese proverb, each of whom tries to describe an elephant by touching just one small part of the animal (It's a rope! It's a snake! It's a wall!). While facts (as best we can pin them down) and various explanations may describe certain happenings in one place or another, no theory can possibly encompass the point of view of every man or woman in China. As just one measure of the complexity, there are hundreds of thousands of villages in that enormous nation, each with its own small, unique social fabric. Add to that the varieties of personal experience in a country with dramatically different geographic regions, numerous ethnic strains, great economic disparities, and more than 1.2 billion residents. No statement can apply to every community, no statistics can describe every reality, no single explanation can account for every lost child. Once the human heart is involved, the mystery grows ever deeper.

Every Chinese daughter adopted into an American family has a story all her own, but in some ways all the stories are similar. One of the deepest ties possible between human beings, the bond between parent and child, torn apart on one conti-