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Finally, a mother's love

Mary Monison of Bear gives Chinese infant a new name, a new home, and new hope

By STEPHEN SOBEK

Staff reporter

BEAR - Mary Morrison could finally rest.

She had filled out reams of paperwork over a year and a half, attended meeting after meeting and waited months for just one phone call.

When the call came, she spent thousands of dollars and traveled thousands of miles; all for the 14-month-old baby who now finally slept upstairs.

The baby had a difficult time adjusting to her new home. She refused solid food for a week and was silent for days.

"I didn't know she could walk or talk or anything," Morrison said. "All she wanted to do was be held."

Emily Theresa Morrison was born Ji Xiulong in the Guangdong province of China. Her mother brought her into the world on Sept. 10, 1997, and abandoned her the next day. She was left, like so many unwanted girls, at a crossroads in the south China city of Huazhou. She spent the next 13 1/2 months with a Chinese foster mother, waiting for someone like Morrison.

How Ji Xulong, which means "beautiful dragon," became Emily Morrison is a story that is increasingly familiar in Delaware.

The number of Chinese adoptions in the state has risen from nine in 1996, to 25 in 1997 and to 22 so far this year. Delawareans are adopting more children from China than any other country, bucking a national trend toward Russian adoptions.

In 1997 Americans took in 3,816 Russian and 3,616 Chinese babies. But in Delaware, Chinese adoptions outpaced those of Russian children 25 to 19, according to the six licensed agencies that did international adoptions that year in the First State.

Many more Chinese babies, almost all girls, are coming.

"We're sending about a group a month" to China, said Tara Miller, executive director of Adoptions from the Heart, the nonprofit adoption agency that sent Morrison, a 44-year-old unmarried woman, to China in October to pick up Emily.

Single? No problem, China will let you adopt almost as easily as a married couple.

Too old? China prefers people older than age 30. And there's virtually no threat of a poor Chinese birth mother flying half way around the world to reclaim her baby.

Delawareans are paying as much as \$20,000 to bring home a child from China. By comparison, it can be fairly simple and inexpensive to adopt here at home. The trouble is, the waiting list for American infants is long.

The older the children, the more difficult it becomes to find adoptive parents. Nationally, a million people are in line for only 30,000 children under age 2.

In Delaware, 12 children ranging in age from 6 to 14 are available for adoption. They come from a variety of racial backgrounds. All were abused or neglected by their parents and have lived in a series of foster homes.

Many parents are willing to cross racial lines to adopt a domestic child. Adoptions from the Heart reported that 40 percent of its domestic cases this year involved minority children. Most of the adopting parents in those cases were white.

Morrison is happy with her choice.

"I thought that plane would never land," she said of the return trip from China.

But the journey was worth it.

Her living room is filled with baby clothes and toys, all gifts from friends. Upstairs, there's the rhythmic sound of a sleeping child sucking her thumb.

Abandoned children

Emily may never know why she was left at the crossroads or if her mother later missed her.

Baby girls are often abandoned in China. The main reason goes back nearly 20 years. The Chinese government, after Chairman Mao Tse-tung had encouraged families to reproduce during the early communist years, realized there were too many people in the world's most populous country.

A fifth of the world's population lived in China, and government officials decided that if the nation continued to grow, it might not be able to feed itself.

A "one child per family" policy, instituted in 1979, was intended to push the country's population below 1.3 billion by 2000. In 1996, China's population was at 1.25 billion.

Mothers who break the rule can be fined or barred from placing their child in school. Fines can total twice a family's gross annual income, according to the U.S State Department's 1997 Human Rights Report on China.

Families can't legally place their children up for adoption; that would break the one-child rule. So many parents abandon children in public places such as the crossroads in Huazhou where police find them and take them to orphanages.

Most abandoned children are girls because in Chinese society, male children are expected to take care of their parents during old age. Many families will give up daughters to try for a son.

About 1.7 million children are abandoned each year, according to the State Department report. The Chinese government can be tight-lipped about the Policy. Shuning Yu, a spokesman at the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., would not discuss the one-child rule in depth.

"There are some flexibilities," Yu said. Some of China's 56 minorities, including Tibetans, are not covered by the policy, Yu said.

"People could argue that that's a good policy for a country with 1.2 billion people," said T. Kumar, Amnesty International's advocacy director for Asia.

Morrison could care less about the rule. She has Emily.

But perhaps it did have something to do with why Morrison settled on a Chinese baby.

"You were committed to the idea of saving one of these girls," Morrison's fiancé, Jim Evans, 51, told her as Emily slept shortly after they had returned from China;

Difficult choices

Morrison never tried to have children of her own. She had never thought of adopting. A newspaper advertisement in spring 1997 for Adoptions from the Heart made her consider bringing a child into her life.

"I was never a person who thought, I have to have a child," Morrison said. "But when I saw the ad, something, just clicked."

Deciding to adopt is the first of a series of difficult choices adoptive parents face. Should they adopt an American or foreign child? If foreign, then from what country? Through which agency?

Delawareans who adopt Chinese babies often do so for simple reasons: There's no age limit for parents, little possibility of a challenge by birth parents and no long waiting lines. And it's almost certain qualified couples will receive a baby girl younger than age 2.

Morrison was 43 when she saw the ad for an informational meeting on adopting Chinese babies. At the meeting, the agency brought a couple who had just adopted an 11-month-old Chinese girl, and Morrison fell in love with the idea of having one of her own.

"It just felt right," she said. "It was funny. From that minute, I never doubted it."

People in their 40s can face challenges when adopting locally, challenges they don't face when adopting from China.

China prefers people older than age 30. Those younger than that age must be willing to take a "special needs" child: one who has a correctable medical problem such as a birthmark or a heart murmur.

There is no age limit to adopt in Delaware. Mariann Kennville, adoption program manager for the state's Division of Family Services noted that her department recently approved the adoption of a 2-year-old child by parents who are 58 and 67 years old.

But in reality, American birth parents often have a say in where their baby goes. "They want to look at a family that they feel is young enough to handle the responsibility of parenting in the long term," said Jennifer M. Chantz, coordinator of international adoption programs for Bethany Christian Services in Newark.

U.S. birth parents have pushed prospective parents toward international adoptions in another way, too.

After several high profile cases in which birth parents challenged adoptions and were able to get their children back, such as in the 1995 "Baby Richard" case in Illinois, many adoptive parents are scared they might lose a child if they adopt domestically.

"I am too worried about other parents ... coming back and taking their children back from me later on," said Cindy Bones of Georgetown, who with her husband Richard, adopted their daughter Caly from China in 1996. "It's a final process with China."

But the feared challenge almost never comes to pass, adoption professionals say. A study by three adoption researchers published this year suggested only 2 percent of all domestic adoptions are dissolved. Less than 0.1 percent of all adoptions are successfully contested, the study said.

Still, the publicity is enough to send potential parents overseas, said Bill Pierce, president

