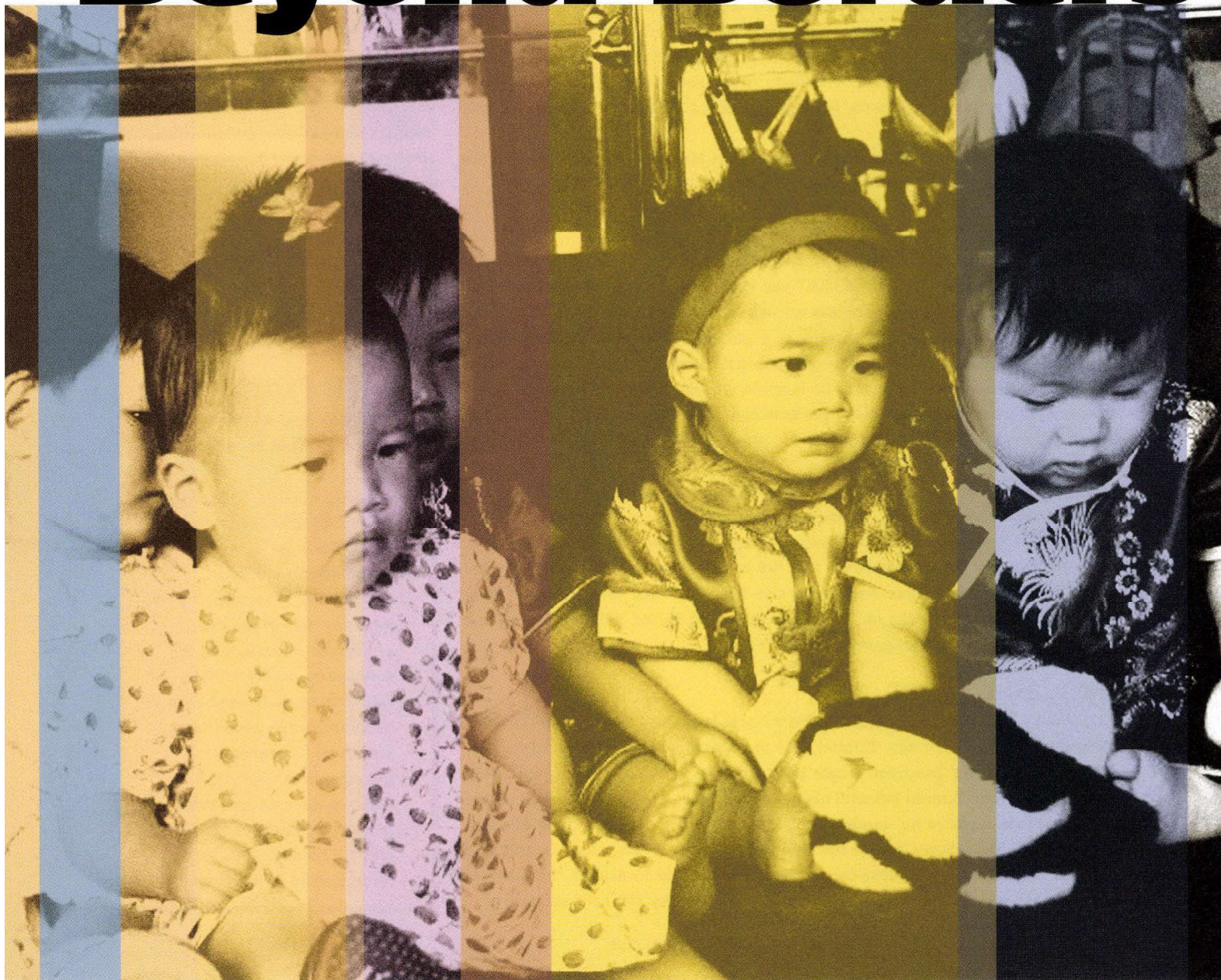


# Building a Family **Beyond Borders**





# China's stricter foreign adoption policy is causing many Americans to look elsewhere for a child in need of a home.

STORY **Teena Apeles**

**W**hen Southern California residents Michael and Vivian Mora first considered adoption, they immediately looked beyond the United States to China for a child. That country's international adoption program, which has been recognized for being efficient and reliable, has attracted Americans for years.

In fact, over the last decade Americans have adopted more than 56,000 Chinese orphans, and China has been the most popular country of origin for U.S. foreign adoptions since 2000, ahead of Guatemala, Russia and South Korea. But on May 1, 2007, new regulations regarding intercountry adoptions went into effect in China that could mean the number of Chinese-born children adopted by Americans each year will drop significantly.

## China Calling

"When we got married, we knew that I was sterile," says Michael, a Filipino American. "We knew we had to go through fertility treatments. Then we found out Vivian had difficulty conceiving as well, so the only option was to adopt."

It was 2004 and the Moras had been married for eight years, were in their early 30s, owned a home and made a good living — Vivian, as a first grade teacher in the Chino Valley Unified School District in Southern California; Michael, as a project manager at City of Hope Medical Center. These factors made them ideal prospective parents based on China's adoption requirements for foreign applicants at the time. They were within the desired age range, finan-

cially stable and in good physical and mental health.

In March of that year the couple started the process of adopting from China through Children's Hope International. The agency, which has facilitated adoptions from the country since 1992, submitted the necessary paperwork on their behalf to the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA), the government agency responsible for processing applications and matching individual children with potential adoptive parents.

"I knew from people I talked to that it was safer to go to China just because there's no chance of the mother coming back and taking the baby away from us, so we were more at ease adopting inter-

nationally than domestically," recalls Vivian, a Chinese American. All the children up for adoption in China are deemed abandoned (their daughter-to-be was left at a vegetable market), thus, biological parents have no rights to the child and have no legal avenue to reclaim custody. "When you adopt a baby in China, that's it; it's finalized."

"Adoptive families receive a certificate of abandonment that proves the biological parents have relinquished their parental rights through abandonment," says Christine Stasko, who adopted her daughter from China in 2003 and is currently a promotional coordinator for Chinese Children Adoption International, a China-only agency started in 1994 with headquarters in Colorado. "Its finality stands in stark contrast to domestic adoptions, where revocation of parental rights can be a concern."

It took about six months for the Moras to prepare their dossier, which included health and financial records, references and a letter of intent. Their "log-in date," the day that China approved their dossier, was January 27, 2005, and just two and half months later they received a "referral," a document that introduced them to their daughter, LeAnne, accompanied by her photos and health record.

If this sounds like an incredibly short time for a foreigner to be matched



**"Some of our friends are either angry or heartbroken because they started the process of adopting and didn't [submit their dossier before] May 1."**

— Vivian Mora, an adoptive parent

with a child, it's because it was. The Moras' application received priority because both Vivian's parents were born in China. (If one or both adoptive parents were born in China, including Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao, the couple's application would also receive special attention.) "We were lucky, we got our papers expedited," says Vivian. At that time, applicants who were not of Chinese ancestry typically waited up to six months before receiving news of a match.

Eight weeks later, the Moras traveled to China with nine other couples from their adoption agency — they were the youngest as well as the only Asian couple — to meet their toddler at the Fuling Social Welfare Institute. The total time for processing LeAnne's adoption, minus the preparation of their dossier, was well under a year and the whole process cost them between \$15,000 to \$20,000.

## A Shift in Policy

But China adoption stories like the Moras' are unheard of now — adoption fees have gone up as have waiting times for all applicants to receive referrals. According to local agencies, the amount of time it takes for an approved applicant

to be matched with a child has increased from six months in 2005 to close to two years in 2007.

An arguably more significant development this past year was the December 2006 announcement by the Chinese government that it would be tightening its adoption regulations for foreign adoptions. This was the first major change in its policy since it did away with the quota system in 2002. Unfortunately, China's new set of adoption qualifications — which had stricter criteria concerning the education, health, economic and marital status of applicants — meant many Americans who hoped to bring a Chinese orphan into their family would no longer be eligible, including the Moras, even though they had adopted from the country before.

Earlier this year, through Children's Hope International and various Chinese adoption support groups, the Moras heard about the impending new regulations, set to go into effect May 1, and realized their chances of adopting another daughter from China were in jeopardy.

"You have to have a certain body mass index, they don't want any parents who are morbidly obese, no single mothers and you can't be taking any antide-



Scenes from the Moras' trip to China to adopt their first child in 2005. Photos courtesy of Vivian and Michael Mora.





pressants or have any history of mental illness in the family," says Michael. Though the Moras met all those requirements, there was one condition that would eliminate them from eligibility: Michael's medical history. "I was in hospitals more than your average person," says Michael, who survived a long battle with leukemia as a teenager. As a cancer survivor he would be considered to have a serious disease that required long-term treatment or affected life expectancy, thereby disqualifying the Moras from adopting from China based on the new rules.

The couple rushed to have their dossier in before the new qualifications went into effect on May 1 (any family who submitted their dossier before that date was not affected by the new requirements), submitting it "in just the nick of time" on April 30, keeping their dream of another child intact. Other people they know weren't as fortunate. "Some of our friends are either angry or heartbroken because they started the process of adopting and didn't [submit their dossier before] May 1," says Vivian. "One of them took an antidepressant for a certain amount of time."

This restriction on antidepressant use is eliminating China as an option for many families. "Many families who have battled infertility have been prescribed antidepressants to get them through the sad time," says Cory Barron, outreach director for Children's Hope International. "Once that antidepressant is taken, the family won't qualify for China for at least two years after the medication is no longer taken." According to Vivian, many couples have gotten around this obstacle by "a little fibbing and lying" on their applications.

## Dreams Interrupted

Single mother Linda Waldrop of Stockbridge, Ga., is among those who no longer qualify for Chinese adoption due to the new regulations. The 52-year-old office manager had previously adopted two Chinese girls from the Hunan province through Chinese Children Adoption

# Are You Eligible?

**As of May 1, 2007, only if you are in a heterosexual marriage and you meet the following requirements:**

- Have been married for at least two years. If either spouse has been previously divorced, the couple must have been married at least five years. No more than two divorces are allowed.
- Are between the ages of 30 and 50. Though couples as old as 55 may apply to adopt a special needs child.
- Are in good physical and mental condition, with none of the following conditions: AIDS; mental disability; infectious disease that is actively contagious; blind in either eye; hearing loss in both ears or loss of language function (those adopting children with hearing or language function loss are exempted); non-function or dysfunction of limbs or trunk caused by impairment, incomplete limbs, paralysis or deformation; severe facial deformation; severe diseases that require long-term treatment and that may affect life expectancy; major organ transplant within 10 years; schizophrenia; severe mental disorders requiring medication for more than two years; a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 40 or more.
- Have a net worth of at least \$80,000 and an annual income of at least \$10,000 for each family member in the household (including the child to be adopted).
- Are high school graduates or have vocational training equivalent to a high school education.
- Have no more than four children under the age of 18, with the youngest being at least 1 year old (those adopting special needs children are exempted from this requirement).
- Have no serious criminal record and have a history of honorable behavior and good moral character.

Source: Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State

**For more information, visit:**  
 Bureau of Consular Affairs, <http://travel.state.gov>  
 Chinese Children Adoption International, <http://chinesechildren.org>  
 Children's Hope International, <http://childrenshopeint.org>

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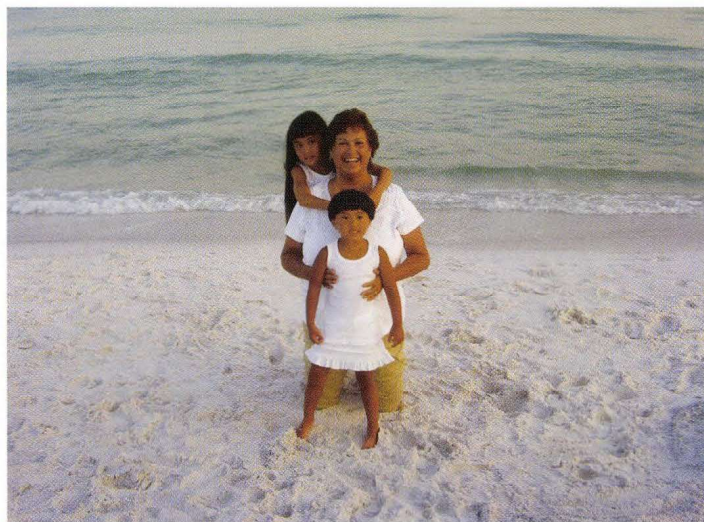
International. "I got my first daughter, Lorna, when I was 45 in 2000," says Waldrop. "My younger daughter, Lina, was put in my arms after I turned 50 in 2005."

She had initially tried to adopt domestically and did not even consider going international. "A lot of doors were closed here for me being divorced, being

older and single," she says. Waldrop met a couple who'd heard about China as an option so she started researching and found the Colorado-based agency, which aided her through the process of adopting her daughters.

After such a positive experience with Chinese Children Adoption International





Linda Waldrop, a single mother in her 50s, no longer qualifies as an adoptive parent under China's new rules, even though she's adopted in previous years. Photos courtesy of Linda Waldrop.

**"It breaks my heart because I know of other single moms like me who either found out they couldn't have children or they're still single. So I hurt for them, too, and the children over there, because there are so many people here who want children and it's hard to adopt over here, too. And [raising a child] is just a wonderful experience."**

— Linda Waldrop, a single mother in her early 50s who had previously adopted two Chinese children

and raising Lorna and Lina, whom she calls her "Chinese princesses," she considered adopting again. "I'd have a whole house full if I could, but I was hoping to get another daughter," she says. "I didn't know if I could do it this year, but then I heard there was a rumor about new regulations. Then it happened. No more single moms are allowed to adopt. Now I'm out of it."

On a personal level, she was obviously saddened by the news. "It breaks my heart because I know of other single moms like me who either found out they couldn't have children or they're still single," says Waldrop. "So I hurt for them, too, and the children over there, because there are so many people here who want children and it's hard to adopt over here, too. And [raising a child] is just a wonderful experience."

Stasko of Chinese Children Adoption International notes that the new marriage requirement has received a lot of negative attention, but mentions that this rule may not always be in place. "This may change again as China has opened and closed single applications over the years."

Still, Waldrop feels incredibly blessed to have been able to adopt her two daughters and is well aware that single individuals are not the only people who are affected by China's new requirements. "Other regulations make it more difficult for even married couples, but then it is

their [China's] children and they have their reasons. So if they want the parents' body mass index to be a certain amount and your income to be a certain amount, it's their babies and we understand. We don't like it, but it's their choice."

When asked about adopting elsewhere, Waldrop admits that her heart was set on China. "I really trust my agency and wanted that common denomination (Chinese ancestry) for my daughters, to have that bond with each other and to share in that," she says. "Not that they couldn't share that with someone from another country, but it would have been nice."

## A Delicate Balance

So why was the Chinese government limiting the number of foreigners eligible to adopt from China and why now? "Agencies have been told by CCAA that there are fewer orphans available to be adopted," says Barron of Children's Hope International. According to Chinese officials, the increasing number of foreign applicants since China first opened its doors to international adoption in 1992, combined with a growing interest in *domestic* adoption in China, has resulted in the number of applicants looking to adopt surpassing the number of orphans ready for adoption.

Stasko of Chinese Children Adoption International understands the motivation behind the government's move to modify its foreign adoption guidelines. "These



tighter qualifications should decrease the number of incoming dossiers, thereby returning them to manageable numbers," she says. "More in balance with children who are ready for adoption." The new intercountry rules also should bring down the wait-to-match period for prospective parents — cited by several agencies as the most trying part of the adoption process for parents — and more importantly, better identify the best homes for China's orphans. Adoption is not about meeting the demand of people who *want* children, but rather finding good families for children who *need* them.

In recent years CCAA has become responsible for a significantly larger number of orphanages, notes Jane Liedtke, who adopted her Chinese daughter more than a decade ago and works with several adoption agencies through her Chinese Daughters Foundation. And while this development would lead one to assume more orphans would be eligible for adop-

tion, that's not necessarily the case. "I believe the government is taking time to improve those institutions," says Liedtke, who lives part of the year in Beijing where CCAA is headquartered, "and will make children from them available when the conditions of the orphanage and children are improved."

However exclusive China's new requirements may seem, they are actually comparable to other countries' international adoption programs. "Although Russia and Ethiopia will allow single women to adopt, China's new physical and mental medical requirements now come more in line with these two countries," says Barron. And South Korea, which has the world's oldest international adoption program, also requires its foreign applicants to be married.

## Reality Check

At Children's Hope International, Barron confirms that his organization has already

started to experience a sharp decline in the number of applications for China. "The new qualifying standards for adoptive families along with the much longer waiting period has reduced the number of families applying to adopt from China in half," he says. "Fortunately, Children's Hope has options for many of these families. Several of the other five countries we serve (Russia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Columbia and Kazakhstan) will accept most of these potential adoptive parents."

Even before the new intercountry regulations went into effect, the number of Chinese orphans coming to America had started to drop. The U.S. State Department issued 7,906 immigrant visas to Chinese orphans in 2005, but 6,493 in 2006. Local agencies report this is a direct result of China taking twice as long to match prospective families with children because, according to CCAA, less orphans are ready for adoption.

Despite the new criteria, Stasko of Chinese Children Adoption International and Barron of Children's Hope International encourage people who are interested in international adoption to still consider China as an option. They are firm believers in the country's adoption program and are dedicated to finding permanent and loving homes in America for China's abandoned children. "If your heart is calling you to adopt from China, go ahead and start the process now. The longer you wait the longer the process will be," notes Barron. "Going to another country simply because the wait time is less may not be the right move if your child will be waiting for you in China."

Meanwhile, Michael and Vivian Mora are anxiously counting down to the moment they can show LeAnne the picture of her younger sister. The family is expecting to receive their second child's information from CCAA around April 2008, and 3-year-old LeAnne couldn't be more thrilled. "She told us that she's happy, but her sister's sad right now," says Vivian. "I asked her why and LeAnne said, 'She doesn't have Mommy and Daddy like me, but she will.'" ❀

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— Christine Stasko of Chinese Children Adoption International

In 2005, the Moras joined a group of Americans seeking to adopt Chinese babies through Children's Hope International. Photo courtesy of Vivian and Michael Mora.

