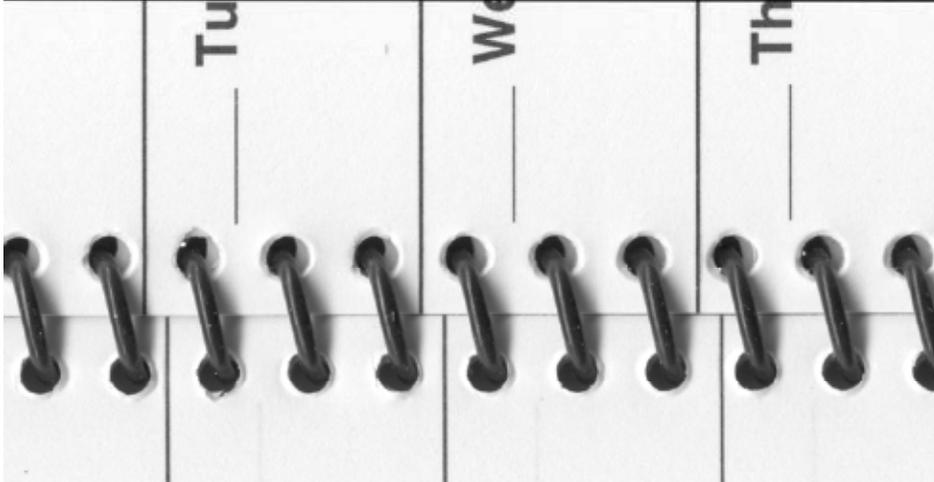
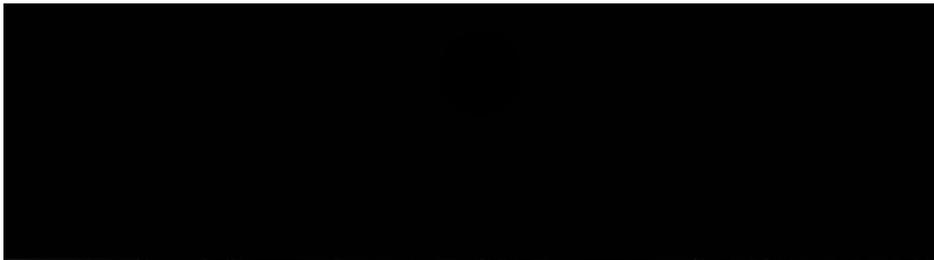




(M)OTHER

JENNIFER EISENHAUER



October 5th, 2005 was a very warm day. I was busy teaching. I felt like I lived at work on Wednesdays as I taught both a morning and evening class and didn't go home in between. Honestly, I don't know for sure what I did on that day, but I can imagine myself at work running from meeting to meeting or in my office grading student papers.

I can imagine what the morning light is like in my office on a warm autumn day—the way it demands attention cutting through the morning hush offering my poor plants the only light they will have. On that particular day, anyone watching wouldn't have realized that it was one of the most important days of my life. I didn't know it either.

October 5th, 2005 was a cooler day compared to the week before and there was a little bit of rain. I don't know if it happened during the day or night, if it was noisy or quiet, hectic or peaceful. I don't know what the place looked like or even who was there.

This was the day my daughter was born in China.

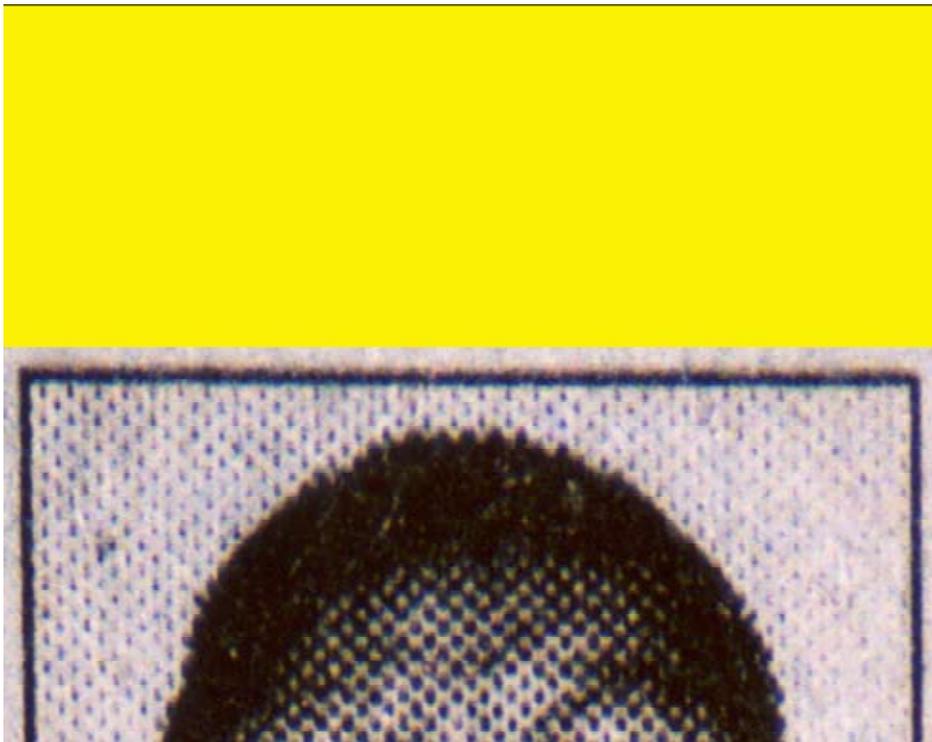
I don't know what my daughter saw when she opened her eyes for the first time, but I hope it was love.



October 5th, 2007

Our daughter's second birthday party was our first celebration of her birthday as a family. She spent her first 16 months of life and her first birthday in an orphanage in China. She was found only one day after her birth alongside a street near the orphanage. It was late and dark and she was in a bed of yellow blankets with a note and some baby formula.

I have a recurring vision of watching her birthmother wrap our daughter in a yellow blanket, but then the film breaks and I can never see what happens next. I am then only left with questions that become nightmares. Did she lay their baby down? Was this her decision? Was it an act of love? Would I have done the same? And I am then reminded of how often within the mythology of Chinese adoption that it is always the birthmother who is portrayed as *giving* her child *away*. I am careful to tell myself that our daughter has both a birthmother *and* a birthfather.



We received a copy of the photograph the police took of her that night after she was found. Her tiny little face is so pixilated in that picture, but I can see her scream too well. There is our baby and she is scared and hungry. I imagine the sound of her cry when she falls and bumps her head or when she has an ear infection, and imagine that cry multiplied to levels I cannot bare to hear. Every time I see a newborn cry, so small and helpless, I think of that picture. I can feel my body reach for her as her fingers brush past my own, but then she falls away becoming notations on paperwork.

女 2005 年 10 月 5 日生, 先天性唇腭裂
3 时 50 分后宰门派出所接群众报警称其在房
现一女婴, 派出所在查找不到其父母的情况
分送入我院 经初步检查 该弃婴为女婴



While driving to work the morning of her second birthday I began to cry. For the first time, I could feel her birthmother, imagine her thoughts, and envision her pain. I wondered what she thought about on this particular day. Up until this point, she had remained like a blank line on a form to me. She was more a presence that I thought of in terms of our daughter's feelings and questions than my own. However, as I drove to work that

morning her birthmother sat next to me passing beyond my peripheral vision. Her pain filled my body. This was the first time that I had ever come close to connecting with her and I realized the presence of our relationship. This feeling wrapped itself around my stomach making me feel like I might throw up my morning coffee all over the steering wheel. For the rest of the day, I was tearful every time I remembered the meaning of a *birth*-day. I wonder if she thinks about me and it is this very possibility that brings us together. *The other mother.*



October 5th 2008....

My daughter's third birthday was a beautiful autumn day and we decided to visit a farm outside the city. We are no longer surprised to find that she is one of only a few non-Caucasian children there and that we are the only multiracial family we see. We are also no longer surprised by being

watched and questioned. Glances and gazes cut short by my own reciprocal looking. Once, while playing at the mall, a little girl stared intently at me as she arrived at the bottom of the slide, blonde curls dancing all the way. *That is funny. She is tan and you are beige*—a comment that I responded to with a surprised chuckle and a brief explanation about all families being different. She was probably around three years old herself, and I found her vocabulary sounded like a crayon box. However, some comments and questions, while expected, remain uncomfortable and troubling. *Why didn't you have any children of your own?* But, she is my own child. She was our *first* choice.

I have since been working on making our daughter a scrapbook about her birth and life in China and about the nannies who tried their best to love her even while she laid for hours a day in a crib wearing the hair away on her head as she rocked herself against the crib rails. I think about the culture that I want more than anything for her to stay connected to, even while her placement alongside a street one day after her birth also has much to do with poverty and cultural ideas about gender and disability. It is taking me forever to finish this scrapbook and at times I wonder if my own struggle with this story determines my pace. It is hard to write a story without one of the authors.



Endnote to My Visual Scrapbook

Many infants have been abandoned in China following the implementation of population-growth control policies in the late 1970s and 1980s. Most of the children in Chinese orphanages are girls and children with disabilities. The “one-child-policy” was established in 1979, but enforcement varies from location to location. Many people in rural China are held accountable to a one-son, or two-child policy, in which a family can have one child if the first is a son, or a second child if the first child was a girl (Johnson, Banghan, & Liyao, 1998). In the past, Chinese officials have given what are likely very conservative estimates that around 100,000 to 160,000 children are abandoned each year in China (Johnson et al., 1998). Penalties for violating the one and two-child policies have included high fines, abortion, and forced sterilization. The penalties for violating China’s population control policies, coupled with China’s existing societal preference for sons, result in most of the abandoned children in China being girls. Johnson, Banghan, and Liyao (1998) write, “Most importantly, sons are permanent members of their father’s family and are still the major source for elderly parents in old age since rural China, outside of a few wealthy suburban areas, lacks a social security system. Daughters ‘marry away’ and join their husband’s family, where they are obligated to support his parents” (p. 475). Prior to these policies, a significant portion of abandoned children in China were children with disabilities. Yet, it is illegal to abandon a child in China. Our daughter is a child with a disability.

In 1992, China opened the adoption of Chinese children to families internationally in an attempt to address the overwhelming amount of children in Chinese orphanages. In 2008, families in the United States adopted 3,909 children from China. In 2007, the most children adopted from any country internationally were from China (5,453 children).

This essay and the experience of being a (m)other is itself a “scrapbook,” a multi-authored assemblage. These visual and written “texts” are intended to function as ways of raising questions and considerations about the boundaries and borders of (m)otherhood. While “motherhood” is often

represented as a linear and biologically-based progression beginning with the woman’s body, my own experience of being the (other) mother through adoption offers other insights into both popular and cultural discourses of what it means to be a mother. As a (m)other, my experience is a series of juxtapositions with what I am “told” a mother should be through popular and dominant representations, and the meanings we create through the repeated assembling and rearrangement of fragmented experiences. Likewise, these representations most often do not represent the diversity that characterizes our family in other ways. My own (m)otherhood is located at the boundaries of cultural traditions and transgressions as I am a Caucasian woman and a member of a Chinese-American family.

My “telling” of this story in this format is purposefully disjointed in that I see the seams, margins, and spaces as important as the text, images, and narrative. The meaning of being a (m)other is located in these juxtapositions which are at times meaningful, ironic, and contradictory. This is a narrative overwhelmed by both what is experienced and not experienced; what can be seen and never seen; known and not known. I wanted to explore the conceptual challenge of telling a story that is always incomplete, not in order to suggest that there are complete stories, but rather to question the notion of there ever being complete stories and ultimately ever being a unified and singular “(m)/other.”

Reference

Johnson, K., Banghan, H., & Liyao, W. (1998). Infant abandonment and adoption in China. *Population and Development Review*, 24(3), 469-510.

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