

# ADOPTING OVERSEAS

*Lucy Burns and Ailsa Burns*

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years, some 8000 children from other countries have been adopted into Australian families. They come from over 50 countries, including Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, Colombia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Guatemala, Hong Kong, India, the Philippines, Romania, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and most recently China. They are living in every part of Australia, and are attending government, religious and independent schools. Those who have reached adulthood are engaged in every kind of occupation. This book explores one aspect of this great social adventure: the experience of families who adopt children into Australia from overseas.

Intercountry adoption has become the most common form of adoption in Australia. The wait can be a long one, depending on the situation in the birth countries, and the numbers of people from other countries also seeking to adopt children from those countries. The children are aged between 1 week and 7 years (a few are older), and have had many different kinds of experiences before adoption. Among the adopted people from overseas now living in Australia, the oldest are likely to have been born in Vietnam and South America, the youngest in China and South Korea. The oldest arrived at a time when Australia was a far less multicultural society than it is today.

This book has been written to help families who are going through the adoption process, families who have formed by intercountry adoption, and people who are interested in child welfare and child development more broadly. It starts out with a brief history of intercountry adoption in Australia, including a discussion of the

reasons why adoption remains controversial: for example, the widespread removal of Aboriginal children from their families, and the sometimes unhappy outcomes of the past practice of unmarried mothers relinquishing their babies at birth. Although this history may be confronting, we need to understand it for two reasons: it is the background to today's policies around intercountry adoption, and it helps us appreciate why the adoption process today often seems so intrusive.

The second part of the book gives an overview of the laws and the procedures governing intercountry adoption and presents some of the main findings from Australian and international research. Because this is not a legal textbook we haven't gone into great detail about the specific laws. Instead we focus on the Hague Convention, which guides the processes around intercountry adoption in Australia today. A brief background to the Convention will also help readers understand how important this legal framework is for protecting vulnerable and disadvantaged children from a range of potentially dreadful circumstances, including child trafficking and sexual and physical abuse.

The next main section describes the roles and experiences of professional staff working in adoption agencies, focusing on the issues that some adoptive families will face. The aim of this section is to give parents a set of strategies, tools and tips that can help them and their children settle into family life with the least stress possible. Following this we talk about the findings from our survey of nearly two hundred NSW adoptive families. This is the largest survey of adoptive parents in Australia, and the information they have shared with us focuses on getting through the process without too many battle scars so that you can thoroughly enjoy being parents.

Interspersed through these three stories of the book are stories about their personal experiences written by a number of adopting parents and one adoptee.

The last part of the book contains facts and figures about intercountry adoption in Australia, along with addresses and websites for adoption professionals and parent support groups in the various states and territories, and a reading list for those who want more information. When you refer to these, however, please keep in mind that adoption practices and programs are constantly changing, so although this information is current at the time of publication, it may not be by the time you read it.

## **SETTLING IN**

Settling in is a major issue for adoptive families. Although most children, especially those who arrived as babies, were reported to settle into their new lives within several months, others, mainly older children, took longer, sometimes years, to settle.

In particular, initial sleeping arrangements were very important in helping the children settle. The usual advice to parents is never to take your child into bed with you, and adoptive parents found the childcare books they consulted stressed this. But babies and children who are used to a dormitory find it hard to sleep in a room of their own, however attractively it is decorated. The children fussed, cried, and woke frequently, sometimes with night terrors. 'Controlled crying', a frequently recommended procedure, was usually unsuccessful with adoptive children. The most successful strategy was co-sleeping, at least for a time, and those who did this as a last resort wished they had started earlier. Another strategy that was sometimes successful was to pick the child up and carry them around the house, talking softly to them until they fell asleep.

Tantrums were quite a common problem, especially with later-adopted children, and parents resorted to many different strategies to handle these. Time out was not usually successful, as it only frightened the child more. Waiting it out and then providing hugs was the most common solution. Tantrums can of course have many sources, and professional workers outlined a range of possible anxieties and frustrations. Parents most commonly mentioned two: one, frustration caused by lack of language in a child who was previously able to communicate their feelings and needs; and two, a lack of child companions. Communication frustration wore off as children learned English – it usually retreated after six months. With respect to absence of companions, older or other children who were frequently around the home often played an important role.

## **ATTACHMENT**

Parents were often astonished at how rapidly and strongly their children accepted them. One commented that, 'It was as though she knew I was what she'd been waiting for.' Another was amazed at how her 4-year-old 'accepted us in those first couple of minutes ... [he] took our hands and we left – he did not look back'. The great majority of children, no matter what age they were when they were adopted, were described as bonding to parents within two months, and as having a secure attachment bond; but some insecurity and separation anxiety was not uncommon in new or stressful situations.

Professional staff felt that the presence of a main caregiver – a foster mother, for example – in babyhood was a predictor of good later positive relationships. Unfortunately, there is often not enough information about children's backgrounds available for anyone to be able to check out this connection.

A number of parents were concerned that over-emphasis on attachment as the cause of all the problem behaviour a child might exhibit could prevent parents from investigating and dealing with other possible causes.

## **FINDING OUT ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S BACKGROUND**

Professionals and adoptive families emphasised the importance of this, and agreed that the visit to bring home your child is the best – and sometimes the only – time to find out about the child's background. Sometimes, however, virtually no information is available, and nor is it ever likely to be; and also, unfortunately, some parents are given incorrect information. Lack of information can raise difficulties for adoptive parents when their child wants to know more about where they came from. The advice from parents and professionals alike was to discuss the adoption openly from the very beginning, always putting it in a way the child can understand. Professional workers also pointed out that adopted children vary greatly in their desire for information. Some take the view that if no information is available, 'That's it then', at least for the moment, but others develop a strong, and in some cases intense, need to know more.

Parents should ensure that their child feels free to ask questions about their adoption (without, of course, ramming it down their throats). Several suggested that regularly using the birth mother's name can help a child picture her as a real person. They also pointed out that a good knowledge of the birth country (from books, visits and other means) also helps answer the inevitable question, 'Why did they give me away?'

A special problem arises when parents are aware of some distressing aspect of their child's background but cannot bring

themselves to pass on this information to the child. Counsellors who see such families feel that this is a mistake, because the children can see there is something they are not being told, and they then build up alarming fantasies of what it might be. In addition, they lose trust in their adoptive parents. Even if the information is distressing, children need to know all they can about themselves. Professional workers can give you advice on the best ways of delivering this information.

### **KEEPING THE BIRTH CULTURE ALIVE**

All people we interviewed stressed the value of keeping children's birth culture alive, and encouraging them to be proud of their dual heritage. Most parents had gone to great lengths to do so, filling their homes with photos, books, CDs and other material, joining birth country associations, going to birth country restaurants, attending festivals, taking cooking lessons and often language classes.

A problem that many parents noted was that the children themselves were often less than enthusiastic about all this, because they just wanted to be 'normal' and 'the same as everyone else' – the son of one parent in the survey, for instance, would not let his younger brother speak Korean. However, parents of older children, and professional workers, found that these attitudes were likely to change when the young people reached their twenties and thirties and became more interested in their heritage. Parents often said they wished they had kept up with parent support groups, so both they and their children would feel connected and supported by other adoptive families as the children grew older.

An unexpected finding was how important the birth culture had become for many parents. Australians today travel widely, and

often fall in love with foreign countries and return there many times. Something similar happened to many adoptive parents, who not only valued the culture because of their child, but found it had opened up new worlds to them personally. They felt new and ongoing connections to these places and cultures. Parents and professionals agreed on the great value of trips back to the birth country, but also warned that such trips could be stressful to some children. Younger children in particular could have vague and unexpressed anxieties about being abandoned there, or returned to an orphanage. Making sure that children understood these trips would be fun-filled family holidays was important.

## **RACISM**

Racism is a problem in many countries, and Australia is no exception. Although most parents in our book reported that their children experienced little outright racism, there was quite a lot of curiosity, some of which was tactless. As has been noted in other countries, racist comments and behaviour were more common in areas where there are fewer people from other countries than there tend to be in our major cities, such as country towns, where the child stood out as 'different'. Parents and professionals recommended finding a multicultural school, if that were possible, explaining to the teachers about intercountry adoption, and, if necessary, making use of the school's anti-discrimination policy to press a point. Most parents found their local schools very good at handling discrimination issues, but there were a few bad experiences. In such cases moving the child to a more sensitive school was recommended.

We also found that children did not always report racist behaviour, either because they were too upset, or because they did not want to upset their parents. Parents described various strategies

they had developed to deal with inquisitive stares and comments, and offered advice on strategies they taught their children, the most common first point being to understand that it is the bully who has the problem. Professionals pointed out that having such strategies is especially important in adolescence, when social life becomes more complex and members of the opposite sex become more important.

## REWARDS

To write about the rewards of intercountry adoption expressed by parents would require a book in itself, and one containing many volumes. Seeing the joy in their children was the greatest reward, often with the extra kick of 'seeing a frightened little girl develop into her happy, secure self'. The wonder of being a parent was the next most commonly mentioned reward: 'The little everyday events that teach you about yourself – your strengths and weaknesses – and the knowledge that you are Mum and Dad, the best role ever.'

Several other things were also greatly valued: the friendships made with other families; expanded cultural horizons – 'Becoming a transracial family and bridging two cultures'; and the sense of becoming trailblazers – 'The children have changed other people's perceptions and stereotyping.' One parent told of recently reading an article entitled 'No history, no culture, no language, no self' and planning an alternative piece entitled 'Know history, know culture, know language, know self'. These are aspects of intercountry adoption that are not given much consideration in the research literature, but they are an important part of our story.

## CHAPTER 2

# WENDY'S STORY\*

'May I speak to Wendy?'

'Speaking.'

'This is Sue, from the Department of Community Services. Have your circumstances changed in any way?'

For a week I had known the call had to be coming. I, and the members of my local internet support group, had been scouring the referral announcements on the internet lists of other countries for over a week, knowing ours couldn't be far away. I had spent most of that morning pacing the room, unconsciously trying to ease the stress of the imminent 'birth'.

When the call finally came I think I yelled. I know I was laughing. Mostly, I was just shocked. The prepared sheet of questions I had carefully left near the phone was forgotten. Sue continued talking.

'Have you moved house?'

'No.'

'Are you pregnant?'

'No.'

'You have a baby girl. She's 10 months old, 66 centimetres tall and weighs 7 kilograms ...'

I was overwhelmed with excitement. Sue went on to give me many more crucial details, few of which I could take in. Finally, I realised she was telling me she had photographs. Photographs! In record time, I had collected Nana, driven across town to the Department of Community Services (DoCS) office and was holding

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\* © Willa McDonald. First published in *Finding Happiness: Single Mothers Share Their China Adoption Stories*, 2004, Our Chinese Daughters Foundation (<http://www.ocdf.org>).

a photo of Yu Yu in my hands. I immediately fell in love. I couldn't believe this chubby, smiling child with the bright black eyes was being given to me to raise as my own daughter.

I first applied to adopt a child when I was 40. I was reasonably successful in my career as a teacher, was on good terms with the family I was born into and had many friends, but I sorely missed having a partner and children of my own. While backpacking through Vietnam with a Canadian friend, I met an Australian couple who had just applied to adopt a child from South America. It was through them that I discovered that it was possible for single women in their forties to adopt.

Although I had just begun seeing someone, I wasn't sure how serious the romance would turn out to be, and it was already overburdened by my loudly ticking biological clock. I rang DoCS, the government department responsible for adoptions in New South Wales. At that time, New South Wales put age restrictions on people who could adopt. The regulation was that the adoptive parent could not be more than 41 years older than the child. It was clear that the adoption process was going to take several years (in my case, it turned out to be about three and a half years from the time of the first phone call) and that I would be looking at adopting an older child.

There were also very few countries an Australian single person could adopt from. I was told they were India (but no adoptions had come through in years), Colombia (particularly expensive), Ethiopia and Romania. Ethiopia seemed the better choice for me. I sent off the cheque for my initial information pack and then began the first of many long waits. At that stage, I did not take the adoption process seriously. Several months after my initial phone call, I was called to attend a seminar for people wishing to adopt.

Six months after that, I was notified to attend another compulsory seminar, this time for people adopting older children (these were only held twice a year). I then had six months to lodge my formal application. My relationship broke down during this time, and with my sadness over it and related issues, I ended up taking the full six months to submit my application. The Ethiopia Program closed, apparently because a child had died from measles soon after being assigned to Australian parents. This left Romania. My interest in being a parent had increased, but the reality of adopting an older, institutionalised child, probably with very severe problems, was making parenthood via adoption seem all too hard.

Basically, I was terrified. Would I be a good mum? How would I manage raising a child on my own? Would I love her? Would I be ground down by the daily demands of childrearing? How would I manage financially? (At the time I owned my own apartment, but I had been studying for my doctorate and working on a contract/freelance basis for some years – I didn't even have a full-time job.) Could I be both sole breadwinner and sole nurturer to a needy child? What if the child had severe attachment problems or disabilities? Was I selfless enough to give and give to a child who could be so damaged she couldn't love me back? What on earth was I thinking?

But I didn't pull out of the program. Miraculously, in November 1999 I was assigned a social worker, Joan. Within a few weeks I was being assessed. Joan was an extremely astute woman. I met with her five times and she helped me sort my way through most of my questions and insecurities, plus a few more that weren't adoption related.

While I was seeing Joan, the news that Australia had signed an adoption agreement with China hit the front pages. As part of a package of adoption reforms, New South Wales dropped its age

restrictions so that I was now eligible to adopt a baby. At the same time, I unexpectedly secured a permanent teaching position. Suddenly everything changed for me. It was as if a light had been turned on. Unlike Romania, China was a country I knew. I had studied Chinese politics at university and had always been fascinated by the culture. I had travelled extensively in Asia, touring through many countries, teaching for an extended period in Japan and visiting China in 1980 and again in 1989 for holidays.

Adoption – and cross-racial adoption – hasn't always had a good reputation in Australia. In New South Wales a recent Senate inquiry found that adoption practices in the 1970s had resulted in young single mothers being forced by hospital workers and social workers to give up their babies for adoption. As well, Australians have been appalled at the revelations about what has become known as the 'Stolen Generation'. Under a government policy of assimilation that was in place for much of last century, children who appeared to have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal blood were taken away from their Aboriginal families and either put into institutions or assigned to white families as domestic and farm labourers.

A number of people I respected asked me to spell out why I would be willing to adopt a child, let alone transplant one from her own culture to life in Australia, a country which has more than its fair share of racial bigotry. I thought long and hard about it. The bottom line was that I wanted a child, but I also needed to feel good about the way a child would come into my life and about the sort of future she would have.

By adopting a child, I did not want to be unwittingly encouraging inhumane practices that were resulting in children being abandoned or taken from their birth mother. At the political level, I did not support the way China was implementing its population control policies or its maltreatment of women. But at the individual

level, there are thousands of children already in orphanages there who need homes. As a friend of mine who works on 'Stolen Generation' issues once said to me about the victims of these Australian policies: 'They are mad at the people who put them into the orphanages, not the ones who took them out.'

At the time I adopted Yu Yu I did not know about baby trading in China, but I've since heard of child smuggling rings, in particular in Guangxi, a very poor province in southern China. The evidence from the October 2003 trial of the Guangxi smugglers indicates that most of the babies were girls, and were destined for sale to urban Chinese families in neighbouring provinces, and some were intended for sale to country families to help with housework. Others were to be sold as child brides. It is unclear whether any of the babies who were (or are) traded end up in overseas adoption programs.

The possibility that my child might have been made available for adoption in such circumstances is horrifying. But the likelihood that this occurred is small, as statistics released by the Chinese Government show that relatively few of the children in the orphanages find their way to being adopted overseas. In China, the usual route to foreign adoption is abandonment as an infant, resulting in institutionalisation in an orphanage. Many children don't survive that abandonment or their life in an orphanage – food can be scarce, infectious illnesses are rife and there may be little personal attention or care. Of the children who do survive, the vast majority remain in the orphanages till they become adults. These children grow up experiencing an institutional culture, not a Chinese one.

Attitudes towards non-Caucasians have been changing in Australia. National policies have been evolving for several decades towards the view that Australia is part of Asia. Bitterness towards the Japanese for their role in World War II, and their bombing of Darwin and 'invasion' of Sydney Harbour, has faded as the generation

of Australians directly involved in the war has grown old and died. Multiculturalism has been a successful experiment here, particularly in the cities. This is reflected in the immigration statistics. Twenty-eight per cent of Sydney's four million residents are Asian; 12.5 per cent are from China, Hong Kong and Korea, and 5 per cent of Sydney families speak Chinese languages at home. Sydney has a thriving Chinatown, and for most Sydneysiders, it is second nature to eat with chopsticks. On the whole, Australia is a safe and stable place to live, with little domestic strife.

While I knew I couldn't always protect a child from racial prejudice in Australia (or anywhere else), I felt I could give a Chinese child a loving home, a sense of belonging and more opportunities than she would have if she stayed in a Chinese orphanage. I waited till my final approval came through and then asked to be reassessed for China. More forms and another social worker visit later and my real adoption journey had begun. My documents were sent to China in August 2000.

Unwilling to jinx myself, and never really believing that I would be allowed to become a mother, I made no preparations for Yu Yu's arrival for the 12 months I waited until she was allocated to me. As it turned out, it wasn't until 10 weeks after allocation that I could travel with the other six families to collect Yu Yu, so there was time to prepare for her. With seven families to organise and no prior experience doing it, DoCS had decided to wait until the *Notices to Travel* arrived from China before they made the travel arrangements with the Chinese travel service. Now, with more experience and pressure from waiting parents, travel times after allocation are down to about six weeks.

In those last few weeks before travelling, all sorts of baby equipment suddenly materialised – a cot and highchair from a friend's garage; a car seat presented by my teacher friends; bags of clothes

from an assortment of people. I raced around in a panic. The kitchen cupboards were replaced; the electrician rewired the back half of my apartment and installed safety switches; new shelves were put in to sort my books (12 large cartons of books went to a second-hand shop as part of the clean-up); the baby's bed, cot, bookcase and dressing table were all repainted.

The only major thing I had allowed myself to do during the long wait was negotiate for my employer to grant better leave entitlements to adoptive parents. After years of part-time work, I was concerned about how I would manage financially if I adopted. In New South Wales, the government requires all adoptive parents to take six months' leave to be with the child and smooth the transition to their new home. This applies even when the adoptive parent is single and there is no other breadwinner in the home. A friend of mine, a mother of three biological children, had reassured me during the adoption process that 'babies always bring a loaf of bread'. I hoped she was right.

Although I suddenly had a secure job, I had only just started it when I was assessed for adoption and I would have no leave entitlements until I had been there for at least 12 months. At the time, the union was in the middle of negotiating a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement that would set the employment conditions for all university staff for the next three years. Under the existing agreement, adoptive mothers could only have three weeks' leave.

I approached the union for help to have entitlements for people adopting brought in line with those for people having children biologically. Biological mothers were allowed to take 12 months' leave, with the first 12 weeks of that leave on full pay (or 24 on half pay). Alternatively, they could choose to work part-time for two years, taking the first 12–24 weeks of that as paid leave.

Unfortunately, the union turned out to be obstructive rather than helpful, but a direct appeal to the administration was successful. It was like a miracle. Suddenly, I would be able to take six months leave on half pay. That, plus my savings, would see me through.

One of my final preparations was to send a package to the orphanage containing a disposable camera, a fluffy teddy that I had slept with for a month and then sprayed with my perfume, and some close-up photographs of me holding the teddy near my face.

Eventually, everything was ready (or as close to ready as it ever would be – my kitchen cupboards are still waiting to be cleaned). My sister Terry, who lives with her husband about 11 hours' drive from me, on the far north coast of New South Wales, agreed to come with me to China. She flew to Sydney and we had a celebratory farewell dinner with family the night before we left at the end of October 2001.

I had been hoping I would meet Yu Yu on her first birthday – 1 November. That was the day we had been told to gather in Guangzhou with the other six adoptive families from our batch. It was unclear whether we would meet our daughters that afternoon or the next day, so the train trip in from Hong Kong was nervewracking, even though we had the company of one of the other adopting single mothers (there were three of us in our batch), and the friend who was accompanying her through this arduous adoption process.

It was almost a relief when it became clear we would not be meeting the children until the next day. Surprisingly, I slept heavily that night, though in hindsight I realise it was probably the narcosis of fear. Our guide, Helen, arranged for our batch of families to be collected at 8.30 the following morning, to be taken by minibus to a government office block in the city.

When we arrived we were ushered to the fifth floor and down the corridor towards the sounds of distressed children. All seven little girls, aged from 12 months to 3½ years, were waiting in a room with carers from the orphanage. There were two cots in the centre of the room, but several of the children were being held or were huddling near adults. Not all were upset, but one child, in particular, sounded inconsolable.

I couldn't find Yu Yu at first, but when I saw her I instantly recognised her from her photographs. She was clinging to a carer and was wracked by long, slow sobs. I didn't want to upset her more, so I just stroked her back while she stayed in the carer's arms. Soon the assistant orphanage director strode over and made me take her. This distressed her even more. It was a humid day and it was an airless room, but she seemed particularly hot (I later found a receipt in her medical documents showing that she had received a shot of antibiotics the day before, so her misery was probably exacerbated by a fever). As she began to calm down, the cries became little, breathless heaves. Eventually she fell asleep on my lap and slept for about an hour.

When she woke up she sat listlessly, leaning against me. I felt in my bag and produced a twin of the fluffy, pink teddy I had sent over in advance. She reached for it, looked at me, looked at the bear – and smiled at me. Her foster mother/carers must have prepared her well for the handover, because at that moment she made the decision to begin the bonding process.

After completing the interminable paperwork that was necessary to complete the adoption, we were allowed to go back to the hotel to rest before having to attend the police station that afternoon to organise more paperwork, this time for our daughters' Chinese passports. It should have been a quick visit, but the officials needed a new passport picture of Yu Yu and one or two of the other children.

Yu Yu was tired, unwell and grumpy. They didn't want me in the picture, but she wasn't going to have anyone separate us. They tried to put a whiteboard between us while she sat on my lap, but she screamed and screamed. She refused to let anyone else hold her. She wouldn't go in a highchair either. They kept shaking rattles at her and clapping, which only upset her more. So we asked them to stop and I calmed her down again, and eventually they got the photo by turning me to face the wall and taking it over my shoulder. Poor Yu Yu, what a day! But I was secretly thrilled that she was definitely seeing me as a safe refuge.

We would spend another 10 days in China, finalising all the paperwork for her visa before we could bring her home to Sydney. Our group requested a Buddhist blessing for our girls. We were taken to the Temple of the Six Banyan Trees, an old temple built like a pagoda, with 17 floors. In the grounds of the temple is a room with three giant golden statues of Buddha. While we were waiting for the monk to be ready, we ventured into a side courtyard. Immediately we were swamped by older women who were visiting the temple as part of their devotions. I had a booklet a friend had prepared: it explained that we were adopting these children. The women were delighted. They clearly wanted us to know that they thought we were doing a good thing. They gave us the 'thumbs up', patted us and the babies, smiled and nodded their heads. The blessing itself was given by a young monk; it didn't feel nearly as moving as the blessing these older women gave us.

We were also taken to visit the orphanage. It wasn't the horrendous experience I had expected. Although very clean (it had only been built 15 years previously), it seemed old and shabby. We were taken past a long low table where a dozen or so toddlers were eating a lunch of rice, vegetables and meat. Further down the corridor were several nursery rooms. I was taken to a room with a number

of babies crawling over a mat – I recognised the mat from the allocation photographs taken of Yu Yu and sent to me in Australia. Yu Yu showed no distress and was soon crawling all over the mat with the other babies while I knelt among them.

We were then taken to another room where we were told we could ask questions. No one could speak English and I was too overwhelmed to produce a clear thought, let alone a question, but we were given copies of our girls' finding notices (this is a notice that has to be placed in the local newspaper when an abandoned baby is found, so that relatives have the opportunity to claim the child). A member of our group translated the finding notice for me. My sister and I visited Yu Yu's finding place. As a symbolic gesture, I lit a candle and left a letter for her biological mother, listing the promises that I wanted to make to her and assuring her that I would always love her little girl.

It is now over two years since I brought Yu Yu home. We arrived to a warm welcome from our family and friends, but it was some time before Yu Yu really settled in. She took to me very quickly, but was clingy and insecure. This increased over time in the first year, rather than getting better. It was our second Christmas at home when I suddenly realised I was using the toilet without holding her on my lap.

I had received a great deal of information from my support group about the importance of promoting attachment with Yu Yu as soon as possible. This proved invaluable, and I was more than happy to carry her in a pouch rather than use a stroller (she took to it like a little koala – eventually learning how to hang on). I put her cot next to my bed from the very first night so that we could begin co-sleeping, and it wasn't long before she was climbing in with me in the middle of the night. For the first few months we

bathed together and swam together because that way she had to hold on to me and develop trust in me.

She was very frightened of most of the new experiences she was facing in Australia. She obviously had never been to the beach and had never walked on sand or grass. She was petrified of travelling in the car and being locked into a car seat. She never really took to a stroller. She was reluctant to sleep and, particularly in the early months, cried and cried while I rocked her and sang to her, sometimes for three or more hours at a time. She often refused to go down in a cot for her daytime naps and I had to hold her. When I left our precious photograph of her foster mother where she could reach it on the bookshelf, she went through a stage of patting it every day (but she also patted and kissed the photograph of me holding her that a friend had sent us). For a long time she was wary of middle-aged women – anyone she might be passed on to. She had decided that she wanted to stay with me and she wasn't going to shift.

There was no way I could return to work after 6 months, or even 12. Yu Yu simply wasn't ready for that separation. My employer ended up giving me 15 months' leave. Even then, Yu Yu wasn't ready for me to return to full-time work. Luckily, I have a very flexible job. The transition to childcare when I returned to work was very difficult, but the centre at my workplace is an excellent one. I spent 16 full days with her there, gradually spending more and more time in the staffroom rather than in the playground with her. The first time I left the premises I was called back after an hour because she couldn't be comforted. Her fear was so great during those first few weeks of childcare that she wouldn't allow anyone to touch her or do anything for her.

The carers had begun to describe her as 'non-compliant', which I knew was incorrect. She is a remarkably agreeable child, but sheer terror was making her try to control everyone and everything in her

environment. It was clear that I couldn't return to work full-time. My extremely patient employer bent the rules and allowed me to return to work part-time for the next year. This meant that I could take Yu Yu to the childcare centre for three short mornings and slowly build up to three full days. Within two months, she had adjusted – there were no more tantrums at home or at the centre, and no more tears in the morning when I left.

The extra leave meant a financial sacrifice and the running up of a debt, but with the help of a small pension and a childcare subsidy from the government, we managed well in the circumstances, and it was time well spent with Yu Yu. If called to, I would make the same decision again. She is now a confident child who loves going to childcare three days a week, plays with all the children and has made a best friend. Although she will always have the reserve of a sensitive child, the excruciating shyness she exhibited in the first 18 months is gone.

Despite her gentleness, Yu Yu's character and sense of self are remarkably strong. The name given to her in the orphanage was Mei, Ruo Yun. I wanted to keep her Chinese name to honour her and her heritage, but Ruo Yun, which means 'like white clouds', is a particularly difficult name to pronounce correctly. On the other hand, Mei is easy and pretty in English, and works well with our surname. When I collected my daughter I began by calling her Ruo Yun, but she never recognised it (or at least she never responded to the way I was pronouncing it). Slowly, I introduced Mei, and she very quickly answered to it (and all the affectionate names I gave her – 'peach blossom', 'sweetie-pie', 'darling'). So Mei she became.

However, a few months after Yu Yu began childcare, it became obvious to everyone, carers and family, that while she would answer to Mei, she was not using the name to refer to herself. Her speech was delayed, but at the age of 2, she was capable of saying the

names of people close to her, such as 'Auntie Tessa'. Yet even in games with the other children at childcare, she would not refer to herself as Mei. Around that time she also seemed to be having a problem with the correct use of 'you' and 'me'. She would say, 'You do it Mummy!', clearly meaning herself, as she took the tea towel from me.

One day I was singing to her and making up the words to tell her a story about herself. I called her Mei in the song. All of a sudden she became very cross, and with great exasperation said: 'NO, Mummy, NOT MEI, YOU!' Finally, I began to understand. I checked with my Chinese friends and friends involved in adoption. It became clear that her nickname in China was probably 'Yun' or 'Yun Yun' and that all this time she must have thought that I just had a funny accent when I was saying 'you'. The next time we were at childcare I approached the main carer for advice. We decided that 'You' was too awkward a name to use in English, but we came up with another idea. When I asked her if she would like to be called 'Yu Yu', she gave me a huge smile and agreed, and she has been Yu Yu ever since.

Perhaps it is a coincidence, and perhaps it was just a matter of timing, but once Yu Yu had reclaimed her name, her speech progressed very quickly. Within a couple of months, at the age of 2½, she was suddenly talking clearly and well, often in complex sentences. Now that she is 3, her favourite saying is 'Ahoy, me hearties!' which she yells out with gusto while jumping on her trampoline in her Captain Feathersword outfit.

I am told by her carers that Yu Yu is academically clever, popular with the other children and well adjusted. Although there is some evidence that she spent too long lying in a cot or stroller during her time in China, her carers believe she must have been

well looked after in the orphanage and in the foster home to be as developmentally mature and secure as she now is.

Yu Yu has a number of friends who are also adopted from China, some of whom were adopted from the same orphanage on the same day. We meet with other adoptive families twice a month, once to learn Mandarin songs and be mentored by some young Chinese women who are studying in Australia. Yu Yu also spends one day a week with a Chinese family who speak only her dialect at home. The mother of the family also spends time each week with Yu Yu teaching her Mandarin.

There are still moments when Yu Yu feels sad. During the emotionally heightened time of her last adoption anniversary and birthday, her grief resurfaced, as it no doubt will at different stages of her life. Rather than tears, she spoke of her sadness and drew pictures to express it. But she is a fundamentally happy and fun-loving child. She enjoys listening to stories, swimming, dancing and singing. She has a great sense of humour, loves to play tricks on me and smiles her way through most of the day. She has a generous heart and a great capacity to love.

It is a cliché to say that the Inuit have umpteen different words for 'snow' but we have very few words in English for 'love'. I tell Yu Yu that I fell in love with her photograph the minute I saw it. Yet that feeling was nothing compared to the inexpressible feelings I now have for her. I still can't believe the joy and wonder that fills my life just because she is in it. I am so glad that I took the risk to adopt her. The tragedy of not knowing her is unthinkable. I feel honoured to have been given this opportunity to parent her and just wish that I could somehow communicate to her birth family that she is safe and well looked after, and very, very loved.