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At Last, a Mother!

by Melissa Ludtke '73

The phone call I'd been waiting for arrives early on a spring morning.

"Melissa, we know who your baby is going to be," says Lillian Zhang, a woman who directs China Adoption With Love in Brookline, Massachusetts. In a few weeks, she would become my guide when I traveled to China to meet my daughter and bring her home.

"Your baby's name is Chang Yu Xia, and she was born on September 10, 1996," Lillian tells me. Quickly I calculate her age: Tomorrow she will be eight months old. Even as I'm figuring this out in my head, with my hand I am reaching to my desktop, trying desperately to locate a scrap of paper on which to write this new and important information.

"How do you spell her name?" I ask, after discovering, to my dismay, that an old enve-

lope will have to suffice. "And what does it mean?"

Slowly Lillian recites the English letters, explaining as she does that the first part of my daughter's name simply tells us the town where she is, Changzhou. After all, Chang Yu Xia has no family name. She is an orphan.

"Beautiful colorful jade, that's what her name means," Lillian says. Later that morning I write in my journal about this child who is lying in a crib twelve time zones away from me. Now I know her name, but her features and personality are left for me to imagine: "I wonder if you have green eyes

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Chinese calligraphy by J.K. Wang, translation of title.

like mine," I write, realizing how focused I've suddenly become on the color jade.

Chang Yu Xia was abandoned by her parents as a result of China's population policy that pressures families to have only one child. No one knows, or ever will know, if she was her mother's first baby, born to parents who decided, as many in China do, to reserve their precious slot for a boy they one day hoped to have. Or she could have been her family's second child, a child whose orphaned fate was understood during her mother's pregnancy. Either circumstance must be excruciating for birth parents as they go through the emotional and physical steps of abandoning their babies, leaving them to be cared for by strangers.

Some mothers in China, I've been told, apply a plant's toxin to their daughter's skin. By doing this, they create a mark like a birthmark that, to their eyes, will be forever distinguishable. The mark speaks for these mothers' absent voices: "I did not willingly abandon you," it proclaims. "And when one day I see you again, I will know you as my child." Swaddled in blankets, and sometimes accompanied by a note, a mother leaves her infant in a public place, on a park bench or near government offices, where authorities soon find her and bring her to an orphanage. It is unlikely that a parent will ever see her child again.

Several weeks before I left for China, I was given a postage-stamp photograph of my daughter's three-month-old face. In that picture, which the Chinese adoption officials had sent to Lillian, the baby's basketball-shaped head pops up out of a loose-fitting and tattered red sweater. Her unfocused gaze makes it appear as though someone startled her at nap time. I carried this photo with me everywhere I went.

Ever since June 1996, when I began the process of adopting a child from China, I had wondered how the Chinese adoption officials would put me and my child together. With thousands of babies in need of adoptive families, how would these officials in Beijing select the girl who would grow up in my house, as my child, in Cambridge, Massachusetts? Along with the pile of documents I'd been asked to submit, the Chinese requested a photograph of me. Now, as I gazed at this tiny image they'd sent back to me, I knew I was developing a strong attachment to this baby, convincing me that she and I belonged together.

This extraordinary feeling of connectedness didn't easily translate into words. Nor was I even certain I understood all of the emotional exchanges that were transpiring between me and the photo of this little girl. However, as I showed her photo to friends and family, I declared my certainty not by saying things such as "we were meant to be" or

"I know we belong together" (though I believed both), but by jokingly describing our physical similarities. "Look at her," I'd say. "You see how much we resemble one another." Friends nodded politely, but didn't know quite how to respond since my hair is blond and my face has Caucasian features. "See those fat cheeks, double



Maya and many other babies slept side-by-side in cribs at the Changzhou orphanage.

chin, and thin hair," I'd say, prompting them to look again at my daughter. They'd laugh awkwardly, a bit fearful of fully acknowledging my face's pudgy tendencies. Still, in this exchange I felt they'd sensed this unspoken connection.

Lillian also surprised me on a different morning by calling to tell me that my daughter's name wasn't Chang Yu Xia,

as she'd thought it was.

It seems the Chinese character had been a bit blurred in the initial fax. Now that copies of my daughter's records had arrived, Lillian could accurately decipher the character. "Her name is Chang Yu Lu," she told me. It felt strange to hear my daughter called by a different

name, especially since, in my mind, I'd already made "Xia" a part of her American name. Besides, I didn't like the sound of "Lu" with "Ludtke," which is my last name and soon would be hers. So I decided to keep the name I'd

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associated with her from the moment we had been introduced: She would be Maya Xia Ludtke.

Ludtke is the name I was born with. It is also the one I asked a judge to legally return to me after I was divorced following a brief, unhappy, and childless marriage during my late twenties. I had never remarried, so my family name has remained mine. Now, at the age of forty-six, I was about to become Maya's only adoptive parent. It occurred to me more than once that since I am on my own, I will pass on to my daughter the last name my parents gave me, something women rarely do.

In thinking about this, I recalled a conversation I'd had with another unmarried mother. She had remarked on this circumstance, as we'd talked about the divergent paths women in our generation are taking to motherhood. While in her early forties, she'd given birth to two boys on her own, each the product of anonymous donor insemination. What seemed to astound her most about her route to motherhood was that she'd created a family by herself (albeit with the help of purchased sperm) and now her sons would carry on her family's name. "I mean, I passed along my family name," she exclaimed to me one day. "That's not supposed to be something a girl could do."

Now I was about to do the same thing, just as hundreds of thousands of other unmarried women who belong to my baby-boom generation are doing, as they give birth to or adopt children on their own. From 1984 to 1994, government statistics tell us, the rate of births to unmarried women between the ages of forty and forty-nine increased by 88 percent; for unwed women thirty-

five to thirty-nine, the rate of increase was 82 percent. Similarly, many well-educated single women—who are economically self-sufficient and determined not to allow their chance for motherhood to slip by—are adopting children in this country and abroad. On my trip to China, the group I traveled with returned with eight babies. Four of these mothers were unmarried, and one was partnered with another woman who had adopted a Chinese baby several years before.

One afternoon in China, a shop owner inadvertently focused my attention again on this subject of passing on my family name. I was ordering two *yens*, ornately designed cylinders on which Chinese characters spell out names. People use them as personal stamps. The order I placed was for my parents; one would say grandmother, the other grandfather. I thought they'd be something my parents could use when they wrote letters to my daughter.

"Are they your parents or the father's?" the saleswoman asked me, looking toward a male friend who was visiting me that afternoon.

"My parents," I responded.

The absence of marriage no longer stands as an impenetrable fire wall between women's sometimes intense desire to become mothers and their ability to transform that desire into reality.

As she drew the characters to be carved, my friend, who speaks Chinese, explained to me the significance of my answer. "You see that character," he said, pointing toward it. "That means they are her outside grandparents."

"Outside?" I asked him. "Outside of what?"

"Outside of the family," he replied. "You are the mother, so your parents are considered your children's outside grandparents, the ones who aren't in the main family. Other symbols would describe her paternal grandparents."

I asked my friend to instruct the saleswoman to come up with a less formal designation for Maya's grandparents, thereby removing the symbol for "outside" from their *yens*.

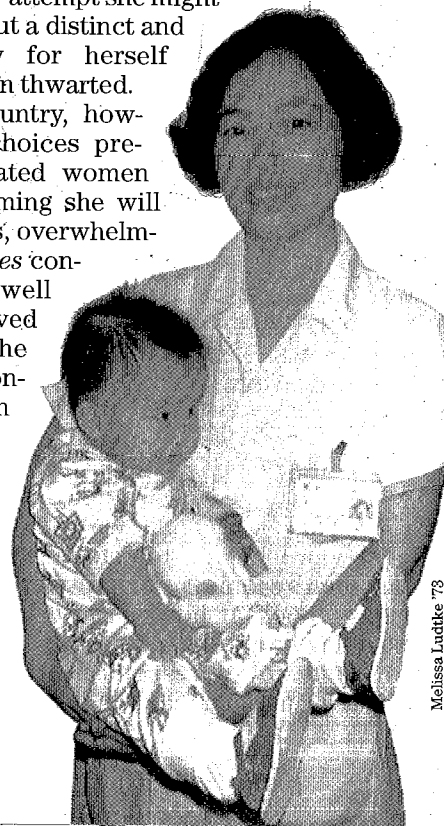
In the midst of this brief episode at the store, the clash of cultures hit me hard. Here I was, a single American

woman adopting a Chinese girl abandoned because of her gender, and her birth mother's heritage held an outsider's status within her own family. Not only do Chinese women not pass on their family's name to their children (even in a hyphenated version), but the notion that they could lead independent and self-sufficient lives and raise children on their own, if they chose to, remains wholly alien.

How extraordinarily different are the possibilities my daughter will be able to embrace, I thought to myself as I walked back to the hotel. Had Maya remained in China, to be raised as an orphaned girl, her life as a woman would have been circumscribed by the extremely tight boundaries society set for her at birth. After all, if women are viewed as "outsiders" within the cultural institution that matters most in China—the family—imagine the life prospects of a girl with no family! Quite likely Maya's destiny would have been to perform some kind of menial labor, such as carving boxwood combs in a Changzhou factory. But I believe that no matter what occupation she might one day have pursued, any attempt she might have made to carve out a distinct and pronounced identity for herself would likely have been thwarted.

In Maya's new country, however, the array of choices presented to well-educated women (something I'm assuming she will be) can seem, at times, overwhelming. As *New York Times* contributor Mary Cantwell once cogently observed in writing about the decision-making of contemporary American women, "We have choices about what we do but not about what we desire." Indeed, the absence of

Maya sits happily in the arms of one of her caretakers at the orphanage.



Melissa Ludtke '78



The Ludtke family in the mid-1960s: (front row) Rebecca Ludtke Callaway '88, Betty Ludtke; (middle row) Mark Ludtke, James Ludtke, Jean Edwards Ludtke '45, Melissa Ludtke '73; (back row) Leslie Ludtke.

marriage no longer stands as an impenetrable fire wall between women's sometimes intense desire to become mothers and their ability to transform that desire into reality. This is not to say that women who make this choice dismiss marriage as irrelevant or undesirable. Rather, in talking with many such mothers, I've learned that they saw marriage as sadly unattainable at this critical time, whereas motherhood wasn't.

As my own experience attests, making this decision to parent alone is not done hastily. Between the time I began to think about having a child on my own to when, at the age of forty-six, I first held my daughter, nine years had passed. Many women seek counsel from therapists or rely on the close company of friends to listen and offer advice. Others seek out support groups; some link up with Internet listservs and communicate by e-mail with women wrestling with similar issues. I confronted my questions—most of all my concerns about not providing a father for my child—by discussing them with other unmarried women, many of whom were already mothers. Out of these visits I wrote a book about my journey of decision-making and theirs, pairing what we, as women, decide to do with our lives with what researchers who study these family changes are learning about the consequences of our decisions. (The book, *On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood in America*, was published by Random House in September.)

One woman described to me how she'd once dismissed as impossible the idea of having children on her own, but the notion refused to go away. Growing up in what she calls a "very nuclear family," she told me that she'd had a very difficult time envisioning a different arrangement. "I was saying to myself, 'Of course, I can't have kids because I'm not married,'" she told me. "But then it was like, 'Well, wait a minute. Is this really true?' Once I let this idea that I didn't have to be married seep into my consciousness, it was like I was able to hear people saying to me, 'Well, maybe you should.' Maybe they were saying things like this to me before, but I'd always ignored their promptings."

Her words resonated with me. My childhood was spent in a similar two-parent family; my father went to his job as a university professor while my highly educated mother remained at home to raise their five children. As most children do, I imagined my family life would resemble theirs, albeit as the years went by I added twists that awareness of feminism gave me. But such a circumstance was not to be. After my marriage failed and then another serious relationship ended over the issue of children (I wanted to have children, he didn't), I finally collapsed into an intense period of grieving for this family I'd never have. Only after this happened was I able to accept the likelihood that I'd never give birth to a child in the conventional way. This acceptance eventually transformed itself into my willingness to push forward with motherhood on my own.

I've come now to appreciate how fortunate I am to be a well-educated, financially independent woman who lives at the time and in the place I do. Unlike even highly educated women of earlier generations, my ability to become a mother doesn't begin nor end with marriage. This awareness came more sharply into focus when a woman I visited with, who adopted a child by herself, shared with me a conversation she'd had with a childhood friend, a single woman who used an anonymous donor to help her to conceive a child. Both grew up in a community in which nuclear families, like the ones each of them grew up in, were the norm.

As the two came to the end of a path they'd walked on together as children, her friend remarked on their good fortune. "Isn't it extraordinary that we live in a time when having a child on our own is not only attainable but acceptable?" she told her former childhood companion. "If a woman wants to have a baby badly enough, she goes out and finds a way."

My way took me seven thousand miles from home to an orphanage in Changzhou, China. And when Maya and I returned to our home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, our journey as a family was just beginning. □