

Jena Heath: Let's start with the basics. Tell me her name. How old is she? Where did she grow up?

Jun Wang (daughter and translator): [Chinese]

My name Li Shaofang. I was born on December the 11<sup>th</sup>, 1951. I was growing up in Beijing.

Jena: The reason we're talking to you is because you have a very unusual story. You were adopted and my understanding is that certainly was not common when you were a girl. Is that true?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said that's right.

Jena: Can you talk to me about your childhood? How old were you when you were adopted? Why were given up for adoption? Who adopted you?

Jun: [Chinese]

I heard from my grandma in the family who adopted me. She said I was adopted when I was three months old. I heard that my birth mom, she had two girls. She was sick at the time so there was no breast milk. We would die. They heard at another village not far away, there's a family. They don't have any kid. They contacted this family. My mom and my adopting mom and my grandma, they came to take me. The answer to the third question is my mom and my grandma.

Jena: The people who adopted you were another family from a neighboring village, and your grandmother and your biological mother arranged it? Did I understand that correctly?

Jun: Most of the part. Her biological mom contacted this adopting family. The mom and the grandma from the adopting family came to take my mom.

Jena: I get it. Really, her biological mother arranged the whole thing with the adoptive mother and adoptive grandmother. Was this supposed to be a temporary arrangement in the beginning, like, "Can you please take my daughter? Feed her. Make her well," or was it understood that they were going to raise you forever?

Jun: [Chinese]

It was supposed to be forever. It was not temporal. My mom said there is another story she wants to share, she wants to tell.

Jena: I want to hear it. Let's hear it.

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said because she was one of the twin girls, both of the girls were really, really small at that time. Her adopting mom and grandma came to take a look. They left without taking any of the girl. The birth mom worried they would not adopt them or one of them, so the birth mom picked one and asked relative to send her to that family.

Jena: They came. They take a look. They said, "We're not sure."

Jun: Too small. We are worried we cannot save her.

Jena: Does your mother know how small she was? How much did she weigh?

Jun: [Chinese]

She said she was really, really, really, very small. When she was one year old, the village women, they don't have sewing machine, but they have some equipment this big. It's like container for the needles or something like that. People put her and a cat in that together in that thing. [laughs] She was really small.

Jena: Wow. Your biological mother is so concerned that she gives you to a relative and says, "Take her to these people." Then what happened? The women just said, "Well, I guess we're keeping her?"

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said that's right. She's already here. Let's take her.

Jena: I have so many questions. You were three months old? At what age were you told that you were adopted, or were you ever told? Well, you were told at some point. You obviously know. When did you learn you were adopted?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said it was when she was in first grade. One of her classmates who was also a neighbor, another girl, the girl told their teacher my mom was adopted. My mom didn't know, but they already knew she was adopted. That girl told their teacher. Their teacher told my mom. My mom didn't quite understand what "You're adopted" mean, but sort of. She sort of understood she's not their biological daughter. She didn't say anything when she went home. She became to behave carefully.

Jena: This was first grade you said, or third grade?

Jun: First grade.

Jena: How far apart were these villages? I'm trying to get the idea from where she was born to where she was adopted.

Jun: [Chinese]

About three miles.

Jena: Very close. This is somewhere in the area of Beijing, not in the city, I'm assuming?

Jun: [Chinese]

They were both in the rural area. When my mom was about one year old, their family took her to Beijing. That family moved to Beijing when she was one. My mom said she was so small that people didn't believe she was one. People said, "You are so smart."

Jena: She was so smart at one?

Jun: She's small. People think maybe she's six months or seven months. She was really one year. She was very smart for a six-month-old.

Jena: [laughs] In the very beginning of this -- I'm sorry to be so specific, but I'm trying to locate this -- what province was this? Was this the countryside right outside of Beijing, or was this somewhere farther away, before they moved to Beijing?

Jun: [Chinese]

It was in Hebei Province. It's about three hundred miles.

Jena: Hubei, H-U-B-E-I, correct?

Jun: No, Hebei. H-E-B-E-I.

Jena: Okay. Hebei. Now, I got it located.

Jun: You know where Hebei is right?

Jena: I think so, yes. When people read stuff about the interview, they're going to want to locate this. That's why I'm asking. You go to this family. You're in first grade. Your laoshi tells you you're adopted. Then you went home and behaved carefully. Why? What were you thinking at that point? Why did you feel you had to behave carefully?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said she thought adopted should be different. When the teacher told her "You're adopted," she didn't understand what that mean. She asked the teacher, "What does that

mean?" The teacher might think, "I said too much." The teacher told her, "Never mind. When I was little, someone told me I was found in the trashcan." [laughs] She said she got to know from that point.

Jena: This had to be very confusing. First, the teacher says you're adopted. Then she says, "Whoops. I said too much. No, no, no. Once a friend told me I was adopted. I was found in a trashcan."

Jun: The teacher was trying to say every child was told at some point when they were young they were found in a weird place.

[laughter]

Jena: I don't know why we're laughing except that your mother looks completely comfortable and relaxed and not all -- I think so many years have gone by that she doesn't seem upset. My question is how did you feel about this? You're a very little girl. You get this information that's confusing. Did you feel like when you went back home that you had to be on your best behavior because maybe they would decide to put to somewhere else? Do you see what I mean?

Jun: [Chinese]

Oh, you're taking a picture of us.

Jena: I'm taking a picture because this is so great. Hang on. I'm going to take a picture. Just for a minute. Great.

Jun: My mom said she thought this must be true because at that time other families, they have seven or eight kids. Her family only has her. There are other parents are younger. Her parents are older so this must be true. She was so young. She said she was so young. She didn't think too much, but she believed that she should behave differently. From that point on, she started to behave very carefully, talk very carefully.

Jena: Was she afraid in some way that if she didn't, something bad would happen? Was it more a sense that she had, somehow, a place in that family that wasn't completely legitimate so she had to be on her best behavior?

Jun: [Chinese]

She said maybe because of fear. She emphasized it was so different at that time. Every family had a lot of kids. There's no only child. She was the only child, so it must be different.

Jena: What was it like? What were your adoptive parents like? Were they nice to you?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said they are good parents. Because her dad -- this is the people who adopted her -- her dad and her grandma, her mom's mom, they had very bad relations. She was in a very weird position. When she was close to the grandma, the parents were upset. When she was close to the parents, the grandma was upset. My mom said she moved to Beijing to be with the adopting parents. The grandma moved to Beijing later. She joined the family in 1958. My mom said her adopting mom was a true only child.

Jena: There were no other children born, just the adoptive mother? How interesting. That was unusual for her adoptive mother and then unusual for your mother.

Jun: That's why the grandma joined, moved to Beijing to stay with her daughter. The grandma didn't have any other kids to stay with. Even though they had a bad relationship, they had to stay together.

Jena: This must have been difficult for you as a child because you were pulled, it sounds like. You had your parents over here, your grandma over here. That must have been tough.

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said indeed. It's a very special family, very complicated. You could use a book to explain.

Jena: Maybe we'll write one because this interview is turning out to be very interesting.

Jun: [Chinese]

There's too many things. My mom doesn't know all the things. It's a complicated family.

Jena: When you moved to Beijing, what did your parents do? What did your father do for a living?

Jun: [Chinese]

Her parents worked in the local factory. Sometimes they worked daytime shift and sometimes night shift. Before 1958, the grandma moved to Beijing so when the parents worked all night shift, they always found some food or fruit to eat at home and ask my mom to eat, prepare some food for her. After the grandma moved to Beijing, things started to get changed. When she was little, the parents sent her to the rural area, to the hometown, to stay with the grandma for a little bit every year. Two years before she went to elementary school, they stopped doing that. She thought the reason was they thought my mom started to remember things. They didn't want my mom know her story. The reason they told her not to go, "Because you're going to school. You have to speaking Beijing-[indiscernible]." They didn't want her to speak the dialect anymore.

Jena: When they first moved to the city, to Beijing, for a little while, her grandmother came?

Jun: When she was seven years old in 1958, the grandma came.

Jena: For the first seven years they're in Beijing. Her parents are working at the factory. At some point in that period they sent her back to the village?

Jun: Every year.

Jena: They sent her back to the village every year? For what? To go to school?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said her adopted mom, she didn't have kids. She didn't really know how to take care of a child. She sent her back to the rural area. She told me she remembers she spends maybe half time in Beijing. Because her parents were working, that's another reason. My mom said she stayed in the rural area longer, more time there than in Beijing.

Jena: Basically, she went back and forth between Beijing and the village in Hebei, living with her grandmother and with her adoptive parents, back and forth. The reason for this, the given reason was, "We want you to learn Beijing talk. We don't want you to talk that village talk."

Jun: Two years before she went to elementary school, when she turned five, they stopped sending her back to the rural area.

Jena: That only lasted until she was five. Then once she started going to school, she was in Beijing. The idea was, "We want you to speak Beijing talk?"

Jun: Yeah. My mom said the true reason she figured out is they didn't want my mom to know her birth parents and that family.

Jena: Back to when the laoshi told you that you were adopted, when you went home that day, back to first grade for a minute, you never asked your adoptive parents, "Hey, wait. Laoshi says I'm adopted?" You didn't ask? Did you ever at any point bring this up with your adoptive parents? Did they at some point talk to you about it?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said no. She never asked. She never brought it up. Because of the bad relationship between her parents and her grandma, later on when she was a teenager, her grandma told her. She told her grandma, "I already knew this."

Jena: Wow. How do you say "wow" in Chinese?

Jun: [laughs] Wow.

Jena: This is one wild story.

Jun: My mom said the kids, actually, are smarter than you think. They know a lot of things.

Jena: That's a very, very good point. As an adoptive parent myself and also having adopted a child who is Chinese so there's no question, people look at us and they know that I'm not her biological mother, I've been very honest with her right from the beginning. The reason that I'm a little stunned by your story is that it's so completely different from the way I'm experiencing being an adoptive parent. My heart goes out to your mother because it feels like it must have been very difficult. I'd like to know, was it difficult? What was it like?

Would she describe her childhood as happy or not happy? How would she describe it?

Jun: [Chinese]

She said not that she was unhappy always, but one advantage was other families have a lot of kids, so they were starving. There was not enough food for everyone in other families. She was not starving because she was only one. On the other hand, she was always observing. She was very observant. It is different from other families. One example she was giving and I thought she was about to cry, her mother was always sick. At that time, she was about ten years old. She stayed with her grandma. I think they have two rooms. On the same street, there are two different places. One day she went to her parent's place because her mom was always sick. Her mom, that day, had two oranges. Her mom told her, "You can have two pieces of orange." Her dad said, "Why give that to her?" She felt very sad. From that point, she behaved more carefully.

Jena: I understand.

Jun: My mom said she actually, inside in her heart, she's closer to her grandma.

Jena: It sounds like that to me too. She was able to have a real connection to her grandma. That created tension with her parents.

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said the parents and the grandma, they have a lot of problems, a lot themselves. My mom didn't dare to show her real connection with her grandma. She never had that seen by other people.

Jena: Does your mom think that growing up this way affected how she deals with emotions and being close to people once she became an adult? She had to hold on to her emotions, it sounds like, as a child to protect herself.

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said yes. When she started to think about that, yes. The growing up that way does affect her a lot. She said she started to realize that when actually we, [indiscernible] and I, we send my parents to a couple's camp, marriage camp. At that camp, people talked about your original family. She started to realize, "That's something affecting me." She said when she grew up, when she started to work, it was very hard for her. When she bought something for her mom, she grandma was upset. When she bought something, a little something, for her grandma, her mom was upset. It was even harder than being a daughter-in-law. My mom said there's a lot of stories.

Jena: Your poor mother. She got it from every side.

Jun: My mom said there are a lot of stories. She doesn't want to take a lot of time from you. I told her, "Jena's good at time control, so don't worry."

Jena: Tell her that I don't want her to talk about anything that she doesn't want to talk about. I don't want to push her to talk about anything she's not comfortable talking about.

Jun: The thing is she's very worried. [laughs] It's eleven twenty-five your time.

Jena: She's worried we'll be here at six o'clock in the morning. The way we're going, I could be. Let me ask your mother about a couple of things that I'm also interested in.

What I have understood, and other adoptive parents in the United States who talk understood, is that there is this informal adoption in Chinese villages not unlike what your mother had. Did she know anyone else who was adopted in this way that is not a formal way with paperwork, but a family sends a child for one reason or another they can't or won't raise to another family in village? At the time that this happened with her, was this common or uncommon?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said she was one of them. There was no paperwork, no documentation, nothing. She said that was kind of common at the time. There's no restriction of Beijing hukou at that time. My understanding is it was easier at that time for this informal adoption.

Jena: When she moved, was her hukou in Hebei, or did she assume the hukou of the family who adopted her? Were they so close together it didn't matter?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said she's not even sure. She had Hebei hukou. Her guess is her adopted mom would say, "I gave birth to this child when I was in Hebei." She didn't want anyone to know

she's adopted. "I gave birth to this child when I was in Hebei." So my mom had a Beijing hukou.

Jena: I got it. How does she feel about her adoption? On the one sense, it sounds to me like it probably saved her life in the sense that she was so small. Her biological mother didn't have milk. In another sense, I guess you could argue -- tell me if I'm wrong in my understanding of this -- in terms of the whole of your life, it's probably a better thing to have a Beijing hukou than a Hebei hukou, but maybe I'm misunderstanding that. Is she laughing at my pronunciation? In certain ways, this was a good thing. In other ways, it was not a good thing. How does your mother feel about it ultimately?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom brought two points. Yes, the adoption saved her life. My mom had a twin sister. After she was given away, that girl, because there was only one baby and probably her birth mother had some milk but was not enough for two of them, that girl survived and grew bigger than she was. But that girl died because of some kind of illness at around age one. My mom said that could be her if she was not adopted. Yes, adoption saved her life. It's not on the other hand, but she mentioned there's even reality show in China, people like her wants to find, locate their birth parents. She doesn't want to do that at all. Her reason is, "Once you gave me up, I was given up. Why I go to find you?"

Jena: What would she think if I told her that there are families in the United States and in other parts of the West who've adopted children from China who embark on this quest to find the birth parents in China? That can be very expensive. It can be time-consuming. It usually doesn't work, but it has worked. There are in fact cases now, increasingly, where adopted Chinese children or their adoptive parents searching on their behalf have found their birth parents in China. What does your mother think about that?

Jun: [Chinese]

She doesn't want to find them. She said in the reality shows there are kids, not adopted but kidnapped and sold, they want to know who they are, where they are from, who are their parents, so they try very hard to find them. My mom said she knows who her parents are, so she doesn't want to find them. The most important reason is later on she found out in the birth family she has two older sisters, one older brother, three younger brothers, one younger sister.

Jena: Wait a minute. How many siblings is that?

Jun: Nine kids total, including the twins.

Jena: Including your mother, so they had nine children. Did they raise the other eight of them or did they also give some of them away?

Jun: My mom said she was the only one they gave away, "So why I need to find her?"

Jena: Ironically, because your mother does know her birth parents, she really has no interest in connecting with them. She understands that kids like on the reality show, which I've heard about, who don't know their story, seems logical to her that if you don't know your story, you're going to want to go and find out what it is. Sometimes if you do know your story, you have no interest in revisiting it. Is that correct?

Jun: Yes.

Jena: I'm also interested in a little bit of your mother's perspective on being born and growing up before the one-child policy and then having the one-child policy come into effect. What was that like from her perspective, when the one-child policy came into effect in China? Both personally and for friends, what was that like in life?

Jun: You mean for her being an unusual only child, what's her perspective of the policy?

Jena: She had grown up in a house where she was the only child, but she said around her that was very unusual. Most of what she saw were these big families. Her birth family was a big family. When she went to have her own family under the one-child policy, it was limited. She's seen both sides of this, both chapters. I wonder what that was like.

Jun: Now I understand your question.

[Chinese]

My mom said she really thinks only child is too lonely. She thinks two or three is the best.

Jena: China has now changed this policy. The government announced in the last two or three months that people can now have two children. I'm assuming she thinks that's better?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said she thinks the policy is better. In reality, a lot of people don't want two.

Jena: Why not?

Jun: She said it's too much work. It's too expensive and it's too much work.

Jena: In a way, the one-child policy not only helped the population, it controlled the population growth, but it also changed the mind-set of people, it sounds like she's saying. It changed their sense that maybe it's better not to have so many kids?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said, to her, perspective is people are smarter right now. People are smarter than the older generation. People have started to understand that this is a better way of life. She mentioned the generation, they didn't have birth control. Before she got to know her birth family, she had always thought she was the youngest so they could not raise her, so they gave her up. She was surprised when she found out she was kind of in the middle, when her birth mom recovered and they had more.

Jena: In a way, without birth control, for a woman it would be very difficult to control that. You know what I mean? You're married. It's really tough not to keep having babies. It must have felt terrible to your mother to find out that in fact there were these other kids that came. I can also see how her mother probably was -- not many people wouldn't think twice about having nine children. It was probably difficult for her birth mother in the sense that it doesn't sound like there was much choice at the time but to keep having babies.

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said that's right. Some people kept having children. When they could not raise them, they gave them up. It was kind of common at the time, she said.

Jena: Nothing she says is going to hurt my feelings. I don't want her to feel like she can't answer honestly because I've adopted Caroline. I'm wondering what does she think about international people adopting Chinese kids? Did she really know anything about that? Does she have any views about it?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said she's really positive for that. Her understanding is it's out of love. If those kids were not adopted, they may not have a future.

Jena: She's okay with them being raised in another country? Does she feel like we have an obligation to bring them to China, to educate them about the country of their birth? Does she think that's beside the point in a way?

Jun: My mom said she thought that's a blessing for the kids, to give them a family. My mom said yes, you should do that.

Jena: Yes. We're doing that. Don't worry. We're doing our best even though we're not Chinese. We're really trying.

Jun: What's your question?

Jena: About teaching Chinese culture. Adopted Chinese kids, bringing them to China, teaching them culture.

Jun: She said yeah, you could do that. She added her observation of the culture difference of adoption. She said it kind of is still the same. It's not open. Adoption is not an open topic, especially in the adopting families. She has a colleague who adopted a little girl because they could not have a child. The little girl's now in her twenties. They don't talk about that. It's still an issue that people need to cover up. My mom said that doesn't really work because the adoptive parents, they don't say anything, but other people say. Usually, the kids got to know from other people. My mom said she really doesn't think if you tell the child "You're adopted" it will make a difference. She said she knew she was adopted. She took care of the three, her parents and her grandma to the very end. She took care of all of them. There was no difference if she was adopted or she was born.

Jena: If I'm understanding what she's saying, then the reason that it's so secretive is that there's a fear on the adoptive parents' part that if the child knows they're adopted, they somehow won't feel the same obligation to care for the parent that they would, that's the perception that hangs on, the traditional perception?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said exactly. Her adoptive mom never told her she was adopted. Her adopted mother had fear of not being taken care of when she got old. She was always talking that issue in some other ways letting my mom know, "You have to take care of me."

Jena: There's so many things changing in China. There's so much about life that's changing so fast. Does your mother believe that there's any possibility that this could change, that if people understood more about adoption, if they talked more about it, that somehow this fear could be lessened so that China could become more open about adoption and maybe children wouldn't have to go through what your mother went through, being a secret?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said she hopes so, but she doesn't think so. It's rooted very deep in this society, in this culture, even now. She has a neighbor. It's a wealthy family. They don't have any kid. Even though the family said why we don't have a lot of kids, but in their heart that's not true. It's a big problem if you don't have a kid in your family in China. It's still true now.

Jena: Even though they don't have a child, they won't adopt a child?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said they never talked real talks about this. My mom's guess is they will not adopt. They will try IVF.

Jena: That's true here too. Most of the families, the parents I have interviewed so far, the majority, when I ask "Why did you adopt," they had infertility. Adoption was not their first choice. I'm very unusual in this, in terms of the people I've interviewed so far. I don't think

China's that different in that sense. I have even had people in my own life when I explained I was adopting, I had a couple of skeptical husbands. I knew exactly what they were thinking, which was, "How do you know what you're going to get?" I would always say you can have a biological child and not know what you're going to get. There's always a risk with parenthood. Those things aren't inconsistent. What is different, and I totally understand your mother's point, is the deep-rooted, traditional, filial thing. The children take care of the parents. I can see where it would be a long road to changing that, if at all. I can see why your mother's skeptical. I can see how that enters into this culture of secrecy about adoption. That's really helped me understand it.

Is there anything that I have not asked your mother that she feels like she really wants to say?

Jun: [Chinese]

My mom said if you have -- not today, maybe later -- if you have any more questions, feel free to ask. She doesn't have any problem to answer them because all the parents have passed away. She mentioned no matter her birth parents or adopted parents, they're all her parents. The birth parents, they couldn't raise her, but they tried to find a way to give her to another family. Her birth mom's sister-in-law lived in the same village with her adoptive mom. She mentioned to her birth mom, "That family doesn't have a kid." She was sent to that family. She felt this was more arranged to save her life. My mom said this adoptive family's really special in the sense of their complicated relationship. In addition to that, there's not a lot of things that she complained. The adoptive parents saved her life. She's appreciative to them. She felt she was obligated to take care of them.

Jena: I totally understand that even with the difficulties with her adoptive parents, that she feels the same loyalty as a daughter as she would in any other situation. I think that's what she's saying. I understand.