

**Maria: Mother of Li-Hua**

Jena Heath: Tell me about the birth parent searching. Do you have any concerns that Li-Hua seems a little bit, I don't know if I'd use the word ambivalent, but clearly not as --

Maria: -- enthusiastic as me. It's been like that from day one. [laughs] Li-Hua's a little bit along for the ride. Whatever will be, will be. I remember going up to tell her that this couple that we had thought were her birth parents were not. We had just gotten the DNA stuff. My heart sank that they weren't because I really liked the couple. When I went up and I told Li-Hua, her reaction was, "I really don't care. I told you all along, if they're not my parents, I don't care. I'll care about the people when I know they're my parents." We've talked about how she's going to care about them. Don't get me wrong, I'm very protective of her. I make a point of always saying to her, "Who's your mother? Who loves you with all her heart and soul, and would do anything, and die for you?" "You! I know. You." She says that to me all the time. "You, you, you. Dad, dad, dad."

She's very connected to her older brothers. They dote on her. If anything ever happened to my husband, I know that both of her brothers would step in in a parent way and completely take care of her. I know she feels that intense love from the four of us. It's really beautiful. She's not that interested on a certain level. In her heart, I would be really hard-pressed to think that she would ever develop the type of feeling for her biological family that she has for us. She's said to me, "I think if found them, they'd be like my cousins," people that you see every now and then that you have a connection to, but not the people that I'm going to really be tight, tight, tight, tight, tight with.

Jena: If those are her feelings, why is it important that she establish a connection at all, from your point of view?

Maria: Health reasons. That was one of the things that I thought, to be able to have a basis for going back to say, "Have there been any health issues in your grandparents? Typically, how long have people lived in your lives? Is there anything that we should know about?" I did get interesting DNA results from 23andMe that showed basically nothing was wrong. She was a healthy girl. She is really pretty healthy. She has a little bit of eczema, which is pretty common in some Chinese people, anybody really, or so I've been told. Other than that, nothing really that was anything out of the ordinary at all.

Just for curiosity's sake. I was talking to friend of mine who's -- I'm trying to think, is she Korean or Chinese? She's in my journalism class at Columbia. I was telling her about the birth search. She was like, "Every human being should know who their birth family is, everybody. They need that information. Everybody should have that information." I was thinking about that. I thought, "I don't know if I'd quite go that far." I don't know if it's healthy for people that come of situations that are not healthy environments, healthy psychological environments. I don't necessarily think that's always the best thing that somebody knows. By and large, I think that if there's a really good emotional support system there with the adoptive family where the child feels really safe and loved, then I feel it would answer a question.

It's up to my daughter if she wants to pursue those people or not. Maybe if there's a sibling in the family, maybe a sibling will be eager to establish a relationship with her. Then she'll know that she has a biological sibling that she can have a connection. Being that China's halfway around the world and being that probably most of the families in China aren't going to necessarily have the wherewithal to travel easily to get the US, we would be the ones who would have to be making more of the real effort to get over there to meet the family, to do those things. You don't know if the family's going to be receptive. If the family's not receptive, the family's not receptive. If we find who her birth parents are, it could be that if they do have other children, they've never told the other children that they actually had another child or they gave a child up for adoption. I don't want to screw around with that process.

I also wonder if as a parent, if I gave a child up for adoption, I probably would always be wondering about that child and where they were, if they were okay, if they were healthy, who was raising them. On some level, I wanted those people to know that if they want that information, we're here. I know it's a slippery slope. I would close ranks immediately and protect my daughter in any way. I am strong person. I'm a bright person. I would do whatever I had to do to protect her. I'm not that worried about them, whoever they may be, her biological parents if they're ever found, interfering to a significant degree in her life if she doesn't want it, and if we don't want, or if they don't want it. It's going to be a fine line. I feel pretty safe about that.

Jena: It doesn't feel like a risk?

Maria: I would be feeling more uptight if they were US-based, if it was somebody that was US-based. A lot of the parents in the Chinese adoptive system -- for whatever reason, those children were put into the system. I don't think they were necessarily people of great means. They may be now. I don't think they were back then. Most people are just grateful to know that a child that they may have put into an adoptive system were placed in a family that was incredibly loving and could give their child a lot of opportunities. I've thought about it from so many angles. Sometimes I think that it is much more of a risk for the birth parents to say, "Okay. Let's meet," because if they do have biological kids it might open up not a great can of worms. It could open up a can of worms with the biological siblings if they see, "Oh, my gosh. This family's able to come from the United States. She might have many more opportunities. Why wasn't I put up for adoption?" They may have that type of attitude. It's like anything else in life, one day at a time. Do the best you can do with the information that you have, and keep an open heart, and try and protect yourselves and your child as much as possible.

Jena: I don't think people really understand, except the people who are doing this, the mechanics of how all this works. Can you explain how you're doing this?

Maria: What I would start off by saying is we probably did not go about it in the smartest way initially. That's because my daughter and her older brother, who speaks fluent

Mandarin, flew to China this summer for a trip and embarked on their own search. Their search consisted of initially going to the orphanage to try to get as much as information as they could. Of course, the orphanage was not really a hundred percent forthright with the information that they in fact had and knew. They were lovely and tried to be as gracious and welcoming as possible. That didn't deter Paul. After they went to the orphanage for a couple days and talked with people, they decided they wanted to start putting posters around town. People said, as they started to do that, "You should go to the local television station and see if maybe they'll do an advertisement for you." When they did go, the news director was really keen on doing a human-interest story. They were able to get a piece aired on their search. Then social media started exploding.

They got one important nibble that way from a couple who seemed to have legitimate information about their biological daughter that had ended up in the orphanage system. For the past twelve years they've been trying to get information on their daughter who had actually been confiscated from a local family that they had given their daughter to to raise, sort of like an open adoption type situation. At the time that they had their second daughter they were very impoverished. They were very young. The mother was still only nineteen. They couldn't care for their daughter. They chose a couple locally in the village that was childless and gave their daughter to that couple so that they could keep an eye on their daughter. The couple would have a child. Corrupt local officials in the Hengdong city area got wind of the baby being placed with this couple, and came in, and confiscated the child, and said to the adoptive couple, "You have no right to this child. This is an illegal adoption." The biological parents tried to go get their daughter back. They had no luck. The local officials were flatly refusing to return the baby. She ended up in the orphanage system.

They had for the longest time been trying to track whatever happened to her. The part that had struck them when they heard about the story of searching for Li-Hua's biological parents was that they said that her birth name by the orphanage had been [indiscernible], and that she was from Connecticut in the United States, and that she was born in March of 2002. This couple knew that their daughter had been born March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002. They had just found out the year before from somebody inside the orphanage who gave them some information that their daughter had in fact gone to a couple in Connecticut in the United States. When they heard Connecticut, March of 2002, they thought, "This could be our daughter." They told us that they had been told their daughter had been given one of two names. It was either [indiscernible] or [indiscernible]. That's why when they had heard about the news report, they immediately contacted the news director. The news director put them in touch.

We said, "What day is your daughter's birthday?" They said March 10<sup>th</sup>. Li-Hua's birthday, we were told, is March 16<sup>th</sup>. Still, it doesn't mean that we don't necessarily believe that this could be a match because some of the information we've already gotten about various things from the orphanage is not, in fact, true. We don't want to rule out the possibility these might be her parents. Why don't we do a DNA test? They quickly took their hair samples, which is not the best to do it. The website 23andMe does it through saliva. That's the fastest, least expensive way to do it. We didn't know anything about 23andMe or that process. What we knew is we were scrambling at the last minute because we didn't think that we were going to

get that far, somebody coming forward within twenty-four hours saying, “We think we might be Li-Hua’s parents.” They sent their hair sample. They were actually in Guangdong Province at that moment because they work outside of Hunan during the week, or maybe even for most of the month. They come back periodically. They managed to get the hair samples to the news director. News director FedEx’d them to us, the hair samples. We sent in Li-Hua’s DNA and their DNA to see if it was a match. That was the way the first search experience that we had.

Within a month we got the results. It was not a match. We were very, very saddened by that because we really liked the couple. We chatted with them at great length, like a Skype situation. They were darling. They have two additional children now, another boy and girl. They were very sad when they found out that it wasn’t a match. Here we were actively searching for our daughter’s parents. They’re actively searching for their daughter. What was interesting about that whole story, and which is very challenging on a lot of emotional levels for a lot of people, was that when I knew we were in the process and we were waiting for the DNA results, I’d actually reached out to two other couples that had been in China with me when they were adopting their daughter. There were about ten other couples all total. Only two of the other couples in the group that I went to were from Connecticut. I thought, “I really do not think that either of those couples would ever have information that would lead me to believe that in fact maybe one of their daughters was this couple’s biological daughter and not Li-Hua’s.”

What this couple had said was I knew that their daughter had been born on March 10<sup>th</sup>. I knew that one of the other names that the orphanage had said their daughter’s name was was either [indiscernible], which was our daughter’s name; the other name was [indiscernible]. I reached out to both of these other Connecticut couples who I’d been friendly with over the years. I just wanted to fill them in on what was going on. One of the couples was on Facebook with me at the time. She knew what was transpiring and was interested to hear all about that Paul spoke fluent Mandarin and how that was going. It was so fascinating. She saw the video that had been done because I posted it on Facebook. When I called to talk to her to fill her in, it was a very lovely conversation.

Then all of a sudden after about twenty minutes of talking to her about what was going on, I informed her in that conversation that we all had not known something. There had been a huge corruption scandal in Hunan Province two years later called Hunan [indiscernible]. It was a baby-trafficking scandal where forty-five officials from six different orphanages throughout Hunan were indicted in China on corruption charges of buying and selling infants. At the heart of that scandal was the orphanage in Hengdong where our daughters were from at the Hengdong Social Welfare Institute. The orphanage director was facing time in jail and heavy fines, as was in the local town, the head of the civil affairs office there, who was facing fifteen years in jail. He ended up going on the lamb and was never caught. All these people in the town and in the orphanage were being charged with major corruption.

I was filling them in. “Oh, my gosh. FYI, our daughters may not really in fact be from the Hengdong area the way we’d all been told. You can’t really believe anything you’ve been told

now.” In part of this conversation I say to one of my friends, “By the way, your daughter wasn’t born on March 10<sup>th</sup>, was she?” She goes, “Yes, she was.” I said, “Wait a second. When you got her from the orphanage, her name hadn’t been [indiscernible], was it?” She said, “Yes, it was.” I thought, “Oh, my goodness. This isn't happening.” All of sudden, there was silence on the other end. I know she thought, “Oh, my goodness. What's happening here?” I feel badly because I really did do it in just a curious -- I'm a journalist. I'm curious. I'm a curious person about everything that crosses my path in life. It might have felt like to her I was setting her up in a way. That was so completely not the case. It was completely me just telling what was going on, trying to get information, trying to do it a subtle way. In my heart of hearts before I even called her, in the back of mind I was thinking to myself, “Please don't let them have that information. Don't let these people --” I really wanted Li-Hua to be the person who was their daughter and/or somebody that I had no way of contacting.

The only other people that I legitimately could ask about this whole situation were people that I had known, had gotten their daughters from the same orphanage I had, and who I knew, and who had travelled at the same time. Otherwise it was going to mean that I was going have to do all this research for someone else. It wasn't worth it. When they were telling me about a Chinese couple saying, “Our daughter was March 10<sup>th</sup>. This is the story of her confiscation. We tried to get her back. We were told this is possibility one of the other birth names that could have been given to her,” it was almost a moral imperative for me to check it out for them, to at least ask the two people that I knew if their daughter possibly had that birth name from the orphanage and it's possibly that birthday. I thought, “Uh oh.” That's where that stood.

The other couple, this couple in China whose biological daughter we think is now with this couple from Connecticut that I traveled and got my daughter with, that couple in Connecticut has completely shut down. The wife defriended me from Facebook. Even though it wasn't an acrimonious type of situation, she got completely freaked out. She doesn't want to know anything about the birth parents. She was not interested in checking her daughter's DNA against this couple's DNA, and really closed ranks and stuck her head in the sand. When I had encountered that from her, I wrote her a very carefully crafted email. People who have read the letter say, “This could be read in a court of a law and nobody would give you a hard time over it.” I really approached it from not a friend perspective but from a journalist's perspective and said, “You really should make informed decisions. I just want you to think of long-term not short-term. I don't want you to be making a decision based on your immediate fear. You really need to get a bigger picture of potentially what you could face down the road if this couple does continue to search and if your daughter when she's twenty, twenty-five, without telling you does a search of her own. What if this couple does put their DNA on 23andMe like a lot of Chinese couples are being encouraged to do?”

What if their DNA is on the site and their daughter, without telling them, puts her DNA on it? Oh, my goodness. She's got a match. She's found her birth parents. She reaches out to them. They say, “Guess what? Eight years ago, ten years ago, we reached out. Your parents rebuffed. We very clearly told them that we thought you were our daughter.” People make decisions without really thinking of -- they live in fear instead of being smart. I also kept

thinking the way I lead my life, if somebody came to me with that type of information and I completely was shutting ranks, it would be very hard for me not to think about that on a daily basis. It would be very hard for me not to have a moral dilemma pervading my everyday life about if what I was doing was right and smart and the best course of action. When I wrote the letter, I also wanted her to be thinking that way. I wanted her to think of me. I wanted her to remember that I was telling her, "Don't be uninformed. You need to be informed about how you're going to move forward. This could come back to really bite you in the wrong way. I'm sorry this happened this way. It was never my intention. My intention is to find my daughter's birth parents. Wow, sometimes the universe throws us a curveball. You need to try to deal with it in whatever way that's going to benefit all parties in a positive way."

I do understand her fear on a lot of levels. I'm going to table it at that point. These things are so complex. The person that I'm the most concerned about is the daughter, is the girl, on all sides all around. The couple in China was trying to get as much information from us as we could give them. We really did not give them any information at all. We just said that we do believe it's somebody I travelled to China with, but that they don't want to be in touch with the birth family at all and that they've shut down. The couple in China was really devastated. It was very, very hard for them to hear. They were really pleading with us to give them information. We said, "Listen, can we revisit this in five years when she's eighteen, when she's an adult, when we think that she's an adult? We might be more willing to assist you in giving you road marks," or things that maybe they could do to try and have a successful search. The things that I would do for a successful search now, both for Chinese couples and for adoptive couples and/or for adoptees is I would definitely seek out people like Brian Stuy and Longlan out in Utah who have a website called [research-china.org](http://research-china.org). Is that what it is, Jena? I think that was the name of it.

Jena: Yes.

Maria: Don't ask me how I didn't come across them before this search. When they came back and I somehow came across the website -- that's the way I found you too -- in that regard alone, I feel like there's a road that's being paved brick by brick by people like Longlan and Brian Stuy for adoptive families around the world and the birth parents in China to reconnect if they want to reconnect. The DNA site 23andMe is really instrumental, and pretty amazing, and as far as I'm concerned, the wave of the future. They have so much information already catalogued, readily at their disposal about the placement articles, when babies were found. Who knew such a thing existed? I never did, and I'm a journalist. I didn't know that. I didn't know that when babies were found in China there were these founding notices or something, what the baby's name is, where they were placed or something, certain information that helps people track things.

Jena: That are placed in the local newspaper, you mean?

Maria: Right. Yes. I didn't even know anything like that existed. In my particular case, they were very excited because they had the names of people that were involved in the placement at the orphanage. They could go back and ask those people what their specific experience

was unto my daughter. There was information to be had there. There's a whole bunch of ways that they can track information, not just the ways in which they've been doing for me. There are a lot of tricks that through the whole process in China that, unless you were working with somebody like Brian and Longlan, you wouldn't know that there was that much public official documentation that could actually be had. In fact, it really rebuffs a lot of the information that people are given about their kid.

I was told she was found at the entrance to the civil affairs office. All the documentation says that our daughter was found at the entrance to the civil affairs office in Hengdong. When I found out about the corruption trial and I learned that the orphanage director at Li-Hua's orphanage was involved in the corruption, lost his job and was facing jail -- then I also learned that the head of the civil affairs office, the very building where Li-Hua supposedly was found, was facing the most time out of the forty-five people that were facing jail and the six orphanages that were singled out for being part of this corruption scandal, I thought, "Hang on." The orphanage director and the guy who runs the building and the whole process there where she supposedly was found -- I'm supposed to believe now that this is how she was found?

The initial information that Longlan and Brian came up with refuted that completely and had a different type of scenario. Then it just took time to research that scenario. The first scenario that we had recently, that's two months ago, we just got the results from 23andMe on the father of the man that we thought maybe was -- this is a different couple that I'm talking about, not the couple that contacted when they were in China. This couple was somebody that Longlan and Brian thought potentially there's a really good shot they could be based on a lot of official documentation in China. We did a DNA on the father. We just got the news earlier that in fact it was not a match. Not even thinking it was a match, just looking at them, I thought, "These people don't look anything --" They send photos when they think it's a certain couple. I could see sort of maybe the mother. She's very beautiful. The mother looked much harder, even though she was a forty-year-old version of Li-Hua. [laughs] She wasn't as soft and as delicate looking as Li-Hua. I think Li-Hua had really beautiful parents. One would think that. It didn't surprise me that they weren't the parents.

Now, Longlan just emailed me a lot more information that the research has come across as another possibility that they're really hanging their hat on. They're hoping that this could be. This would be more difficult and more challenging situation to try and research. What they think now is potentially that Li-Hua was found on the banks of a river that separates [sp] Goutian village, which is about forty kilometers from Hengdong, and another village that's on the other side of the river. Apparently, there's a bunch of information that Longlan was describing in a phone message to me that leads them to believe the description of what this baby was wearing rivals what was being described when she was taken into the one-child policy system and she was being placed.

This child who Longlan thinks might be Li-Hua, this child was found in a basket on the banks of the river of the people of village. I think it was nighttime the way it was described to me. They saw a man leave a basket there. The villagers knew it was a baby, but they

didn't go over to it. It took an old man who was walking by who saw the baby, and then walked away but later came back. The baby was still there. He picked the baby up and brought it with another man. Longlan sent me the picture of the old man and the cab driver who took him to give the baby to the officials. They think that may be her.

They have asked us just in the last twenty-four hours to send us a poster that Paul had done up over summer with a picture of Li-Hua, and all the information about Li-Hua, and how we're trying to look for her birth parents. What they want to do is this weekend since it's Chinese New Year, they want to blanket both sides of the river and some areas around there with posters informing everybody. Since it's Chinese New Year, a lot of people are coming back from other provinces where they work. If there's going to be a good shot at people paying attention, it would be at this time of year. That's where we stand now. This will be the third portion of our search right now. The last two things were, I don't want to say fruitless, but learning experiences and did not turn out to be matches for our daughter.

Jena: I have a couple of logistical questions about this. The first is while we know of reports of Chinese birth parents who are searching themselves for children who were confiscated, trafficked, kidnapped, I imagine that there are also people who are very reluctant to be drawn into this process, as the people you knew in Connecticut were reluctant to be drawn in. I can imagine what their fears are. If we find birth parents, what does that mean? Are we in a permanent relationship with people who are across the world? Will it change our daughter's attachment to us? What if we find out that she was in fact not abandoned, but confiscated or trafficked? What's our moral obligation? It opens up all of these questions for the adoptive parents.

For birth parents, I wonder when you come knocking on the door, or Longlan comes knocking on the door -- she is Chinese. She's from Guangzhou. She's the adoptive mother of three Chinese daughters. She's married to an American. She has feet in both cultures. She's the ideal person to go knocking on this villager's door and saying, "Hi. I think that you may be the birth parents of a child who's been adopted in the United States. Can you give us some DNA?" What kind of reaction have you had from the potential birth parents? I know the first parents were very eager. How 'bout the second parents? Were they like, "Sure. Swab my cheek," or are they like, "Who the heck are you?"

Maria: Actually, when I found out that they weren't the birth parents I was very relieved only because it was very funny when Longlan's researcher went knocking to try to explain why we thought that perhaps they were the biological parents and wanted to do a DNA test. The mother, the woman who would've been the birth mother, was really freaked out by it and wanted to only give her DNA at the police precinct. She said, "I'll give you my DNA, but you're going to have to go to the police precinct to do that." Longlan called me on a Saturday night at midnight. It was Sunday noon there in China. She said, "The researcher's there. The mother is not wanting to do it unless they go to the police precinct to do it. The husband may be willing to do it. He's seeming more agreeable to see if it is a match. The mother is wanting to go to the police precinct. I think that's crazy. What do you think?" I said, "No.

Longlan, forget it. If the mother's getting uptight, there's no reason." Is she getting uptight because she thinks she's going to get in trouble or something? This isn't about that.

This is about people that are enthusiastic, wanting to have their daughter reconnect with whoever the biological parents are. We're all taking it one day at a time. It may not be that it's a great situation if we aren't able to find who the birth parents are. I said this too when you were interviewing me earlier. We're a very tight-knit family here. Li-Hua's incredibly supported in our family with her two older brothers. We always talk about the fact that, "Li-Hua, who are your parents?" She's like, "You and Daddy." I'm like, "Right. Who are the people who are in China?" We've started calling them the sperm donor and the egg donor. [laughs] Instead of having her have a deep, deep connection to these people, we want her just to think of them -- I say, "How would you think of them down the road?" She says, "Like cousins." I was like, "Yeah, they're like cousins. Exactly." We not going to spend too much dwelling on it, but it's nice to know that they're there. It's nice to know that you can have a good relationship. You can stay as close or as far as you want. You can be in touch. You can write letters, maybe have a phone call. Everything can go as quickly a pace or as slow as a pace as any one human being wants something to go. She's in the driver's seat.

Even when I said to her, "This other couple, they're not your parents," she said, "I didn't think so, mom. I didn't think they were." I said, "How are you feeling?" I said to Longlan, "I guess we're back to square." She said, "I guess we're back to square one." I said, "Do you want to continue on?" She said, "Whatever. Yeah, sure." From our perspective I think that we all as a unit -- her older brothers, my husband and I, and Li-Hua -- have a pretty good take on why we're searching, why she's searching. We certainly don't want to force anybody. It may be that we don't get an answer, that even if the person walking by sees a notice and says, "Oh, my gosh. That's around the time that I dropped my little girl right there. Should I reach out? Shouldn't I reach out?" just as well as there may be people who don't want to open that can of worms, a Chinese man or woman saying, "I don't want to open that can of worms. There's no point." They may say, "Yeah." I'm into the people that say, "Yeah. I'm into the possibility. I'm into the hope. Life is miraculous. There are surprises to celebrate." I want to think that there's potential for Li-Hua's birth mother or birth father to want to reconnect. I'm going to hold out that hope [indiscernible] going to hold out that hope. If it happens, great. If it doesn't, it does not define her at all. The older she gets, the more aware she becomes of how complicated the whole process in China was.

Jena: What would you do if you found them and they wanted far more contact than you or Li-Hua wants?

Maria: I don't know how that would manifest in terms of far more contact. What would that mean? They're on the other side of the world. I would think for most Chinese couples and/or their potential other offspring, it's not going to be that easy to come to the United States. They'd probably be counting on us to try to get over there to reconnect or to say hello. Does it mean a lot of Skyping or WeChatting or emailing? Could mean that. Once again, just like every human being in those dynamics, you can control that type of interaction. You can control how much you want to respond to a phone call or an email. On social media you can

block people if you want to block people. It's just the way humans navigate their social interactions whatever they are. When you get to know someone, you get to someone on who they are step by step, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, month by month. We would take it from there.

It would be interesting. I would love to know if she has any siblings. Certainly if she had one or two siblings at the very least, I'd love her to have an interaction with them, biological siblings. Who knows? This is all conjecture. Who knows? Only time knows. [Indiscernible] future knows what's going to transpire. Everybody handles this so differently. You and I talked about this. I'm one of those people that really tries to seek joy. I'm a journalist. I try not to be afraid by things. I am afraid by things, just like other people. I try not to be. I always want to try to figure out, navigate the waters to a place of goodness. I'm always working that angle. I want to bring joy to people's lives, not misery. This is why when the woman in China would say, "I want to go to the police station and give my DNA. I'm worried." I was like, "No. Longlan, forget it. Tell her don't even worry about it. We don't need your DNA. Don't worry about it." We're not out here to upset anyone. That's not what this is about.