

Jena Heath: Where were you in your life at the point where you decided to adopt from China? What was going on in your thinking?

Brian Stuy: The decision to adopt from China was an end result of many years of change. I grew up in a Mormon family in a Mormon culture. In my culture growing up, there was large families. We were told that we had to have children to bring spirits down to Earth. I grew up in a culture that advocated for having lots of kids. In the late eighties I read one article that was a pivotal article for me. That was on the extinction of the black rhino in Africa. It talked about the growing population in Africa and how it was resulting in these animals, black rhino and others, being driven to pretty much extinction. Reading that article caused me to think about man's place on Earth. It really changed my view of having a lot of kids.

I'd been married about five years by that point. We were happy in our little, double-income, no-kids life. We weren't preventing kids from happening. It wasn't an urgent matter with us at that point. I began to reflect on the need to have biological children. It became a question not just of "Well, they'll come," but the question is "Do I even want a biological child to come?" This evolved for another five years or so. I studied more and more. I came to the firm conclusion in the early nineties that I didn't want to bring another human into the world biologically. I sat down with my then wife and told her that. She was pretty much okay with it. She had a lot of medical issues. She was concerned with the genetic side of biological children a little bit. We both came to an agreement. This is fine. Let's just continue on as we're going. That was the way it was. I was a rabid anti-child person for nearly a decade.

Then in 1996 I read press releases and stories about China's dying rooms. I remember thinking I'm in this zero-growth mind-set. Here's a country that's trying to do something about their population. I support that desire. Maybe adopting would be a way to have children but yet also support a population-growth agenda. I pondered that for a couple months and really didn't say anything to anybody about it. It was something that was percolating. One Sunday we were coming back from church. My then wife had been in a church class where a woman had talked about her trip to China with her husband on a medical project. She'd visited an orphanage. She'd come back and she said, "My goal is to find homes for all the kids that were in this orphanage." My wife at that time said, "I think we should adopt from China." I said, "That's amazing because that's exactly what I've been thinkin' about for the last couple months. Let's do it." We started from scratch, started investigating how to adopt from China. Finally in early 1998, March of 1998, we received a referral for our oldest daughter Meikina. Then in April, we went. The rest is history, as they say.

Jena: You went and you adopted Meikina. Then at some point your marriage broke up?

Brian: China was a life-changing experience on many levels. From a cultural point of view, I saw a world that I'd never seen before, a people that I'd never seen before. I feel deeply in love with China on our first trip. I loved so many things about it, their sense of community, their humbleness, their openness. It was everything that I found my American society to not be. It was something I was drawn to. We came back with Meikina. We both intellectually

knew that raising an only child probably wasn't in the best interest of Meikina. We thought, "Let's go back to China and adopt again." We were told we had to wait six months. Almost to the day six months later, we submitted our second dossier to adopt another girl. We were in the middle of this wait.

Going back to 1988 or '89, the article that had started me on this path at odds with my Mormon culture eventually resulted in me spiritually, emotionally, intellectually leaving the Mormon church. This was quite concerning to my then wife who was a very devout member of the Mormon church. It crystalized and became a huge issue while we were waiting for the referral for our second daughter. It was such a important issue on both of our sides that we decided that we could not remain married. She couldn't remain married to a person who was, not actively trying to destroy her belief system, but with my associations with friends and others in our house we would have conversations that would leave her tremendously bothered about things that she was hearing. It came to a head one night when she was driving home from Salt Lake. She came home and said, "I was praying. God told me that if I don't get divorced from you that you will destroy my testimony."

That became the culmination. I won't say that this occurred in a vacuum. That certainly would be unfair. There were many issues at play. We both decided it was probably better for both of us if we did not remain married. She called up the agency immediately and said, "We need to withdraw the application for the second girl." In the months since we'd submitted the application, I had emotionally accepted the reality of a second daughter. I don't want to belittle the idea of a miscarriage or anything like that, but I did feel like somebody had died when my then wife withdrew the application. I felt like there was a sense of loss. As soon as the divorce was finalized, literally the day I received the divorce decree, I called the agency and said, "I want to reapply as a single father." I turned in my application right as China's policies towards single parent adoption was changing. Just under the wire, got it in. In March of 2002, I received a referral for my daughter Meigon.

Jena: In the course of being in China you met Lan, your current wife. The two of you adopted Meilan together, in what year?

Brian: You're really hurtling through time and space.

Jena: We got half an hour.

Brian: [laughs] On the trip to adopt Meigon we were shoppin' on Shamian Island, as adoptive families are wont to do. I walked into a store. Whether I met Lan on that trip is open to debate. We don't remember. It was not a real consequential event. We were just shopping. I don't remember who I met in stores. She doesn't remember all the customers that came in the store. I did order a custom painting from her store of both my daughters. She got my email address. Through the summer as the painting was being done, she would email me updates of the painting. I would start emailing her back saying, "You're a woman in China. I'm raising these two Chinese girls. I would love to get your perspective on what life is like in China for a woman." She was agreeable. We spent a lot of time emailing. I would email

her questions. She'd email me back answers. In the course of that time I organized a trip to go back to China to do some additional research.

I asked her if she wanted to be my guide for that trip. She said, "I would love to. I've never been. I've been working with adoptive families for years with my store. I've never been to an orphanage. I would love to go to an orphanage." She was my guide on that trip. We started dating through my research projects in China and then got married two years later. After we got married in October of 2004, we went back to China to celebrate the wedding with her family and of course paid for the trip by doing some research in Henan province by Beijing. We went to this orphanage for a bunch of families that wanted us to do some research. I was videotaping the baby rooms and the kids to make a DVD for the families. When we were done, we got back in the taxi. We were driving back to the hotel.

Lan says, "I just met a girl. I think we should adopt her." I was like, "Wait a second. We've only been married a month, maybe a month and a half. This isn't even on our radar. I don't think so. I don't even know how this would work." She said, "You really need to meet this kid." We went back that evening to the orphanage and asked the director if we could take this child with a couple of her friends -- we didn't want her to think we were focused on her - - "Can we take them to the area McDonald's?" He said that was okay. We took these three kids to McDonald's and let them play and eat. Sure enough, this kid was radiant. She was happy and singing and really engaging. We brought her back to the orphanage and talked about it. I said, "I have no idea how we could do this." I know that the CCAA doesn't allow designated adoptions. We're going to have to find out if this is even possible. We went back to the orphanage.

The director said, "The only way you'd be able to do it is as a domestic adoption." Lan would have to adopt her as a single mom. We thought that's a possibility. I have to find out how to do it on my end. I don't want to adopt a kid in China and then not be able to get her to the United States. I said, "Lan, you go back to your family planning office. I'll go back to the INS in the United States. We'll all see if we can put together a way to do this." She did that. She went to the family planning office, walked in and said, "I'd like to adopt this girl." She said, "Are you married?" "No. I'm a single girl." They're like, "What? Wait, what?" They literally could not comprehend what she was asking them. They were like, "Wait a second. Why are you as a single woman wanting to adopt a child?" That's the opposite of what is going on in 99.9% of the situations. They didn't even know how to process a request. It took them a couple weeks to finally come back and say, "I think we've figured out how to do this, get you the permission, get you the certificate."

I am, at the same time, going to the INS office and saying, "My wife is adopting this child in China. How would we get her over to the United States?" The official in the INS office said, "No problem. Since you two are married, therefore any children of her are by default going to be your children. It's just filling out an application, getting her over here." "How long will it take?" "Maybe two to three months at the most." I said, "Really? It's just that simple?" "Yeah. It's that simple." I call Lan in China. I said, "It doesn't seem like there's that much to do over on my end." She says, "I got permission from the family planning on my end. Let's

do it.” In February of 2005, we took the whole family, my other two daughters and myself, we went back to Louyang in Henan. We adopted Meilan. Then I had to begin processing the paperwork. One thing led to another. Sixteen months later, we got Meilan’s visa to come back home.

Jena: Wow.

Brian: We call those the dark years.

Jena: [laughs] That was quite a lot of pirouetting you had to do. Among the many, many things I find so interesting about your story is that you started out in a faith that's all about children. You were not convinced that you wanted children. There's this irony there. You got interested in China and adoption from China in part because China was making an effort to control its population. It resonated with your concerns about overpopulation, depletion of the earth.

Now, the work that you do and the role that you play in the Chinese adoption community as somebody who does research for adoptive families into their adoptive children’s backgrounds and who has spoken very frankly about your very real concerns about corruption in the adoption system in China, I wonder now where you are in terms of how you think about China’s one-child, now two-child, policy. Back in the beginning of all this, it seemed like a good thing to you that China was trying to do something about its population. What do you think about it now fast-forwarding, knowing what you do both as an adoptive father of three Chinese kids and even more as a person who’s been really involved in so much research on behalf of adoptive families? What do you think of the one-child policy now?

Brian: It’s become a lot more nuanced and complicated. I'm still highly supportive of the philosophical underpinning on the one-child policy. I do believe that the one-child policy kept China’s population smaller than it would have been absent the one-child policy. I know that there are demographers that believe that China’s population was already declining. I have a wife whose mother had five siblings, whose grandmother had five siblings, who herself has five siblings. I believe that the population train in China would have slowed down a lot slower absent the one-child policy. Certainly there were myriad abuses of the one-child policy or actions taken by family planning officials under the guise of the one-child policy. I won't even say they were legal actions. Those are, of course, terrible. I recognize the pragmatic difficulties of the implementation in many areas of the one-child policy.

Whether it’s providing birth control in Africa or whatever, I support any country’s effort to limit population, fundamentally. It’s certainly a lot more complicated. It’s very much American thinking in a lot of regards. We as a people are very backward looking. We like to take our understanding today and recast our history within that understanding. The reality is in 1996 my belief was there was a one-child policy. These children are being abandoned and left on the streets to die by their birth families. Therefore, it behooves me to step forward and

provide a home where I'm capable of doing so. That was my intent and motivation in 1996. That belief system wasn't even, in any way, impacted until 2002 when I adopted Meigon. It was on that adoption trip I began to see small cracks in that veneer.

Subsequent events completely revolutionized my belief on the need for China's international adoption program. I dealt with what I knew at the time. Even with Meilan's adoption, even though no scandals had broken out in China at that time, both Lan and I were very well aware that there were issues with China's adoption program, especially as it related to healthy infants. When we met Meilan, we went through a lot to make sure that this was a girl that had no biological family available, had no domestic family that was willing to adopt her. We tried to cover every base to make sure that this would be an ethical adoption. Even after all of our effort, we still fell into the pit. All you can do is all you can do.

Jena: You fell into the pit because, without going into a lot of detail, you actually discovered in the course of adopting Meilan that in fact there was a biological parent, correct?

Brian: The whole thing was a setup. We'd been deceived.

Jena: Twenty years hence -- 1996 you felt one way. Today, it sounds like you don't fundamentally disagree with a government's policy, even a policy that dictates the number of children people can have, that philosophically you don't fundamentally disagree with that. What you have real, genuine concerns about, what you've really lost faith with, is the international adoption program from China. Is that right?

Brian: There's the philosophical reasoning behind the one-child policy. Then there's the unforeseen and unfortunate results of that policy. Could it have been better implemented? Probably. Certainly on the far side of the spectrum, forced abortions and forced sterilizations and family planning confiscations, these are all acts that are far outside the pale of what anybody would consider as appropriate activity to enforce a one-child policy law. The idea that you establish fines for extra children; you promote the idea of one child, much like China's done; that one child is enough; boy or girl, it is the same; each can pass on the family name, these kind of things to slowly turn the population boat, I would support.

The problem was that even before the one-child policy, there's always been a very fluid population of children inside China. My own wife, her sisters, all of them born before the one-child policy, all of them transferred to other families to be raised by them. That was the result of the idea that China was by and large very poor. Like all parents, Chinese families wanted what was best for their kids, to give their kids the best opportunities. Like in my wife's case, her family saw the village teacher as providing better opportunities for one of their daughters than they could. This fluid population of children that existed even before the one-child policy came in became a method of abusing the one-child policy for adoption.

I entered the adoption program thinking that these children were being left on the side of the road, that there was nobody that wanted them. On my second adoption trip to adopt Meigon I was walking with the assistant director of her orphanage. I asked as a point of curiosity,

“How many families do you have inside China that are adopting from your orphanage?” She said, “We have a five-year waiting list.” That was the beginning of my starting to look at things saying, “Wait a second.” Maybe everything I’ve been told and believed about this program should be questioned. If there is five years’ worth of domestic families wanting to adopt from an orphanage that I as a foreign am adopting from right now, this is a problem. I think that the international adoption program took the one-child policy and the dying rooms and the myth that these children were being left on the sides of the road, and they were able to utilize that and take advantage of that to promote their program. I still support the philosophy of the one-child policy. I’ve learned to be suspicious of the motives of those inside China that are working within the international adoption program.

Jena: I wonder how much you've evolved into someone who believes that fundamentally at its core these adoptions were really fictions? Am I overstating that?

Brian: No, I don't think you're overstating it. We have very few data points to draw on. Prior to 2000, China's program is the unknowable. We don't have the ability to collect, for example, finding data on children because by and large adoptive families are reluctant to share their children's stories. There was no finding ads. We don't know much data about what was goin' on before 1999 and 2000. We do know from testimony that was given in the Hunan scandal, for example, that in 1996 orphanages in Hunan were already pressuring their employees to recruit children. This was when the adoption program from China was in the low thousands, one or two thousand children. Already, that was creating a strain on the orphanages to supply the children. An incentive was being created to recruit children for adoption because the realization was there's enough families that are standing in line to adopt these children that if we can grab a child, submit it, flip it, and get the money, we could go out and get some more. We can keep doin' that all day long.

We see stories in the press about children being abandoned. It's the very fact that there are stories in the press about abandoned children that shows how uncommon it is. We were told in the early adoption period, “These kids are being found wholesale.” Finding a child on the side of the street is like, “I can't even walk down Main Street without finding children.” Yet there were no stories about these kids being found. If there were, they were so infrequent. They were rare. That should have already been a flag for us. There's different levels. Even if there had been children abandoned, in 2002 I realized that there were already enough families inside China to have adopted those children, that there never really was a need for China's international adoption program, at least as it relates to the healthy children, that there were always families that were willing to adopt those children. Even if you accept that there were children abandoned, there still is very little justification for those children to have been adopted internationally.

Jena: Essentially, the international adoption program, in your view, was simply another method to lower the population. Rather than having many of these children adopted within China as they traditionally might have been, sent to live with another family, they are in effect exported.

Brian: I don't think that the international adoption program was used as a way of lowering China's population. I think what the justification was -- you can call it an altruistic justification -- is the reality that the children predominantly came from poor, uneducated, traditional, rural families. These children were viewed as continuing that economic tradition. Whereas if that child was adopted to a western family, that child would be given a much better opportunity in life. Plus, it took a child out of that poor, uneducated, superstitious culture or class. I think it was viewed as a way of shifting the population to a higher level. By taking out the lowest denominators you increase the average for the entire population, rather than as a way of just lowering the population. I don't think that that was the rationale.

In talking to directors, almost always when we asked them, "Do you think it's good if a child is adopted domestically versus internationally?" they always say, "Absolutely. Internationally is better. They have a much brighter future." That really was a component of the program. The money, of course, was the gravy to the program and became very much a motivation. If you sat down with a director and really asked them -- they're not evil people by and large. They are people who believe "I'm helping this child. I'm helping China. Gravy, I'm getting five thousand dollars because of that." That's basically the hierarchy of the program.

Jena: Regardless of the motivation of the government for creating this international adoption program, you really believe that the vast majority of the children who have been internationally adopted -- tell me if I'm overstating this -- or a significant number of the children who have been internationally adopted probably could have found homes within China?

Brian: If they were a healthy, young child, yeah. No question.

Jena: What is an adoptive parent to do with this at this point, in your view, and as an adoptee? Whatever has happened, this child is raised in this country. Many of these children have no memory of China. The only parents they've ever known are their adoptive parents. How do you think as a community, what is our ethical obligation? What should we do? If we accept that this program was deeply flawed, that these children might well have been able to stay in their country, is there anything that we should do? What should we do or not do?

Brian: To answer that question you have to prioritize the needs of the players in the adoption community. I would say that number one, and whose needs need to be foremost in any conversation, is the adoptee themselves. They're the primary victim/participant in the program. Their voice should be taken as the first voice. Secondly to that would be the voices of the Chinese birth family and the adoptive family, parents themselves. Last should be the voice of the adoption agencies and the governments.

When our adoptive children come to us and ask for our help to provide information on their backgrounds, to help answer their questions, to do the searching or whatever it is that they want to do to gain more information, we should recognize that that is our primary objective as adoptive parents. We should put aside our own fears and insecurities and familial myth

and recognize that our children have these questions. We should do everything we can to answer them.

At the same time, we should be educating ourselves and speak out when possible. There is a large contingency of families entering the adoption program who for one reason or another may not type into Google, "China adoption problems" or something like that. They want to go to China to adopt. They may not be willing to do a lot of pre-adoption research. As adoptive parents when we recognize these issues, we should be speaking out to help others understand the adoption program before they go into the adoption. Otherwise we're just this growing community of enlightened. We're doing nothing to stop the abuses and to stop the problems inside China. It's only when we begin to speak out and campaign for change and reform will change ever come. Otherwise the boat's passed us on the river, and we can't change anything.

Jena: How do you and Lan talk to your girls about this?

Brian: Lan and I are talking all the time about different scenarios of different stories we're working on with families, different situations. Our girls are very well versed in the issues with China's program. If they have individual questions, we always sit around the table and talk about it. There's no desire to avoid a question. As you stated, all my kids are in that zone where their number one goal is to just fit in with their friends and have a normal, American life. They're not deep thinkers at this point and not asking existential questions. That will come.

Primarily, most people get to that point in their early twenties and mid-twenties. It might be when they're starting to have their own kids and they recognize their own situation in contrast to having their own kids. It's almost guaranteed that the day will come when the child will start asking these questions. As adoptive parents, we have two choices. We can say, "Any searching for information is up to my daughter or my child. It's their story. They control it. It's not my prerogative to do any of this research." That's pretty much guaranteed to result in a frustrated child in her mid-twenties whose trails are all cold. The people that knew her in the orphanage are all gone or dead. There's no expectation or even a hope that they'll ever be able to find information.

You can be a parent who can see the future and can recognize that there's a high probability that that will become an issue for their child and will take the steps to be prepared when that day comes so they can provide their child with as much information as is humanly possible. Obviously, we side on those that are the long-range thinkers and try to get as much information as soon as possible, not necessarily to communicate to the child at the time, but at least there so that when the child does ask those questions that the ability is there to answer them honestly and factually.

Jena: If you knew then what you know now about the Chinese adoption system, would you have adopted from China? This is not saying anything that you don't love your daughters. They are wonderful. I'm just saying purely as an intellectual exercise.

Brian: There's an intellectual argument. The intellectual argument, of course, would say no. I find it immoral to deprive a family inside China. Ignoring the arrival of my kids into the orphanage, taking an agnostic view to that situation, from the idea that there are families inside China who are, like most families, wanting to have a child, I wasn't in that position. I was perfectly satisfied with the probability of never having children in life and not really caring one way or the other. I know that there are families inside China who desperately would love to have children due to cultural, and religious, and everything, biological reasoning. I would intellectually say no. I would not go down that path again.

I have to balance that philosophical idea against reality that my kids bring immense pleasure and joy to my life. I look at my life before I had kids and I look at my life now. There's no comparison. The joy factor, the fulfillment factor, everything is so much higher. If a being came to me and said, "You can go back to 1997 and not turn in this dossier. All you need to do is push this button," I don't think I would push it. The reality is my kids are my life. They have brought me enrichment in so many different levels that I would not have without them. It would be incomprehensible to me to unwind that and not do the path again. In the end, if I knew now what I knew then, and I could see my life now back then, I would still do it again.