

Jena Heath: We've talked at length now about your commitment to finding information for your daughter. My first question is that the narratives we receive as adoptive parents of Chinese children usually document similar stories of abandonment. For example, according to my own paperwork, my daughter was found in front of the health center in a city in southern China. The report documents what she was wearing and doesn't offer much more detail. This is not unusual. You've told me that you doubt these narratives are true. Can you give me one or two specific examples about how you've come to have these doubts?

Robin Bell: In my opinion, finding locations that are very similar within a social welfare institute or even between different social welfare institutes within the same province or even between different provinces may not be believable. The reason I feel that way is, in my opinion, a random abandonment in China should be random. I would think each birth parent would come up with a unique idea about how to relinquish their child. When you see birth parents doing the same thing over and over again, or a bunch of them abandoning on one date and then no abandonments happen for months afterwards, you have to suspect that it might not be true. I've been told that abandoning a child in China is a very taboo thing to do. It's not like birth parents are going to be discussing it with their coworkers and their friends and their neighbors. They're embarrassed by this. Only their close inner circle and sometimes maybe just the parents and the grandparents might know about this. In my mind, there is no reason why repeated locations should be showing up or clustering of abandonments over short periods of time and no abandonments thereafter. It just doesn't make sense. To me, it's not random. If it's not random, it's important to try to figure out what's going on.

Jena: What do you think is going on?

Robin: I'll refer to my daughter's abandonment statement. You have nine out of ten children abandoned in the summer of 2003. All of them are abandoned the following January and February of 2004. All but one are about four to six months of age at abandonment. When you initially look at the abandonment locations, they might look different but they're really not. They're all nebulous, general government-affiliated locations, either the social welfare institute or government or social activities buildings in one of three towns. I have learned that the social activity building is within the township government building. When you see a social activity building, it's not a different building. It's the same building as the township government building.

Interesting, these places are impossible to search. You're relying on people with government jobs to give you information if you ask. I'm very suspect of getting my information from government-related people. If they say, "Nope. We don't remember anything," you're stuck. You have nowhere to go. It didn't make sense that all these mothers do the same thing in the summer. They all have the children in the summer and then the following early winter, or early in 2004, they all abandon. I actually know the area pretty well. I visited there. It's very warm in the summer. It can get very cold in the winter. In 2008 they had really bad ice storms. I found out our foster mother's house was severely damaged. Why do the women wait until the dead of winter to abandon their child? Then you find that nine other supposed

Chinese mothers did the same exact thing. Logically, it does not make sense. It just doesn't. What do I think is going on? I don't think these children are being randomly abandoned.

Jena: Where does your mind lead you at that point? You've done a lot of research. If they're not being randomly abandoned, what do you think is happening?

Robin: I can only talk about my daughter's case. I actually had the finding ad in my possession from 2005 when I adopted until a Chinese friend accidentally saw my finding ad in 2008 and read it and was the first one to tell me, "I don't believe any of this information." I never thought to get the other ads translated. I had the ad in my possession originally when I adopted in 2005. I didn't know a single person that spoke Chinese or was bilingual in Chinese. Over the years, I made a few acquaintances. It was an accident. She happened to see it. We were talking about finding ads. She didn't know what a finding ad was. I said, "Here, I'll show you my daughter's." By the way, it was a group of ten, so there's nine other girls published. When I showed her the whole ad, she took a long time reading it over and over again. There's only one sentence written about each child. It should not have taken her that long to read. I knew something was up when she kept on reading them over and over again. When she told me what she knew, I was a little shocked. Up to that point, I didn't know anything. Then I asked her to translate all the ads because I wanted to see what she thought. When she translated them into English, I understood exactly. I agreed with her. That was 2008.

Other things bothered me, the abandonment clump. I got Brian Stuy's birth family search analysis. In 2004, there were twenty published finding ads. In 2005, there was another ten. In 2006, there were zero. In 2007, there were around ten. That didn't make sense either. Why so many in 2004? Why zero two years later? It just didn't seem normal. It didn't seem random. Somethin' was going on. These finding ads really bothered me a lot. I tried to go online on the Yahoo! groups to get other parents to share their finding ad information, but nobody would share anything to me. Adoptive parents guard their child's finding stories like it's top-secret information. Nobody would share anything. I wanted to see the finding ad group before my daughter's and the group after my daughter's to see if the same kind of thing was going on. I couldn't get anywhere.

In January 2009, that's when Brian Stuy started the birth family search analysis where he would pull all the finding ads and look for the unusual trends. I'm like, "Oh, my god. Here it is. This is what I've been looking for." I want to see what these other finding ads said. It might be the same weird trend. He was the one that actually first alerted to me that some years there were lots of published finding ads, and some years there were zero. The other thing he caught on that was a post a Chinese man made on some sort of Chinese internet forum. He was complaining that family planning officials had taken three children of his relatives. He did not live in the area any longer. He lived in another province. He was asking for information. Brian put a link to that post in my birth family search analysis. I clicked on it. This is back in 2005. Google Translate wasn't good then. It's not that great now for Chinese, but it was horrible back then. I'm on some Chinese internet site. I don't know how to search for it. I can't understand anything.

I showed it back to my Chinese friend, the one who was the one who alerted me to the weirdness of the finding ads in the year previous. I said, "First of all, this is what Brian Stuy is alleging. Is it true?" She read the post. She said, "Yeah. That's exactly what this guy is alleging." Family planning officials took these three girls. They were a little younger than my daughter, maybe about five to eight months younger than my daughter. She said he had an email address and a cell phone number in his post. Brian didn't mention anything like that. I didn't realize there was a way to contact this person. Her next breath, she says, "Do you want me to contact him?" I wasn't expecting any of this. I was like, "Yeah. Sure." She caught me off guard. I said, "Yeah. Sure. Contact him."

She contacted him. It was interesting. I didn't find out until a few years later. I thought she contacted him and that's how the dialogue started, but it didn't start. They were very suspicious of her when they contacted her. At first, they didn't answer her. Then they called her back. When she said hello, they hung up a couple times on her. She said it was very strange. Finally the third phone call, they talked. I think she thinks that she was trying to scam them or something. She said they were very suspicious of her. The Chinese are very suspicious of strangers. They were suspicious somebody was actually going to provide information without trying to get money out of them. I think they were searching her phone number in the meantime to try to figure out if she was legit or not.

Jena: She's calling from the US.

Robin: I think she would call from Skype. She would always tell me she would call through Skype. It was very cheap. She used to make phone calls to the foster mother for me. She said it costs one cent a minute or something.

Jena: Let me stop you here. One thing we haven't explained is who Brian Stuy is. He is a person, an adoptive father of three Chinese daughters with his wife who is Chinese from Guangzhou, does birth parent research for adoptive parents. Your friend's suspicions, the contact with this gentleman, have all led you to what conclusion about your own daughter?

Robin: I believe the children were, I'm going to use the word coerced, from their families. In some cases it seems like the children were outright taken. In other cases it seems like the parents faked an abandonment, which means they bring a child to the officials and they claim they found the child when in fact it's their own child. They knew what the political situation was going on. I feel they felt they had no choice. They saw this going around with all their neighbors or friends. They can't leave their villages because of hukou system. They're stuck. You see all this around going on around you. What do you do? Do you wait 'til family planning comes and causes havoc in your house, or do you realize that you have no choice and you just make up a story and claim you found a child and turned her in? There is evidence that some families did that as well.

Jena: Having reached that conclusion, you're now confronted with a very difficult thought, which is that your child whom you adopted assuming one thing -- we've talked about this.

You went into this process, like many of us, most of us I'm sure, with one understanding of how the girls -- mostly girls, some boys -- become available for international adoption. In the course of this research and becoming aware of these patterns and abandonments and doing your own work, you've now come to this conclusion that your child may not have been legitimately abandoned. In fact, you strongly suspect that. Yet, you are her parent.

How do you manage knowing or suspecting that she wasn't abandoned and in fact may have been confiscated if your theory is correct? How do you manage those feelings? How do you feel about being her parent having come to these conclusions?

Robin: I'm a realist. I've accepted that I did not create this role. I was not the family planning officials that coerced these birth families into relinquishing their child, lying to them. I was just, as I put it, the dumb, naïve, adoptive parent who believed what I was told back then. I followed the rules, all the rules that the American government, the Chinese government, my adoption agency had. I waited and waited. I was never given an absolute guarantee that I would ever be able to adopt a child. I did not create this mess. Nevertheless, I've been sucked into it because I adopted a child and years later learned that family planning was coercing birth parents to relinquish their child.

There's evidence that this started one year after the social welfare institute got approval for international adoption. The timing is very amazing. The real question is what does one do after the fact, after you've adopted and you've learned about all this fraud? Do you keep it to yourself so you don't upset your immediate family or your child or people in your travel group or other adoptive families who adopted from the same social welfare institute? Do you open up and publicize it risking disapproval from all those other people but at least alerting pre-adoptive parents of the not-so-nice side of adoption from China?

For me, keeping quiet was never an option. I felt if I kept quiet, I was no better than all those family planning officials that didn't play the rules and took children -- which is illegal for them to do in China. If I kept quiet, I'm no better than them. I've been very open about our story despite the fact that I'm sure some of family members prefer I not be. I tried to take precautions to protect their privacy. I'm out there on the internet. Most people will know who I am by my story even though I'm using a pseudonym. I do want to protect the others in my family. I don't have any links to any of my family members on any social media groups. I have a different last name than my children, my husband, because I never changed my name when I got married. Hopefully although people know my story, they may not necessarily link it to my husband and my children. That's up to them how they want to handle it.

Jena: Your daughter is twelve now. Is that right?

Robin: Yes.

Jena: Where is she in all this? What do you tell her about her origin story? However your steps to protect and separate your work in this way from your family's names and identity, is she aware that you are out sharing this story? How does she feel about it?

Robin: She has no interest in China. She has no interest in finding her birth family, birth parents or siblings. She's totally into her own life in the United States, her school, her extracurricular activities, her friends. She doesn't care at all. I did feel obliged to mention things to her as we go along just because she's getting to the age where she could do an internet search, although I know she wouldn't because she has no interest. I'm concerned a friend of hers, maybe a really [indiscernible] kid in school might do a search someday and say, "Wow. This is what I found about your town." If you do a Google search, there was a 2009 scandal about the family planning officials seizing children in this town. Even to this day seven years later, on the first page of Google hits are all these links to the stories of what happened in 2009. It's very easy to find information about this Chinese news scandal from 2009. My concern is really one of her friends doing a Google search and giving her the information because she has no interest. At this age, I'm fairly certain she wouldn't do it.

I, over the years, have hinted at what I think happened. She says, "Mom, I'm not interested. I don't care." I said, "Well, I think you should hear it. Someday you might hear it from one of your friends. I'd rather you hear it from me." I tell her I have her official information in this big file. Anytime she wants to look at it, she's welcome to look at and I'll explain it to her. She says, "I have no interest." I said, "Let me tell ya. I have what the government -- your official version of what things happened. I don't think it's true for a lot of reasons." I have different independent sources of evidence, not just one. One of the big ones is her foster mother, from day one, told she didn't believe the finding information. I said, "I don't believe the official information is true. I've learned some things over the years. What I think happened was your parents were very, very poor. China is a very different country than the United States. We have a lot of freedoms here that they don't necessarily have."

One year at school in third or fourth grade they were learning about freedom of speech, or freedom of the press, or freedom of religion. When we were studying for the test, I also added, "We have another freedom here. That's to have as many children as we want." China has the one-child policy. If you were a poor family and you accidentally had an extra child, you could get into a lot of trouble. The officials could make things very difficult for your family. They could punish you. They could smash in your roof. They could take all your belongings and your farm equipment -- they were poor farmers -- and your farm animals. Then, nobody in the family could eat. Nobody had a way to make a living. They pressured these families that they should give up their child. They really weren't supposed to do that. They don't have laws like we do in the United States. These people were very poor. I say, "I don't think your family had a choice. I think they relinquished you, but I don't know if they did it willingly or not. I tend to think they didn't do it willingly." That's kind of the story I tell her.

Jena: So far her reaction is, "Thanks, but I really don't want to know about this?"

Robin: "Thanks, but no thanks. I want to go over to my friend's house. Bye"

Jena: Are you embarking, or have you, on an actual birth parent search?

Robin: Yes.

Jena: You're doing that. Does she know you're doing that, your daughter?

Robin: Yes. As she's gotten older, she's actually been a bit more militant about not wanting any sort of interaction or contact with her birth family. At one point she said she would like to know if she had siblings. Then as she got older, she said she doesn't care. It was getting the point where I thought maybe I should stop searching. She said, "Mom, I don't want to know. I don't care at all." I told her, "Do you want me to stop?" Her answer was, "If you want to search for yourself, fine. Go ahead, but don't do it for me." I felt that at least gave me the green light to continue. At this point, I am searching for me and not for anybody else.

Jena: What would happen if you had a DNA match and you found birth parents? Given her ambivalence, what would you do? Let's say in six months that happened, would you tell her? Would you wait? Have you thought that through?

Robin: I think everything through. I feel a great injustice has been done to them if she was truly forced from them. I turn the situation around. If I was in their shoes, if my government had forced a child from me, what would I want to happen? For me, I would never forget about that child. I would think about that child every day until the day I die. I don't know what they think. If they were like me, they deserve closure. They, at minimum, deserve to know where she's living and how she's doing. I'm hoping as my daughter matures and gets older, her thinking will change. I think her thinking will change. At the time where she is open to making contact, we'll make contact. It might not be for a long time. They do have a right to know what happened to their daughter.

Jena: I'm going to challenge you a little bit. What if she's never open to it? What if she turns around and says, "You inserted yourself into a decision that, as the adoptee, should have been mine. I'm angry at you."

Robin: I'm not forcing her to make contact with them. I can't make contact with them. I think it's two separate things, me making contact with them and her making contact. I'm sure they would like her to make contact with them. I will explain the difficult situation. As much as I would like her to make contact with them, I can't force her. As she gets older, there's very little I can force her to do. She is a very strong-minded twelve-year-old. All I can say is I will encourage her the best I can. A lot of this is the maturity at her age. She is young. I'm hoping as she matures her thinking will change. I honestly think at the latest by the time she's pregnant and has her first child, I think at that point she'll, for the first time, be able to relate to her Chinese mother. Then, her thinking may change.

At this point, she totally does not relate to China, doesn't relate to a Chinese birth parent, birth siblings. She's totally American and doesn't understand why people think she should want to have Asian friends or want to be interested in China. She does not see herself as Chinese at all. She doesn't relate to China at all. If she could relate to being a mother, that

might be -- hopefully it'll be sooner than that. If not, I think at that point she will then be able to put herself into the situation her Chinese mother was. Maybe her feelings would change.

Jena: There is a strongly held view in the general adoption community that the decisions about birth parent connection should reside exclusively with the adoptee. Is it fair to say that's not a view that you share? I'm not talking about just her decision to connect. It sounds like what you believe is that you have, as the adoptive mother in a set of circumstances that are particular to the Chinese adoption system, that you have as much right to try to have a connection with the birth parents as the adopted child. Is that fair to say?

Robin: I feel that way because I believe fraud was involved. I feel responsibility because the fraud is involved to do something about it. If fraud was not involved, I don't think I'd be doing what I was doing. Once again, I've also talked to a lot of adult adoptees. Many of them say they have no problems with the adoptive parents gathering information. The actual contact, that's a different story. Most of them said they wished their adoptive parents had gathered information, and then leave it up to the adoptee to make final contact or not. That's why I said I couldn't even pressure my daughter to make contact even if I wanted to. She is a very strong-minded twelve-year-old. She's twelve going on twenty. It's going to have to come from within her. I can encourage and suggest. In the end, it's her decision.

Because she was so militant against contact, I did go back to her and say to her, "Should I stop what I'm doing?" I asked her that about a year ago. She said, "No. Mom, if you want to do it, just know you're doing it for yourself, not me." I feel she's given me the green light. Just because I make contact, that doesn't mean she'll make contact. Knowing what she's like now, she's probably not going to want to make contact for a while. She's not going to change next year, the following year. She has to grow up a lot before she's going to get some curiosity. I would think at the earliest, late high school or college.

Jena: Is it fair to say that your husband is not on the same page with you about this kind of research that we've been discussing? How do you reconcile that if that's the case?

Robin: Yes, that would be a good portrayal of my husband. I reconcile it as he's entitled to his opinion, and I'm entitled to mine.

Jena: That's workin' out? He's not mad that you discuss this on the internet? Is he okay so far as you make these efforts to conceal your identity?

Robin: I've told him just like I've told some other adoptive parents from our social welfare institute that I've been doing some research for a lot of time. "I found a lot of information. Most of it isn't good. Are you interested in knowing about it?" They said no. I don't push it. I treat him as the other parents from the social welfare institute. He doesn't stop me from doing this. As I said, with the precautions of having a blank Facebook page, I tried not to link him or my children to me. Sure, some people will probably know who we are. If people in our town would know about it, it would get back to him. He might not want to hear it. That's why I do not link him or my children to me on any online forum that I am on.

Jena: I have one last question for you. If you met your daughter's birth parents, what would you say to them?

Robin: The first thing I would do is I would apologize for what happened to them. I just can't imagine what a parent goes through who has gone through something like this. I can't imagine if it would've happened to me, how I would go on living. I would have a very hard time going on living. I found out one of the birth parents in her town who had a child confiscated did try to commit suicide and tried to stab himself in the neck. Since then, what's quoted in newspapers is it seems like he hasn't been quite right in the mind. He talks nonsense. I can understand why he did something like that. He felt like a complete failure. He made several attempts to try to get his child back. They said, "Tough luck. She's gone." My heart really breaks for what these families have endured.

If I met them, first of all I would want to know the real story. I would want to know if they had a message for my daughter, what they would like to tell her. I would tell them I will be in contact and make them aware of what she's doing in life. I would also feel the need to help them out in some way. Obviously, returning the child is not an option. I would consider them family. I told my daughter that, I would consider them family. She looked at me like I was crazy. Family helps family. I would do whatever I could, whatever they ask, something reasonable. If they asked me for ten thousand dollars, I'm not going to give them ten thousand dollars. If they need help for school fees, it would depend. I would come up with something I felt was reasonable.

Jena: I have one more question, which your answer made me think about. You said returning your daughter is not reasonable. How old was your daughter when she came home?

Robin: Twenty months.

Jena: Twenty months. She's now twelve. She's lived her whole with you. I realize this is a hypothetical, but since you've given this so much thought, I'm going to ask you. What if a younger child were found to have been trafficked or in some way inappropriately placed for international adoption and the Chinese parents did demand return of the child? What do you think should happen if that ever did happen? I realize it's very highly unlikely. Everything about the system in China makes it really very difficult to impossible for biological parents to have any real standing in this situation. The world is changing. We know much more than we did. There's far more connection going on back and forth because of the internet, social media. I don't think it's outside the realm of possibility. What do you think?

Robin: It's a difficult situation. I would never tell another adoptive parent what to do in that situation. I know that kind of situation has occurred in China already. I know secondhand of an incident that happened years ago with an internationally adopted child. Then there was one recently in the news in China, domestic adoption, but it wasn't a legal domestic adoption.

Jena: I read about that. The child was purchased.

Robin: Yeah. The adoptive family gave the child back. I think the child had been with them for a while.

Jena: This was two Chinese families. This was within China, not an international adoption.

Robin: I also know one, Jane Liedtke of Our Chinese Daughters Foundation, in a talk she gave -- I'd never seen the case written up in the news or anything -- she mentioned a case of a child adopted by a European family. This is years and years ago. I don't know what happened, but somehow they found out he was stolen from his family. I think he had been with the European family for a while too. He got different language, different culture.

I can speak to my instance. In my instance, I do have a legal responsibility to raise my child. I have a moral responsibility to raise her and do what's best for her. I take those responsibilities very seriously. If I don't think something is in her best interest, I'm not going to go along with it. I also have my husband to think of. While he may not agree with what I'm doing in terms of searching, it's his child too. I respect his rights too. If there was something I wanted to do with our child that he did not want me to do with our child, I would defer to him. It's his child too. I don't have unilateral control. I'm not a single mother. Just like I wouldn't want him to do something with our daughter that I completely disagreed with.

There's a lot of factors. My daughter is of an age where, as I say, it's very difficult to make her do anything. That's out of the question. Even if she had a great interest and wanted to go back to China, I don't think it's in her best interest. I wouldn't do that. I'm not going to send her back to China. I had reporters ask me that question back in 2009 several times over. "Would you give the kid back?" "No." What I would do if she showed interest, I would encourage a relationship between her and her Chinese family. While we can't make up for the past, we can start a relationship today. We have the future to visit China as much as we possibly could given the expense and her vacation schedule from school. Then when she's eighteen and she's an adult, it's her decision. I don't think it's necessarily an either/or or black and white. There's a middle ground. The adoptee can have two families. That's what I would encourage. I would encourage her to love and cherish both families.

Jena: I want to thank you very much for a very, very compelling talk and for being really open about your own experiences and all the thinking you've done about a really tough part of the Chinese adoption story.

Robin: Thank you very much for interviewing me. I appreciate it.