



China's wide-open adoption door closes

China soon will bar foreigners who are single, obese, blind, deaf, over 50 or twice-divorced from adopting

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By Cristina Rouvalis, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It seemed natural that Dr. Tai Wen Chen would travel to a Chinese orphanage to fulfill her dream of becoming a mother.

Dr. Chen, born in Taiwan, adopted 17-month-old Katie in September. The two speak Chinese and English and celebrate Chinese New Year's together in their Churchill home.

It seemed natural that the single mother would try to return to China in a few years and bring a little sister or brother home for Katie.

But her plans for a second Chinese child have been shelved because China is forbidding singles from adopting. "It's very disappointing," she said.

The once wide-open door of Chinese adoption is also shutting to obese people (a body mass index or BMI over 40), people with severe facial deformities, those on anti-depressants, people over 50, and couples who do not meet new income, health and other requirements. Anxious prospective parents are scrambling to get their paperwork completed before the new restrictions go into effect May 1.

"I call it the single-fat-depressed law," says Sal Schlieper, a single mother who lives in Ross and adopted 6-year-old Mya in 2001. She has no plans to adopt again, but if she did, "I would be eliminated on two counts -- I am single and overweight. I respect the Chinese government, but I wish they had done it differently. There is no hard data that correlates marital status or BMI or taking antidepressants with one's ability to parent."



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

Sal Schlieper and daughter Mya, who was adopted from China in 2001, at the family's Ross home. Ms. Schlieper is a single mother who probably wouldn't be allowed to adopt under new rules slated to be imposed by China.

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Hear excerpts from PG staffer Cristina Rouvalis' interview with Sal Schlieper, a Ross single mother, and her adopted daughter, Mya:

Audio 1 [Sal Schlieper's reaction to the Chinese government's tightening of its adoption laws](#)

Audio 2 [Mother and daughter talk about their lives and their feelings for each other](#)

Why obesity but not smoking? she asks.

"No kid has ever been harmed by secondhand fat," says Ms. Schlieper, a social worker.

But Ms. Schlieper and adoption officials say China that country has the right to make its own adoption rules to reflect its cultural values.

"Americans may see these regulations as onerous or a little over-the-top when you start talking about people with facial deformities or people over a certain body mass," said Lee Allen, director of communications and policy for the National Council for Adoption in D.C. "We know that overweight parents can be incredible parents. But China has identified obesity as a significant health risk for Americans. Obesity is unacceptable in Chinese culture" but smoking is common.

International adoptions drop

China is the No. 1 overseas destination for U.S. families adopting internationally, and the new regulations will change China from one of the least restrictive countries to adopt to one of the most restrictive.

The tough new restrictions come at a time when international adoptions in the United States are down, a troubling trend in Mr. Allen's view. In 2006, there were 20,679 international adoptions, a 9 percent dip from the previous year, but still almost three times the 7,093 in 1990.

Chinese adoptions were down too -- a 17 percent dip to 6,493 in 2006.

Officials at adoption agencies said China can afford to be more selective because it promoting domestic adoption and because more orphans are being adopted in Europe.

But Mr. Allen believes that there is no shortage of foreign orphans in need of homes or Americans wanting babies. He attributed the dip in international adoptions mostly to bureaucratic delays.

China remains a sought-after international adoption destination because it is organized and predictable and is known for taking good care of infants in foster care, instead of letting them languish in institutions.

Dr. Chen, a pulmonologist who moved to the United States when she was 8, liked going to China to adopt. She could speak to workers at the orphanage in Fuling about how well they took care of the little girls. The whole process was highly organized, she said, and left little to chance. She loved the experience, and was hoping to repeat the adoption process in a few years.

Although she does not have a spouse, Dr. Chen says she is lucky to have a mother who is well enough to take care of Katie during the day. "As a single physician, a professional, I think I have a lot to offer. I think they are missing some wonderful opportunities in beautiful homes. ... But it is their country. It is their rules. They are looking out for their children."

Beyond girth and age

Debbie Cohen, district supervisor of the Pittsburgh office of Adoptions from the Heart, has

been calling some people on the waiting list to tell them that China is no longer an option. "They were heartbroken. They were single and they really wanted to do China."

Ms. Cohen, a single mother who lives in Greensburg with two biological children and one little girl from China, will be able to adopt her second Chinese child within the next few months before the rules change. But others will not be able to get their paperwork in before the May deadline because they are on a waiting list. Four years ago, China began restricting the number of single applicants to 5 percent of the total at any agency. Adoptions from the Heart has already filled its single slots for the year.

"If it were a perfect world, you would have a loving mom and dad," Ms. Cohen said. "But what is important for a family is at least one loving parent. I have met hundreds of very competent single parents. Just because you are overweight or visually impaired, that shouldn't eliminate you from parenting."

The new restrictions go beyond girth and age. People who are blind, deaf or use a wheelchair will not be allowed to adopt Chinese children, Ms. Cohen said. People cannot have used antidepressants in the last two years. Childless couples must have an income of \$30,000 and a net worth of more than \$80,000. (International adoptions typically cost between \$20,000 to \$30,000, but some families are eligible for a \$10,000 tax credit.)

Neither the husband nor wife can have two divorces. If either person has had one divorce, they have to have been remarried for at least five years.

Also eliminated are people who have had cancer, suffered from anxiety, have a severe facial deformity or have had an organ transplant in the past 10 years. The Chinese government allows less discretion for people who have had even minor brushes with the law.

Previously, it was reviewed case-by-case. "In the past, a disorderly conduct might have gotten through. Let's say someone who was in college celebrating a football victory and thousands of people got arrested on disorderly conduct charges," said Margie Remerle, supervising social worker of the northeast region and China program director for Commonwealth Adoptions International in Cranberry.

But now that minor footnote in an otherwise clean record would prevent an individual from adopting from China.

South Korea has similar restrictions. It bars singles from adopting and neither parent can turn 45 before the child joins them. It also excludes people who are 30 percent overweight, based on U.S. size charts,

Even though some people have their heart set on China, Ms. Remerle tells singles there are still other good options. "We would recommend Guatemala and Vietnam and Taiwan case-by-case."

Guatemala is now the second most common place for Americans to adopt, edging out Russia.

But Dr. Chen had her heart set on another Chinese adoption because it is a culture she knows and loves.

The Asian-American might try to adopt a child from Taiwan, although adoption there is not as structured. Or she might wait to see if China loosens its adoption rules.

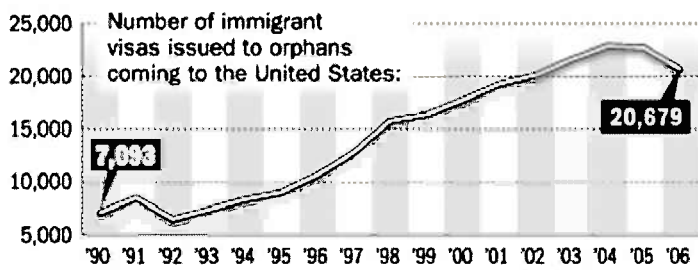
"I am disappointed but we have to keep on going and cherish the girls we have."

Where the orphans come from

Top 10 countries of origin for orphans coming to the United States receiving immigrant visas

2006		2005		Change
Rank	Country	Rank	Country	
1.	China	1	China	-17.9%
2.	Guatemala	3	Guatemala	+9.3
3.	Russia	2	Russia	-21.0
4.	South Korea	4	South Korea	-15.6
5.	Ethiopia	7	Ethiopia	+6.5
6.	Kazakhstan	6	Kazakhstan	-22.3
7.	Ukraine	5	Ukraine	-44.0
8.	Liberia	12	Liberia	+93.0
9.	Colombia	9	Colombia	+18.2
10.	India	8	India	-0.9
Total (from all countries)				-9.0%

Orphan tide falls back



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