

China Adoption Trip

December 10 – 25, 2014



This is Elijah, the little man we're traveling to adopt.



Six families from our travel group in Tiananmen Square.

Cultural Immersion: Saturday, 12/13/14

Our adventure has begun. On Wednesday, December 10, at 11:45 am, we climbed onto a Japan Airlines (JAL) flight bound for Tokyo, Japan. We arrived at 4:55 pm on Thursday, December 11, the fastest day of either of our lives, courtesy of the International Date Line. At 6:30 pm, we boarded another JAL flight for Beijing and arrived at 10:30 pm. Total elapsed travel time was actually about 18 hours.

Upon arrival, we looked for our guide, but no one was to be found due to the fact that we were over an hour late because of heavy air traffic leaving Japan. Our adoption agency, America World Adoption, suggested that we arrange for a "Panda Phone," a cell phone provided for a fee for short-term visitors to China. We thought, "We don't need that. We can text everyone over WiFi. We're good." Except there was no unsecured WiFi in that part of the Beijing Airport. Note to self: Your adoption agency is wiser than you. Follow their suggestions. Fortunately, a kind information agent offered his own phone and our guide arrived in short order, having only stepped away a short distance due to our delay.

We were driven to the Beijing Crown Plaza, a great hotel where five other adoptive families

were also settled. The next morning, after brief introductions, our guides took us on a couple of excursions to see the sights of Beijing.

Why not just go meet your child immediately? Several reasons: (1) Jet lag takes its toll on adopting parents. A traumatized child, who's been taken from the only home he's known, will often react with great anxiety... lots of crying, refusing to eat, etc. Having a few days to adjust to the time difference makes a world of difference in your ability to handle anxiety in your little one; (2) You get a taste of China, so that you're able to speak well to your child about his country of origin; and (3) You get to know other parents who will be going through the same process at the same time. You can see our travel group of six families above.



Kevin and Janet at the Summer Palace outside Beijing.

Our first stop on Friday was the Summer Palace, the place Chinese emperors spent their leisure time. It sits on an enormous man-made lake and covers hundreds of acres. We enjoyed our tour, in spite of the fact that it was freezing cold with high winds blowing off of the almost completely frozen lake. We had a lot of laughs and enjoyed getting to know each other as we wandered through gardens and by the shore. Our group has families from Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, Oregon, and California.



Kevin enjoying the balmy Summer Palace weather.

Later, we had a tour of famous pearl shop and Dr. Tea, a well-known Chinese tea supplier. We also had a couple of meals as a group and stopped briefly outside the “Bird’s Nest,” the unusual stadium built for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to tour the stadium, as was the original plan. The high winds meant the entire facility was closed.



One of several throne rooms in the Forbidden City.

On Saturday, we visited the Forbidden City, the walled palace complex built in the 1400s to house the Ming and Qing dynasty emperors.

It’s a fascinating place with several throne rooms, like the one shown above, and acres of interlocking buildings for family members and servants. We joined a crowd of thousands touring the giant facility, but we stood out as foreigners, so local entrepreneurs took note.

At one point, two young Chinese school girls approached our guide and shyly asked if they could take a picture with us. As we posed for the picture, we noticed an older man staring intently at us and scribbling furiously. He marched up and held out a portrait of Kevin he’d just sketched with a calligraphy marker on a small ceramic plate. He asked for Kevin’s name and wrote in Chinese characters on the plate. Our guides confirmed that he’d written Kevin’s name in characters that would be pronounced as close to “Kevin” as you can get in Chinese. We wouldn’t have known if he’d written “Large, Jet-Lagged, Bearded Foreigner” on the plate, so it was comforting to know he’d been kind. We haggled for awhile and finally bought the plate, because it was kind of spooky in its accuracy. You be the judge.



The portrait and the real thing, an uncanny match.

The afternoon was spent at the Great Wall, probably the best-known landmark in Asia. We hiked a significant way up the very steep steps. I stopped after passing two watchtowers, but Janet bravely soldiered on to the top of the ridge with a few other souls in our party. It’s a bit surreal to stand on something so old and full of history, to hear music from ancient China playing out of hidden speakers, and to wonder what it might have been like for men who stood

guard in those cold, high places eons ago.



Janet surpassed Kevin hiking up the Great Wall.

Tomorrow is the day our group splits up and heads to the provinces where each of our children lives. We will fly to Guangzhou and will finally meet our little boy, Elijah, on Monday. We can't wait to tell you all about it.

Crazy Amazing Day: Monday 12/15/14



We met Elijah for the first time in the Adoption Center.

What a crazy, amazing day! Neither of us slept much last night; our thoughts flipped between excitement and anxiety. By 6:30 am, we were up and headed for breakfast, an overwhelming buffet of Western and Chinese choices at the Cafe Veranda in the hotel. After breakfast, we had about seven hours to kill. We spent most of it packing up clothes and making snacks for a two-year-old, writing down questions we wanted to ask the nannies who brought him from Shantou, making sure our cameras were ready to go and watching movies to distract us. At 2:00 pm, we met Helen, our cool guide, in the lobby. She had a van ready to take us to

the Adoption Registry Center. As we drove, she told us what to expect. "When we get there, you'll have to wait on a couch until the nannies arrive with the children. Sometimes there are as many as 50 children, but today has only ten. Your son might be one of the last to arrive, his trip from the orphanage is seven hours by bus. I'll take care of the paperwork and payments, while you wait." So, when we arrived, we settled onto the couch and waited.

Not long afterward, nannies began to stream into the office with young children in tow. Other Western families began to file into the office too. The children were taken into a play room. Diapers and clothes were changed and the families waited anxiously. Finally, one by one, the nannies brought each child out into the main room where a pair of new parents waited. Many of the children dissolved into tears and screams as their nannies disappeared and they were left with people they'd never met who looked incredibly strange to them. A few kids took the change in stride, but most of them were also meeting new, young siblings, which seemed to take the edge off of their discomfort.

After all the parents were matched with their children except one other couple and us, Helen came out to tell us that the bus carrying Elijah had broken down and might be late. No one knew how long. We felt a little pang of despair, wondering if he might not show up today, if we might have to wait until Tuesday to meet him.



Elijah and his nanny arrive at the Adoption Center.

Then, about 30 minutes later, a nanny walked

in holding a little boy's hand. It was Elijah. We weren't allowed to go to him until they were ready, so we held our breath and stood outside the play room door. Then, out he came, looking confused, holding tight to the nanny. She said to him in Chinese, "This is your new Mommy and Daddy!" Elijah burst into tears.

Janet picked Elijah up and tried to comfort him, but he sobbed and wailed like most of the other kids had done. He was frightened, confused, and inconsolable. Then, in a moment of what I can only call "Mom brilliance," Janet started singing softly with the sad little boy held tight in her arms. Elijah almost instantly went quiet and began to slowly relax, listening to her voice.



An exhausted Elijah begins to fall asleep in the van.

him awhile to adjust. Out of the many snacks we brought, we discovered he was most happy with a sweet version of what looks like Saltine crackers... he pounded down half a dozen... a cup of water, and half a bottle of formula. Two-year-olds in orphanages are often still given bottles because they're easy and comforting. We found a ball he liked and took turns putting it on the bed, so he could throw it off. At the end of our game of "catch," we actually got a couple of shy giggles and smiles. Elijah fell asleep at 8:00 pm in a new pair of pajamas, holding onto a bottle of Eucerin calming cream that he'd inexplicably decided was his.



A terribly frightened Elijah begins to relax as Mommy sings.

Not long afterward, Elijah had calmed enough for us to take a few sweet pictures. We madly signed paperwork and were released by the Adoption Center to go back to our hotel, pending a series of follow-up appointments in the next several days. Our guide took us to a massive, underground supermarket, so we could stock up on diapers and other essentials, and we returned "home" for the night. On the way, our son... so cool to say that... burrowed into Janet's arms and began to fall asleep.

Back at the hotel, we spent the evening quietly holding Elijah and coaxing him to try to eat and drink enough to keep him hydrated and able to sleep. Newly-adopted younger children often don't eat or drink much in the days following the trauma of their separation, so we want to make sure he stays healthy, even if it takes



Elijah lets Daddy give him a comforting bottle.

We're exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. Just think, six hours ago we were a family of four. Now, we're a family of five... and that's forever. We're very grateful tonight for all of the people who helped us get to this point with their faithful prayers, encouraging words, and financial support. Now we're off to sleep... listening to the sound of our little guy breathing.

Making Adjustments: Wednesday 12/17/14



We signed our first batch of documents at Civil Affairs.

We've had Elijah now for about 72 hours. After the whirlwind day of meeting him and taking him home to the hotel, we had a relatively quiet night. The next day, Tuesday, we returned to the Civil Affairs Offices for two appointments. Our first was very brief. It consisted of a few quick questions to verify we were the people who had signed the adoption documents and a promise never to abandon, abuse, neglect, or otherwise harm our new son. We took a quick picture with the Civil Affairs officer and headed to another floor.

The second meeting was more intimidating. We were meeting a notary. Notaries in China are very different than notaries in the US. A notary in the US makes certain that documents are signed by the right people in the right way. A notary in China is more like a federal court justice in the US. She can ask any questions she wants to ask and her decision, signature, and stamps determine whether or not you get the paperwork you need to return home with your child. Fortunately, our notary was firm but kind. She made us clarify a few responses, but congratulated us and sent us on our way.

Today, we went to the main police station in Guangzhou and had Elijah's notarized documents checked and a photograph taken for his Chinese passport. It was a quiet day for them, only 18 children to process. We were told that, on some days, they see as many as 80 adoptees pass through their offices.



Elijah sleeps best when he's being held by Mommy.

Elijah's had a little trouble adjusting to us. He's been very quiet... no words at all on the first day and only one or two on the second. He didn't want to walk, only to be carried and not put down, and he didn't want to play with any of the toys we brought. We also had some trouble at first finding anything he wanted to eat. Everything we offered him was met with a violent "No" headshake or tears.

We were told that children going through the trauma of international adoption often have these kinds of responses. Fortunately, we were prepared by social workers and our reading, so it didn't alarm us too much. But it made us sad. We also discovered that, in order for him to go to sleep, we have to hold him until he drifts off, which is not entirely bad, because it provides extra face-to-face bonding time, where our little guy can learn to trust us.

Today, however, we saw a noticeable change. He responded well to several kinds of food.... applesauce, a rice porridge called "Congee," and noodles. Does he love noodles. Jordan had better get ready for tough competition in the noodle-eating arena... as you can see.

Elijah also relaxed enough to wander the hotel room a little bit on his own, play with some small toy cars and animals with us, and chatter a few words in Chinese. We even got a couple of smiles, when his guard was down. It seems he's already adopting Western posture, too, sitting with one leg across the other, man-style.



Elijah is adopting Western masculine sitting styles.

We haven't posted updates in several days, mainly because the past several days have been more difficult. Although we expected Elijah to have trouble adjusting, as we were warned all adopted children do, we were a little bit surprised and discouraged by a sudden turn we saw. Our little munchkin went through about two and half days of major, long-term tantrums and anxiety, with lots of wailing, crying, kicking and throwing himself down. If a two-year-old does that, it's normal. When Kevin does that, Janet just calls him immature.



Elijah certainly loves his noodles.

The last twelve hours, however, have seen a promising turnaround. He's running around the room, playing tricks on us by "hiding" things, drawing pictures (just scribbles, but to us it's cute), holding our hands to walk, and giggling lots. We also discovered a couple of foods we didn't know he liked, including drinkable yogurt.

Tonight, we introduced Elijah to McDonald's. He didn't like it one bit. In fact, he flung his only French fry to the floor in disgust. Unlike Jordan with his noodles, Taylor it seems will have very little competition for her French fries.



Elijah loved the drinkable yogurt at the hotel buffet.

Making Progress: Saturday 12/20/14

We haven't posted updates in several days, mainly because the past several days have been more difficult. Although we expected Elijah to have trouble adjusting, as we were warned all adopted children do, we were a little bit surprised and discouraged by a sudden turn

And we've found he's already familiar with chopsticks. His style may be a bit unorthodox, but at least as much food gets to his mouth as

gets to ours when we use chopsticks. Given the age handicap, we think he wins.



The chopsticks king shows off his style.

Today, we even were able to take Elijah to a little children's playground in the fourth floor rooftop garden of our hotel and he was excited to try the toddler slides and swing more than once. We think we're making progress.



Elijah and Daddy check out the playground swing.

We've done some fun things along the way, when Elijah was up for it. Yesterday, we had lunch with a San Diego friend, who happened to be in Guangzhou with her daughters. Elijah was very curious about the girls and they very sweetly drew pictures with him and helped him play with his toys.

The rest of the families in our adoption group arrived from their provinces yesterday. Today we all went to an art and history museum, which was built in the 1800s by a powerful family in the region and served as a temple for ancestor worship. It was full of old furnishings, clothing, architectural features, and lots of



We had lunch with friends from San Diego.

amazing art. Our guide, Helen, told us most people in China are atheist, so for them the temple is a curiosity and glimpse into the past, rather than a place of any religious practice. Still, a lot of locals were touring the facility, watching artists and reading plaques.



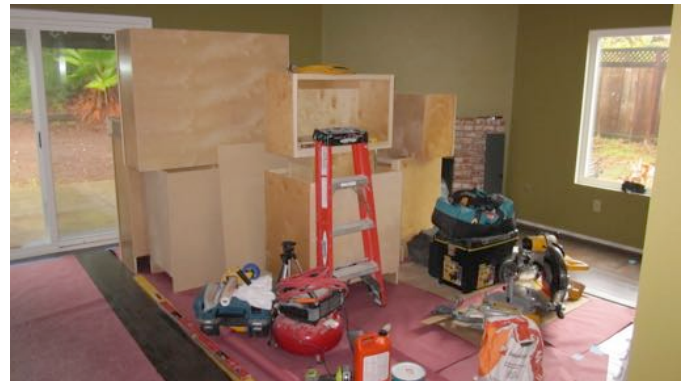
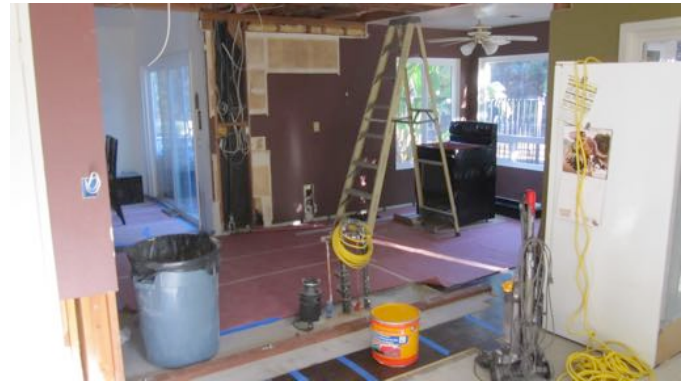
An ancestor-worship altar in a Guangzhou museum.

Along the way, we've seen some things make us smile, like odd signs and strange foods, which promise greater health. I think I'll stick with my multi-vitamin. Enjoy a sample below.

This will likely be our last journal entry. Our last days will include final paperwork, a four to five-hour drive from Guangzhou to Hong Kong by van on Christmas Eve, and a very long twelve-hour flight from Hong Kong to Los Angeles on Christmas Day, immediately followed by a van ride from L.A. to San Diego. We look forward to seeing everyone again soon and thank you so much once again for all of your support.



A warning we saw posted on the Great Wall.



These pictures show our kitchen and family room as work was ongoing. The entire lower level of our home with the exception a single bathroom and the laundry room were gutted and rebuilt.



This item was located in the health aisle. Really?

Post-Trip Footnote: Monday 12/29/14

We didn't mention in our journal that, during our trip, a construction crew was feverishly working on a major remodel of our home. After a pipe burst in July, we gutted the entire lower level of our home and rebuilt. When we left for the China, work was still incomplete. We came home to a new house, although furniture and boxes still had to be unpacked. It was a crazy season. Here are few pictures of ongoing work.

