

Published: 10.09.2004

Serendipity, the Internet unite probable twins

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ARIZONA DAILY STAR

At 3 years old, XiMei and TaoTao are too young to understand the gift they received at the end of last month.

Both were abandoned as babies in China and adopted by American families. A Tucson couple adopted XiMei (pronounced shee-may), and an Alabama family adopted TaoTao. In such cases, it's often next to impossible to obtain information about their biological families.

But then came a serendipitous little miracle - with a bit of help from technology.

It turns out the two children are almost certainly twins.

XiMei's 38-year-old mom, Tucsonan Rose Veneklasen, struck up a casual friendship with Montgomery resident Jutta Walters on a Web site offering support for families who adopted children from China. As they talked about their children, some interesting facts surfaced.

Their children were estimated to be about the same age. They were found abandoned the same day. They both had cleft palates. They were both taken to the same orphanage. Both were afraid of the dark, according to their adoption profiles.

The women swapped photos and realized the babies looked very much alike. Walters, who adopted TaoTao in 2003, couldn't shake the feeling that the toddlers just might be siblings.

They ordered DNA tests in July that confirmed with a 98 percent probability that they share at least one biological parent. The possibility that the same man would have impregnated two different women at the same time seems too remote a stretch, so they've concluded that the children are from the same mother.

The tykes were reunited when TaoTao and his mom arrived at Tucson International Airport. "It took all I had to hold the tears back," said Walters, a 41-year-old administrative assistant at a bank. "You hear about stories like this, but it's not something that happens to an everyday person."

TaoTao was overwhelmed at first, clinging to his mother in the airport and in the car. But as soon as the toddlers tumbled into XiMei's Midtown home, they were playing like they'd known each other all their lives. Sibling rivalry, tug-of-wars over toys and all.

The women were struck right away by similarities, quite aside from their round little faces and the shape of their noses and eyes. TaoTao's name in Chinese may mean peaceful ocean wave, but "he's more like a hurricane," said Walters. XiMei, meanwhile, makes visitors want to cover their eyes as she tears around the wood floors in her stocking feet.

Their voices sound alike as well, to the point that when one of them calls for mommy, both women look. They even share a rather unlikely, favorite catch phrase: "Oh, man!"

In fact, there are all sorts of circular connections to the saga. Veneklasen and her husband, Tom, a commercial photographer, right away felt drawn to XiMei, whose name means "happy and beautiful." She was found on Sept. 12 - one day after their eldest child's birthday and one day after their wedding anniversary.

Chinese officials estimated XiMei's birthday to be July 28, one day after the Veneklasens' younger son's birthday. And Veneklasen's mother, from Taiwan, is named Mei, sharing part of her granddaughter's name.

Connections

- Are you considering Chinese adoption and would like to talk to other families who made the same choice? Or maybe you've already adopted and are hoping to learn more about how to help your child retain aspects of her heritage. Call the Southern Arizona Families with Children from China, a nonprofit group offering mentoring and programs like a one-day summer culture camp.
- Online: mywebpages.comcast.net/jknorman/fcc
- Phone: President Cathy Lee at 299-3033.

And the families themselves share some traits. They both have three children, two of one gender, one of the other. Veneklasen has two biological sons; Walters adopted two girls from China before TaoTao. Walters' middle daughter's name is MeiXi.

Both families are bilingual. Veneklasen's mother, Mei Kuenhold, speaks Chinese. Walters' parents speak mostly German.

Both women agreed they want to help their children retain their cultural roots, although it isn't easy. XiMei is having an easier time of it because her grandmother speaks only Chinese to her when she watches her. "I'm very serious about it," said Mei Kuenhold, who also lives in Tucson.

Veneklasen is disappointed that she didn't practice Chinese as a child. "But she was 4 months old when we came to this country," Kuenhold said. "There were hardly any Oriental people around and her father was worried that she would not do as well in school if she didn't concentrate on English. I take responsibility for that and I want to make sure XiMei knows Chinese."

Veneklasen has other plans to help retain that connection. As vice president of cultural events for Southern Arizona Families with Children from China, she helped bridge an alliance with the Tucson Chinese Association.

The two groups together sponsored the Autumn Moon Festival at Fort Lowell Park the first weekend of October. The festival, an important Chinese holiday, is held during the full moon and celebrates love and family. She hopes the partnership will encourage mentoring relationships between the non-Asian families who typically adopt the Chinese babies and residents of Chinese descent.

The two families hadn't specifically planned on meeting for the moon festival. That was just good fortune. But it was also apropos. "This is almost like gaining new family members," Walters said. "In fact, we keep joking that now when people ask us how many children we have, we'll have to say three and a half."

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