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Adopting kids overseas grows more complicated

By [Tanya Bricking](#)

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Gayle and Tommy Ohashi have two baby pictures of a stranger, and they've already fallen in love with her.

This little girl in a Chinese orphanage is the one they've dreamed of to complete their family. So they refuse to let a little global uncertainty stand in the way of an international adoption.

The couple and a daughter they adopted from China two years ago will board a plane today, along with six other parents-to-be from Hawai'i, to meet their new children.

The Ohashis will finally hold a girl named Le Wang. They will rename her Morgan Le Wang Ohashi. They will celebrate her first birthday next week. And they will bring her home to Honolulu.

Kristine Altwies Nicholson counts these families among those "still brave enough to go" despite tension stemming from Sept. 11. Since then, adoption applications at her agency, Hawaii International Child, have dropped by about 50 percent.

She normally sends would-be parents to China, Kazakstan, Russia, Ukraine, Guatemala and Azerbaijan, calming their anxiousness about the adoption process. But bigger fears are getting in the way.

The Sept. 11 attacks have led to a shift in priorities for U.S. embassies and immigration officials, snagging paperwork for thousands of families waiting to adopt overseas.

Americans adopted 18,477 foreign-born children last year, according to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse. But the numbers are likely to dip this year as adoption agencies nationwide report a decline in applications.



Tommy and Gayle Ohashi pack for their trip with some help from daughter Madison.

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For the handful of Hawai'i agencies that deal with international adoptions, trips are going on as scheduled to places such as China, the most popular overseas adoption source for Hawai'i parents. Other would-be parents debating travel plans closer to world conflict are having second thoughts.

Dashed hopes

Josephine and Robert Minasi are desperate for a child and were close to an international adoption through Nicholson's adoption agency.

They had even picked out a little girl from a video in an orphanage in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic in Central Asia, and they had planned to go there at the end of this month to pick up their new daughter.

"Then Sept. 11 happened, and that just changed everything for the worse," said Josephine Minasi, 39, of Yonkers, N.Y. "For us, it was a big disappointment. It was a tragedy for us. We just couldn't go."

The couple, married for 12 years, now has a hole in their hearts. They're not sure when they'll be ready for international travel. And they think they've forever lost a little girl named Afat.

"We still tend to think about her," Josephine Minasi said. "I'll be driving somewhere, and I'll see her face from the video. It's very disappointing. I just feel like the rug was pulled out from under us."

Other Hawai'i adoption agencies say some clients are more worried about flying, but they are going ahead to countries deemed "safe" because parents are more focused on bringing a child home than leaving one orphaned.

"The only thing people are concerned about is the security on the airlines," said Danny Morishige, program director and adoption worker for Catholic Charities' Mary Jane program, which handles adoptions from Korea. "The countries that are going to be more difficult are in eastern Europe where the security is not as stringent."

'Step of faith'

Gene Ward, who has shared his experiences adopting a daughter from China by talking to people in an adoption support group, encourages potential adoptive parents to look beyond the threat of terrorism.

"There's no assurances when you're traveling even when there are no scares on," he said. "But it's a rescue mission for these children. What a difference that one plane ride can make. There's a step of faith and a step of boldness in the whole adoption process in general. Don't let Osama bin Laden get between



Today, Tommy and Gayle Ohashi head for China's Guangdong province to adopt Le Wang whom they will rename Morgan Le Wang Ohashi.

you and your child."

Ward, of Hawai'i Kai, is the proud father of 7-year-old Johanna Mai Ping Ward. She has focused his determination on making sure international adoptions continue so that no child goes unwanted.

It is a philosophy the Ohashis might not have discovered had they been able to successfully conceive biologically. They went through fertility treatments. She miscarried. But they learned about people who had good experiences adopting internationally.

Gayle Ohashi, 42, a financial analyst, and her husband Tommy, 44, a real estate banker, didn't want to have to put their family on hold waiting for the world to calm down. They worked their way through foreign bureaucracies, and they've spent thousands of dollars and thousands of thoughts on their future. They were thrilled with the first adoption of their daughter, Madison. Their fight for a family has made chancing global tension seem somehow less risky.

"You do have their input," Gayle Ohashi said of the adoption agency. "And the rest is all faith."

The Sept. 11 attacks made people focus more on families and relationships, said Cindy Klein, assistant director at Adopt International, a Hawai'i agency where she handles about 140 adoptions a year.

"People know that when they're going through with an international adoption, they already have to have a lot of guts, stamina and flexibility," she said. "Most people say, 'I'm going to get on the plane, because this is about my child.' "

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