

Star-Bulletin

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COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY

The temple in the background was host to a daily flag ceremony that raised the Chinese flag at 4 a.m. daily.

Adoptee finds herself

[STORY SUMMARY »](#)

By Nancy Arcayna
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When Xiu Xiu Cooney was 18 months old, policemen found her abandoned on the streets of Nanjing in China. They took her to an orphanage, and she was eventually adopted by an American woman, Barbara Cooney, and brought to Hawaii.

Last summer, Xiu Xiu, now 15 and a student at La Pietra-Hawaii School for Girls, joined a group of American Chinese adoptees chosen to visit the land of their birth, through a China Center of Adoption Affairs program.

She got a crash course in her heritage -- from the Peking Opera to eating chicken feet -- and forged a strong connection to her home country and the orphanage she left behind.

Xiu Xiu plans to return on her own, to volunteer at orphanages in China, and hopes to adopt her own children one day.

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[FULL STORY »](#)

By Nancy Arcayna
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Xiu Xiu Cooney flipped through the pages of her adoption file, finding a police report, a photograph of her alone and abandoned on a busy street, and an old shot of her adoptive mother.

"I didn't cry. ... I just kept thinking, 'I can't believe I'm looking at this.' Knowing that they have files for all of these kids, but they could still find me."

Xiu Xiu is forever grateful that the four policemen who found her abandoned in Nanjing, China, shuttled her to an orphanage instead of leaving her on the streets to fend for herself, like so many other children in China.

And she is definitely thankful that at the age of 4, she was adopted by Barbara Cooney, a single mother living in Japan, who eventually brought her to Hawaii. "I'm grateful that I was adopted, that I have a family to call my own, someone who will take care of me, no matter what," Xiu Xiu said.

Barbara describes Xiu Xiu as a happy and mild-mannered young girl. "She never cried," Cooney said. Well, not until the day Cooney took food away from her.

During their first few days together, Xiu Xiu would eat until there was no food left on the table. "Wherever she could put food, she would store it. I'd find rolled-up rice balls in her pockets," Cooney said.

Xiu Xiu's first tears fell when Cooney pried crunched-up bread from her daughter's small fists at bedtime.

"She also used to hold food in her jowls," probably a sign of her hunger during the years spent in the orphanage, Cooney said. "She never wastes food."





COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY
Xiu Xiu got to see her adoption dossier at the China Center of Adoption Affairs. Her file included a photo of her adoptive mom.



COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY
Xiu Xiu visited Tianjin Orphanage, where she passed out candy.

Xiu Xiu also has an adopted younger sister, named Ju Ju, from the same orphanage in

Nanjing. Ju Ju was found next to a police box with a red note pinned to her jacket, indicating her birth date. Xiu Xiu's birth date was fabricated by a doctor who examined her and determined her age.

It was on a trip to China in August that Xiu Xiu was able to review her adoption file and come to know a small part of her past. Thirty adoptees participated in the "Embrace China, Feeling Beijing" summer camp sponsored by the China Center of Adoption Affairs to give the teen participants a better understanding of their heritage.

They visited tourist sights like the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, Capital Museum, Beijing Zoo and Peking Opera. An excursion outside of Beijing took them to an orphanage in Tianjin.

Before her visit, Xiu Xiu had plans to return and work in the orphanage where she was placed, about a night's train ride from Tianjin. "Now that I visited another orphanage, I would volunteer at any, not just my own," she said.

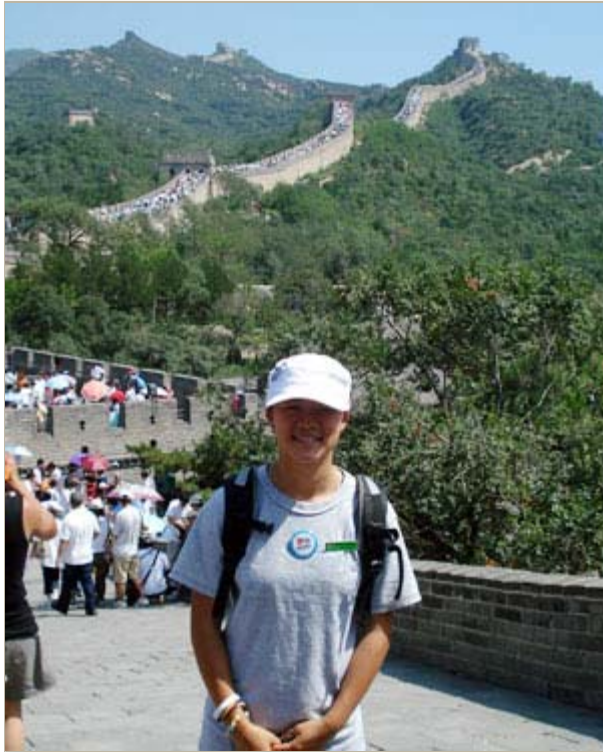
The adoptees also spent time with a local families. Xiu Xiu wrote in her diary of the day she and another adoptee, Sarah, spent with a family that included a teenage daughter and son. The entry is titled "Chinese Friends":

"Once we started to get to know each other, I started to warm up to them a little bit. We all started to play card games. Sarah and I learned how to play a new game called 'Bian Se Long.' It was a lot of fun. We also talked about what kind of music they liked. I also found out that the girl Vanessa really liked to read Harry Potter. She had all the books in Chinese.

"Then after all that it was time for lunch. Their mother cooked for us. I really loved the food. She cooked so much. ... I dared Sarah to eat a chicken foot and so she tried, but had a hard time with it. So the family wanted to me try and eat a chicken foot, too. I could not eat it. It was too hard and it tasted really funny."



COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY
Xiu Xiu helped a young orphan create a butterfly as they learned how to paper cut.



COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY
A stop at The Great Wall of China is a must for all visitors.

Xiu Xiu, the only participant from Hawaii, danced hula at the closing ceremony.

"I feel more connected to my own country," she said. "I'm learning Chinese, but I wish I could speak fluently. I just want to learn more."

Her adoptive mother said she was pleased that her daughter had this "golden opportunity that provided further enhancement of her identity and self-esteem."

She described Xiu Xiu as "China-sick" upon her return, yearning for many things from her homeland. "I asked her what she was missing. To my surprise, she said everything -- the food, the experiences, the other adopted kids, the leaders."

Xiu Xiu added, "It was like I was reborn."

She plans stay in touch with her orphanage and in a few years will return on her own as a volunteer. "I can relate to the children," she said. "I want to let them know that they are not the only ones going through this and that they may be adopted and have a great life."

One thing has changed since Xiu Xiu was adopted: The Chinese government no longer allows single parents to adopt. "The law changed about a year ago, but I feel that they should change it back," Xiu Xiu said. "My single mom raised me very well."

Cooney said she was moved to adopt her two girls by what she learned of their situation in China. "I was drawn to the plight of Chinese girls victimized by extreme population-control policies and cultural prejudices favoring boys."

But China has imposed stricter rules for adoption, ruling out not just single parents, but even those who are obese, according to the Hawaii International Child Web site's general guidelines. Parents looking to adopt must have been married for at least two years and in a current marriage for five years, if they were previously divorced. Xiu Xiu knows for certain that she wants to adopt but doesn't want to have to get married first.

Cooney said Xiu Xiu's summer trip built on a connection that her daughter already felt with the country of her birth. "Xiu Xiu already had a strong interest and pride in her heritage," she said.

"Some kids don't know that they are adopted. Their parents try to hide it," Xiu Xiu said. "I'm glad I know I'm adopted and where I come from."



COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY
A group of ladies passed out fans and taught Xiu Xiu and her group a traditional fan dance in Tianjin.



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARBULLETIN.COM
Barbara Cooney adopted Xiu Xiu, left, and Ju Ju from an orphanage in Nanjing, China.

My Birthparents

By AiXiu Angeleigh "Xiu Xiu" Cooney

I wonder if you remember me!
Even though I think to myself
Where could you be?
Where would I be if you didn't leave me?

Was I not good enough for you
Or for anyone else?
But I can't think that
I have to say to myself
That you love me and always will
No matter what had happened.

People say that I am the lucky one
Because I was adopted
Even though my Mom is the lucky one
Who I should give all the credit to
Without her
My life would not be filled
The love I have is stronger
Than anything you could imagine
For my Birthparents and my Mother.

I know you have been protecting me
And watching me
Wherever I go
Like a red thread clinging to my heart
And not letting go
No matter what happens.

I would give anything
To see what you look like
And I would stop the world
And melt with you
Just to have our moments
No matter how long it would take
The forever love.



COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY
Sarah, left, and Xiu Xiu tried the Chinese delicacy -- chicken feet.
"I could not eat it. It was too hard and it tasted really funny," Xiu
Xiu wrote in her journal.



COURTESY XIU XIU COONEY

Xiu Xiu, third from left, and her "green team" visited the Temple of Heaven. She and Victoria, front, became good friends.

To learn more about these summer camp programs, visit www.china-ccaa.org/frames/index_unlogin_en.jsp.

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