



By George F. Lee, Star-Bulletin

*Liz Ornellas relaxes
with daughter Norine,
whom Liz adopted from*

China.

Motherhood at last

**There was a time when single women
had few options for motherhood,**

but China's changing that

By Susan Kreifels
Star-Bulletin



Aimee McCullough and Lenore Peterson have a lot in common - professionals in their 40s, outgoing, independent, single. And they want to be moms.

Peterson, 43, tried two years of artificial insemination that ended in a miscarriage. McCullough, 48, had pretty much given up the idea of having children.

Then a new frontier of motherhood opened for them in China, which allows single people 35 and older to adopt healthy babies. Peterson and McCullough now have the same opportunity as married women who have adopted overseas, and the two have seized the opportunity, as have a growing number of single women in Hawaii and on the mainland. They were approved for adoption in China late last year and are awaiting Chinese babies.

"China is the first country in the history of international adoption to really embrace single mothers," said Kristine Altwies, executive director of Hawaii International Child, one of the first four adoption agencies in the world to be approved by the Chinese government, in 1992.

For Peterson, a counselor at Punahou School, China ended "such a long journey.

"I thought it (marriage and family) would all come together for me. Not until my 40th birthday did I think maybe it wouldn't," Peterson said. "I realized I would have to take things into my own hands."

For McCullough, who found it harder and harder to leave her nieces and nephews when she visited them on the mainland, the China opportunity resurrected feelings she thought she had buried.

"I just kind of gave up on having kids until it came into my consciousness again," said McCullough, a Kailua psychologist specializing in children. "I pondered and pondered. And then it clicked. 'You need a baby.' I didn't want to lose out on being a mother."

Hawaii International Child has helped eight single women adopt Chinese babies. Another has been assigned a baby, eight are awaiting assignments, five have applied, and three more are interested, including a 62-year-old woman. Altwies has formed a support network called SWAN - Single Women Adoption Network.

Altwies said clients in Hawaii and the mainland run the gamut from graduate students living at home to blue-collar workers and stock brokers. Most women in SWAN are Caucasian professionals in their 40s.

"The women are an inspiration to me," Altwies said.

"They're doing just as splendidly as the couples."

She expects the number of single-parent adoptions to grow. "Women in general are becoming more and more aware that they have options. They don't have to take the traditional path."

For some single, older women who are adopting or considering it, the thought of children slips into their consciousness, unplanned, as they enter their 40s.

For others, The quest has been lifelong:

- Jessica Padilla, a special education teacher at Nanaikapono Elementary School, has "wanted to be a mom my whole life." She no longer wants to wait on the possibility of marriage and pregnancy. At 34, she's slightly under the age limit but has been approved to adopt in China.

- Diane Ross, 48 and a teacher at Fern School, lived abroad for years and didn't think about having a child until she was 40. Now she's considering adoption in China. "I don't want to be 60 and alone."

- Bonnie Freitas, 45 and the human resources manager at Castle & Cooke Homes Hawaii, always wanted a family but never married. At 40, she felt getting pregnant was a health risk.

Then she visited China three years ago and learned about baby girls who are abandoned because of the one-child-per-family population policy. Because of the cultural value placed on sons, some women abandon their daughters in hopes of having a boy.

Last October, Freitas flew to southern China with her mother and brother to pick up 9-month-old Lauren Yanqui. "It kind of seemed right," she said about adoption. "I have really good support through my family (Hawaii residents). I would still get married but I'm not seeking it out."

Several women said living in Hawaii makes it easier for them to adopt overseas because of the multicultural environment and the importance placed on family.

They said colleagues and friends here have supported them. But without family in Hawaii, care is more difficult and more expensive. Padilla hopes to develop a baby-sitting cooperative with

other single mothers.

Child and Family Service has helped one single woman adopt in China, has a couple of applications and many inquiries, said Daniel Leung, program administrator.

Leung recommends taking at least a month off work in the beginning. That can put off single people who don't have the paid leave, especially when adoption in China costs at least \$17,000. Some take out loans, others get help from family.

"Children from orphanages have great need for attachment and bonding," Leung said. "They're always in fear of being left alone."

Liz Ornellas, 44, adopted 2-year-old Norine Marie in China last year. Ornellas was a full-time nurse at Queen's Hospital and attended graduate school then. But she lives with her parents and sister, and her sister-in-law provides day care.

She first tried to adopt on the mainland and was offered two babies of drug-addicted mothers.

China, with a reputation for adopting out healthy babies, provided a better option.

When she got the call saying a baby was available, "there was no photo. I had 24 hours to decide. I said 'OK, this must be the right one for me.'"

She and her sister flew to Wuhan to pick up Norine Marie, who was thin and lacked muscle development.

But with state-supported therapy, Norine Marie has caught up.

"I'm so happy," said Ornellas, who would like to adopt another child if it wasn't so expensive. She paid \$22,500.

"I don't have any regrets."

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