

“Do you think I should adopt a baby girl from China?” my friend, Emily, asked me one afternoon.

We were visiting together in her newly-renovated house in the English countryside, and the question came up casually – tucked in between glasses of wine and solicitations for my opinion on new toile slipcovers and damask drapes. Had I known the consequences or felt less emotional about the subject, I might have answered Emily differently. To this day, I wish I had. Instead, I plunged in heedlessly.

“What makes you want to do that?” I began. I was a Chinese-American married to an American Jew; Emily was an American Jew who’d married a Brit. I didn’t have children yet; they already had twins of their own, two cute, pale-skinned boys playing in the fruit orchard below. The vision of a little Chinese girl living among them, separated from her own culture, bothered me.

“What do you think it’ll be like for her with the twins?” I asked. “She’ll always know she’s the adopted one, the oddball.” Just that afternoon, walking with Emily on the village’s quaint high street – complete with

church, village hall, pub and post office -- I’d felt mildly self-conscious as the only non-white person. We’d picked up the two boys from school. In their blue and white uniforms, a costume unchanged since their father’s boyhood, they looked like little princes to me.

Sitting in Emily’s thatch-roofed stone house, her husband’s ancestral home, I could smell English heritage and tradition as clearly as the cultivated roses outside. I imagined a Chinese girl amidst the hedgerows and ha-has. I envisioned her walking between her two older brothers dressed in her little school uniform, too. What would her life be like here? Would she be stared at or accepted? Would she grow up wishing she was one of them? Would she ever belong?

I’d written about China’s long-standing antipathy to girls. I knew about the government’s draconian one-child policy, female infanticides, and abandonment. But talking with Emily that day, I didn’t think about saving an infant’s life. I just thought about an identity burdened with questions of origin and racial complexes.

I even questioned Emily’s motives for the adoption. I knew she was a real Sinophile and had loved living in Hong Kong while getting a degree in

Chinese art. I was compelled to ask her, was this her way of always keeping China with her?

We had that conversation just over ten years ago. Thinking about it now, I'm surprised Emily had been so polite to me, that she hadn't thrown a glass of wine in my face. After dinner, I took the train back to London. A few days later, I flew back to Moscow where I was then living.

Several years later, I ran into Emily's husband, Richard, at a mutual friend's wedding. Even though I'd passed through London a couple of times since that afternoon, I hadn't looked Emily up.

Chatting with Richard, I asked after Emily and the boys. "Did you ever adopt a daughter from China?" I asked, as I sipped my champagne.

"No," Richard said curtly. "After that talk with you, Emily decided not to."

"Oh," I said, startled. I hadn't always felt comfortable with Richard – he made me feel very young and gauche – and now I felt embarrassed that Emily had mentioned our conversation.

That she had acted upon my advice filled me with remorse.

I knew that what I'd said to her that day had been sincere.

But now,

standing across from Richard, I realized that much of what I'd said to Emily had come from my own hurts and slights garnered growing up in a small New England town as one of the few Chinese.

I have moved back to that same New England town I grew up in. Driving by the town hall, and shopping at the mall, I can remember every little slight and every little comment that was ever made about my yellow skin or slanted eyes.

The town has changed a lot since then. It's no longer the almost all-white suburb of my childhood, and my daughter is only one of many multi-racial children growing up here. I have also noticed many white families have adopted Asian daughters.

My own daughter, whose father is white, is often mistaken for one of these girls when she goes out with my husband alone. "What agency did you use?" some people ask.

I wonder what culture my Chinese-American-Jewish daughter will claim for herself. Only time will tell. As the mother of a mixed-race child, I'm not so

sure how important questions of cultural purity are, especially when measured against a

chance for life.

And who's to say what culture claims you? I'm Chinese and American – both work for me and I know I couldn't choose between either one.

I have come to know several mothers of adopted Chinese daughters. Some of them want their children to learn Chinese. Others want to educate their children in a multi-cultural environment. As we talk about our children's futures, I realize that none of us can predict what will happen.

One of my new friends, Caitlin, tells me how she took her four-year-old adopted Chinese daughter to Hong Kong for a visit. The two of them were sitting on the subway and her daughter looked around in puzzlement at the faces of all the other passengers.

Finally, she looked up at Caitlin and asked, "Are you my mother?" "Why?" Caitlin asked. "Because I love you," her daughter answered. Emily's daughter might have said the same to her.