

3 Louisville families in painful limbo after China stops foreign adoptions of its children

Maggie Menderski

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Aimee Welch, second from left, and her husband Stephen Welch, second from right, with their sons Caleb, 13, left, and Thaddeus, 16, right, and adopted daughter Grace Welch, 8, in their kitchen in Louisville, Ky. on Sep. 30, 2024. The Welch family had been matched with another daughter to adopt, Penelope, in China as the Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions. They are hoping the U.S government will work with China to honor the adoptions that were already in process. Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal

Five-year-old Penelope had already lost one family when Aimee and Steven Welch decided to adopt her.

A new ruling from the Chinese government may take a second from her.

China paused its international adoption program at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, when the shutdown began, the Chinese government told parents it would honor all matches made once travel resumed and the pandemic ended, but in early September, the government announced that it was dissolving its international adoption program altogether.

That decision has left three Louisville families in a heartbreaking limbo.

The Welch, Troyer and Monroe families are among roughly 300 pairs of American adoptive parents and Chinese children who haven't been able to complete adoptions thwarted by the pandemic. Before the shutdown in China, the Welches planned to meet Penelope, their "daughter-in-waiting," in March of 2020. They set up a bedroom for her, stocked drawers full of clothes for her, and ordered a backpack with her name on it. They had received approval from the United States Consulate that would, in theory, seal the deal on the approval for travel they still needed from China.

At first, they thought they'd have to postpone their trip to April.

Then May.

Certainly, they'd be there by June.

But they've been waiting for that final step for more than four years.

Penelope was 5 years old when she first learned a family in the United States wanted to give her a home. Over the years, the Welches have sent her birthday gifts and made her a picture book of their family. When Penelope, or Penny as they call her, speaks to them in videos, she uses the Mandarin word for "mommy" and "daddy."

A lot has changed for the Welches over the past five years. Their other adopted daughter from China, Gracie, has blossomed from a toddler into an 8-year-old. Their two oldest boys have gone off to college and have completely missed out on living at home with her.

Penny, too, has spent five more formative years in an institution with 30 other children waiting for a family.

What hasn't changed, though, is the commitment the Welches feel to their daughter-in-waiting and their desire to bring her home.

Aimee Welch has launched a grassroots organization of waiting parents called Hope Lead Home, which is designed to advocate for these children. They're seeking support from politicians at the local and national levels, and they're calling on President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping to find some sort of solution for the 300 children and families caught in the middle of the program's dissolution.

"I think we're all eyes wide open that this is an incredible longshot," Steven Welch said. "This is a specific individual that we have prayed for, focused on, and prepared for. That duty of care doesn't stop just because time is passing, and it doesn't necessarily stop because the Chinese government said the adoption program isn't going forward." They intend to continue praying and fighting for this girl, who they love as a daughter. But whether they'll be able to keep the promise to give her a home isn't up to them.

Why was international adoption from China halted?



Aimee Welch, left, kissed her adopted daughter Grace Welch, 8, as she read a book in her bedroom in Louisville, Ky. on Sep. 30, 2024. The Welch family planned to adopt another daughter and had been matched with a child in China as the Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions. They are hoping the U.S government will work with China to honor the adoptions that were already in process. *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal*

The China-to-United States adoption program placed 80,000 children in American homes between 1999 and 2018. In the 1990s, many of the adoptions were young, healthy girls often abandoned due to China's former one-child policy that was created as part of an effort for population control.

That hasn't been the case for a while, though. Eight years ago, the Chinese government allowed families to have a second child, and in 2021, it permitted married couples to have as many as three children.

The Guangming Daily, a national newspaper in China, reported that from 2014 to 2018, a total of 97,819 adoption registrations were processed nationwide. Statistics from China's Ministry of Civil Affairs indicated Chinese citizens adopted 85,581 of the children and 12,238 children were adopted by parents from different countries. About 95% of the international adoptions were children with special needs.

That's the case with every child among the 300 caught in limbo, said Karla Thrasher, the director of international adoptions at Lifeline Children's Services in Alabama, which has worked with several families caught in the delay. As domestic adoptions increased, it wasn't unexpected that China would eventually discontinue its international adoption

program, Thrasher said, but no one anticipated the country wouldn't honor the arrangements that had already been made.

The pause on adoptions during COVID wasn't unprecedented, according to Myriam Avery, executive director, of Washington state-based Agape Adoptions. Similar precautions were taken during a SARS outbreak in the early 2000s.

But that halt lifted in a matter of months. This pandemic pause has gone on for years.



The Welch family has a family photo which shows them holding a photo of another daughter, Penelope, they intended to adopt from China hanging on their wall at their home in Louisville, Ky. on Sep. 30, 2024. The Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions during the process and they are hoping the U.S government will work with China to honor the adoptions that were already in process. *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal*

China largely stopped providing official updates to families in 2021, but a renewed sense of hope emerged in early 2023 when 40 families, who received travel authorization before the shutdown, were allowed to complete their adoptions.

Agape Adoptions was involved with three of those cases, Avery said. One young boy, who was born with Apert Syndrome, has since had surgery that will allow his brain to continue to grow within his skull. Another little girl had Arthrogryposis, a genetic condition that limits joint movements and causes the muscles around them to be thin, weak, stiff, or missing. Now that she's with her adoptive family in the United States, Avery says, she's in therapy and thriving. The third child, who has spinal muscular

atrophy, has received medical treatment now that's she in the U.S. and is using a wheelchair that increases her mobility.

"These children definitely needed medical attention and resources," Avery said. "We're not talking about healthy plump babies, we're talking about children who are languishing in orphanages, who oftentimes are getting their very basic needs met, but nothing more to become the best version of themselves."

After those children arrived home, many waiting families believed it was only a matter of time before China moved forward with completing their adoptions. To add to that, this summer, Thrasher and Avery heard through international contacts that China had followed up with agencies in Spain and Italy to see if the next wave of families in those countries were still interested in bringing those children home.

When China announced the end of its international adoption program in early September, the call that came from the United States Department of State had an entirely different tone, Thrasher said. Families were encouraged to consider adopting children in other countries.

For many of the parents still waiting, letting go doesn't feel like an option.

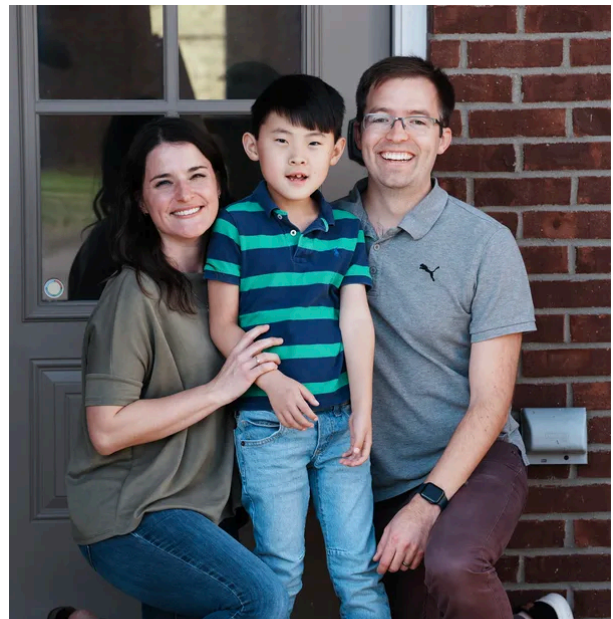
"I feel like there is still such a fight for these children," Thrasher said. "There's an attitude of 'We're here for the duration. We're here for the long run. We're here until the door is shut.'"

'We are going to love him until the very, very end'

For the past four years, Callie Troyer of Oldham County has worn a silver pendant around her neck that's stamped with the brail symbol for "mother." She and her husband, Brian Troyer, began the process of adopting a 5-year-old boy, who is blind, in October 2020.

He's 9 years old now.

The family first learned of Sam through a nonprofit organization called Bethel China. His picture and story appeared in a newsletter, and the Troyers placed his photo on the mantle above their fireplace in 2018. They prayed that he'd find a family to love him. At the time, they'd just

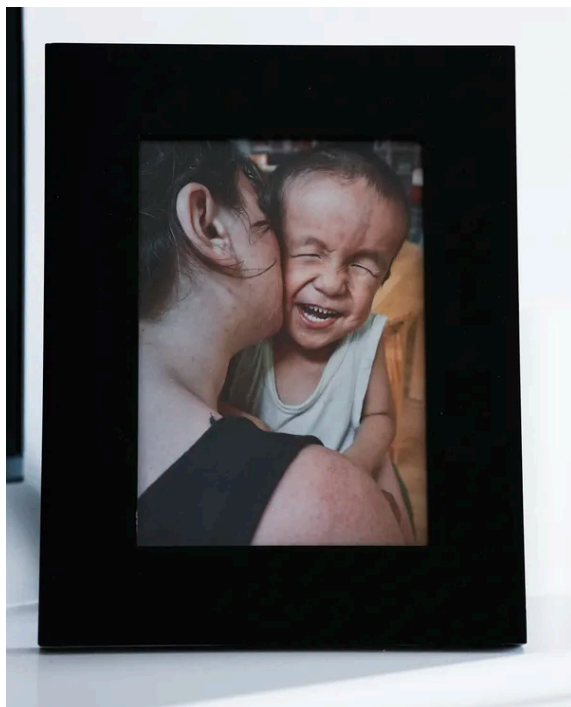


Brian Troyer, right, his wife Callie Troyer and their son Gideon Troyer, 8, center, who was adopted from South Korea, at their home in Lagrange, Ky. on Oct. 9, 2024. The Troyers had been matched with another son to adopt, Sam, from China just as the Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions. They are hoping the U.S government will work with Chinese government to honor their original commitment. *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal/Gannett/Imagn Images*

adopted their other son, Gideon, who has autism, from South Korea. After about three years, they felt called to adopt Sam, as well.

Their situation is different from the Welches and the Monroes in the sense that they stepped into the Chinese adoption process while the program was on pause. By that point, the vaccines were in the works, and the end of the pandemic seemed closer than it had in the months before.

They kept that news quiet at first. The hopeful parents needed to complete 100 hours of training on topics such as blindness, caring for an older child, and having adopted siblings from two different countries, before they could even review his file.



The Troyers display a photo on their mantle of a son, Sam, they had been matched with to adopt from China at their home in Lagrange, Ky. on Oct. 9, 2024. Before the process was completed, the Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions. They are hoping the U.S. government will work with Chinese government to honor their original commitment. *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal/Gannett/Imagn Images*

Government offices were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so they overnighted the paperwork stamped with seals of approval from county, state, and federal offices just to make sure they'd meet all the deadlines. China gave the Troyers preliminary approval to adopt Sam in March of 2021 and logged the dossier they submitted that May.

Finally, they shared the plan with friends and family. They had no reason to believe Sam wouldn't come home to them.

The Troyers tracked down the same model of a toy they'd seen in one of his pictures so he'd have something familiar in his new home. They reached out to the Kentucky School for the Blind and built connections with other families in the area who had children that are blind.

They even built an addition off their attic so they could convert Callie's office into a bedroom for Sam.

They started a fundraising effort to help cover the \$30,000-\$40,000 adoption fees.

They began writing the names of the people who donated on glow-in-the-dark stars to put on Sam's bedroom ceiling. The idea came from a story in the Old Testament of the Bible where God tells Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.



Gideon Troyer, 8, is busy in a playroom inside his adopted family's home in Lagrange, Ky. on Oct. 9, 2024. The Troyers adopted Gideon from South Korea and had been matched with another son to adopt, Sam, from China just as the Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions. They are hoping the U.S government will work with Chinese government to honor their original commitment. *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal/Gannett/Imagn Images*

In a similar way, the Troyers wanted their sons to know just how stunning and expansive the network was that helped bring them home.

But Sam's stars are still in a plastic bag tucked next to an unused stack of children's books in Braille.

When the call came down from the U.S. Department of State that matches likely wouldn't be honored, the Troyers sat in disbelief for the first few hours.

Then it shifted to grief.

"I was trying to reconcile this loss of a little boy I've called my son but have never met," Callie Troyer said.

That ache has since blossomed into determination.

"For years, we haven't had a real update, and we don't really know what his day-to-day is like but he is our son, and we're going to fight for him, and we're going to love him until the very, very end," she said.

'She was always our daughter for so many years'

Brenn and Greg Monroe don't expect Maya will ever come home. After the news from the U.S. Department of State, they've made the painful decision to move toward closure.

For the first three years of limbo, the Monroes held on to a rational hope that China would honor the matches between those children and the prospective parents in the United States. Maya has a hearing impairment, so the couple bought flashcards and learned sign language.

As the pandemic went on, they knew the longer Maya went without having a cochlear implant, the less likely she was to adapt to them. So they made plans to send her to Cochran Elementary, which has an American Sign Language program.

"With every phase throughout COVID, it was never a thought of whether we'd be able to come, it was always a matter of when," Brenn Monroe said.

Then in 2022, they stopped receiving photos and updates about Maya. They were not allowed to send birthday cakes, gifts, and toys to her like they had in the past.

Until very recently, they had a bunk bed in their daughter Evelyn's room, but in the past couple of weeks, they've removed that. Looking at the bunk beds was just too painful. Brenn Monroe hasn't had the heart to take Maya's pictures down, and she doesn't suspect she ever fully will.

"She was always our daughter for so many years," she said.

From the moment they saw the photos, they memorized everything about Maya they could. The Monroes have never met her, but they have loved her like a daughter. Now, they're mourning her like one.

'We are just not ready to grieve a living child'

For as long as 8-year-old Gracie Welch can remember, she's been waiting for Penny. She was only 3 years old when Penelope's adoption process started, and she's always had an extra twin bed in her room. There are two matching initial necklaces pinned on her bulletin board. Gracie picked those out on a Target run with her mother years ago. As the girls have aged, Gracie has worn and outgrown several matching dresses that Penny was supposed to share with her.

The necklaces, though, have waited in their packaging for when the two girls can formally be sisters.

Every year the Welches celebrate the Chinese New Year, and every year, they hope the next will finally be the year Penny can join them in that tradition. If they hadn't been paired with a specific child, Steven Welch said, they likely would have considered this second adoption a casualty of the pandemic. International adoptions, certainly, weren't the only things that dissolved during the shutdown.

That's not the case, though.

They know Penny likes piano and basketball and their third son, Thaddeus, is eager to share those passions with her, but so much time has already slipped away. He has less than two years before he heads off to college.



Aimee Welch held up a photo of herself and her adopted daughter Grace Welch (who is now 8) in her bedroom in Louisville, Ky. on Sep. 30, 2024. The Welch family planned to adopt another daughter and had been matched with a child in China as the Chinese government ended all U.S. adoptions. They are hoping the U.S government will work with China to honor the adoptions that were already in process. *Sam Upshaw Jr./Courier Journal*

Back in 2019, the Welches youngest son, Caleb, collected an assortment of small toys for Penny that he earned as rewards for good behavior in his second-grade class. They're still in a drawer waiting for her, even though he's now in eighth grade.

When the time came for the Welches to take their most recent family portrait, they huddled around a photo of Penelope. That single photo of their complete family hangs on the wall in their kitchen.

They've heard her sweet voice call them "Mommy" and "Daddy" in Mandarin on videos.

They made a promise to Penelope, and while they're still caught in an unfathomable limbo, they know they can't give up.

"We are just not ready to grieve a living child on the other side of the world," Aimee Welch said.