

CLOTHES POLICE

When you are walking on the streets in China holding your newly adopted baby; when you are waiting in the elevator or dining at the hotel, you may be approached by local Chinese, old and young, either indicating to you that you need to put more clothes on your baby, or covering your baby without asking for your permission. You can call these people “The Clothes Police”.

The Clothes Police have volunteered their service since the first day China opened its doors to international adoption in 1992. They have become a very annoying, but interesting, part of China adoption experience.

Why do they care? Why are they so serious about covering the babies? To answer these questions, we need to peek into Chinese diet and childcare traditions.

My first meal in America was a 4 x 4 x 2 inch thick steak. My jaw fell to my chest when the waitress put the gigantic piece of meat in front of me. “What is this?” I couldn’t believe my eyes! “This is enough for a family of six in China!”

When I grew up in China, we ate more rice, wheat and vegetables than meat. Meat was more like an appetizer. However, it is just the opposite in America. Here you do not often see a lot of vegetables on dinner tables or in restaurants, especially at fast food restaurants. Every time I go to a McDonalds, I have to ask them to add extra lettuce on my burger!

This is a major dietary difference between Americans and Chinese. Some interesting food facts according to my research: The meat products an average American consumes in one month is equal to what a Chinese person eats in a whole year. Most Chinese stop drinking milk when they reach their teens, while most Americans drink milk every day. The cheese and other dairy products commonly used in American cooking are either unheard of, or are very rare in China. As a result of different dietary life styles, Americans seem more cold resistant and heat intolerant. The Chinese are just the other way around. It is not uncommon to see Chinese in Guangzhou who wear two or three layers on a 70 degree day, while American adoptive families wear shorts and a t-shirt and still feel it is too hot!

When I was a child, my parents always wanted to make sure I wore enough clothing, winter or summer, before I walked out the door. When my younger brother was born, my mom always wrapped him in a heavy blanket and had his face completely covered whenever she took him out to the street, even on a hot summer day. We always joked about the heavy steam coming off his little forehead when my mom would unwrap him. You see, having children covered is just a traditional way of caring for a baby in China. People in China believe that a child is physically more vulnerable than an adult, and therefore, they need extra clothing so that they will not catch cold.

For children living in the orphanage, the care and nutrition they receive falls considerably behind children living in a normal home. It is common knowledge that a twelve month or younger Chinese child living in an orphanage is, on average, delayed developmentally by about four to six months. Lying in their cribs most of the time, an orphanage child's mobility is unintentionally, but greatly, hindered when caretakers put layers of heavy clothing on them and, many times, cover them with heavy blankets. This, according to their belief, helps prevent these children from catching a cold, especially in the winter. As a result of the inability to move, lack of external physical stimulation and proper nutrition, these children are even more vulnerable to weather-related illnesses. Colds, fever and pneumonia are sicknesses that many adoptive parents have to deal with while in China. Some Chinese believe that American adoptive families' eagerness to "undress" their "still very Chinese" babies and their unwillingness to cover their newly adopted babies "properly" is partially responsible for the occurrences of these sicknesses.

That is why as an adoption agency, we always remind our adoptive families to have their babies properly covered while they are in China. This is not only culturally appropriate, but also necessary to reduce the possibility of having their children catch cold, and at the same time, to ward off the offensive intrusion from those Clothes Police.

It is a common scientific fact in the West, as well as in China, that a child produces more body heat than an adult. Therefore it is perfectly fine to cloth a child with the same amount, or even less, clothing as adults. Nonetheless, as long as people in China still heed the traditional childcare practice and belief, and stick to their own diet and life style, adoptive families will always have the Clothes Police to give them unwanted, but good-intentioned advise.