Interview: Trish Diggins

Ladybug Love: 100 Chinese Adoption Match Day Stories

Author, adopted person, mom, writer, and professional designer Trish Diggins has worked in the corporate, television, web, film, and non-profit worlds creating communication and branding projects for clients across the country including New York, Chicago, Houston, Boston, Seattle, Tampa, and Jacksonville. She's currently designing for her roster of freelance clients and producing adoption-related books with Kat LaMons for Marcinson Press.

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1. **As an adoptee and adoptive parent, what do you think is the most important thing for a prospective adoptive parent to know?**

As an adopted person, besides love and support and all the other things you would do for any child, it's critical that adoptive parents are as open and honest with their child about their adoption as possible. Of course, you have to use common sense and be age-appropriate and the like, but it's a part of your child's life that shouldn't be hidden or treated like something to be ashamed of. It's not! My parents raised me to know I was adopted before I even understood what it meant, which I feel is easier on kids than having a big "surprise – guess what!" talk.

As an adoptive person and parent, I would love for prospective adoptive parents to really research the ins and outs of all the adoption options. When you choose the one that's right for your family, you may get some negative reactions from friends, family, and co-workers. That's okay. At the end of the day, how you choose to create your family is up to you. Adopting my daughter is truly the very best thing that I've ever had the privilege of being part of – I could not love another human being more. She's changed my life, my soul, and my spirit in so many ways I can't begin to count. I am beyond blessed to be a part of her life.

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2. When it came for you to adopt, why did you choose China?

I put my journalistic background to good use. I did tons of research about the process, interviewed families who had completed all kinds of adoptions – closed, open, foster, international, private, researched agencies. When it came down to it, all I can really say is that down deep, I just knew that's where she was, and my husband felt the same way.

3. One of the couples in the book was told that the wait for a healthy child would be 7 years. Another couple almost gave up because of the amount of paperwork required. Did you face the same wait times or obstacles with your adoption?

Yes, we did. Stacks of paperwork. We filled out paperwork that got lost and had to be redone, we renewed paperwork, we visited Homeland Security so many times I can't remember how long we spent in the waiting room, and our adoption worker stopped doing home studies. The wait time went from a year and a half or so to nearly five – which felt like an *eternity*! It left me WAY too much time to decorate and redecorate her room – that kid had hand-painted linen-washed walls when she came home (like she'd care)! Sometimes, I'd get so sad seeing the prepared room with the empty crib that I'd just cry and shut the door. But we made the most of the wait – we saved, traveled, went to concerts, visited friends – which all in all, turned out to be the best thing we could have done. When she finally arrived, we were seriously ready to nest for a few years. Looking back, every hurdle and obstacle was worth it, because I cannot imagine having any other child but the one we have. She's absolutely a perfect fit for our family, and I'd go through it all again and more.

4. Do you have any contact with your daughter's biological family? Do you plan to take your daughter back to China someday?

Sadly, there are absolutely no records or information about her biological family. I'll share with her everything I do have, as her maturity allows. We'd love to take her back to China one day – both as a heritage trip for her and because we just fell in love with the people and culture ourselves. She should experience life in other countries and cultures – her homeland, as well as others. It makes for a much more well-rounded and appreciative life, don't you think?

Have you found ways to incorporate her culture into your daily life?

Absolutely. We have artwork and items from China around our home and in her room. She loves checking the weather every morning on my iPhone for both our town and her birth city in China. She finds it quite exciting when the weather is the same there as here! We're members of our local Families with Children from China group and we attend social, heritage and holiday celebrations with them throughout the year.

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Together, we look through her "China Books" every few months (our photo books from our adoption trip), and she gets a real kick out of seeing herself as a baby in China. We have some Chinese-related adoption books we read at bedtime, too. I do think it's important to recognize and incorporate her birth culture in our lives. But most of the time, we're just a normal family, and she's just a normal kid, doing the same things everyone else does – although you have to take into account I'm admittedly wildly prejudiced, as I think she's the cutest, sweetest and most adorable kid there is!

5. Your book, Ladybug Love, shares 100 stories of families on their match day. Why did you choose to focus on match day as opposed to homecomings or other important milestones?

The moment that makes Match Day so special is that it's the same miracle as it is for every parent – that first glance at your child's face is unforgettable. For some, it's love at first sight. For others, it's a total and complete shock. For the rest – everything in between! There are so many emotions wrapped up in that one life changing moment, no matter how you become a parent. My writing partner, the brilliant, talented and hilarious Kat LaMons, had done a *Ladybug Love* book many years ago, and this book is the updated version. We loved the idea of growing the book and having it span more than a decade's worth of stories. The adoption process has certainly changed over the years, but the magic of that special moment hasn't.

6. What was the process like to collect 100 stories? Were your interviews done over the phone? Through email? What was the time frame?

We had a great start from the original book. We compiled the new stories through phone interviews, email interviews, Skype interviews, and in-person interviews. All in all, it took about a year and a half to put the final version of the book together. We're incredibly appreciative and grateful to the families who contributed their stories, and truly hope they're happy with the result. One family was so thrilled to be part of the book, they asked for two copies – one to read and share, and one to put in their safe deposit box! Don't get me wrong, I don't think that has anything to do with our writing - I think it has everything to do with showing how precious these stories are to the families. We're honored to have had them be willing to open their hearts and share these amazing personal moments.

7. You and your writing partner Kat LaMons have another book titled "The Crunch-Time Guide to Parenting Language for Chinese Adoption." Can you tell us a little bit about the book and why it would be helpful for prospective adoptive parents?

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Sure! Kat is still an adoption caseworker, working with families before and after they adopt. Last year, one family's daughter came home crying. When I say crying, I mean CRYING. Bless her heart, she cried all the way through China. She cried on the plane home from China. She cried when they got home. She cried all morning, all afternoon, and almost all night.

The desperate parents called Kat for help. Within four hours, the incessant crying had stopped, and they'd even gotten her to smile! How? Kat had spoken and sung to her in Chinese! She also taught the parents some phrases to use—writing everything out by hand.

Kat soon found many other families with similar adjustment issues, so she continued to share words and phrases, and even a few songs. The kids seemed to adjust so much better when there was less of a language barrier. Over the past few years, there's been a shift in Chinese adoptee demographics. For the most part, the children are at least toddler age at adoption, and parents are finding the language barrier more difficult than they had imagined. Seeing that this was a growing trend, Kat came to me wanting something beyond the sticky notes and bad copies she was giving her families. She had done the research and there just wasn't anything out there that fit the bill. I used my design background to help make it all something neatly packaged in a colorful, user-friendly format. That's how *The Crunch Time Guide to Parenting Language for Chinese Adoption* was born.

We surveyed adoptive parents for the words and phrases parents said were most desperately needed. We knew we had to include sections on family, feelings, health, safety, parent-to-child instructions, pottying, and more. My personal experience adopting from China helped too – I knew it had to be small so it could be tucked in a purse or backpack, really light, so it wouldn't affect the baggage weight, and super-easy to use (especially when doing the new parent juggle).

The best part is, each book contains a code that gives access to a website where parents can hear words, phrases, and even a couple songs. The individual files can then be downloaded to a phone or computer. For prospective adoptive parents, it means you can learn a few essentials in advance of meeting your child, but if you find yourself in a "crunch" as a new parent, you've got a quick, easy means of communicating. So far, we've gotten great feedback from parents, and we're planning to release another *Crunch-Time* guide for another country later this year!

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See Trish's portfolio website at http://www.trishdiggins.com.
Find *Ladybug Love* at http://www.tinyurl.com/ladybuglovebook.
Find the *Crunch-Time* guide at http://www.tinyurl.com/crunchtimechinese.

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