

Travelogue China

By Nick Gerlich

Dispatch #1: Greetings From China 17 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

We arrived in China safe and sound Saturday evening 6:30pm local time. We had good weather throughout the journey, and managed to stay awake most of the time, trying to trick ourselves into being ready to go to bed easily Saturday night here.

Of course, it didn't work.

We've now seen more of the Olympics from China than we did while back in Texas. The only problem is that we didn't understand a word of it.

But it was something to do at 4am.

Our stay in Shanghai is short, but the adoption agency has built a full schedule for us. Today we toured a botanical garden in Suzhou, dined at a nice hotel, visited a silk factory (and made a significant economic contribution at the gift shop, of course), and walked up Tiger Mountain (more like a small hill) to view an ancient pagoda.

Tonight we are going to an acrobatic show, and then hopefully off to bed for a full night's rest.

Tomorrow it's the Shanghai museum followed by a quick flight to Changsha, where we will check in to our hotel and promptly do some adoption-related paperwork.

And then the excitement really builds as we await Tuesday morning and the arrival of our daughters.

I'll send more news as it happens. Until then, remember that they don't call it Chinese food over here. It's just food.

Nick, Becky, and Becca
6:35pm Sunday in Shanghai

Dispatch #2: Bailee is Ours!

19 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

At 10:30am Tuesday 19th February 2002, we became parents for the second time. We are thrilled beyond words to introduce to the world Bailee Noelle Shao Gerlich, nee Jiang Shao.

There were 18 families in our combined two groups who received babies at this time. The different orphanages from throughout the province made the trek to Changsha in a cold rain and biting wind. In standard Chinese style, the babies were bundled up like little Eskimos, and had to be relieved of some of their clothing immediately.

Bailee cried loudly when she was taken from her nanny's arms and handed to Becky. This was, in effect, the second time in 7 months that she had lost a loved one.

But that will all change now, as there will be no more exchanges.

We quickly took her upstairs to our room, stripped her of four layers of clothing and a hot snow suit, bathed her in the bathroom sink, and put her in a much more comfortable sleeper.

She immediately quieted down. We put her on the floor with some toys, and then Becca went to town as The Big Sister. Suddenly Bailee relaxed and smiled and laughed. Becca entertained her like a champ, and the crying and screaming of the first 40 minutes were quickly forgotten.

Bailee is somewhat longer than Becca was at the point of adoption, and has already become quite adept with her opposable thumbs. To top things off, while we were on the phone to the states, she stood up and walked three steps unassisted to the bed.

Of course, the camcorder was out of reach and turned off. So much for capturing important moments on tape!

We are all very blessed and happy on this special day. Becky's 40th birthday has been made one to remember.

We awoke at our "normal" 3:30am. After surfing the channels for a while, we stumbled upon an old Frasier rerun on a Hong Kong TV station coming in via satellite. The episode was one in which Frasier was telling the pregnant Roz what parenthood was like. Frasier said, "You don't love your kids. You *fall* in love with them."

How true. And how appropriate that we should see this episode in the middle of the night preceding Bailee's arrival.

I started falling in love with Becca the minute we got her match picture, and haven't stopped since. I started falling in love with Bailee when we got her match photos this last December in Florida. And now that we have her as our own, I'm doing it all over again.

It's our privilege to have two beautiful daughters. People keep telling us how lucky the girls are. True, perhaps. But *we're* the lucky ones when you add it all up.

I'd better keep this short. Becky, Becca, and Bailee are waiting for me up in the room. It's time to get some lunch. The dirty diapers are about to begin again, as are the frequent feedings and clothing changes.

These I can handle. They are only a minor task, and really not a chore, but rather an honor to do.

But I don't know what to do with that tossed salad and scrambled eggs.

Nick
Changsha, Hunan, China
Tuesday 19 Feb 2002 12:50pm

Dispatch #3: Getting To Know You

22 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

Everything continues to be sailing smoothly here in Changsha. It is now Friday 7pm China time (5am US Central Time).

If there is any constancy in Changsha, it is that the weather is lousy. Think Seattle. Add dirt and grime. Throw in some fog and haze. Got the picture? Good, because we don't. The visibility is only a couple of blocks most of the time, so photography is all being done in shades of gray.

But that aside, we're having a great time here. Bailee is doing well, although she has had a little runny nose and some itching. A doc in our group said she is OK, though. Bailee continues to bond with Becky, which is critical during this time of separation from her nanny. Becca is also helping the transition, because Bailee really likes to play with her.

As for me...well, all is going well, too. Bailee seems to like me, and lets me hold her and feed her. But it is definitely Becky with whom she identifies the most.

Becca has really changes a lot this week. Or at least it seems that way to me. Before the 19th, she was my little girl. Now she's my big little girl, because she looks and acts so big compared to Bailee. It is fun to watch her being a big sister. Yes, she is also normal to the point of sometimes feeling a little jealous of this new person. Suddenly her parental resources must be shared. But she is getting used to it. I also try to give her special father-daughter interaction to help make her feel special.

We've seen some of the historic sites of Changsha, a city that has been inhabited for over 3000 years. We've eaten some incredibly good food. But the thing that sticks out the most in American minds is the traffic. Thank God most Chinese don't own cars. Still, what cars there are, along with taxies, trucks, buses, scooters, motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, pedicabs, and carts make for an interesting symphony of movement on the streets.

Somehow it all works, but it befuddles our western minds to no extent. Whereas we are taught highway protocol and courtesy, that's all out the window here. Everyone and everything keeps moving. Stop signs often do not exist. Red and yellow mean "go;" green means "go faster." A 4-way intersection will often feature every mode of transportation going every which direction, all at the same time.

And no one was hurt.

Just this morning, our tour bus driver did a U-turn on a major downtown street. No thinking, no pondering the liability. He just did it, and anyone else in the way, well...too bad.

Today the four of us walked 3/4 mile to the McDonald's and A.Best department store. Needless to say, we two blondes with two dark-haired kids were a constant source of entertainment, amazement, awe, or just plain gawking. Everyone, it seemed, had to catch an eyeful.

We obliged, and then caught a lens full in return. We've shot at least 500 pictures thus far in analog and digital format, plus lots of video.

We've only a few days left in Changsha. On Tuesday we fly to Guangzhou, another city of roughly 6 million. In 8 days we fly home, and we begin our journey together as a family in Texas. And Bailee's life will begin anew.

I think back on the 19th when we received Bailee. All the babies came to us with only the clothes on their backs (and there were *lots* of clothes), and clutching an individually-wrapped gummy candy. She came as she was, and with a small offering.

To those who practice the Christian faith, this is all very familiar. The concept of adoption is central to Christian theology, in which believers have been adopted into the family of their Creator. We come as we are, and are embraced as God's own.

Many people ask us why we have chosen to adopt. Becky and I feel that much has been given to us throughout our lives, and to be able to do for these children as has been done to us is both a privilege and a calling. No, adoption is not for everyone. But we believe the adoption metaphor of our faith very strongly, and wish to practice it ourselves. Family is what you make of it.

We send you our best wishes, and look forward to seeing each of you!

Nick, Becky, Becca, and Bailee

Dispatch #4: Back Street Parents

24 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

Our time in Changsha is drawing to a close. On Monday we have been granted special permission to send one person per family to the Changsha orphanage to do a quick visit. Although none of the babies in our group came from this orphanage, we all think it would be very enlightening to see it. Unfortunately, no cameras are allowed (I tried to find a pen cam today in the dept store to do a little James Bond-style photography, but they did not have any).

Tomorrow afternoon we're having a special party for our combined adoption groups. We're recognizing the many February birthdays among our babies.

It's interesting being at the Grand Sun City Hotel (www.grandsuncityhotel.com). It is the major baby hotel in town. In Hunan province alone there are over 1000 adoptions per year. Today we met someone from a group of 11 families hailing from Norway. Another US group (through a different adoption agency) arrived today. There was yet another group here when we arrived. It must be like a never-ending parade of parents and babies at this hotel.

Good thing, because it doesn't seem like they get much other business.

The past two days we have taken walks down some of the lanes and alleys off the main street. They have been fun and educational. Today I bought a 24" hard-sided suitcase for .50! I need it to help haul home all of the Made in China goodies that we can't find in the US.

Andy Warhol once said that everyone has his 15 minutes of fame. He was wrong. Twice today our little group of 4 parents and babies were surrounded by locals, with men and women alike cooing at the babies. It was fun, and certainly a Kodak moment.

And speaking of Kodak...thus far we've taken 325 snap shots, 500 digital shots, and 8 hours of video.

Our walks yesterday and today took us into the real China, off the main drags with McDonald's and KFCs. We saw how people really lived. And believe me, it ain't that pretty. Population densities here are among the worst on the planet, but somehow people manage to get along. I think that they've been doing it so long, they know no other way.

Earlier today we went to the Hunan Embroidery Company and saw their museum as well as production facilities. Hunan is known far and wide for its embroidery, including 2-sided pieces that simply blow you away.

We were all good tourists, and spent lots of money.

I hate to think that soon we'll be coming home to our American diets, because we have eaten so healthily while here. The Chinese food we get in the states is at the level of TV dinners. Until you've tasted the real deal over here, you have no idea what Chinese cooking is all about.

Bailee is doing well, although she is undergoing one of those painful stages that everyone must endure: teething. She has 6 teeth, and is trying to pop the rest of them all out at once. We've had to use lots of Anbesol and children's Tylenol to help ease the pain. But the best cure yet was a chocolate milkshake that chilled her mouth.

Otherwise, the Family Gerlich is doing great.

Best wishes to all of you!

Nick, Becky, Becca, and Bailee

Dispatch #5: The Orphanage

25 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

It is now 7:45pm Monday 25 February in Changsha. We leave early in the morning for Guangzhou, which means that we are technically on our way home. We have a few days there, and then leave early Saturday for the USA.

This morning we were allowed to send one person per family to the nearby Changsha Welfare Institute. It was pretty much as I imagined it would be, and, yes, it was sad beyond words.

Three sensory memories linger:

1. It was dark. No lights in the foyer of this 8-level building. The baby orphans are on the 8th floor, and there were only two fluorescent lights on when we arrived. They turned on a couple of more lights after we arrived, but still it was very dark.
2. It was cold. It is true that the orphanages have no heat. The babies were bundled up like the ones we received as ours last week. You could almost see your breath.
3. It smelled, much like smelly diapers and cleaning fluids. In other words, it was a very institutional smell.

In two rooms each were 14 babies sharing 7 cribs. The nannies periodically put the babies in very small enclosed wooden devices that have a small bench seat and a rail across the top for practicing standing. Some had holes in the seats for potty training (a pan could be inserted beneath the hole for capturing waste). These devices were barely wide enough to accommodate one child, and were called "walkers without wheels." The Chinese push their infants to be walking by age one.

There was an abundance of the common rolling walkers we use in the US. I did not see many toys, though, meaning that there really is little stimulation. One room had a radio on playing western rap music.

The babies in both rooms all stretched out their arms, wanting to be picked up. It broke our hearts to see this, but the nannies let us hold the little ones for a little while. Two older girls (30 months each) were allowed to walk around the facility, and they instantly took to our group. Both had recently matched with American families for adoption, but one was refused. We could see no reason why.

I did see one boy...he had a cleft palate, and a slightly deformed left nostril. We also saw a 16-year-old girl mopping the floor. Apparently they put the older ones to work.

Age 12 is considered the last age at which children are adoptable, but the orphanage will keep them until age 18. At this time they must leave. The government either assigns them to a job, or sends them off to university if the child desires it.

I wish we could have taken cameras in with us, because I would love to be able to have a permanent record of our visit. Immediately after returning to the hotel, I quickly wrote every detail I could remember.

More than anything, our group wished we could each carry out as many as we could hold. These little kids deserve better, and we are all able to find room in our hearts for another. But bureaucracy and paper chases must be completed for each adoption, meaning that there's no quick option for more.

I anticipate being able to send more dispatches from Guangzhou. Until next time...

Nick, Becky, Becca, and Bailee

Dispatch #6: Leaving Home

26 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

This dispatch is coming to you from Guangzhou, China, the capital of Guangdong province. We left Changsha this morning, and arrived to sticky, hot weather conditions.

After 8 days in the fog and drizzle capital of the world, it was a perfect welcoming.

Today marked a very important day for Bailee. She left home. Literally.

She had spent the last 7 or so months at the Ping Jiang Welfare Institute in the city of the same name. By Chinese standards, this town of 952,000 residents is small. Of course, it's all relative.

When the nannies brought her to Changsha last Tuesday, they started Bailee on a journey, one that would terminate in Canyon, TX.

Today was the next step in that journey. But it was an important one, because she left her home province of Hunan ("South of the Lake" in Mandarin).

Who knows...she may never see her home again. While it is almost certain that we will take the girls to China on future holidays, it's not certain that we'll venture back to Changsha. It is quite a bit more remote than Guangzhou, Shanghai, or Beijing, and not even a smidgen as modern as Hong Kong.

Whereas many of us don't contemplate leaving home until adulthood, Bailee and her 17 little friends all have been uprooted like trees, to be planted in fertile soil elsewhere.

Of course, Bailee did not comprehend the significance of this event. She took her first plane ride in stride, and was a "new" person today following her discomforts of late with teething and an ear infection. She was bubbly and giggly, and thoroughly enjoyed playing with Becca.

Our stay in Guangzhou is but a brief one, as we will wrap up matters on Thursday with the US Consulate, and then on Friday with her passport visa.

Our jobs as the 18 sets of parents is to keep the roots and limbs of our babies healthy and alive so they can be planted in a few days stateside, where they can be nurtured and raised to maturity.

And in the process, the former home will fade into the background as the new

home becomes their domain.

Bailee doesn't know it yet, but there's plenty of room in our home for her. The Welfare Institute in Ping Jiang will have been a mere stepping stone on the way to a new life in the US.

Please feel free to visit us and become a part of Bailee's life.

Nick

Dispatch #7: Breath of Fresh Air 26 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

I send two dispatches today because it was an important day for Bailee singly, and then for all of us collectively.

As I mentioned in the other dispatch, we left Changsha. Once again, it was foggy, damp, and cold.

We had no idea how much the poor weather was affecting our minds until we landed in Guangzhou, where it was sunny and 77 degrees. For once, we could see beyond a couple of blocks. The streets were dry. And it was sticky warm.

Oh, what a feeling!

Instantly, everyone's spirits perked up, including those of the babies. Guangzhou is much better off than Changsha, and it is obvious from every angle. Cars, shops, and hotels abound.

Yes, it is still China, and it is still crowded. There are still a million little shops occupying 10X10 foot stalls (we went down a marvelous bazaar this afternoon in a narrow alley--what fun!).

But it's a different China.

Our hotel (The China Hotel) is owned by Marriott. The rooms are large. There's a huge fashion mall on the first floor and in the basement. There's a Hard Rock Cafe on premise (yep, we had lunch there today). And there's much more to do nearby.

OK, I guess this all means that we were starved for some better weather and a little more western influence. I admit it. I needed it. Asia can really wear on western minds because it is SO different. People live in such proximity to one another that it boggles US minds.

All I know is that it felt so good to sit in the HRC and eat some western food. Not that I haven't thoroughly enjoyed eating local fare in Changsha. It's just that I needed to taste home again.

The music blaring from the loudspeakers felt great. AC/DC, Aerosmith, you name it...it all was heaven-sent as far as I was concerned.

And when "Born in the USA" was played, I couldn't help but feel proud.

Very proud.

Yes, it is good to be here. It will be good to be home this Saturday, with feet firmly planted on American soil.

But I also know deep inside that I shall return to China some day, with family in tow. There's much more to see, and much more to learn. And our daughters will need to be exposed to their motherland.

Thankfully, it is possible to traverse the huge divide between the US and China quite easily. Even when we're thousands of miles away, it feels right now like I'm a lot closer to home than I was earlier this morning.

And I like it.

Nick and B3

PS---my apologies for typos in my dispatches. I have been working from old PCs in Changsha with a poor dial-up connection at the rate of 12.5 cents per minute. I just typed and sent...I'll fix them up later. Right now, I'm in heaven because I'm working in a sports bar with high speed internet at only \$3.75 per hour. Life is good.

Dispatch #8: We're An American Band

28 Feb 2002

Greetings Everyone:

In the early 1970s the legendary rock band Grand Funk Railroad had a hit with the song "We're An American Band." While the song was a proclamation of the band's nationality, I find it appropriate also to describe my band of family members.

You see, today Bailee became a US citizen, thus rounding out our foursome of Americans.

At a swearing-in ceremony at the US Consulate down on historic Shamian Island, we and many other adoptive parents raised our right hands in unison and promised to uphold...blah blah blah...and then by the power vested in some man we had never seen before, everyone was a US citizen.

It was actually a rather anticlimactic way to end 22 months' worth of work to get Bailee, but we were grateful nonetheless.

On the way out, every family stopped to pose for pictures by the seal of the Consulate on the exterior wall. It's not a very attractive wall, but the building behind it represents all that we hold dear in our country. And while Bailee may not realize for many years what it all means, we are delighted to welcome her into the brotherhood and sisterhood of America.

Our trip is nearly over. Tomorrow night (Friday) we must have our bags outside our doors at 9:30. Our wake-up calls come Saturday at 5:30am, and we're off to the airport for a quick shuttle to Hong Kong, and then the big flight over the Pacific to San Francisco. From there it's off to Denver, and, if the forecasted snow fizzles, then on to Amarillo.

It will have been a long day.

But that's a couple of days away. For tonight, we're taking a taxi back to Shamian Island to commission a local artist to do an etching of both Bailee and Becca. The nightscape looking across the Pearl River should be beautiful.

I thank you for sticking with me this long through my 8th dispatch. There may not be any more until we return to the states. We appreciate your concerns for our safety and well-being.

Nick

Dispatch #9: Home Where We Belong

02 Mar 2002

Greetings Everyone:

It has been a grueling 16 days, and even more grueling 22 months, but we have made it home with Bailee. Mission accomplished. Bailee is safe at home in Texas with a mommy, daddy, and sister.

It is now nearly 11pm Saturday the 2nd of March. By virtue of the 14 hour time difference between Texas and China, this has turned into a 38-hour day. We are all pretty whipped (well, Becky and I are...the kids slept a lot on the plane, and appear to have enough energy now to make it well into the night).

The day started for us in Guangzhou with a wake-up call at 5:30, although I had tossed and turned since 4. The baggage had all been put outside the door the night before, and stored for a pre-dawn truck ride to the airport. At 7 we boarded two tour buses and bid adieu to the China Hotel.

What awaited us at the airport was only a taste of things to come. Security is at its highest levels ever, and there are now so many hoops to jump through that travel is now frustrating at best.

All baggage had to be located curbside, loaded onto carts, and then one-by-one x-rayed, and then taken to the banding machine. A per-bag fee was assessed (a whopping 15 Yuan per bag, or a little less than \$2 each).

From there it was off to passport presentation, and then to baggage check-in. This was followed by Departure Forms, presentation of these, the passports, and Bailee's visa to an official, and then presentation to yet another official.

And then we finally went through x-ray for our personal effects.

By this time I was wringing wet in the tropical air, hardly a good sign for those traveling near me.

The 360km flight to Hong Kong was quick and uneventful, and the four hours we spent there went quickly thanks to a rather lengthy walk/tram/elevator/people mover experience through the beautiful new HK airport.

Interestingly, the 11.5 hours across the Pacific went by pretty quickly. The girls got along well, and had no travel difficulties. But the Immigration and Customs crews in San Francisco were overrun by weary travelers, and this consumed a lot of time. We had to claim our bags, pass through Customs, and then promptly re-check our bags for our connecting flights.

As if that wasn't enough, we then had to pass airport security again, and, of course, there was a lo-o-o-ng line. By the time we had cleared everything, our plane was half-boarded. No time for lunch or bathrooms.

Because of the delays in getting people through Immigration and Customs, air traffic had stacked up, and our plane could not leave on time. Our schedule showed only a 34-minute layover in Denver, but now it was beginning to look as if we might not make it.

Becky and I calculated our options, and queried a flight attendant about where our connection would be located. She gave us directions, and we planned to have Becky bolt forward from our back-of-the-plane seats as soon as the plane stopped. She would take Bailee and one carry-on, leaving me with Becca and three carry-ons and a stroller.

As soon as that plane stopped, Becky and Bailee were making a mad dash for the door. They were the first ones off, and quickly headed to the gate. Becca and I gathered our belongings, waited for the aisle to clear, and then made a dash for the gate to meet Becky.

But along the way I spotted the Departures board, and noticed that our flight was in another terminal far, far away. Not knowing if Becky had seen this, I headed to our previously-arranged meeting spot, only to find she was not there. I then assumed she had the correct information, and we struck off in hot pursuit of both her and an airplane.

If you've ever been to the Denver airport, you know that it is huge. We had to walk the length of the B terminal, take the elevator down to the train, take the train to Terminal A, ride the elevator back up, and then walk/run the length of Terminal A.

Becky met me at the end and said they were holding the plane for us.

Bear in mind that this was not that big of a deal, since there were only five others on this commuter flight. And never mind that we were in short sleeves walking to our turboprop, while Denver was a paltry 3 degrees. We were too hot to notice.

Having made our final connection, we heaved a sigh of relief, only to wonder if our bags had made it. As we found out in Amarillo, they did not. They couldn't run as fast as we did, so they'll be on the first plane tomorrow.

Waiting for us at the airport were many of our friends from church, as well as Steve and Martha with their daughter, Mary (whom they also adopted from China, and Becca's best friend). It was a great surprise for us, and we were greatly moved by their gifts and presence.

The evening ended with a great dinner with Steve, Martha, and Mary, and then introducing Bailee to her new home. This was the best part of the day...showing her the dogs, her new room, her playthings...everything.

Bailee doesn't quite yet know what to make of everything. Having seen a Chinese orphanage, I do know that she has far more here than where she was.

But more importantly than toys and clothes and a cozy house, she has a loving family. We could get by with a lot less, but Bailee would not be any the poorer for it.

It thrilled our hearts to watch Bailee feeling her way around, touching things, petting the dogs, soaking up her new world.

And here's the neat thing...she already looks right at home. Maybe it's because we have been anticipating her arrival for so long that we just kind of arranged things with her in mind. Maybe it's because we had this love for her sitting on hold until the day we could make her ours, and we hers.

And maybe it's because it was all meant to be.

Whatever the reason, we're grateful for Bailee. We thank each of you for your kind thoughts and prayers as we took on this adventure. We look forward to introducing Bailee to our people...you, our family and friends.

Nick and Becky (and Becca and Bailee, of course!)

PS---In the weeks ahead I will be compiling the 1100+ images I have shot, and creating numerous web slide shows for you to see. In so doing you will be able to catch a glimpse of what we saw and experienced. I'll send emails when these are available.