

TITLE: Rough Going Overseas
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ABSTRACT:

This article deals with challenges faced by gay couples who adopt children abroad. Born in Asia in 2001, Benjamin was an orphan until Wood and his partner, voice-over actor James Sie, took him into their lives. The couple researched the process, found an agency that was right for them and met with an adoption support group. They underwent a home-study evaluation and rounded up the necessary documents. Then they waited for a child to become available. The couple was also introduced to a homophobic government from which they needed to hide their relationship. While planning the first of their two trips to the country, the couple discovered that their stateside adoption agency had not informed its overseas representatives that it was working for a gay couple. The adoption could be blocked if local officials found out that Sie was not single. Hence, the couple decided to obscure their relationship. Wood remained in the background, pretending not to be involved as they met Benjamin for the first time. The first trip went smoothly enough that Wood and Sie traveled alone when they returned 40 days later, the waiting period required by local law to complete the adoption. They spent the next two weeks finalizing paperwork, but they remained guarded by their relationship.

ARTICLE:

Gay men and lesbians who adopt abroad must hide their lives from suspicious antigay governments. But those who persevere give desperate children loving homes

At 3 1/2 years old, Benjamin is already a Beatles fanatic. "He was Ringo for Halloween," says singer-songwriter Douglas Wood, one of Benjamin's two dads. "There's nothing more adorable than hearing him sing 'When I'm 64' or 'Eleanor Rigby.'"

Benjamin hasn't always been so Westernized. Born in Asia in 2001, he was an orphan until Wood and his partner, voice-over actor James Sie, took him into their lives. "We wanted to adopt an Asian child, and that's hard to do domestically," Sie says. "There are very few Asian women here who give their children up for adoption. It seemed like an international adoption was our best bet."

The couple researched the process, found an agency that was right for them, and met with an adoption support group. They underwent a home-study evaluation and rounded up the necessary documents. Then they waited for a child to become available.

Several months and \$20,000 later, they were on their way to Benjamin's native country, where they were introduced to a rich culture they have come to admire deeply.

"When you're filling out the forms explaining to the country's officials why you want to adopt from their country, you're supposed to say something like, 'We've always admired your culture and heritage.' After we visited, that was no longer an exaggeration," Wood says. "We really fell in love with the place."

The couple were also introduced to a homophobic government from which they needed to hide their relationship. While planning the first of their two trips to the country--the name of which they asked The Advocate to withhold, to help keep the door open for other gay couples--Wood and Sie discovered that their stateside adoption agency had not informed its overseas representatives that it was working for a gay couple. The adoption could be blocked if local officials found out that Sie was not in fact single.

So they decided to obscure their relationship, taking a female pal along as Sie's de facto beard. Wood remained in the background, pretending not to be involved as they met Benjamin for the first time. The first trip went smoothly enough that Wood and Sie traveled alone when they returned 40 days later--the waiting period required by local law--to complete the adoption. They spent the next two weeks finalizing paperwork, with Benjamin now in their care. But they remained guarded about their relationship.

"Right after the official adoption, it was really hard," Wood says. "Here was my son, and I wasn't allowed to show my feelings."

Of the handful of countries where nonnationals can adopt, not one allows gays and lesbians to do so openly. Information about the practice is circulated largely through word of mouth or anonymous e-mail lists. Couples avoid speaking openly about their process to online friends, wary of snooping governments monitoring the Internet.

"If the discussion is happening [openly] on the list, people believe it's being monitored by other countries," says Arlene Istar Lev, author of *The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Guide*. "Think about it: If you

were in the equivalent of the CIA in Guatemala, and you knew that children were being adopted by gay families and this was against your religion or whatever, it's very simple. You get on the Internet, you search for 'gay adoption,' and you sign on. And there's everybody's name, saying, 'Hi, my name is John Smith and we just got a child from Guatemala.'"

Because of this danger, most U.S. agencies that facilitate international adoptions for gay and lesbian families are secretive about it. One such agency, whose representative asked not to be named, warned The Advocate that any publicity could endanger countless couples' ability to adopt.

"Word of mouth gets around, so there's no problem with [gays and lesbians] finding out that an agency supports gay and lesbian families within the community," he says. "But particularly with the political climate, if the wrong people find out about it, they could begin taking action."

Even if the foreign government cooperates with a gay person's adoption, potential parents face other risks. Marlowe and Elijah B'sheart, a lesbian couple from the Detroit area, were working with an agency in 2002 to adopt two orphan babies living in foster care in a Latin American country. When they arrived for their final visit to finalize the adoption, they found one boy with pneumonia, a hole in his lung, and burns on his back, possibly from crude attempts to raise his body temperature. He had brain damage from an episode of cardiac arrest.

"We trusted people we shouldn't have," Marlowe B'sheart says. "But we didn't have as many choices in an agency because we were open about our relationship from the beginning." (To read the B'shearts' full story, go to Advocate.com and click on LINKS.)

Some countries are friendlier than others, but any nation's policies can change suddenly. "It varies from week to week and month to month and year to year," says Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and the author of *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming America*.

To avoid being identified as a gay couple, parents-to-be designate one partner to adopt the child while the other stays in the background--or even invisible, checked into a separate hotel--during visits to the country. Only when they've brought their legally adopted child back to the United States can the new parents seek a second-parent adoption, if their state allows it.

Some countries have what amounts to a "don't ask, don't tell" policy;

others prohibit all single-parent adoptions. Some look suspiciously at unmarried people but still allow them to adopt.

"When Chinese officials see a single person, they grimace and start asking questions," Pertman says. "They changed their rules to accommodate more married couples, which was largely a way of cutting instances of gay and lesbian adoptions." China now requires adopting parents to sign a statement of heterosexuality.

Adds David Wing-Kovarik, executive director of Families Like Ours, a Seattle-based nonprofit: "The majority of countries now are putting limits on the amount of single parents that agencies can send them. They're not stupid. They know that gay and lesbian individuals from the United States are filtering through the system. Is it impossible? No, it isn't. Is it increasingly difficult? Yes, it is."

Deceiving the country of origin about such particulars raises the specter that the child can be taken away at some point in the future through international legal action by the homophobic nation. Though no one has heard of such a case, adopting parents still fear the possibility. And they expect no help from the current administration in Washington, D.C., should a nation demand the return of a child adopted under false pretenses.

Some gays circumvent foreign homophobia by never revealing their sexuality to the stateside agency, presenting themselves as single whether they are or not. After all, agencies that knowingly help gay Americans to adopt abroad also risk legal retribution. "There are some agencies in this country that you can be out with, that know how to write the home study [report]," Lev says. "If I write a home study for a lesbian couple, and I write as if the woman who's adopting has a roommate, and someone finds out that I lied, we're talking about lying to the federal government. It could get very ugly."

Scott Sherman is still relieved that he didn't have to lie outright to officials in his son's country of origin. The Vermont resident and his partner, Marty Rouse, adopted Sasha from a European country in 2001. "I was never asked a question to which I had to lie," Sherman says. "I would have, and I'd tell you if I did, but I never did. It feels good that I was able to retain my integrity in that way."

Like son, like father

Three-year-old Benjamin gets his music jones from dad Douglas. Wood's

melodic, mostly self-penned CD Broken is available at douglaswood.net and in the iTunes Music Store. We're betting the tune "Picture of You" is about little Benjamin.

Overseas Adoption Primer

It's impossible to know how many gay and lesbian parents have successfully found children overseas. "There are not statistics that say, 'This percentage of gay and lesbian families [with children] have adopted internationally,'" says David Wing-Kovarik, executive director of Families Like Ours, a Seattle-based nonprofit that works with GLBT parents and parents-to-be. "Nobody knows exactly what that number is."

The price may lock out some prospective parents. The couples The Advocate spoke with said they paid about \$20,000 to get their children, but that figure can quickly rise to \$50,000.

For some, the cost is worth it. The adopting parents can usually avoid the emotional drama of interacting with the birth mother, for example, and the domestic danger that she'll decide to keep the child. In addition, a large number of babies are available for international adoption, and the process is often quicker and smoother than domestic adoption.

For gays and lesbians with the resources, enthusiasm, and patience necessary, there are a few things to keep in mind when considering international adoption:

- Be prepared for a substantial investment. Some banks are offering loans to adopting parents, but a wiser approach might be borrowing against your 401(k). Many companies' plans allow participants to borrow as much as 50% of their current balance.
- Unless you're prepared to remain closeted for the entire process, focus on finding an agency that is gay-friendly and has a good reputation domestically. Then ask that agency to act as your go-between with one that specializes in the country or region you prefer.
- Decide at the outset whether it's important to you to have a child of your race or cultural background. Whether or not you have ties to the child's country of origin, emphasize your interest in that country's culture and your intention to raise the child with a sense of his or her heritage.