

## Going to China Camp by Joy Lenz

I had been looking forward to China Camp ever since we had adopted our daughter in 2004. The idea of a heritage camp was so exciting to me and I knew from past experience that camp of any kind is nearly always fun. What would we learn at China Camp? Who would we meet? What would Katherine think of it all?

Since Katherine hated being left in a nursery and didn't really like being away from her dad and me for any reason, we chose not to go to China Camp when she was a toddler. It just seemed as if she would be stressed and we would be frustrated. We would have to wait until she



was older. Finally, this summer, at nearly 4 ½, she was big enough to join the Lower Camp. Armed with new social skills honed at preschool, and bursting with anticipation, she bounced in the doors ready to take on China Camp.

That first morning, as we milled around with dozens of other families and a small army of children, Katherine clung to her dad's shirt and watched everything with wide eyes. Watching over 200 kids roam around the gym WAS amazing. It struck me that although Katherine had been around other Asian children, she had never seen so many Chinese faces at once. For the first time since she was in China, she was just like everyone else.

When it was time for the children to go to their classes, Katherine willingly joined the other "Frogs." There were three other girls from our travel group in her class. These "orphanage sisters" had seen each other a few times since we came home, but had never really interacted much. When I checked on Katherine later in the day, she was happily coloring a panda bear with one of her travel group friends at her side. I went to a parent session and came out to find Katherine and her friend sharing a chair and giggling as they made wonton dumplings. Later, the two girls proudly showed me the medals they'd gotten in kung fu class. "Kung fu was fun!" Katherine beamed, "And it came from China, just like me! So do dumplings!"

As I was fixing Katherine's hair the next morning, she announced, "There are lots of kids at China Camp with black hair." "Yes there are!" I agreed, "Isn't that great?" Katherine nodded. "They're all like me," she said. Then she tugged at her China Camp T-shirt and added, "And today we're all going to be dressed alike. Now we'll REALLY be the same!"

I had volunteered to help during China Camp and that morning I was assigned to assist in a second grade room. We started off in geography class, looking at maps of China and studying pictures of famous sites there. The girls chatted happily and showed me their maps. "Look, I came from Hunan and so did she!" "I never knew that Jiangsu was close to the ocean." "I was born in Hunan and Jessie was born in Jiangxi. Now I live in Oklahoma and she lives in Texas, so we're still neighbors!" It was easy to see that the girls were learning and that they were taking real pride in the places and people that are a part of their history. I was having a great time watching and listening to them interact, knowing that I was getting a glimpse into my own daughter's future.

Later, I accompanied the second graders to WISE Up training, where they talked about how they felt about adoption and about all the annoying questions people ask. Rebecca Hackworth was leading the discussion and the girls were eager to share. They talked and talked, sharing their fears and frustrations and the things that made them proud. Rebecca gently kept the girls on track and affirmed all of their feelings. I sat at the back and just listened. "People ask me where my real mom is." "People ask me if my sister and I are twins. We're NOT! She's two years older than me! Then they ask if we are real sisters." "Sometimes kids want to know things

and I don't know the answer. It makes me confused." After half an hour of animated discussion, Rebecca commented, "It must be nice to come to places like China Camp, where everyone has a similar story and you don't have to explain yourself." All twelve girls let out a big sigh of relief and shouted "Yes!" One eight year old said, "This is the best place in the world." All of the girls looked around the table at each other. They smiled huge grins. A few girls grabbed each other's hands. They were in



this together. The sense of empowerment in the room was almost palpable. The girls were sharing their stories and it was making them strong. One girl leaned over the back of her chair to see me and gave a big upside-down smile of contentment. I swallowed the lump in my throat and smiled back. I felt honored to be there with those little girls and their wide-open hearts.

I sent the second graders off to lunch and stopped by the 4-year-old class to check on Katherine. She was sitting on her teacher's lap watching *Big Bird Goes to China* with one of her friends curled up at her side. When she spotted me, she beamed and flashed a thumbs-up sign.

That afternoon, I watched the 4<sup>th</sup> graders do kung fu and the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders make moon cakes. I calmed a fussy two year old from the nursery and had a long talk with the mom of one of Katherine's orphanage sisters. And I thought about all the things the second graders had said. I realized that China Camp was more than just a fun way to spend a few days. The girls I'd spent the morning with had shown me that this time spent with others who shared their experiences was vital to their well being. China Camp was as important as doctors' appointments and Sunday School and visits to the dentist. It was certainly more important than soccer games and piano practice and slumber parties. China Camp was sacred.

The last afternoon of camp, as I carried an exhausted 4 year old and her bag of art projects to the car, Katherine asked, "Can we come back next year?" "Of course!" I exclaimed. Of course we'll come back next year and the year after and every year after that. We'll come to let others teach Katherine what we cannot. We'll come to share our story and be a part of others'. We'll come to settle our spirits and fill our souls. You can mark your calendar for the next 8 years – we'll be at China Camp.