



# A complicated legacy

TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE IMPOSITION OF CHINA'S ONE-CHILD POLICY, A NEWBORN **CHARLI COPELAND '22** WAS LEFT AT A HOSPITAL IN BAODING ON A COLD DECEMBER DAY. SHE KNOWS LITTLE ABOUT WHY.

GIRL, INTERRUPTED  
BY MARY BROLLEY  
Ⓢ 15 MIN.

"Hope is the name I was called in the newsletter, and my mom stumbled across me."

So begins Copeland's adoption story. Brought to the United States from an orphanage in Baoding at age 3, she knows almost nothing of the first six weeks of her life. Not the circumstances that led to her being left outside of a hospital. Not who her parents were. Not where she was born.

But she does have one crucial bit of information.

"When the night watchman found me, '11/1/99' was written on a piece of paper bundled inside my clothing and blankets," she said. "So at least I know my birthday."

Although Copeland is unsure exactly how, she feels certain China's one-child policy played a part in her abandonment. Because of a cultural preference for males, and even

though it was illegal, female babies were frequently aborted or given up for adoption, overcrowding orphanages. Babies with birth defects, such as Copeland's moderate vision impairment, were more likely to be given up. These "waiting children" were sometimes profiled in newsletters like the one her mom saw when she began the adoption process through Holt International Children's Services.

## POPULATION CONTROL EFFORTS, DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES

"One of my students from China told me the government did many bad things to implement the one-child policy," Jihyun Kim said. "I've had a number of international students from China as well as second-generation Chinese American students in my classes. It's safe to assume all of these students have been affected by



OPPOSITE: DUANE ZEHR; OTHER PHOTOS: COURTESY CHARLI COPELAND '22.



the policy in one way or another. But Charli's life journey stands out as one of the most dramatic and memorable."

Each time she teaches IS 182, Fundamentals of Contemporary East Asian Civilizations, the professor of international studies covers the population control strategies of various Asian countries, including the best known: China's one-child policy, in effect from 1979–2015.

Last fall, Copeland was in the class and delved into her past to create her final project.

"Charli was very open about her adoption," Kim said. "She was eager to share this with her classmates and me. (The policy) lasted more than three decades and really affected human beings. It was considered necessary to achieve population control, but its designers didn't think carefully about the many unintended and negative consequences."

"IT'LL ALWAYS BE A PART OF MY HISTORY. THERE'S A HOLE IN MY HEART I'M TRYING TO FILL."

— CHARLI COPELAND '22

In 1979, with population nearing 1 billion, the Chinese government instituted the one-child-per-family policy (with certain exceptions). Married couples were encouraged to delay having children, and women of childbearing age were tracked — even their menstrual cycles were watched. Required to register when they were pregnant, they were often sterilized or forced to use long-lasting contraception after a first birth. For unplanned or second pregnancies, forced abortions were common.

In response to punishments including fines and demotions, those who found themselves pregnant with a forbidden child gave away their babies — overwhelmingly female — 80,000 of whom were then adopted by American parents in the 1980s and '90s. These young women grew up with a complicated legacy: gratitude for their adoption by loving, financially stable

families, but with a lifetime of doubts, uncertainties and loss regarding their origins.

#### THE ADOPTION

Copeland's mom, Connie, remembered immediately falling for the little girl, called Hope, in the newsletter. An optometrist, the elder Copeland was undaunted by the little girl's vision problem. "I'd never understood how other parents would say they fell in love with their child through a picture, but I did," she said. "I thought I could help her."

It took a year of paperwork, background checks and home visits, but finally Connie Copeland flew to China to meet her new daughter and take her back to Madison, Wis. They joined a support system of families who'd recently adopted girls from China. Connie Copeland took Mandarin lessons to communicate with the child and better understand her culture.

There were memorable moments. "I was 3, but had never seen a cat. I would run after our two cats and pull their tails. I thought they were handles," Charli Copeland said. "My mom had to learn to say 'Don't pull the tail!' in Mandarin."

She is generous in her assessment of her birth mother, saying she's grateful that she left her at a hospital, where she would be found quickly and cared for. But 20 years later, Copeland still struggles with why she was abandoned. "Was it because I have a vision problem? Because my birth family was poor? Or because I'm a girl?" she wonders.

Throughout the adoption process, Connie Copeland was aware of the effect of the one-child policy. "These little girls were being left, abandoned. There was infanticide. The culture said that a boy takes care of his parents in old age, so boys were preferred."

"People tell me how lucky Charli is. And I say, 'I'm the lucky one.' Adopting her is the most wonderful thing I've ever done."

Through her adoptive mother's stories, Charli Copeland knows that at the orphanage, she became attached to one of the caregivers, called nannies. "I called her mama," she said. Also, because she took a DNA test in the last few years, she knows she is 79% Chinese and 13% Mongolian.

Copeland urges people not to make assumptions about adoptees, such as that their happy lives with their adoptive families completely wipe out the anguish of their beginnings. "It'll always be a part of my history. There's a hole in my heart I'm trying to fill. I feel a loss inside of me," she said.

"Still, I got a chance at a really amazing life," she said. "Without what happened, I wouldn't have my mom. I'm blessed by her generosity and selflessness." **B**



**ABOVE** Copeland and her mother meet the night watchman who found her at a hospital as a newborn. **RIGHT** Copeland in her crib at the orphanage. She climbed in when they visited to say goodbye.

## The 4-2-1 phenomenon

Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies Dan Getz, who's traveled extensively in China, said the one-child policy has had a significant effect on its society. "If you're there, you can't avoid it. Anybody that has married and is having children has been impacted.

"It's complex, right? Leaders were freaked out by the demographics. But it's a totalitarian policy. From a human rights point of view, it was terrible.

"It all goes back to the Cultural Revolution (starting in the 1960s). The family planning cadres

(local groups that tracked their neighbors' pregnancies and fertility) had control over people's lives. Deciding how many children to have is one of the most basic rights human beings have."

Because there are not enough women and not enough younger workers, the policy has caused major demographic and economic problems, Getz said. "And such pressure is put on all these only children, because all the expectations of the family are on them.

"You've got the 4-2-1 phenomenon, where one child has to take care of two parents and four grandparents. You put it all together and you've got a real complex of societal burdens and issues that are very hard to address.

"One effect of this is because of the large gender imbalance, girls are (now) more cherished, more valued. But when a woman marries, she's still marrying into her husband's family.

"The lack of gender balance is socially and politically destabilizing."

