

## GUEST ESSAY

# China Helped Raise My American Kids, and They Turned Out Fine

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**By Heather Kaye**

Ms. Kaye lived in Shanghai for 16 years, where she raised two daughters.

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When Covid was raging across the world a couple of years ago, I came across a picture online of an American woman wearing a T-shirt that proclaimed, “I refuse to co-parent with the government” — a response to perceived government overreach regarding school mask mandates. I laughed out loud: My own kids were, in a way, co-parented by the Chinese government.

My work in the fashion industry took my husband and me to Shanghai in 2006, where we spent the next 16 years and started a family. In China, government co-parenting begins in the womb. Chinese citizens have faced limits on how many children they were allowed under birth control policies that have since been relaxed. People in China are still legally barred from determining the gender of their unborn babies unless medically necessary, because of a history of sex-selective abortions.

As foreigners, we were exempt from such rules. But I had to accept that my growing belly had become community property, subject to unsolicited rubbing and sidewalk commentary (“It’s a boy. I can tell!”), and that restaurants would refuse to serve me cold beverages. Chinese people ascribe medicinal properties to simple hot water, rooted in hygiene concerns and the belief that it maintains a healthy balance in yin and yang. I dreaded the earful I would get each time I ordered an iced latte — though it was usually served with a warm smile.

In 2008 and 2010 we delivered two healthy daughters in Shanghai and faced the choice of all expatriate parents in China: between pricey international schools and enrollment in local schools, overseen by the government and with an immersion in Chinese culture and values.

We weighed the pros of the Chinese route (our girls would learn fluent Mandarin and, hopefully, a broadened worldview) and the cons (exposure to Communist Party propaganda and potential social isolation of being foreigners in a group of Chinese students). We took the plunge.

Our stringent government co-parent quickly made its presence felt. The girls’ Chinese kindergarten lectured us on everything, including how many hours our daughters should sleep, what they should eat and their optimal weight. Each morning all of the students performed calisthenics in straight rows and raised China’s red flag while singing the national anthem. Classroom windows were usually kept open to increase air circulation and prevent contamination by airborne illnesses, even during winter, when the kids would attend class wearing their coats.

We sometimes felt as if our children were on loan to us for evenings and weekends, to be delivered back to school each weekday.

Over time, the benefits kicked in. Constantly served up moral, history and culture lessons on pulling together for the sake of the Chinese nation, our girls came home discussing self-discipline, integrity and respect for elders. With school instilling a solid work ethic and a total drive for academic excellence, my husband and I didn’t need to push the girls to complete homework; the shame of letting their teachers and classmates down was enough to light their fires.

The prevailing student-centered American approach to education emphasizes the needs of the children and what engages them and promotes independent thought. China stresses that you can succeed — as long as you obey your teachers and work hard. To celebrate Chinese culture and offer an alternative to Western influences, government-funded events were always on offer, like traditional musical performances, operas and plays. At times, our girls would repeat propaganda or, concerned about keeping up with their peers, despair that we hadn’t tutored them earlier in math. At the end of the day, our less demanding American family culture helped keep the balance.

Raising kids in China was a plus in other ways — such as the heavy censorship, which results in a kid-friendly internet, and national limits on how many hours young people can spend playing online video games. Ironically, the tight control of the Communist Party surveillance state results in its own kind of freedom: With crime and personal safety concerns virtually eliminated, our daughters were riding the

subway unsupervised in a city of around 26 million people from the age of 11. A constant but benign (and mostly unarmed) police presence kept order; streets and the green spaces around every corner were kept immaculate, and the sense of civic pride was palpable.

The pandemic laid bare cracks in the system. The punishing Covid lockdown of Shanghai that began in late March last year kept us confined at home for two months, dependent at times on government food rations. We had already made the difficult decision to leave China after nearly three years of being unable to see our families, largely because of Chinese pandemic restrictions, and moved to Washington, D.C., last June.

In some ways, the culture shock coming home feels stronger than when we first arrived in China. We've returned to a divided America where many feel government has no place in our lives. For the first time, I'm a parent in America of two daughters navigating their middle and high school years. Resilient, open-minded and independent, they are thriving here, but it's been an adjustment. They had their first live-shooter drill at school recently, and we've adjusted our senses to be on alert in a way we never needed to in Shanghai. In these times, I find myself missing my Chinese co-parent.

There is no shortage of condemnation directed at China's Communist Party by critics in the United States, much of it justified. But my family's experience in China taught us that immersion in a culture with different answers to everyday questions alters how one sees the world. Practices that used to seem clearly right or wrong took on complexity and dimension.

As an American parent in China, I learned to appreciate the strong sense of shared values and of people connected as a nation. Parenting, like governing, is an imperfect art. Priorities must be set, and tough choices made. There's never been a more crucial time for us to learn from one another and build new bridges across the street, nation and world. Attention to the common good is a fundamental value I seek in an American government co-parent.

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