

# GROWING UP



Juliette and her mother in Chinatown.

## Teens explore their rich cultural traditions

The time had finally come. After waiting 17 months and traveling thousands of miles to Hangzhou, China, Roberta Ferdtschneider was about to meet her adopted daughter, Juliette. But when Juliette, then 2, arrived, she sat in the corner of Roberta's hotel room and sobbed. "She was really unhappy," Roberta tells *JS*. "She didn't want anything to do with me. But the minute I saw her, I knew that my job was to win her over."

Eventually, Ferdtschneider succeeded. Now 13, Juliette is a typical seventh-grader who lives in Brooklyn, New York. She sings in a rock band and loves to read. But unlike your typical teen, Juliette has an extraordinary heritage. She is both Jewish-American and Chinese-American. The two cultures will intersect this month at her bat mitzvah.

In the Jewish religion, a bat mitzvah (or bar mitzvah for boys) is a special ceremony that marks a young woman's passage into adulthood, while reaffirming her faith. Preparations can begin several months, or even years, in advance. Juliette began her training last December. "My bat mitzvah feels like a way to connect to my family," she says. "It's a way to say I'm Jewish, and I'm proud of it."

So that Juliette can pay homage to her birthplace, the bat mitzvah will

# ADOPTED

be held at a Chinese restaurant. The menu will feature dishes from China, and a Chinese poem will be read in Mandarin and English. "Whatever you think of a bat mitzvah does not describe mine," Juliette tells *JS*. "We're mixing Asian and Jewish cultures. They're similar. Both say you should be respectful, and family is very important."

Although Juliette strongly identifies with Judaism, she and her mother have made it a point to stay connected to Chinese culture, celebrating both Jewish and Chinese holidays. Juliette attended a Chinese school on Manhattan's Lower East Side. There, teachers used the name given to her at the orphanage from which she was adopted, Wu Pei Yue (which means "precious ornament"). She also had a Chinese nanny.

## Challenges and Rewards

Juliette's story may be surprising, but she is not alone. In the United States, more than 1.5 million children under age 18 have been adopted both domestically and from foreign countries. In 2008, more than 17,000 children were adopted from other countries.

Growing up in an adoptive family, especially for international children, presents special challenges. While many parents try to weave their child's birth culture into the fabric of the family, it is not uncommon for an adoptee to struggle with identity issues.

Social worker Deborah Johnson runs Kindred Journeys International, an organization that takes adoptees

to visit their birthplaces. She says that adopted children begin thinking about their identities at a younger age than most other kids.

"The disconnect about not having their biological, genetic heredity in their back pocket starts to be seen as a great loss, or something they feel angry about," she says. "They think, 'Yes, I was adopted, and yes, I have this wonderful family. But I also left some things behind that I may never get back.'"

Still, for adoptive families, the experience can be incredibly rewarding. Bringing a child into one's family usually makes one more aware of the outside world. "Adoption is a bridge to other countries and other cultures," Johnson tells *JS*. "It opens our minds; it [broadens] our appreciation."

Karen Van Rossem of Brooklyn, New York, agrees. She is the mother of 13-year-old Jenny Schneider, whom she and her husband adopted from China. "When we adopted Jenny, we became a multiracial family," Van Rossem says. "America is becoming more multiracial, and we celebrate the merging of race and culture."

Jenny, who was 8 months old when she was adopted, celebrates Christian and Jewish holidays with her parents. She recently visited



Juliette displays the Torah while preparing for her bat mitzvah.

the orphanage from which she was adopted in Tongling, China. "We met the staff and children there," Jenny recalls. "One of the nurses remembered me from when she took care of me as a baby."

How does one blend such distinct legacies? For Juliette, it's about getting to know herself: "I have two cultures that I belong to, and I'm trying to live by both," she says. "I'm not going to become Buddhist or Orthodox [Jewish], but I want to connect to all parts of me."

—Kristin Lewis

**Write It!**

Write a brief essay about your own search for identity. What have you learned about yourself that surprised you most?