

XTRA THREE NATIONALITIES, ONE FAMILY

JIMMY YAP

WHEN my wife first turned up at my 16-year-old daughter's school for an event, her school mates did a double take. "Are you sure that's your mother?" they asked her incredulously.

Some of them still do. It's not just that my wife is a blond, blue-eyed Kiwi, but also because it's pretty clear that my daughter is 100-per-cent Asian. What with her smooth black hair, almond-shaped eyes and skin the colour of coffee-with-milk.

My daughter and her three siblings are adopted. They are ethnic Vietnamese, born in Cambodia and they now hold Singapore passports.

Our family started about six years ago. Dale, my wife, had multiple miscarriages and we knew early on that adoption would be our choice. We adopted Nary and Narith (child No 2 and 4, respectively) from Cambodia. At the time, they were six and two years old, respectively. We were told that their mother had died and that their father could not care for them. Also, they had no other siblings. We were, to put it politely, misinformed.

One reason we chose Cambodia is because adopting a child from that country was a quick process. About six years ago, adoption was a big industry in Cambodia, largely fed by American demand. (In 2001, the United States subsequently imposed a moratorium on adopting children from Cambodia). And when something becomes an industry, profit overtakes other motives. Typically, the children with the best chance of being adopted are little kids under two years old.

So, the Cambodian adoption agencies did what any supplier would do when faced with demand for a popular product — they stocked up on inventory. And, rather than wait for cute toddlers to fall from the sky, they took the much faster route — they bought babies. In a country where the per-capita Gross Domestic Product is US\$2,700 (\$4,100) in purchasing power parity terms, buying a baby is not expensive.

THE BABY BUSINESS

Adoption agencies buy babies for about US\$200 each, make up stories about finding them abandoned at temples or under trees, then pass them on with a huge markup to rich Americans and not-so-rich Singaporeans. My wife had joined a mailing list and had been sent, first pictures, and later, medical records.

The pictures broke our hearts. Narith, a little boy with an enormous head on a tiny body, was balanced on his sister's hip. Both wore rags and had hair discoloured from malnutrition. While the pictures were effective, what sealed the deal were the medical records, detailing their height and weight, blood test results and doctor's comments. The facts turned them into real people, not just distant tragic figures in a foreign land.

After we brought Nary and Narith back to Singapore, we found out from Nary, thanks to her constantly improving English,

that she had siblings and parents who were alive. She kept dreaming about them, wondering if they were okay. We figured that if we waited too long, we would never find them. So, a few months later, we were back on the plane to Phnom Penh.

Looking back, it was a miracle that we found Nary's siblings. We had no name and no address. Cambodia is a big place, 181,040 sq km in area. Singapore's land area is just 0.4 per cent of Cambodia's. We had been told by the adoption agency that our kids had come from somewhere up north. Nary could only say she had grown up on a boat. Given that the Tonle Sap is the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, and that the Mekong also flows through Cambodia, her description of living on a boat was not terribly helpful.

AND THEN THERE WERE FOUR

We went from church to church, and from the Red Cross to smaller non-government organisations, talking to people to try to locate Nary's biological parents. We had no luck at first.

One day, while walking along the riverbank (Phnom Penh sits at the confluence of the three rivers of the Mekong, the Bassac and the Tonle Sap), we spotted a skinny little girl looking for discarded aluminium drink cans to recycle.

"That girl knows my sister," Nary said. We approached her and were told to follow her. I was carrying Narith. I remember that it was a blazingly hot afternoon. Phnom Penh is an oven of a city, even when you are next to the river. I was worried and anxious. Suddenly, a crowd of people ran towards me. At the head of it was another skinny girl, about 10 years old, running towards us with arms outstretched. Tears were running down her cheeks. We had found Nary's older sister, Muoi.

Muoi — who now prefers to be known as Helen — never thought she would see her younger sister and brother again. Their parents had split up. Their mother could not care for them, so their father took them. He sold two of them to the adoption agency, and off-loaded Muoi, the older one, to a neighbour looking for a maid to cook, clean and take care of her own children. Muoi was lucky to escape the brothel. The father kept his favourite, Binh, a boy, then four.

We adopted Muoi and, about a year later, Binh. The father had remarried and had two more kids. His new wife was not fond of her stepson, so the father gave Binh up, too.

Adoption is a funny thing. It is both commonplace and fraught with taboos. When I tell people I have adopted children, the usual response is: "You're such a wonderful person." (I'm not, and my kids will be the first to say so).

Once, I mentioned our adoptions at a dinner with a group of friends. One of them later told me privately that he had been adopted. It was not something he felt he could say in public. Often, when I tell people my children are adopted, they would respond that their aunt/uncle/father was

THE FAMILY THAT GREW AND GREW



FROM TWO TO FOUR TO SIX
Mr Jimmy Yap and his wife Dale with their adopted children (from second left) Helen, Binh, Nary and Narith.

DON WONG

NOT QUITE SKIPPING WITH JOY ... MOVING FROM CAMBODIA TO SINGAPORE WAS NEITHER SIMPLE NOR EASY FOR THE CHILDREN. THEY LOST THEIR FRIENDS, FAMILY, FOOD AND FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS.

adopted, too.

Perhaps, the most heartbreaking comment I have received was from one of my kids' classmates. I had volunteered to help out at the school and was tasked to keep an eye on the class while they went swimming. While I was sitting at the poolside, one of the students came up to me and said tentatively: "Is there anything wrong with being adopted?"

Teased by his friends, the teenager wondered if there was anything wrong with him to make his biological mother want to give him up. I scrambled for the right words and told him how his real parents are

the ones taking care of him and how parents sometimes give up their children but that it is not the fault of the children. I hope he believed me.

(By the way, adoptive parents prefer to avoid the term "real parents" when referring to the biological parents. If the biological parents are real parents, then we adoptive parents must be fakes. And why can't kids have two sets of parents, both of whom are real? It is not a competition, after all.)

People tend to think our kids should be skipping with joy and overflowing with gratitude because they were rescued from

... NOT AT FIRST, ANYWAY THEY WERE THROWN INTO AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE SQUATTING ON THE FLOOR TO EAT IS NOT ACCEPTABLE, AND WHERE CRICKETS ARE BUGS, NOT SNACKS.

a life of poverty to live in a comfortable middle-class home with lots of food, healthcare, love and the chance of a better future.

Children, however, don't do gratitude very well. Ask any parent.

And consider this: Moving from Cambodia to Singapore was neither simple nor easy for them. They lost their friends, family, food and familiar surroundings. They were thrown into an environment where they could not speak the language, where squatting on the floor to eat is not acceptable, and where crickets are bugs, not snacks.

When Nary first came to Singapore, she

used to hoard her food because she knew the pain of hunger. She remembers having to swim over to a neighbour's boat at night to beg for scraps to eat.

MOST DON'T EAT FROGS HERE

Muoi had to learn to read and write at the age of 10, having never been to school. I remember the first time I gave her a book for her birthday. She looked at it and dismissively threw the object aside.

When Binh came to Singapore, he wanted to catch the frogs in the fields to eat. Fortunately, those he caught were so small that we were able to persuade him

to let them go.

Because my children do not look like my wife at all, my daughters used to tell people that she was their aunt. It was easier than explaining.

They have now adapted, more or less, to their new circumstances. Helen is 16 and studying at Northlight School. She has grown up to be a strong, confident teenager and is finally enjoying her school, thanks to its unique teaching approach.

Our younger daughter Nary, 12, prefers almost anything to studying (just like me, when I was her age) but she is a voracious reader. Narith, the youngest at eight, is in Primary 1 and failing every subject because he cannot read. However, he is the happiest kid in his class and an absolute monkey at advanced gymnastics. The last to join our family, Binh, 11, has adjusted the most rapidly, and we will enroll him in school next year after he has caught up on reading, like he has on maths.

We are a unique Singapore family. Four ethnic Vietnamese kids who were born in Cambodia, one Singapore-born and bred father, and one Singapore-born and bred mother, who just happens to hold a New Zealand passport because her parents are Kiwis. There is a Singapore flag outside our house, which my wife bought because she feels patriotic, as National Day is around the corner.

My children are too young to know what it means to be Singaporean. They still miss Cambodia, though they are aware that the food in Singapore is cleaner (though maybe not better; they don't sell sliced pig's ears on a stick here), and Singapore is a lot richer than Cambodia is.

The girls don't really understand the concept of citizenship. They still think of themselves as Vietnamese (which, confusingly, is both a nationality and an ethnicity) or, occasionally, Cambodian (ditto). My children do not understand the words of the national anthem but, hey, only 13.6 per cent of people in Singapore do.

Thanks to National Service, the boys, though younger, will probably understand what being a Singaporean means, much more than the girls. Binh has already started to feel the impact of being a young Singaporean male after his trip to Genting Highlands had to be cancelled. His passport had expired after his 11th birthday. Unfortunately, we discovered this inconvenient truth only when he was on an express bus heading for the Second Link. It cost me almost \$30 in taxi fare to pick him up from Tuas and take him home.

My children are the Singaporeans of tomorrow, through I wonder what this means for them, and for Singapore. When they grow older, they will have many choices of where to live. They can live in Singapore, or return to Cambodia, where they grew up. They can choose Vietnam, where they have never been but at least the language is familiar, or they can live in New Zealand, where my wife's family is.

If they decide to go to Cambodia, there will certainly be much that they can offer, thanks to their education here. If they stay on in Singapore, they can contribute their

language abilities and their experience of living on a boat. With global warming and rising sea levels, perhaps knowing how to live on a boat and how to fish will be useful skills.

Thanks to our kids, my wife and I know Phnom Penh pretty well. In the first two years after we had adopted them, my wife spent about four to six months in the city sorting out the vast amount of paperwork. Most adoptive parents pay facilitators to do this but we wanted to do this on our own.

A RIVER THAT LEADS TO CHOICES

Thanks to our kids, we have a unique insight into the slums they came from. We have met other families like theirs. We realised a lot of the problems that had broken our children's lives could have been prevented — with a little help. We could not walk away from the kids who had been our children's friends and neighbours, and we did not want other kids to suffer like ours had.

We started a small non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Phnom Penh called Riverkids that works directly with families who are at risk of child-trafficking. Our project is located right inside the slums. There is a pre-school programme for little kids, another one to enrol the older ones in state school and give them additional tuition to help them catch up, and a vocational programme to give young teens, especially the girls, work and life skills, so they will have choices in earning a living instead of working in a brothel. We now have more than 100 kids, and you can read about the project at www.riverkidsproject.org.

It is not easy running an NGO on a shoestring budget. My wife is not paid. She has to care for our kids at the same time, and it is a struggle to constantly balance Riverkids and the needs of our own children. I feel guilty about not spending more time with our kids, but we can't walk away from 100 children who won't be able to go to school or get medical aid without us. Even with our help, not all of them will make it. Just this week, we learnt about a girl who had been trafficked, either by a boyfriend or a sister. We are trying to find her, but she may not want to be found. We try, anyway.

Thankfully, we have friends and family who donate time and money to help us. People have come forward to donate clothes and toys (one wonderful couple organised a donation drive in their condo). Cabin crew from Singapore Airlines volunteered to organise a funfair for the kids that brought the entire slum together for a heart-filled day in July. Students from a junior college are writing a document on child trafficking for us. Other people help us to network while still others volunteer to help us in a million other ways. With everyone's help, we hope we can make a difference to the lives of those kids from Phnom Penh.

Just as four kids from Phnom Penh have made a difference to ours.

Jimmy Yap is a writer and editor.
To learn more about Riverkids, visit
www.riverkidsproject.org