



Home is a Roof Over a Pig: An American Family's Journey in China

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When all-American Aminta Arrington moves from suburban Georgia to a small town in China, she doesn't go alone. Her army husband and three young children, including an adopted Chinese daughter, uproot themselves too. Aminta hopes to understand the country with its long civilization, ancient philosophy, and complex language. She is also determined that her daughter Grace, born in China, regain some of the culture she lost when the Arringtons brought her to America as a baby.

In the university town of Tai'an, a small city where pigs' hooves are available at the local supermarket, donkeys share the road with cars, and the warm-hearted locals welcome this strange looking foreign family, the Arringtons settle in . . . but not at first. Aminta teaches at the university, not realizing she is countering the propaganda the students had memorized for years. Her creative, independent (and loud) American children chafe in their classrooms, the first rung in society's effort to ensure conformity. The family is bewildered by the seemingly endless cultural differences they face, but they find their way. With humor and unexpectedly moving moments, Aminta's story is appealingly reminiscent of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. It will rivet anyone who is thinking of adopting a child, or anyone who is already familiar with the experience. An everywoman with courage and acute cultural perspective, Aminta recounts this transformative quest with a freshness that will delight anyone looking for an original, accessible point of view on the new China.

Home is a Roof Over a Pig: An American Family's Journey in China Details

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From Reader Review Home is a Roof Over a Pig: An American Family's Journey in China for online ebook

JulieK says

I found the author kind of irritating, but I did enjoy her forays into Chinese etymology.

Liralen says

When Arrington's husband decided it was time to leave the army, he made her an offer: Until then, his career had taken precedence; they'd lived in Germany and Japan and the U.S., and she'd never had much of a chance to build her own career. Now, though, with the army out of the picture, it was her turn to decide.

Arrington wanted to move to China. She'd spent little time there, but one of their daughters was adopted from China, and she wanted Grace—and her siblings—to have a better understanding of the culture Grace came from. Her husband agreed, and off they went to teach English.

It's not so different from other uproot-and-move-to-a-foreign-country books (I'm thinking, in particular, of *The Foremost Good Fortune*), but there were a couple of specific things that I loved. First, Arrington ended up using written (Mandarin) Chinese as a springboard to better understand the culture. She talks about this explicitly in a note on sources at the end of the book (315), but it's evident well before that. Understanding what each character is meant to look like helps her both learn the character and understand what's behind it.

The second thing: They adapt and put down roots. The kids have some difficulty adjusting; the oldest in particular struggles against a new language and new norms. But they manage, and the adults don't treat it as a temporary thing. They return to the U.S. for the summer, but they make China their home. According to the author's website, they're still in China; whether or not they've moved since then, they're clearly determined not to be casual expats.

Interesting to see some of the relationships develop. Mr. Jia, who works in their building, proves to be a valuable partner in helping their children adjust and learn Mandarin—but Arrington's relationship with him gains a lot more texture when they talk about the Vietnam War, in which Mr. Jia and Arrington's father had both fought, on opposite sides (194). It's a texture I don't think would have been possible with a relatively shorter stay, and the book is much richer for that and other similar layers and complexities.

Susan Snider says

Interesting view on language acquisition and cultural differences. Made me think.

Shirley says

[Home is a Roof Over a Pig](#) is a fantastic read for the armchair cultural anthropologist. Aminta Arrington's memoir is a fantastic first-hand account of the life, customs, and calligraphy of China. Though she shares her

family's present-day experiences, she also shares historical lessons that have led to the lives and thought processes of today's Chinese. The book is very well-written by an author who is well-educated and knowledgeable about her subject.

I was fascinated by the Chinese education system. Because Aminta and her husband are both educators, they are able to successfully critique Chinese education. They have the advantage of being able to observe their own children in school as well as learn from students in their own classrooms. Additionally, Aminta is being tutored in Chinese so she has the perspective of a learner. Her instructor is an invaluable resource in understanding thinking, traditions, and language.

The author uses quotes to begin many of the chapters from people well-known in Chinese history and even from the Bible. My favorite quote was a Chinese Proverb. "Water and words are easy to pour but impossible to recover." (p. 117)

Arrington makes an interesting observation as she explores the acquisition of language. "Learning a foreign language is not academic, it is social." (p. 253) She tells her university students that they can memorize a word, hear it, write it or recite it but the word does not become their own until the word can be used to express their own thoughts.

In her discussion of the place of women in Chinese society, the author quoted a few of what she considered limitless Chinese sayings. My favorite was "Put three women together and you have a drama." (p. 274) That might be considered a global observation of women. I know it is blatantly true for young women of the American junior high school age!

When the family arrived at the foster home of their adopted daughter Grace, Aminta observed that there were no toys in the home where many foster children had been given care. She suggested that this explained why their daughter had always considered people the best amusement. (p. 306) This is the type of cultural insight shared by this book that is uncommon to other books on Chinese culture. The author is able to share facts in addition to her very personal perspective.

The author does an excellent job of defining Chinese culture. It isn't just ". . . art, language, poetry, architecture, and ceremony, all of which China has in abundance. It also means duties, obligations, manners, rituals, and traditions, and China's long history has layer upon layer, which have become more intricate and complex as the centuries have passed." (p. 276)

She also excels at comparing our American culture to the Chinese. "I might disagree with the war in Iraq, be embarrassed by my country's occasional arrogance, and abhor the violence and the decadence shown in the movies that we export around the world, but I couldn't disown this country that had pushed my bounds so far, that had told me my abilities, my imagination, my work ethic were my only limitations. Perhaps, it was this more than anything else that made me an American." (p. 277)

This was a book that I dreaded putting down and always looked forward to picking up again. I highly recommend it.

Mommymac10 says

Just the sort of travel book I most enjoy: what was it like?? Arrington and her husband and 3 small children

lived in a medium-size city in Shandong while Mr. Arrington taught English in college and his wife taught it in high school. At the same time, their children were going to a Chinese pre-school. Immersion all around, so readers get a good look at the culture. She also studied the ideographs as a lesson in Chinese history -- hence the title, which describes the character for "home". We participate in her gradually learning the language and customs, and we also hear from her students. Most helpful for anyone traveling to China.

Anna Griffith says

Check out my blog for more extensive reviews and more!

PROS: I really enjoyed reading this book. Ms. Arrington's writing is funny at times, poignant at others and always interesting. She is transparent enough to admit when she has shortcomings, and those shortcomings make her very relatable and human. Her examinations of the pictographs that make up the Chinese language were very interesting. I enjoyed her look at the pros and cons of the Chinese education system.

CONS: The only complaint I had was that I wish she had included some photos to supplement the story.

Teresa says

I really enjoyed this thoughtful, interesting memoir of an American family's life in China following the adoption of one of their daughters, Grace. I have a personal interest in China - my brother lived & taught there, I have a native Chinese family member, and two of my nieces will be traveling to China this year - one to Beijing & one to Shanghai. The author is immersed in the education system while living in Tai'n both as an instructor and also as a parent of 3 children attending the local school. She is thoughtful in her assessments of cultural differences and often introspective examining her own background and basis for her feelings. I also particularly enjoyed her examination of the Chinese calligraphy and meaning of the characters. She is forthcoming on the initial adjustment of having an adopted child, honest telling of her feelings of being viewed as a foreigner and final acceptance in the village and tells some heart rending stories of her encounters with her friendships developed there. I loved Mr. Jia and the story of how she attempts to contact Grace's initial foster parent. Beautiful, heartfelt book.

Rachel says

I picked up this up from the travel/foreign history section on a whim, after loving my last choice from there ("In My Father's Country" by Saima Wahab). The book turned out to be a personal family memoir, with snippets of Chinese language, culture and history, as well as the family adventures traveling through China and living there for 7 years (as of 2012 when the book was published). The title comes from the actual Chinese character for Home, which literally translates as "a roof over a pig". The Arrington family, with three children under the age of six, decided to move to China after adopting a girl from China four years before, to show her more about her culture. They move to the Shandong province and the city of Ta'in. At first they are only known as the "foreigners," but after spending four years there and building relationships, they are considered part of the community. They did move eventually to Beijing as the children got older and their apartment was too small.

Each chapter discusses a particular Chinese character, usually something about its etymology from

traditional to modern characters, and then how it applied to a particular episode in Arrington's life. An example would be the chapter on language, which means "the words of myself," in which the author discusses how her adopted Chinese daughter Grace did better in learning the Chinese language, despite the fact that she had never really been previously interested in words or books. I liked when Arrington told her students that "learning a foreign language is not academic, it is social." I definitely believe this to be true, especially in relation to taking Italian as a foreign language at university. I found it much easier to grasp the concept of Italian after having to use it in everyday life and conversation versus trying to read it in a book and I've found the same to be the case with internationals that I helped in conversational English. Highly recommended, 5 stars.

Luanne says

One of the best books on comparing/contrasting Chinese vs Western cultures. The icing on the cake, the author is a very talented writer whose perspective is that of a mother/wife who moves to China with her husband and 3 small children, one of whom was born in China and adopted into the family.

Kelly says

I enjoyed Aminta's narratives of her encounters in China. I especially appreciated that she wove in information about the Mandarin language and the meaning/etymology of some of its symbols. I chose this book because I'll be traveling to China soon and this book was a nice introduction into Chinese culture and language, especially from a southern woman's point of view.

guiltlessreader says

Originally posted on my blog [Guiltless Reading](#)

My two cents: Wonderful memoir! I really enjoyed it -- it's a mixture travelogue, family diary and history lesson. Arrington's strong point is the charming way in which she recounts her experiences. It's personal, it's funny, and at times heartbreaking. If you like to travel, it's extremely interesting to view China from another's eyes. And I learned quite a bit about Chinese culture, history, and the educational system.

Aminta Arrington is an American who has always been fascinated with China. When her husband, Chris, retires from the army, they decide to live out her dream of living in China. Having adopted a Chinese baby girl, Grace, is the other reason for their move. They want Grace to identify not only with her Western upbringing, but also her roots. They pack up their family and take the leap into an unknown culture ... and have a grand (if rather culturally shocking) adventure until years later, they eventually become accepted in the small university town of Tai'an where Aminta finds a teaching post.

One major device that Arrington used throughout the book, and in fact the title of the book is derived from the Chinese symbol for home, and each chapter has an equivalent in Chinese script. I came away with a better appreciation and understanding of how unwittingly the pictorial representation of the words gives us a glimpse of ancient Chinese life. She likewise injects her own observations or opinions, giving us a bit more depth of how she interprets the meaning behind these words.

For example, the word "population" is pictured literally as "people mouths" and knowing that China is a over a billion strong, Arrington explains: "... they austere, yet uniquely express the challenge China has long faced: a large population means more mouths to feed."(p. 41).

The book focuses on a Western experience in China -- from university town, to a rural countryside, to a modern metropolis. It was interesting to read a Western viewpoint when I come from a very Asian viewpoint. The culture shock they experience is where I could totally relate to. (I am an immigrant to Canada from Asia) -- the shock of unfamiliarity of everything, the language barrier, and the agony of learning how to do even the simplest of things (like buying something, or taking public transport). I found the "second culture shock" they experience when they go back to the US and return as fascinating -- it's the first time I have ever heard of it.

This book is also as much about family life and rearing kids in an alien culture. I had a few moments of quiet heartbreak as she recounts how they learn of Grace's origins. I laughed a little as they struggled to make sense of themselves as a family within a strange country. I cheered on the kids as they became more proficient in the local language and made friends. I turned sober as I see the desire of Aminta and Chris to retain their American-ness while embracing some of the China that they had so desired for Grace and for themselves as a family. And I smiled when a small gesture of Mr. Jia, their super, reveals to Aminta that they are finally accepted as part of the little community.

There are many other diversions. Some interesting points that I appreciated were the pressures that Chinese students face in a China that is fast modernizing, the peek into how steeped in tradition China still is, and finally the subtle commentary about the one-child policy which has resulted in a generation of girls being adopted by other countries. The book is a rich source for many potentially controversial discussions.

Uh-ohs:

Arrington seems to be quite open to the cultural differences she experiences. Obviously, this has a strongly Western-centric viewpoint of the world but hey, it's a memoir, and being biased is the stuff that memoirs are made of. I admit that I am both intrigued and wary about these books as the "holier than thou" attitude of many Western writers writing about Asia always seems to revolve around them. (Think Eat Pray Love.) I flag this as an "uh-oh" because someone coming from the opposite perspective may do a few eye rolls at the obvious, or find offense in her blatant and unapologetic American-ness.

Right off the bat, I was slightly irked by her continual whining about wanting to experience the "real China"... how romanticized a phrase is that? She talks about "modern China" (a China opening to the West and its influences) and she talks about "traditional China" (rural China as if they were two separate things and if one were real and the other less real. But isn't the real China just China ... modern and traditional all rolled into one?

I was also a little annoyed with how she -- whether knowingly or not -- seemed to be foisting her opinions on her students. I tsk-tsked a bit when she got worked up about the idea her students not understanding the concept of independence, individuality and individual freedom. Cultural relativism of what is considered right and wrong is an emotionally laden topic; I applaud her for her honesty because it has also made me more conscious of my own stereotypes and my own cultural lens.

One thing that I thought was missing in the book: photos. I wanted to know what her little hole in the wall looked like, the descriptions of the beautiful mountains and the countryside. If you want to take a peek, she put up a few photos on her website, so go check them out if you're as curious as me.

Verdict: A charming and fascinating look into China and Chinese culture in this travelogue memoir. Definitely worth the read!

Wonderful memoir! I really enjoyed it - mixture travelogue, diary and history lesson. Floundering between 4 & 5 stars. Definitely worth the read! Full review coming soon.

Please visit my blog Guiltless Reading for more reviews!

Sarah says

I really enjoyed this book. I appreciated the author's insight into both the contradictory nature of China, and of the arrogance that Americans are perceived to have. Being willing to accept these made it so much more enjoyable to read.

China is an amazing country, filled with magnificent history and culture, yet it also has some aspects that we might consider pretty gross. On top of this, within the country itself is such a wide divergence between its people, cultures, environment and attitudes.

For the author to accept the myriad experiences she was faced with, without a sense of judgement and smugness (of knowing the "right way") made the journey so much more interesting for me. I felt as though she was always aware of the rules about what she could and couldn't say freely, but that she sensitively broached those questions about communism and the Chinese sense of identity that she did have. I did sometimes feel that knowing the boundaries, she pushed a little too far, but it did not seem to be done with malice or a feeling that her way was the right way, more a true desire to understand.

I loved that she wanted her daughter to be able to have a strong sense of her roots, but I also understood her questioning how much her children would truly belong anywhere since they now straddled two cultures, and while this is wonderful, it also raises further questions.

I also question how society in such a rich culture will continue to thrive when progress keeps pushing forward. I think remembering the importance of retaining history and traditions is very necessary, and I hope that we can maintain the link with the old while also improving our new.

I felt it was an honest and sensitive portrayal of a family's experience in somewhere far from home.

Kristi says

The Arrington family has three small children, one of whom is a Chinese adopted girl named Grace. Once the author's husband retires from military service, he tells his wife, "follow your dream" and her dream is to live and teach in China, based on previous military stations in Japan and a fascination with Asian culture, as well as a desire to give Grace a sense of her roots. While it is incredibly difficult to place families into teaching positions, they manage to both receive jobs at a small university/medical college inland from the hustle/bustle of the coastal, more Western influenced cities. Cultural immersion, successful and unsuccessful, ensues.

Why I like this book more than Kasher Chinese by Michael Levy: AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES AND WRITING

I felt like I was there with the Arringtons - baffled by new foods, intrigued by the Chinese students and culture, and at turns just as tickled or frustrated as the Arringtons were with their Chinese experiences. The use of the Chinese character chapter headings is so useful - it lets Arrington talk about how that character is put together (Chinese writing is typically a blend of two or three word characters merged into a concept), and she usually showed the traditional character and Mao's simplified character now used nationwide. Hence the title, the blended character for home is "house" with the character for "pig" underneath it. As a semantics geek, I really enjoyed the character histories and as a writing geek, loved how that character construction story tied into what was happening in the chapter.

Arrington does not put the "kumbayah" touch on her writing, although she and her family are quietly, deeply faithful and often use that faith to help them understand and cope with their situations. Problems like water turned off overnight, pollution, the incredibly square peg into square hole educational structure of China (round pegs beware), the complete lack of privacy, the incredibly difficult language - nothing is sugar coated. This authentic presentation of the bad with the good makes the good experiences that much more joyful to the reader - the oldest daughter finally speaking Chinese and bonding with her Chinese classmates, Grace flitting from Chinese to English and back again, traveling to meet Grace's foster family, breaking through with students and making friends with neighbors.

I got a lot out of this book and the Arringtons' experiences as they traveled from their small town to the large cities of China and Thailand. I admire them for the risk they took, the challenge they presented to their family, and their belief in the value of each person in this world. I learned a great deal about Chinese culture and had lots of thoughtful moments while reading, mulling over my approach to situations, or wondering how a very difficult situation could possibly be overcome - we are so different. I recommend this book to anyone interested in what's happening in China - it's a very informative view of the culture clash our countries have to overcome to learn to work together in commerce, environmental management, and peace.

Suzanna says

I liked the idea and subjects of this book - China, culture, language, family, adoption, living overseas - but it was a bit of a struggle to get through, sadly. I loved the way she incorporated the written Chinese language throughout, but it often seemed choppy and and though she didn't know quite what she wanted to say. And, I realize this is her story and her perceptions, but I felt like she over-dramatized and exaggerated some of her China experiences. Having lived in China myself about a decade before she did, I found some of her stories a bit much, knowing for myself some specific ways China's has changed. I also know that it's her story and her experiences.

Cate says

When I was in middle school my father called from half-way across the country where he commuted for work to tell me, my mother, and younger sister that we had the opportunity to move to the other side of the world. We all enthusiastically agreed to this adventure and learned that we had ten days in which to pack up our entire lives and arrive in New Zealand. Since my experience living there, I have loved traveling and feel an immediate bond with other Americans who have had the same experience of making a foreign land home.

I was excited to be sent a copy of Aminta Arrington's "Home is a Roof Over a Pig" through the Goodreads First Reads program (which came with a lovely note from the author). I was immediately drawn into Arrington's narrative by her wonderful story telling style. I felt an affinity in motherhood from the very

beginning when she explained that she had given both of her daughters French middle names as I have done for both of mine. I also felt our commonality as lovers of other cultures, and reveled in her beautiful, vivid descriptions of China complemented by the wonderful theme of Chinese characters defining each chapter. As a student and admirer of languages, I was enchanted by the descriptions of the symbolic meanings drawn into each Chinese character. This book is a beautiful exploration of Chinese culture through the symbols of Chinese language, showing how both are inextricably linked.

Arrington and her husband make the decision to move to China to teach English at a medical university in order to create kinship between their family and China where they adopted their younger daughter. She charmingly describes learning to navigate public transportation, haggling for price at markets, constantly being stared at and followed as the “foreigners”, and trying to not simply live as ex-pats, but truly become a part of the life in China.

I delighted in her comparisons of the ever-changing English language and the practically ageless Chinese, illustrated by the ease in which a modern reader of Chinese is able to easily read a poem in this language though written around the same time as Beowulf, whereas very few modern English speakers could even guess at the Old English in which Beowulf was written. Perhaps it is a reflection of my personality, but my favorite story behind the symbols within a word was the “spear-shield” meaning contradiction, which derives from a 2,000 year old story about a man attempting to sell both his spear and shield marketing the first as so strong it can pierce any shield and the second as so strong that it could never be pierced by any spear. I don't know if it is the charm of language characters based on stories, the word itself, or my love of Chinese weaponry developed after more than a decade of practicing and teaching Tai Chi Chuan.

Her descriptions of China and its people are as rich and beautiful as the calligraphy that she explores. She describes their life in Tai'an, the beauty of Guilin, their experience climbing Mount Tai (the foremost of the 5 Sacred Mountains), their visits to modernized Shanghai, staying among China's wealthiest class in westernized Hong Kong, and finally the long anticipated visit by her family to Fuzhou where her adopted daughter had been given up and thereby came into their lives and family.

Part travelogue, part memoir, part linguistic exploration, this book explores China with a Westerner's eyes and a lover's heart. It tells of a country, a family, an adventure-- but most of all relationships, “guanxi”. A word which, Arrington explains, is a combination of the symbols for gateway and silk. She has definitely shown the amazing way in which her family entered into China and were bound up and interwoven into the lives of the people they meet.

I highly recommend this read!
