

My Country, My Destiny

<http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:pWZUHHgTaiYJ:www.newschinamag.com/zw/ck10/c10z1.htm+Flying+Tigers+Zhang+Ning&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>

As a “Baby Tiger,” the son of an American **Flying Tigers** pilot, **Zhang Ning** has spent all of his life as a Chinese person, living through the turmoil and triumph of a nation in constant transformation.

By Staff Reporter Wang Yan



When this reporter first met **Zhang Ning** in his home in Beijing in April 2009, the 64-year-old man seemed more Chinese than American, the only difference was that his nose was not so Chinese, and his eyes were much paler than most. When he spoke, however, it was pure Mandarin with a strong Beijing accent.

But **Zhang Ning** is indeed American. His biological parents were American **Flying Tigers**, stationed in China during World War II. But he was brought up in China, by a Chinese general in a Chinese family.

It was his special identity, as a “Baby Tiger,” that has given **Zhang Ning** an extraordinary destiny.

Mystery of the Blond Hair

In late 1950s, when **Zhang Ning** was a little boy, his blond hair and blue eyes made him stand out from everyone else. He was nicknamed, “Xiao Huang Mao” (little golden hair) or “Xiao Yang Ren” (little westerner) by people around him. As a child, he once overheard somebody say that he was not his mother’s son, so he went directly to his mother for an explanation. His mother, Li Lianfang, explained to him, “When I was pregnant, I used to drink too much vinegar, so that’s why you were born with golden hair.”

During those days, his golden hair and pale complexion garnered comparisons to stars in the Soviet and Albanian films that were popular in China at the time. **Zhang Ning** felt flattered when people said he looked like a Russian or Albanian.

Zhang was born on June 16, 1945, towards the end of the Second World War, which brought thousands of Allied soldiers to China. He was brought up in a Chinese

family whose patriarch was a general during the war, and the family was considered part of the upper-middle class. Family members still call him “Xiaodi,” or “little brother,” with affection. He told this reporter that his childhood in Sichuan was happy, and his family was quite rich. “We had a garden, a tennis court, around 20 maids and four cars,” he said.

After the People’s Republic of China was founded, General **Zhang** Zhihe, his father, was appointed to the State Council in Beijing. So, in 1950, the family left Sichuan for the capital, where life was also as good for the Zhangs. Young **Zhang Ning** received the best education of the day, and was given free reign of Zhongnanhai, the Chinese equivalent to the American White House.

Everything seemed perfect for **Zhang Ning** until 1957, when his father was branded a “rightist” during the Anti-Rightist Campaign launched by the Party. General **Zhang** was sent to Sichuan for “re-education,” and the political turmoil turned the family’s life upside down.

One day when **Zhang Ning** was 15, he stumbled upon his father’s diary, in which General **Zhang** wrote: “My son, **Ning**, was adopted from a hospital.” **Zhang Ning** could not believe what he saw; he burst into tears and ran into his mother’s arms, asking if he was really adopted. His mother held him and revealed the truth about his birth.

Searching for Roots

“Xiaodi, you were sent over to us on the day after your birth,” his mother, Li Lianfang, explained. “We didn’t mean to hurt you by keeping you in the dark during these past years; we just thought you were too young to know this.”

From Li, **Zhang** learned that his parents were both Americans. His father was a renowned **Flying** Tiger, who died during a mission in Sichuan, and his mother was a nurse in the air force.

Zhang was born after his father’s plane went down, so his mother asked doctors to find a more suitable family who could adopt her son. Li said to **Zhang Ning**, “I heard that your mother went back to the US with the air force after the war. But since then, we haven’t heard anything about her.”

Though he knew that he was indeed American, he was unable to look for his biological parents because at that time, the political environment was quite intense. It was during the Korean War (1950 - 1953), and American soldiers were being depicted as cruel and merciless in their battles with the Chinese army. **Zhang** was frightened of what people would say if they found out he was American.

Since his adopted father was sent away, the family suffered, people around them, including friends and classmates, made him feel inferior, and his relationships with them turned frosty. Things got worse several years later when the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) brought even more hardships to the family. “Our family was labeled ‘capitalists,’ so the topic of who my birth parents were became taboo,” he said. “I then gave up my plan to search for my roots.”

Because Zhang’s Chinese parents were affected by the political turmoil caused by the Cultural Revolution, **Zhang Ning** lost his chance for further education after he graduated from junior middle school at the age of 16. He was assigned to work in a Beijing light bulb factory, where the labor was tedious, and the environment was severe. **Zhang** worked in the sweltering furnace room for a grueling 35 years.

In 1979 the government declared that the “rightist” accusations brought against **Zhang** Zhihe were false, and his “re-education” was over. By this time the reform era

arrived, the political struggles in the country had ended, and **Zhang** Zhihe was given the opportunity for a new life.

After so many ups and downs during his life, and given the loving way in which he had been accepted and treated by his adopted family, by then **Zhang** Ning's desire to find his real parents had dissipated.

It was not until 1984, when his dying adopted mother encouraged him to look for his biological mother, that his desire was reignited.

Impending Answer

With the reform and opening-up of China in early 1980s, more and more Westerners came to China, which gave **Zhang Ning** the courage to face his real identity. This open environment also provided him with more opportunities to solve the mystery of his birth.

Dong Bingqi, the doctor who had taken him to the **Zhang** family, said **Zhang** Ning's birth father was a lieutenant colonel that died between December 1944 and March 1945.

In 1997, **Zhang Ning** joined the Beijing Aviator's Association (BAA), which exposed him to **Flying Tigers** reunions and air force veterans.

Zhang Ning, now 64, showed a picture of a young American soldier wearing a garrison cap to this reporter and said, "This man is quite possibly my biological father." The back of the picture reads, "Lt. Col. William Norman Reed (Jan. 8, 1917 - Dec. 19, 1944)."

General Xu Huajiang, a former **Flying** Tiger from the Chinese-American Composite Wing (CACW) affiliated with General Chennault's 14th Air Force used to fight alongside Reed, so he knew quite a lot about him. He is the one who gave **Zhang Ning** hope that Lt. Reed could be his unknown father.

Immediately after General Xu told **Zhang Ning** about the Lt. Reed, **Zhang** asked a journalist to help him write a letter in English to Edward Reed, Lt. Reed's nephew. Edward responded to the letters, but was doubtful of the assumption. After a few letters back and forth, **Zhang Ning** sent DNA results to Edward with the expectation of the same. But the Reed family did not respond, and has not written since.

The initial excitement was replaced by disappointment. **Zhang** has tried to ask others for help with finding his biological mother, but nothing has come of it yet.

Zhang continues to hold on to Lt. Reed's portrait. Sometimes he gazes at the photograph for hours, pondering the possibility that the American man in the picture might be his father. Although there has not been any progress towards solving his mystery in the past few years, **Zhang** expects the truth will someday be revealed. "I've always felt that I lacked a sense of belonging, ever since I was a little boy," he explained. "So I really want to find my roots, my real identity, during my lifetime."

Zhang married a Chinese woman, and together they raised a son and a daughter. In 2000, **Zhang** retired from his position at the factory. He now lives a peaceful life with his wife and a 9-year-old grandson in an eastern suburb of Beijing.

Zhang told this reporter that his fate has been always linked with the ups and downs of this country. World War II initiated the story of his phenomenal destiny; the years of political turmoil and the confusion of youth brought questions about his identity and the burden of being ostracized; and reform and opening allowed his story to come out from underneath the covers. With the normalization of Sino-US relations, he has been given the chance to seek answers to a question that has upset him his entire life.