

## Film Review

### Somewhere Between

(Docu)

A Ladylike Films presentation. Produced by Linda Goldstein Knowlton. Executive producers, Bobby Chang, Jon Fitzgerald. Co-producers, Patricia Verducci, Katie Flint.

Directed by Linda Goldstein Knowlton. Camera (color), Nelson Hume, Christine Burrill; editor, Katie Flint; music, Lili Haydn; music supervisor, Linda Cohen; sound, Lindsey Alvarez; associate producer, Stephanie Graves. Reviewed at Los Angeles Film Festival (competing), June 17, 2011. (Also in Hot Docs Film Festival.) Running time: **94 MIN.**

With Jenna Cook, Haley Butler, Ann Boccuti, Fang "Jenni" Lee.

By JOHN ANDERSON

One needs several hearts to survive the breakage inflicted by "Somewhere Between," a delicately wrought, deeply felt docu-profile of four teenage girls who differ in background and aspirations, but share one life-defining factor: All are Chinese adoptees, and all are trying to come to terms with that fact as they navigate the already perilous waters of American adolescence. As the film states, 80,000 children from China have been adopted in the United States since 1989. Considering Knowlton's sublime subjects and sensitive execution, despite a certain vagueness of context, the docu could have widespread appeal.

Knowlton (who co-directed the 2006 Sundance docu "The World According to Sesame Street"), isn't close to being a remote observer: She adopted a daughter from China, and so "Somewhere Between" is as much an effort by the director to get a grip on the issues her daughter will face as it is an exploration of its subjects' cultural quandary. Fortunately and wisely, Knowlton picked a quartet of Asian-Americans who are secure, self-possessed and articulate enough to approach their own questions in a manner that transcends race or nationality.

All four — Jenna Cook, Haley Butler, Ann Boccuti and Fang Lee, known as Jenni — share an outsider's perspective and a certain self-depre-

cating humor; they refer to themselves, and occasionally each other, as Twinkies, scrambled eggs and bananas (“white on the inside, yellow on the outside”). All were adopted out of Chinese orphanages and wound up in different parts of the U.S. — Lee in Berkeley, Calif., Cook in Massachusetts, Butler in Nashville, and Boccuti outside Philadelphia.

Their families seem sublimely happy; it would be interesting to know if Knowlton stumbled across any potential subjects whose adoptions didn’t work out. But the teens’ individual experiences are in some ways dramatically different, notably that of Lee, who remembers being abandoned at age 5

by her brother at a bus stop.

What seems most notably absent from the film are the motivations of the adoptive parents. Knowlton doesn’t discuss her own reasons; nor does she ask anyone else, although an occasional clue is dropped: Butler, for instance, has grown up in a devoutly Christian home in Tennessee (there’s a fleeting shot of her mother’s car and its anti-abortion/pro-adoption bumper sticker). One assumes religion played a part in the adoption, but it isn’t discussed.

Docu could have offered a more in-depth explanation of why so many Chinese girls were available for international adoption, which would have enriched the story with-

out derailing it. Beijing’s misguided one-child policy is addressed, but not its calamitous consequences: Chinese tradition calls for the son to care for his aged parents, so a girl without brothers was considered a liability.

Knowlton is more interested in her subjects’ world-views, attitudes and peeves — like being told so often how lucky they are to live in America. All express an interest in going back to China, and finding their birth parents; Butler, in fact, does just that, in what is easily the film’s most electrifying sequence.

Production values are tops, especially the agile HD lensing by Nelson Hume and Christine Burrill.



**“Somewhere Between” profiles the life of four Chinese adoptees.**

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