

## First Single Man to Adopt in China

### Support from the Top



***“Neither the ‘bamboo curtain’ nor sexual confusion could keep Peter Rupert Lighte from his appointed rounds. He was determined to become a sinologist before President Nixon called in on Chairman Mao and to be a father when gay still meant festive.***

***In the early 1970s, Peter studied Chinese culture at Princeton University and subsequently taught Chinese history and philosophy to college students. In the early 1980s, he went on to open a bank’s office in Beijing and soon found himself thriving in the world of international finance. He continued to live abroad for three decades, dividing his time between London, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Beijing.”*** (peterlighte.com)

Rarely is a [website](#) so clear in presenting its subject, but Peter Lighte is a rare bird – a 6’5” east coast gay Jewish man who would earn a doctorate in East Asian studies from Princeton, master Chinese calligraphy and leave academia to become a major force in Asia for Manufacturers Hanover Trust and Chemical Bank, later becoming the founding chairman of JPMorgan Chase Bank China and vice chairman of Global Corporate JPMorgan Chase Bank.

Probably more important to Lighte, he became the first single man to adopt a baby in China. He ended up adopting two girls, raising them in his faith alongside his partner and eventual husband, the English composer Julian Grant.

Lighte’s book *Straight Through the Labyrinth* describes the maze he traversed in China as a gay single American to create his family, as well as Lighte’s commitment to fatherhood despite his own emotionally complicated upbringing with a largely absent father.

Lighte never hid his homosexuality, at Princeton or at the bank, but nor did he advertise it. He was who he is.

“Because I’m tall, I didn’t have to tell anyone anything, and I just went about my business. It was not a big issue,” he said, “and Princeton was crawling with gay people.”

Lighte said many senior executives in MHT’s International Division were gay. “Back then, we were *all* called ‘geo-fags’.” Why? “We spoke foreign languages. We were suspect because we weren’t myopic or close-minded, and we knew how to behave.”

John McGillicuddy, chair and CEO of MHT and, after the merger, Chemical Bank, was a Princeton graduate who had helped recruit Lighte to the bank from Princeton and remained his champion. “He was a prominent Catholic in New York, yet he was one of my references when I sought to adopt my first child. I never had a discussion with him about my sexuality. Clearly he knew, but it never came up,” said Lighte.

Still, Lighte had to be careful not to flaunt his relationship with Grant in China. “It was when there was a small window when single people could adopt from China, but unmarried couples couldn’t,” he said. “In Confucianism, there’s the ‘rectification of names’: If something isn’t discussed, it doesn’t exist.”

“Mr. McGillicuddy was human and humane...probably the most interesting thing done for me by the bank happened when I had moved to London and was reapplying for health insurance,” he continued. The bank changed its policy so that spouses *or partners* could be covered. “I almost cried.”

“I heard a story from someone – gay himself – who was at a meeting of senior Manny Hanny bankers, with Mr. McGillicuddy at the head of the table. Nearing the end of the meeting, he asked if there are any issues to be brought up. Out of the blue came a tirade from a national division banking executive complaining about too many fags in the bank! Mr. McGillicuddy gathered his papers and stormed out of the room.”

But what of attitudes in China? More surprising than his sexual orientation to many clients and colleagues was that Lighte had no background in finance. “They never knew what to make of me, but if they valued what you could do, they didn’t hold against you the things you couldn’t do,” Lighte said. “They valued my judgment rather than spreadsheets. I really knew my way around China. Because I studied Chinese classics at Princeton, I could also fool around and be playful in the Chinese language.” Lighte would pepper conversations with Chinese adages, disarming clients, regulators and adversaries.

Lighte and his husband now live back in Princeton, NJ, their daughters graduates of Barnard and launched into the world. But obligations of friendship persist from his time in China. Take the minister who was instrumental in helping him adopt his first daughter: His granddaughter was stranded in the United States during the pandemic, so she lived with Lighte’s family.

“In Japan, it is swell to be a stranger – you’re treated royally – but it’s hard to get beyond that. In China, if you are not known, you are unseen; it’s hard to be new. But if you become a friend, it is lifelong, deep and a lot of fun.”