

Disparities among the Orphans of China

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This scholarly note, by a parent of two adopted Chinese children, considers the current situation of orphans and orphanages in the People's Republic of China, in the wake of rapid social and economic change.

Orphans in China under the One-Child Policy

Numerous studies have been conducted on adoption in the United States. These studies have touched on a number of issues, including interracial adoption, open and closed adoption, the role of the state, policies surrounding home studies, and laws surrounding domestic adoption. However, literature on adoption of children from the People's Republic of China (PRC) tends to present individual experiences of the adoptive parents. In this relatively unexplored field, few studies look at the whole process and, most importantly, the disparities facing China's orphan population. This essay begins to fill the gap by exploring the role of orphanages in contemporary Chinese society. How are Chinese orphanages regulated by policy and location, urban versus rural? How are the orphanages supported? What happens to those children who are not adopted? How are the rapidly changing economic and social situations affecting the orphan population? And how are these changes affecting international adoption?

In 1979, when population control had become a central concern in every aspect of Chinese state planning,¹ Chinese Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) instituted the one-child policy. Under this policy, which remains in force, all Chinese who live in cities or densely populated areas are limited—by law—to one child per family, with the exception of members of China's minority groups. By the 1990s, the one-child policy did not strictly apply in most rural areas, where 75 percent of Chinese people lived. In 2004 and 2005, while traveling throughout rural China, I noticed that many of the farm families had more than one child; some had as many as five. However, I was shown places where, in the early stages of the policy, children had been

hidden when authorities came to visit the villages. In 1991, the first national adoption law was passed, making domestic adoption nearly impossible.

China opened its doors to international adoption in 1990. In 1991, fewer than one hundred international adoptions took place; by 2001, over six thousand were occurring per year.² In 2005, the U.S. State Department granted 7,900 visas to children adopted from China. In 2006, this number dropped to 6,500. The number of orphans in social welfare institutes in China remains high. Orphanages have been populated mostly with girls (75 to 80 percent), but recently boy orphans—almost all with medical disabilities—have been given adoption status.

Due to the cultural importance of sons, the high cost of health care, the lack of educational options for girls, and generalized poverty in rural China, many girls are abandoned with the hopes of a second chance of obtaining a son. This practice, in turn, has left a population known as “little emperors” on whom parents and grandparents place their undivided hopes for the future.

Orphanages in China

Currently, China has approximately 573,000 orphans, of which 66,000 live in government-sponsored Social Welfare Institutes.³ In the past few years, orphanages have received a lot of publicity. A report by Human Rights Watch/Asia in 1996 showed that the orphanages had improper medical care; poor sanitation; abandonment problems; and “dying rooms,” where sickly children were left unattended.⁴ Since the 1996 report and subsequent attention from the international community, including the increase in international adoptions, the Chinese government has taken steps to improve many of the orphanages in the more urban localities. Still, however, a large number of rural orphanages have been kept from the public eye.

Orphanages continue to struggle to find funds and support. One orphanage in northern China, the Fushun Welfare Institute, was able to upgrade its facility by receiving funds from the Japanese government. This money came not in the form of philanthropy but rather as restitution for damages from the 1937–45 Japanese occupation, during which coal and other natural resources were plundered from this area. Other organizations, such as Hope International and International Assistance and Adoption Project, are a few organizations that personally sponsor orphanages or have set up foster homes in China.

When a Chinese child is internationally adopted, the adoptive families are required to pay an “orphanage fee” of US\$3,000 to help support the orphanage. During conversations with orphanage directors, I was informed that most orphanages see little of this money; in fact, \$3,000 would be enough to operate many orphanages for nearly a year. Orphanages in the following areas receive the following amounts per child per year from the

government, using the July 2007 exchange rate of 7.56 RMB = US\$1 (all dollar equivalencies are approximate):

Municipalities like Beijing, Shanghai & Tianjin	3,000-4,000 RMB (\$400-\$530)
Henan, Gansu & Ningxia provinces	1,000 RMB (\$130)
Guangxi, Guizhou & Hunan provinces	600 RMB (\$80)
Seven unidentified provinces	300-500 RMB (\$40-\$70)
Two other provinces	200 RMB (\$25)
Qinghai (the poorest province)	110 RMB (\$15) ⁵

Most Chinese orphanages are painted gray and have little on the walls to stimulate creativity. Few toys are around. Beds or cribs are lined in rows in large rooms, with dormitory-style (public) bathrooms and showers. Members of the staff wear lab coats, and the environment is extremely sterile. Never are there enough workers per child for proper care. Some of the orphanages I visited also housed the elderly or the mentally retarded, putting an extra strain on finances and care-giving opportunities.

In northern China, the main staple is rice; some orphanages raise their own eggplants as a supplementary staple. Meat is seldom seen on the table, and eggs provide the main source of protein. Each child is responsible for the care of a younger child (feeding, changing diapers, and hand-washing clothes and linens, among other tasks). The mostly female staff, though caring, have learned to shut down emotionally and hold the same attitude as many other Chinese: that “girls are worthless.” Most of the workers have no intentions of having children themselves.

Many of the children who enter orphanages had been abandoned. Common practice is for children to be abandoned in places where they are likely to be found. In the past, however, children were often abandoned in fields or the wilderness and, if found, were often found dead. My wife and I are parents of two adopted Chinese children: Our daughter, at two days old, was found at a common area just before people were leaving for work; our son was left at a police station at five days old. While visiting orphanages in China, we were told stories of children who were found with notes attached to them asking for the child to be taken care of or to be given a good life.

Female Orphans, Adoption Patterns & Unadopted Orphans

China’s view of female versus male children has historically been a center of controversy. Within the patriarchal family system, girls were less desired than boys, so girls were frequently neglected or abandoned—and occasionally even killed. Women were constantly under pressure from husbands and in-laws to bear sons and were “frequently blamed, abused and sometimes themselves abandoned when they disappointed the family by giving birth to a girl.”⁶ Couples who gave birth only to girls could not “raise their heads” in the extended family, among friends, or with their neighbors. Couples were

embarrassed if they were infertile, as not producing a son to continue the family line was considered a curse on the family.⁷ China's one-child policy and the culturally embedded need for a son "permitted" the abandonment of female children. As modernization and Westernization take hold, these orphaned females are finally finding a place of recognition in contemporary China.

Two deciding factors in female abandonment are the cost of education and medical care. Education costs are extremely high, especially for rural families; the privilege of a good education is often given only to sons. Children, both boys and girls, are abandoned if expensive medical care is needed. Fortunately, though, China is changing both economically and culturally, and the conditions for orphans are changing as well. For example, the Adoption Law of 1998 allows Chinese families to adopt orphaned, abandoned, or handicapped children—both boys and girls—from social welfare institutes.⁸

In 2004, the government passed a free nine-year compulsory education program for all children in rural areas, including stipends and exemption from textbook fees. However, as I found out in conversations with various education specialists in China in 2006, this policy is not being implemented in many rural communities. What is changing, though, is that economic reforms are allowing more rural families to afford educating their daughters. Some rural parents have begun to value their daughters just as much as their sons.⁹

Some Chinese families prefer adopting females. Childless couples account for 37.3 percent of those who now adopt girls; and, since it is more expensive to adopt a boy than a girl, poor childless couples adopt girls. Also adopting girls are couples with only boys, who are worried about being taken care of in their elder years.¹⁰ Other groups who are now domestically adopting children are unmarried men. Those men who remain unmarried do so primarily because they are too poor or have physical disabilities and are looking for someone to take care of them later in life.

New patterns of family relationships and family definitions are emerging as well. Daughters tend to return to their natal families to offer help, while sons leave the villages to earn money in urban areas. Furthermore, the traditional family structure is changing, and elderly parents are coming to have less and less authority. The old saying, "having sons for old-age security," is being replaced by a new saying: "daughters are brought up to provide old-age security while sons are brought up to send parents off at the end of life (that is, to pay for burial costs and perform various burial rituals)."¹¹

Few studies have looked at orphans who are not adopted and the outcomes of their lives in contemporary China. The director of the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA) is not in favor of older children being adopted and recently lowered the maximum age for adoption to fourteen years old. Some of the children who are not adopted by age fourteen are occasionally supported by orphanage staff to continue their education in, likely, vocational schools. Foreigners sponsor some orphans, but this prac-

tice is rare. Few orphans make it to university. Upon reaching the age of eighteen, many are placed in government-sponsored work programs, doing laborious jobs such as chipping ice from sidewalks during winter, sweeping streets, or picking up trash. Female orphans also may end up staffing orphanages themselves.

Disabled Orphans

Abandonment of disabled children arises from factors not directly related to the one-child policy. More at issue is the burden of raising a child with a disability in China. Outside a few larger cities and welfare institutions, little government support exists for families who wish to keep a disabled child at home.¹² Due to the high cost of medical care and the level of poverty in many rural areas, abandonment may be the only means of getting a child into an institution for any level of care.

Handicapped orphans include those with visible birthmarks, digit deformity, vision problems, albinism, clubfeet, spina bifida, or cleft pallets; many of these issues are surgically repairable. Still, only about 16,000 disabled orphans have received surgery and rehabilitation, a small percentage of China's 573,000 orphans.¹³ Many outside international agencies, including Project Smile and the International Assistance and Adoption Project, now travel to China to perform corrective surgeries, mostly for spina bifida and cleft pallet. Due to the high costs of medical care and the cultural stigma of anything considered "imperfect," children with such handicaps are abandoned in especially great numbers.

In the past, many of the children sent for surgery returned to the orphanage with little or no post-operative care. While visiting various orphanages, I found that many of these children ultimately did not survive. Fortunately, this issue is slowly being remedied, as post-operative foster homes are being built, thanks to financial support of the international community.

China does not allow mentally handicapped children to be adopted. According to my conversations with orphanage directors, these children are placed in larger institutions where they are kept away from the public eye.

Modern Changes in Adoption Policies

Changes that have been made to allow domestic adoptions have, in turn, affected international adoptions. In December 2006, the CCAA announced a series of changes that will affect the outcome of international adoptions. The CCAA reported that approximately 24,000 families abroad were waiting to be matched with Chinese children. The CCAA stated that, due to the large number of applications and fewer children being abandoned, the following changes would go into effect in May 2007:

- Only married couples may adopt. (Previously, single parents had adoption rights.)
- Couples must have been married a minimum of two years, and couples with prior divorces must have been married at least five years.
- Both applicants must be between the ages of thirty and fifty.
- Both applicants must be healthy (and not obese), with no mental or infectious diseases; and neither parent may be on any kind of anti-anxiety or depression medication.
- Both applicants must hold high school diplomas.
- A family's net worth must exceed US\$80,000, and the family's income must exceed \$10,000 per family member (including the child to be adopted).
- The youngest child currently living at home must be over one year old.
- Applicants must be without any criminal history on record.¹⁴

Even though the number of international adoptions has decreased over the past two years, the above changes will result in a further decrease of international adoptions. More handicapped children, however, are becoming available for international adoption. With the new rules, at least two years will be required to adopt a healthy baby from China; slightly less time will be needed for a handicapped child. At present, international adoptions from China require anywhere from eight to eighteen months from the time dossiers are sent to China until the time prospective parents meet their child. (To contrast, domestic adoption within the United States routinely requires at least a two-year processing window.) From personal experience, the wait can be the most painstaking part of the international adoption process.

Other Issues

Before the 1990s, ultrasound devices were commonly used to determine the sex of unborn children, and couples could—and often did—decide to abort female fetuses. A law prohibiting the use of sex identification for child abortion has had little effect, since the procedures (both ultrasound and abortions) can still be acquired with the right contacts and finances. Still, the one-child policy has become less punitive, and greater education and quality of reproductive health services have also emerged.

A new problem facing China's orphan population is the spread of AIDS and HIV throughout the country. In 2005, as many as 650,000 HIV/AIDS cases were recorded in China, with 70,000 new cases reported in 2006.¹⁵ This number is probably under-reported, given the number of people who are ignorant or fear abandonment by their families if they admit to having the disease. According to the PRC Ministry of Health, 100,000 children have been orphaned due to their parents' deaths from AIDS; if this prob-

lem is not immediately addressed, the number could rise to 260,000 in less than three years.¹⁶ The Chinese government is working at addressing the AIDS issue but remains a long way from educating the population. Meanwhile, this new social crisis in China is creating new wave of orphans.

The Future for Orphans in China

The Chinese government has stated that it will not look at changing the one-child policy until 2010. However, the government is making an attempt at providing better services to abandoned, orphaned, and disabled children. Through these changes, the general population of China is becoming more aware of orphans—and of the possibility of helping in some way. With the increase in Chinese living standards and the availability of free education, the people of China are more apt to keep their children than to abandon them. However, with the recent changes in standards for international adoption, Chinese orphanages may see an increase in their populations not from abandonment but from lack of qualified foreign adoptee couples.

Notes

¹Kay Ann Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China* (St. Paul, MN: Yeong & Yeong, 2004), xix.

²Ibid., 142.

³Xinhua News Agency, "China Has 537,000 Orphans," *China Daily*, January 5, 2006.

⁴Cited in Walter Reich, "China's Orphanages and Death," *Washington Post*, January 24, 1996.

⁵Adapted from Joshua Zhong, "573,000 Orphans in China," *Circle 52* (March–April 2006): 6.

⁶Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter*, 5.

⁷Weiguo Zhang, "Who Adopts Girls and Why? Domestic Adoption of Female Children in Contemporary Rural China," *China Journal* 56 (July 2006): 63–82.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Hong Zhang, "Bracing for an Uncertain Future: A Case Study of New Coping Strategies of Rural Parents under China's Birth Control Policy," *China Journal* 54 (July 2005): 53–76.

¹⁰Zhang, "Who Adopts Girls?"

¹¹Ibid., 76.

¹²Johnson, *Wanting a Daughter*, 208.

¹³Xinhua News Agency, "China Has 537,000 Orphans."

¹⁴See the Web site of the China Center of Adoption Affairs, <http://www.china-ccaa.org> (accessed July 29, 2007).

¹⁵See "HIV & AIDS in China," available at <http://www.avert.org/aidschina.htm> (accessed July 29, 2007).

¹⁶"Thousands of AIDS Orphans Destitute in Henan," *AsiaNews*, January 5, 2005.