

# DISPARITIES AMONG THE ORPHANS OF CHINA

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Numerous studies have been conducted on adoption in the US. These studies have touched on issues, such as interracial adoption, open and closed adoption, role of the State, policies surrounding home studies and laws surrounding domestic adoption. However, literature on adoption of children from China tends toward individual experiences of the adoptive parents. In this relatively unexplored field, few studies look at the whole statement and disparities facing China's orphan population. This paper will explore the role of orphanages in contemporary Chinese society. How are they regulated by policy and location, urban versus rural? How are the orphanages supported? A more important question is what happens to those children who are not adopted? How is the rapidly changing economy and social changes affecting the orphan population and international adoption?

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping instituted the one-child policy; population control had become a central concern in every aspect of Chinese state planning.<sup>1</sup> Under the one-child policy, all Chinese who live in cities, as well as densely populated areas are limited by law to one child per family, with the exception of minority peoples. By the 1990s the one-child policy did not strictly apply to most rural areas, where 75 percent of Chinese people lived. While traveling throughout rural China many of the farm families had more than one child and up to as many as five. However, I was shown places where in the early stages of the policy children were hidden when authorities came to visit the villages. In 1991, the first national adoption law was passed making domestic adoption nearly impossible.

In 1990, China opened its doors to international adoption. In 1991, there were fewer than 100 international adoptions, by 2001 there were over 6,000 per year.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, there were 7,900 visas given by the state department for children adopted from China. In 2006 this number dropped to 6,500. The amount of orphans in social welfare institutes remains high, with an increase in adoptable boys over the past two years. Orphanages have been populated with mostly girls, 75 to 80 percent, but recently boys in orphanages have been given adoption status.

Due to the cultural stigma of the importance of sons, the high cost of health care, the lack of educational options for girls and generalized poverty in rural China many girls were abandoned with the hopes of a second chance of obtaining a son. This in turn has left a population titled "little emperors" on whom parents and grandparents placed their undivided hopes for the future.

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Kay Ann pp. xix.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Kay Ann pp.142.

## **Orphanages**

Currently there are approximately 573,000 orphans living in China, in which 66,000 orphans live in government sponsored Social Welfare Institutes.<sup>3</sup> According to adoption agencies and orphanage directors this number is low. The CCAA (China Center of Adoption Affairs) is only now beginning to survey the orphanages in China. However, this survey is to identify the quality of the facilities versus numbers of orphans. Current policy changes have allowed for improvements of orphanages in the more urban areas, including building and reconstruction, better education, medical treatment, employment and lodging for staff. However, orphanages in more rural areas are still in disrepair.

Orphanages in the past few years have had a lot of publicity. A report in 1996, by the Human Rights Watch/ Asia showed that the orphanages had improper medical care, poor sanitation, abandonment problems and dying rooms where sickly children were left unattended. Since the 1996 report and the call from the international community, along with the increase of international adoptions, the government has taken steps to improve many of the orphanages in the more urban localities. There are still many rural orphanages which have been kept from the public eye.

Shortly after the 1996 report, a government campaign sponsored by the Chinese government, put forth an official paper titled: "The Situation of Children in China," reporting: "A mass campaign encouraging kindness to orphans and the encouragement of Chinese families to take children from welfare institutions into their homes from time to time, particularly on holidays, so that these children might experience the warmth of family life."<sup>4</sup> According to an article written in Xinhua News 2006, China is working at improving the orphanage welfare system, offering financial assistance to orphan's education and medical treatment.

Over the past five years people adopting internationally have been allowed and even encouraged to visit certain orphanages, approved for visiting by the government. Recently the head of the CCAA announced that no contact is to be allowed by adoption agencies or families without first obtaining permission from the CCAA. If this new regulation is not followed, the orphanage will be punished and the agency will be ridiculed by the CCAA. This shows an underlying current of secrecy and possible fear of what might be discovered.

Orphanages continue to struggle to find funds and support. One orphanage in Northern China was able to upgrade their facility by receiving funds from the Japanese government for restitution from damages during the Japanese occupation in the 1900s. The Japanese stole millions of dollars worth of coal and other natural resources from this area. In an agreement by both governments, Japan paid money back to the Chinese people. The Fushun Welfare Institute received funds to improve their facility.

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. It is reported that 55 percent of the orphans living in Welfare Institutes do

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua News Agency. January 5, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, Karin. pp. 166.

not receive funds from the government and that 10 percent of these children receive less than 10 percent needed to raise a child.

When a child is internationally adopted, the adoptive families are required to pay an orphanage fee of three thousand dollars to help support the orphanage. One director of an orphanage stated that the orphanage never sees this money and that three thousand US dollars could run the orphanage for almost one year.

Orphanages in these areas:	Amount per child per year:
Municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin):	3,000-4,000 RMB (about \$500)
Henan, Gansu, and Ningxia provinces:	1,000 RMB (about \$120)
Guangxi, Guizhou, and Hunan provinces:	600 RMB (about \$80)
Seven unidentified provinces:	300-500 RMB (\$50)
Two other provinces:	200 RMB (less than \$30)
Qinghai:	the poorest province 110 RMB (\$12) <sup>5</sup>

### *A Look at Three Orphanages in Northern China*

**Fushan:** Located in Liaoning province. This orphanage is located three hours north of Beijing by train. This is the orphanage my daughter is from and the one who has received funds from the Japanese government. Changes that have occurred in the past three years due to improved funding: electrical upgrade, brightly painted walls, new bathrooms, new educational material, personal hygiene items for each child and improved meal plan. Medical care continues to be an issue. It was reported that a child might wait two or three days to be transported to the hospital due to the lack of transportation.

**Siping:** Interior is gray and bleak. Food supplies low, children drink watered milk to make supplies last longer, diapers are reused and personal hygiene is minimal. The town of SiPing is economically poor. Again the need for good transportation is greatly needed.

**Changchun:** Located nine hours north of Beijing in Jilin province. Children range in age from newborn to young adult. Many of the children are special needs. Each group of children are divided into age and health. This facility has most of the same needs as other orphanages. Changchun is the largest city out of the three localities of orphanages.

Most orphanages are painted in a gray color with little on the walls to stimulate creativity. There are a series of beds or cribs lined in a row, a public shower and bathroom. The staff are dressed in lab coats and the environment is extremely sterile and there are never enough workers per child for proper care. Many of the orphanages also house the elderly and the mentally retarded, putting an extra strain on finances.

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The main staple of food is rice and in northern China some orphanages raise their own

<sup>5</sup> Zhong, Joshua pp. 2.

eggplant as another main staple. Meat is seldom seen on the table and the main source of protein comes from eggs.

There are few toys around and each child is responsible for the care of a younger child. Our daughter at the age of four could change a diaper, hand wash her own clothes and often talked about “her baby” she was responsible for.

The staff, mostly female, though caring have learned to shut down emotionally and have the same attitude as the rest of Chinese society, “that girls are worthless”. Most of the workers have no intentions of having children themselves.

The children have a look of hope in their eyes when they meet you, but from an outsiders perception you see weak inactive children, whose biggest challenge is to cry the loudest for attention. They have an institutionalized attitude and their emotional needs are far from being met.

### ***Orphans Today***

Many of the orphans present in orphanages today have seen improvements in their quality of life. There continues to be a vast number of children found abandoned. It is more common today that the children found are abandoned in places where they are sure to be found. In the past abandoned children were left in fields or found dead in various locations. Many of the children now are found at train stations, common public areas, police stations or on the doorsteps of the orphanages themselves. Many of the parents understand that they are unable to take care of their children and that the child will possibly have a better life in an orphanage.

Our daughter was found at a common area just before people were leaving for work, it was estimated that she was two days old at the time. Our son was left at a police station at five days old. While visiting the orphanages we were told stories of children who had notes attached to them asking for the child to be taken care of or to have a good life.

A note found pinned to a tiny abandoned girl:

*This baby girl is now 100 days old. She is in good health and has never suffered any illness. Due to the current political situation and heavy pressures that are difficult to explain, we, who were her parents for these first few days, cannot continue taking care of her. We can hope that in this world there is a kind-hearted person who will care for her. Thank you. In regret and shame, your father and mother.<sup>6</sup>*

While in Guangzhou an elderly woman who, recognizing we had adopted our little girl broke into tears as she shared her story of having to abandon her own child for lack of finances.

<sup>6</sup> Evans, Karen pp.88.

Most orphans attend school, first at the orphanage and then later are sent out to local schools. There continues to be a steady stream of abandoned children arriving at orphanages and according to interviews conducted with adoption agency directors these numbers seem to be staying consistent. There has been an increase in the amount of handicapped boys arriving at orphanages and becoming available for adoption, which is a change in the past two years.

According to a recent report in China Daily, China is aiming at offering free medical treatment to 30,000 handicapped orphans over the next three years. So far, only about 16,000 disabled orphans have received surgery and rehabilitation, a small percentage compared to the reported 573,000 orphans.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that most orphans labeled handicapped have surgically repairable problems. A visible birthmark, digit deformity, vision problems, albinism, clubfeet, spina bifida or a cleft pallet are just some of the issues labeled handicapped. Many outside international agencies now travel to China to perform corrective surgeries, mostly spina bifida and cleft pallet. Due to the high cost of medical care and the cultural stigma of “anything that is considered not perfect”, these children are abandoned in great numbers.

### ***Female Orphans***

In the past, China’s view of female versus male children has been the center of controversy. Girls were less desired within the patriarchal family system, and were neglected, abandoned and sometimes even killed. China’s one child policy and the need for a son, which is embedded in the culture, allowed for the abandonment of female children. It is still an issue that plagues China. As China’s economy and westernization take hold, these orphaned females are finally finding a place of recognition in contemporary China.

In China’s past women were constantly under pressure from husbands and in-laws to bear sons “and frequently blamed, abused and sometimes themselves abandoned when they disappointed the family by giving birth to a girl”.<sup>8</sup> Couples are too embarrassed that they are infertile, a social stigma in Chinese society. Couples who gave birth to only girls could not “raise their heads” in the extended family, among friends and neighbors. Not producing a son to continue the family line was considered a curse on the family.<sup>9</sup> Orphanages began to fill with unwanted girls, leaving China with a skewed sex ratio, 110 to 113 boys for every 100 girls.

One of the deciding factors in female abandonment is the cost of education and medical care. Education costs were extreme, especially for rural families and the privilege of a good education was given to the sons. Medical care was another issue in the deciding factor of keeping a child. Children, both boys and girls, are abandoned if expensive medical care is needed. However, a family would be more inclined to spend their savings on medical care for boys if the possible outcome would produce a healthy son. The need for medical care for a girl may become an excuse to abandon, leaving open the possibility of next producing a healthy son.

<sup>7</sup> China Daily 2006-11-13.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Kay Ann, pp. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Zang, Weiguo, pp. 331.

China is now going through a rapid change, both economically and culturally. As China becomes more westernized and is observed with more scrutiny from the outside world, China is making changes that are affecting the change of cultural norms and the status of females within their society. The government recently passed a free nine-year compulsory education program for all children in rural areas, including exemption from textbook fees and offering a living allowance. This one change has allowed families to look differently at sending their daughters to school.

There has been an understanding throughout China's history that daughters are good at staying home and taking care of the physical needs of parents. The Adoption Law in 1998, allows adopters to adopt orphaned, abandoned or handicapped children in social welfare institutes, allowing opportunity for orphaned girls to be adopted domestically.<sup>10</sup> Some rural parents have begun to value their daughter just as much as their son.<sup>11</sup>

Childless couples account for 37.3 per cent of those who now adopt girls and, since it is more expensive to adopt a boy than a girl, poor childless couples adopt girls. The second group adopting girls are couples with boys, who are worried about being taken care of in their elder years.<sup>12</sup> Other groups who are now domestically adopting are unmarried men. Those men who remain unmarried do so primarily because they are too poor, have physical disabilities or have gained a bad reputation. These men adopted for various reasons, some of which may be challenged morally, but for the most part it is to have someone later in life to take care of them. Most people want to adopt girls specifically because they believe that an adopted daughter will provide the assistance and security that adopted sons, and even birth sons may not.

New patterns of family relationships and family definition are emerging. Daughters tend to return to their natal families to offer help, while sons are leaving the villages to earn money in urban areas. Further, the traditional family structure is changing to where the elderly parents 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."<sup>13</sup>

According to various reports and articles over the past five years, China is missing 40 million girls and women, either because of sex-selective abortions, unreported female births or female infant mortality, supporting evidence that sons are more desired and females are still discriminated against. Yet, given recent studies coming out of China, girls are becoming more desirable. According to the CCAA, there has been a significant increase in domestic adoptions and international adoptions are taking longer for approval due to this increase. Given the growing desire for female children, especially from those who are looking for a strong support system as they age, the girls waiting in orphanages are being recognized as an asset to a rapid changing Chinese society.

<sup>10</sup> Zang, Weiguo. pp.67.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang, Hong. pp. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Zang, Weiguo. pp. 69.

<sup>13</sup> Zang, Weiguo. pp. 76.

Few studies have looked at orphans that are not adopted and the outcome of their lives in contemporary China. What is known is that orphans who are not adopted before the age of fourteen are unavailable for adoption. From reports and personal interviews it is difficult to adopt a child even over the age of ten. The director of the CCAA is not in favor of older children being adopted and has in recent years changed the adoption age. Some of the children not adopted will sometimes be supported by staff or the orphanage to continue education in possibly a vocational school. Foreigners sponsor some orphans, but this is rare. Universities in China are very competitive and costly. Many of the children upon reaching the age of eighteen are put into government sponsored work programs, doing laborious jobs such as chipping ice from sidewalks during winter, sweeping streets, construction labor or trash pickup. While visiting some of the orphanages we met many of the staff, especially female that had been orphans themselves at the institute in the past.

### ***Disabled Orphans***

The abandonment of disabled children is reported to have increased as a proportion of abandoned children. The abandonment of disabled children arises from factors not directly related to the one-child policy. The burden of raising a child with a disability in China is more the issue. Outside of a few larger cities and welfare institutions, there is little government support for families who wish to keep a disabled child at home.<sup>14</sup> 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 and any quality of care, no matter the problems surrounding the orphanage.

Many of the children are in need of medical surgery, which is highly expensive in China. Organizations such as Project Smile, International Assistance and Adoption Project and others have over the past few years provided medical surgeries to correct problems such as spina bifida, cleft pallet and physical deformities, giving these children a greater opportunity for adoption. China does not allow children with mentally handicapped issues to be adopted. These children are kept away from the public eye and are placed in larger institutions.

The international community has stepped forward offering adoptions for children with disabilities, providing medical care and rehabilitation. In the past many of the children sent for surgery returned to the orphanage with little or no post operative care. Many of these children did not survive. Fortunately this issue is slowly being remedied through the financial support of the international community.

### ***Modern Changes in Adoption***

Huge changes are taking place in China today that will greatly affect China's orphan population. In 1998, the domestic adoption law was changed allowing for the adoption of girls and more than one child if approved by the government. Unfortunately, if you already have a

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, Kay Ann. pp. 208.

child you must first prove that your biological child is somehow defective and will not grow to be a valuable member of society.

As mentioned earlier the opening of domestic adoption has allowed for various other parental figures to adopt. The requirements for a domestic adoption are as follows:

- Childless. "Childless" is meant to indicate that the adopters have no biological children, nor adopted children, nor stepchildren. This can be disputed if a couple has one child that is problematic.
- The capacity of rearing and educating the adoptee.
- No such diseases as considered medically unfit to raise a child, is defined mainly as a mental or infectious disease.
- 30 years old. Both parents must be of this age or older.
- Where a person with a spouse adopts both parents have to sign a consent form stating that they are both in agreement.
- Where a spouseless male adopts a female child, the full age between the adopter and adoptee must be over 40 years.
- The adoption of a child belonging to a relative by blood, the age difference between adopter and adoptee shall be no less than 40 years and the adoptee is under the age of fourteen.
- Orphans, disabled children or abandoned infants and children, who are raised in social welfare institutes, and whose biological parents can not be ascertained or found, may be adopted irrespective of the restrictions that the adopter should be childless and adopt one child only.<sup>15</sup>

Though these changes make it possible for domestic adoptions to now take place there is still a cultural stigma that having an adopted child is a socially unaccepted idea. It shows society that the parents for some reason were unable to conceive a child on his or her own.

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 there were approximately 24,000 dossiers from families 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 May 2007.

- Married couples may only adopt. In the past single parents were given adoption rights.
- Couples must be married a minimum of two years, and couples with prior divorces must be married at least five years.
- Both spouses must be between the ages of thirty and fifty years of age.
- Both applicants must be healthy with no mental or infectious disease.

<sup>15</sup> *China Daily* 2006-05-30

- Each applicant must have a body mass index of less than forty and not be considered obese.
- In addition to the requirement for family's income to exceed \$10,000 per family member (including the child to be adopted), the families net worth must exceed \$80,000.
- Each applicant must hold a high school diploma.
- The youngest child currently living at home must be over one year of age.
- Neither parent may be on any kind of anti-anxiety or depression medication.
- Applicants must be without any criminal history on record.<sup>16</sup>

As seen earlier in this report, the amount of international adoptions has decreased over the past two years, with these new changes international adoption will continue to decrease. According to the directors of adoption agencies here in the US the statement made by the CCAA that fewer children are being abandoned seems to be in controversy. According to reports there continues to be a steady flow of abandoned children arriving at the doorstep of orphanages throughout China.

There is however an increase in the amount of handicapped children coming available for international adoption. With the new rules it is predicted to take longer than two years to adopt a health baby from China and slightly less for a handicapped child. At present it can take eight months to one and half years from the time the dossier is sent to China till the time when the perspective parents meet their child. From personal experience this wait can be the most painstaking part of the adoption process.

### ***Other Issues***

In China's past, the availability to use ultrasound to determine the sex of an unborn child has been the center of controversy. Couples could use this medical procedure to decide on abortion of the fetus if not a son. The government passed a law prohibiting the use of sex identification as child abortion. Unfortunately it is still possible to buy this procedure with the right contacts and finances. As indicated changes have occurred, the one-child policy has become less punitive, a greater education and quality on reproductive health services has also emerged.

A new problem facing China's orphan population is the spread of Aids and HIV throughout China. It is estimated that there were 650,000 HIV/Aids cases in China in 2005 with a new 70,000 cases reported in 2006.<sup>177</sup> This number is probably not accurate based on the number of people who are not educated or fear abandonment by families if they admit to the disease. According to the Ministry of Health, Peoples Republic of China, there are now 100,000 orphans due to their parents death from Aids and if this problem is not immediately addressed this number could rise to 260,000 by 2010.<sup>188</sup> The Chinese government is working at addressing

<sup>16</sup> CCAA 2007-01-05

<sup>17</sup> Avert.org. HIV & Aids in China. 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Asian News. 2007.

the Aids issue, but is a long way from educating the population. This is allowing for another surge of population entering orphanages.

### **Conclusion**

The Chinese government has stated that they will not look at changing the one-child policy until 2010. However, the government is making an attempt at providing better services to abandon, orphaned and disabled children. Through these changes the general population of China is becoming more aware of the orphans and the possibility of helping in some way. With the increase in the economy and the availability of free education the people of China are more apt to keep their children than abandon them.

With the changes in international adoption the orphanages may see an increase in their populations not from abandonment but from lack of available adoptees'.

Son preference continues to be persistent within Chinese society and abandonment of female children will only decrease slightly when true gender bias is eliminated. Until China recognizes the value of children, creates an improved health care program, develops a program to assist the elderly, changes the stigma of having an adopted child, addresses the issue of Aids, and financially supports the Welfare Institutes, China's orphan population will continue to struggle to find a place in this changing society.

### **China's Orphans**

Flooded rice field, oxen dung, mosquito larva  
Hollow eyes searching for recognition

Eastbound train, multiple feet, vendor smells  
Grumbling belly waits, a drop of saliva ridden steamed bun.

Antiquated Russian tractor, rising dust cloud, stalks of corn  
Moth eaten threadbare blanket, suffocating dust filled nostrils

Overflowing, putrid smelling dustbin  
Shit smeared hand searching for refuge

Coal-burning woks, grease filled air, automobile exhaust  
Tear stained note, prayer to the Goddess of Mercy, pinned below tear stained eyes

Crooked feet, crossed eyes, visible birthmark,  
Twisted hand, deformed shoulder, shortened leg  
Albino skin, missing ear, exposed tumor  
Ripped soul, no hope, no money,  
No son, No daughter.

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**Note:** Each of the lines and descriptions in this poem describes where an orphan was found and their disability. Many have been adopted at this writing

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