

Dear Dorine,

I really wouldn't place much faith in the Dutch Foreign Ministry's assesment of orphanage conditions at present. The conditions in these institutions across the country when we wrote Death By Default were absolutely shocking, and the majority of them are still not open to access for foreign observers -- I don't know of any reliable outside informants who are genuinely in a position to be able to tell us what is happening in the great majority of orphanages (and similar places for homeless infants and children) nowadays. (Naturally, the Chinese authorities usually make a special effort to make the institutions they do allow foreigners into look acceptable, and I have no doubt that these are the places that the Dutch government is referring to when it says conditions have improved.)

The various Western and Hong Kong-based aid agencies that do very valuable work in China's orphanage system also only have access to a very small minority of the institutions. They are always keen to stress that improvements are being made, because quite understandably they don't want to do or say anything that might lead to their groups being expelled from the orphanages, since even the few children they are able to help would then suffer needlessly. So it's an awful double-bind situation, but the bottom line is that there is no evidence to indicate any major improvement in conditions within the orphanage system as a whole since 1996 when we wrote the HRW report, for the simple reason that foreigners are not allowed into most of these places. Even foreign couples who adopt children from institutions that are not included on the small list of "open to foreigners" orphanages are in most cases not permitted to visit the orphanage where their adopted children come from; instead, the child is usually brought to them at their hotel or some other location, after all the adoption paperwork has been completed.

In the absence of any verifiable evidence of improved conditions in the orphanage system as a whole, I feel it would be deplorable and quite irresponsible for the Dutch government to repatriate a 14-year old girl (presumably against her will) to a highly risky and possibly dangerous fate in one of these ghastly institutions. Protecting the basic interests of children should be the number one priority for Western governments dealing with cases like this, and so she should be afforded humane institutional care in Holland if she has no one appropriate to protect her back in China. Unless she is also seeking asylum in Holland (which I imagine would be unnecessary given her age) she will always be free to return to China once she reaches adulthood in a couple of years' time, if she so desires.

I hope this is helpful.

best regards,

Robin

-----Original Message-----

From: Dorine Thomissen

Sent: Thursday 13 December 2001 14:17

To:

Subject: China/orphanages

Dear mr. Murno,

My name is Dorine Thomissen. I work for the Refugee Aid Council in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. I would like to ask you some questions about the possibilities and conditions for a 14 year old Chinese orphan in a orphanage or other institute. According to a Human Rights Watch report from 1996 "Death by Default", the situation in Chinese orphanages is horrible. Recent country information provided by the Dutch Ministry of Forreign Affairs states that the quality improved considerably the last years. I know about the existence of 3 kind of institutes: orphanages, social welfare Institutes and street childeren protection centers.

Are there enough places in these institutes, especially for adolescents?
Is there a possibility for a 14 year old Chinese girl to find a place in
one of these institutes?

How are the recent conditions/quality in these institutes, especially
for adolescents?

I hope you will have some time to answer my questions.

Thank you very much,

Dorine Thomissen
Refugee Aid Council
Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Hi Dorine

Since June 1999, I have been a Senior Research Fellow at London University (in the law department of the School of Oriental and African Studies.) This fellowship position will end at the end of this month, however, and I will be taking up a new job in Hong Kong, starting next March, with an international religious-rights monitoring NGO.

Since I wrote my comment to you on Chinese orphanages while I am still at London University, I suggest you use my present job title in any use you may make of what I sent you on this topic.

Best regards,
Robin

-----Original Message-----

From: Dorine Thomissen
Sent: Tuesday 18 December 2001 09:21
To:
Subject: Thanks

Dear mr. Murno,

In the first place I would like to thank you very much for your helpful information about the orphanage situation in China. At the Refugee Aid Council it is not clear if you are you still working for Human Rights Watch or/and for an other organisation at the moment. Could you please let us know about this?

Best regards,
Dorine Thomissen
Refugee Aid Council
Rotterdam, The Netherlands