

CHINA RIGHTS FORUM Spring 1996  
[Previous Article]/[Next article]  
[Contents: (English only)/(GB)/(BIG5)]

6

## Ai Ming

### Fighting a Tradition of Abuse

*When Human Rights Watch reported the systematic elimination of children through starvation and denial of medical care in the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute, photographs of a number of skeletal dead and dying children in the orphanage brought the individual reality of such practices to the international community in a singularly disturbing, graphic fashion. The photographs were taken by Ai Ming, who grew up in the Institute, with the hope that they would expose conditions there in a way written reports had failed to do and persuade Chinese leaders to punish those responsible. Sophia Woodman talked to him.*

Ai Ming, 24, seems like an unlikely human rights activist. He is shy and speaks so quietly in his soft Shanghai accent that my tape recorder hardly registers his voice. He appears almost embarrassed that I would want to interview him. As we get going, however, he starts to talk louder, and becomes passionate by the end of our conversation. One senses a deep distrust lurking behind his quiet politeness, but also a steely determination which may have been crucial to his survival.

For the longest time, Ai Ming couldn't believe that any adult could be trusted. Abandoned by his parents soon after his birth following a bout of polio which affected his legs, Ai spent his childhood in the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute, a place where keeping any thoughts or opinions to himself seemed the safest policy. The picture of the Institute which emerges from Ai's reminiscences brings to mind the Victorian workhouses in the novels of Charles Dickens.

Many child-care workers and senior staff behaved like petty despots, forcing the children to perform chores for them and casually administering beatings and other abuse at any sign of disobedience. The education provided was perfunctory; Ai Ming's teacher had only completed sixth grade and the orphanage did not provide any schooling for children once they had reached that same level, even though nine years' of education are theoretically "compulsory" in China.

"We only had three classes per day, when in schools outside they had five or six," Ai Ming says. "We mainly learned how to read and write. When we had passed sixth grade... our whole class went to the leadership to ask if we could continue our studies. They did not respond to us directly, they just let it drop and that was it."

Starting at the age of eight or nine, children were expected to work in profit-making enterprises several hours a day. The Institute had its own workshops, and then as part of the wave of diversification, in which work units of all kinds set up money-making ventures, the Institute emptied several spaces which had housed children and rented them out to three different companies. The children were paid 80 *yuan* per month for working in these businesses, but this money was given to the leaders and the children only received about 10 *yuan*. Ai Ming worked full time in these factories after finishing his schooling at the age of 16.

"In China there is a regulation that if disabled people work in a factory, it can be exempt from taxes," Ai Ming points out. "So lots of people wanted to set up businesses in our Institute."

Since few adults seemed to have their welfare at heart, the children formed strong bonds with each other, but generally distrusted their teachers and carers. Adult hypocrisy was particularly apparent in the contrasts between the life Ai experienced and the stories which were told when the orphanage received visitors, whether Chinese officials or people from abroad.

"The leaders of the orphanage would say how much they cared about the children, how much they helped them to study, how hard they worked... but they wouldn't let us talk at all," Ai recalls.

"If the visitors to the orphanage were to arrive early in the day, that would be awful for us. Say they were coming at 8:00am, we would have to get up around 5:00am, change all our sheets and quilts with new ones, put new clothes on, and then we would have to sit in our chairs and not do anything, because they were worried that if we moved around, we would dirty the new clothes. So then we had to wait for the visitors to arrive. We were instructed on how to address the orphanage staff: 'Greetings, teacher, greetings, aunty.' We just sat there and weren't given anything to eat. They told us that if we were asked by the visitors how we were treated, we were to say that we were treated well."

At the age of four or five, Ai remembers, he and a classmate were ordered to wash the floor for a child care worker, who should have been doing the job herself. They had to carry heavy buckets full of water, and since Ai walks with difficulty even today, he tipped one over. For this offense, he was made to stand still for close to eight hours, prevented from attending lessons, having his meals and even from going to the toilet. In the afternoon, the worker took Ai and dunked him head-first into a bucket of water until he could no longer breathe.

"Choking on water" was only one of a repertoire of abusive tactics used by orphanage workers to punish the children. Some, like "riding the motorbike" and "the airplane," are reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. Children subjected to such treatment had no one and nowhere to turn to for help, and could only commiserate among themselves about the abuse they had suffered. "The leaders of the orphanage were very bad too, so we basically couldn't go to them and tell about a care worker who had mistreated us," Ai says.

Ai had personal experience of the lengths to which Director Han Weicheng would go to enforce discipline. In 1987, one of Ai's best friends had been sent away to work in a factory, and he missed her terribly. He asked for her address, but was not given it, or permission to go and visit her. So he escaped from the orphanage and went to look for her. But he had neither the address nor any money, and after two days wandering around Shanghai, he was so hungry and tired, he went to a police station. Soon, someone from the Institute arrived to take him back.

On his return, Han asked him why he had left without telling anyone, and claimed that Ai would have been allowed to go on the visit.

"I didn't believe it, so I didn't answer any of his questions," Ai declares. "He tricked me, saying, 'Let's go over to my office and talk about this some more.' So we set off, but then I noticed we weren't walking towards the building where his office was, but towards the main entrance... There was a minivan waiting by the gate and several people around it. When I saw this, I tried to run away, but Han held on to me, and two other staff members quickly came over and grabbed me."

The minivan took Ai Ming to a mental hospital, the Shanghai No. 1 Social Psychiatric Rehabilitation Institute. Ai spent four months there although the doctors did not find evidence of any mental illness. He was told that he would only be able to leave if he wrote a self-criticism about his escape, but he continued to refuse to do this. Finally, a man who had befriended Ai persuaded him to sign such a statement.

"The man said that it was too bad for me to just stay in this place for the rest of my life, so I should just swallow my pride this time, and he would write the self-criticism for me. So he wrote it, and they came to collect me."

Ai was not the only orphan to be sent to a mental institution or to be otherwise subject to arbitrary detention as punishment for infractions.

---

"Because I had seen many terrible things in the orphanage, I decided that the world was not a very beautiful place," Ai says. "We didn't have any contact with the outside world, so I didn't think people were very good. I didn't trust other people."

So when he heard through the orphanage grape-vine that a newly-arrived Institute doctor, Zhang Shuyun, and some of her colleagues had started to complain about the conditions there and to try to get changes made, he was initially skeptical.

"But then some delegates from the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress came to the orphanage to investigate. I talked to some of them and I felt there were some people who cared about us orphans after all," Ai says. The delegates had been alerted to conditions in the orphanage after Dr. Zhang and the other critics had failed in their effort to get the city agency responsible for the Institute, the Civil Affairs Bureau, to take any action. "In Shanghai the status of People's Congress delegates is pretty high. So after that, I started to cooperate with Dr. Zhang and the others. We really thought they were going to be able to help us."

In the end, more than 10 of the older children in the Institute, including Ai, were actively involved in assisting the critics' campaign, collecting information and describing their experiences to officials of the various city agencies which carried out investigations.

"We had all grown up there, and experienced the ill-treatment, and everyone hoped that this wouldn't be carried on, that the ill-treatment wouldn't become a tradition that all the children experienced," Ai explains.

This was Ai's purpose when he took the photographs in the orphanage in 1992, at a point when the staff and People's Congress critics' efforts appeared to be running into brick walls. City officials seemed more concerned about preventing any news of the abuses in the orphanage or the high death rates among children admitted to it from reaching the domestic or foreign public than in reforming the institution.

"I thought that many people didn't really understand the conditions in the orphanage, because the propaganda on the outside was all about the Institute leaders' point of view, and not about the real conditions... I hoped that taking the pictures would let people know about the conditions and I hoped that then they would help us to change the bad treatment of the orphans and these frightening things."

The first attempt of Ai and two classmates to create a photographic record of conditions in the Institute with a camera borrowed from Dr. Zhang was discovered, and the film was confiscated from the shop where it had been taken for processing. Ai and the other children were questioned intensively--the orphanage even called in local police officers and security staff from city agencies--but Ai refused to say anything, denying all involvement.

He did not give up, but waited several months until the intensive security had relaxed somewhat. In the meantime, he took careful note of the night routines, figuring out when the duty staff went to bed. This time, he did not tell any of his friends what he was doing. After the last duty patrol had passed, he would get out of bed, sneak over to the "Waiting for Death Room" and climb in through a window. He photographed children tied to beds as they awaited death from what the medical records generally listed as "third degree malnutrition" or "congenital maldevelopment of brain," as well as tiny corpses in the morgue. He also depicted general conditions in the orphanage.

But the photographs Ai had risked so much to take were not given to the Chinese leadership. By that time, the official investigation had switched its target and become a witch-hunt against the critics of the orphanage administration. Ai gave the film to Dr. Zhang and left the orphanage to work at a factory job she had found for him. But when she left the country to take her story to the international community, Ai became worried about his own safety; he thought that if the photographs he had taken were published, he would be pressured to say they were faked. Also, he still had hope that exposing conditions in the Institute would have some effect. So he sneaked out of the country in 1995 to join Dr. Zhang.

"Originally I was very naive, I thought that once this material was published, the Chinese government would admit that these immoral things had happened and would stop this treatment of orphans. But the official statements just say that this never happened, that we made this up." Ai says. A recent article in China Daily implied that Ai himself had tied up a dying child he photographed, that the pictures had been posed and faked.

"Of course it would be very painful for the leadership to admit to these things, but this is fact, you must accept that mistakes were made... China claims to be a country with a rule of law. But if they don't punish these people, what kind of law is that? If the Chinese government doesn't punish them, other people will just do the same thing as they did, thinking 'I can do what I like, and the government will protect me.'"

Ai intends to continue to focus his energy on advocacy for China's orphans, although he would like to be studying, "something technical" he says. He hopes that more Chinese people will find out about what happened in the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute and believes that they would share his anger if they knew that the leadership had been more concerned about saving face than saving orphans.

"Like people anywhere in the world, they would be extremely angry, because everyone's life is valuable. Even beating a dog or a cat to death, people find that terrible. So what about starving someone to death? Everyone would think that is a completely inhumane thing to do. China is a socialist country, a humanitarian country. But these things happened precisely in China... If Chinese people knew about this, they would criticize the Chinese government."

*Sophia Woodman is executive editor of China Rights Forum.*

Copyright © 1996 China Rights Forum. Published by:

<http://www.igc.apc.org/hric/crf/english/96spring/e1.html>

3-8-2002

Human Rights in China

485 Fifth Avenue, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Tel: 212-661-2909 Fax: 212-867-1831

[hrichtina@igc.org](mailto:hrichtina@igc.org)

<http://www.igc.apc.org/hric>

---

[\[Previous Article\]](#)/[\[Next article\]](#)  
[\[Contents: \(English only\)/\(GB\)/\(BIG5\)\]](#)



◀ [back to main menu](#)