

Lost and found

Around 100,000 babies are abandoned every year in China - in department stores, ditches, even on rubbish dumps. What sort of future can these orphans expect? John Gittings investigates
Special report: China

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A small bundle in a grey blanket is whisked through the orphanage gates. The carer pauses while sympathetic staff take a peep at the tiny screwed-up face inside, then hurries on. "It's a newly born one, it must have just been left," they agree.

Zhang Yuxia, director of the Hefei Childrens' Welfare Institute, explains: "Ninety per cent of the children here have been abandoned, 60% are disabled and 70% are girls. Sometimes they leave them right outside the gate: the mothers are migrants from the countryside. They see what a fine place this is and want to make sure their children are taken in."

We peer through a window at a creche with 16 similar little bundles in cots, watched over by one nurse. Zhang expands on her subject. "Sometimes they take the baby to a department store, and leave it with a member of the staff, saying they want to shop or go to the toilet. The store puts out a lost baby message and there's no reply. Then the police try to find the mother: if they fail, they bring the baby to us."

Tens of thousands of Chinese babies - perhaps 100,000 or more - are discarded annually. Official statistics show, significantly, that more than 52,000 "abandoned children" were adopted last year. Disablement is the largest category: the range in the Hefei home is depressingly predictable - lots of cleft palates, a few misshapen limbs, a lovely girl with almost no nose, an albino boy, deaf and blind children, and those with cerebral palsy. I am not shown the most seriously disabled. Eleven-year-old Wang Dongzhen, who has cerebral palsy, proudly shows me her painting of "father watching TV" - the father, perhaps, who abandoned her.

Then there are the healthy babies - mostly girls born to unmarried mothers who fear public censure, says Yan Qingchun, a senior official at the ministry of civil affairs. "It's got worse because of the market economy. Young people come to town looking for work and live together without proper documentation. Their children are illegitimate." They have also fallen foul of the one-child policy (actually two children for most peasant families) which only allows "planned births" for married couples. Hefei is the provincial capital of Anhui province, where it is easy to dump an anonymous baby. In the countryside an extra birth is harder to conceal.

I am on my way to a children's home in Guangde, an ordinary county in the south of the province, to see a special project in community care pioneered by Save the Children Fund (UK). There are only 47 "children" (some have become young adults) on the books in Guangde, and only 10 were abandoned. Guang Qiu, now 21, was admitted soon after birth with a cleft palate. She knows who her parents are, say the staff. They work in a factory and visited her once, but they wouldn't have her back.

Tao Shi, 19, had learning difficulties but can now communicate reasonably well. "Her mother was a mentally disabled street woman," explains deputy director Feng Kanglin. "We took Tao away from her immediately she was born." Guang and Tao are part of a family of five, living in a "community home" under the charge of a devoted housemother, He Yao. The other children are Jing De (10) who has cerebral palsy, Guang Zhu (8) who has surgery for a cleft palate, and Tao He (6), a healthy girl abandoned when 10 days old. They live in town at some distance from the main institution (where there are nine other "family" units with a similar age spread).

He Yao is a model parent in a model project. Seeing the family cuddling up together on a sofa, I can believe her when she says that they "start every new day happily with love".

Guangde is transforming children's lives. "There used to be kids tied to chairs and lying in bed all day," says Kate Wedgwood of Save the Children.

I wonder what conditions are like now in the rural "welfare homes" which never get visited, or for children in need who never get help. This is sensitive territory and it requires weeks of patience to obtain permission to visit even the most advanced institutions. Officials have not forgotten the Channel 4 film *The Dying Rooms*, shown in 1995, which claimed that Beijing encouraged its orphanages to let children die. There was a wave of adverse publicity. Foreign aid workers say the film was right in exposing serious neglect but wrong to suggest it was directed from above. "The best way to describe it," says one, was "lack of care by default."

Though the film's argument was overstated, it helped to speed up changes in the system. "The *Dying Rooms* gave the ministry a severe shock," says a Chinese social worker. "Directives went out that standards must be improved." Beijing continues to get a bad press abroad whenever stories of child neglect surface. Earlier this year, one of China's most outspoken newspapers, the *Southern Weekend*, reported that local authorities had "confiscated" 18 children adopted without official approval in Jinjiang. Later a British tabloid published a picture of a dead baby abandoned in a ditch - allegedly outside a Chinese police station. Such stories reinforce stock images of a communist regime which imposes population controls by force and of a callous attitude towards the weak and helpless. Both images contain an element of truth but fail to acknowledge the sincere efforts being made by many government officials and ordinary Chinese.

"Yes, children do get thrown into ditches," say US researcher Kay Johnson who has done extensive field work in Anhui province, "but they get rescued and taken home, too. Someone finds a child and looks around in the neighbourhood to see who might want it. I know of someone who adopted a child found in a garbage dump."

The research done by Johnson and two Chinese associates demolishes the myth that Chinese couples have an overwhelming preference for male offspring. Many childless adopting couples said that "the gender did not matter". Nearly all who already had a boy of their own were adopting a girl to "make their family complete". Most remarkably, in one out of four cases of abandoned girls, the child was found outside the door by the family that adopted it. In a small community the identity of potential adopters is often known to the abandoning parents. Official policy at the Beijing level is now firmly set in favour of adoption or fostering wherever possible, with the usual mixture of humanitarian and financial motives.

"We want to move from the institution to the community and family," says Yan at the department of social welfare. "The target is that by 2010 all healthy children will be adopted or fostered."

Twenty miles outside the capital in Lizhen township are some of the most cheerful children I've met so far. The farmers' houses where they are being fostered have spacious courtyards, with vegetable patches, family dogs and paved areas for play. Fostering parents here must have children of their own already, adequate sanitation and a "good cultural level".

The foster families are better off than average (another requirement) but the subsidy for the children still makes a financial difference. At 340 yuan (£30) a month, a family fostering three kids will get over 12,000 yuan in a year. Since they grow their own food, most of the subsidy is pure gain. But there is no doubt about the affection and the stimulus of living in a real family - and not just with 23in TVs. "They bring us happiness because our own children have grown up," says a foster mother.

Restrictions on adoption were lifted in a revised law three years ago. Now, adopting parents can be as young as 30; they are also allowed to have one child of their own. The number of adopted children was 55,800 last year - against 20,000-30,000 in previous years. Two-thirds of these were adopted locally without passing through an institution. Of the remainder, more than 6,600 were adopted by foreign couples in what has become a booming (and profitable) business. Six out of 10 babies adopted from the Hefei home go abroad and foreign donations have helped improve conditions there.

From Hefei to Beijing, I know I am seeing the brightest side of a picture which must be darker elsewhere. There are only 126 childrens' homes in the whole of China: the aim is to have a childrens' institution "of some kind", according to Yan, in every large or medium-sized town... by the year 2010. And a welfare institution "of some kind" in every smaller town.

More than half the orphans looked after by the state are in local rural institutions that cater mostly for adults and the elderly. What can life be like for kids in such places - often just one or two among dozens of grown-ups? And what about the children who never get picked up by the system at all? Yan says: "We do our best to locate them, but we cannot guarantee we find them all."

Among the children in need are street children, those living unhappily with relatives or taken care of by village officials, children with HIV/Aids, and those with parents in prison. Some efforts are being made, but no one believes it is enough. Children also suffer from China's stringent family planning laws, often enforced by corrupt local officials who will levy huge fines and tear down the houses of those who resist.

The "illegal" or "black" children who are born may be abandoned, or placed informally, or registered locally or not at all - and in a few cases sold. Sometimes their birth parents try to "adopt" them to get round the restrictions. Susan Greenhaugh, another US expert working in the field, says Chinese demographers have been working quietly "to adjust the policy and make it more humane". Local officials who are chosen by the new village elections are likely to be less heavy-handed. Yet even in urban China, government employees can get the sack for having an "above quota" baby.

Jiang of Hefei Civil Affairs believes that fewer children will be abandoned in the future. "Economic conditions are improving and there is less prejudice against unmarried mothers. In Shanghai we even have couples who are dinkies [dual income, no kids]."

It may be coming true in cosmopolitan Shanghai. But it will be a very long time before the dinkies find their way to the heart of rural China.