

OUT OF PLACE AND OUT OF SCHOOL

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Who are China's street children? The extent and nature of the issue are outlined here by Andy West and Yang Hai Yu, who for the last two years have been working with Save the Children UK to support government responses. They argue that the notion of 'street children' encompasses many different situations, and that this suggests the need for a more integrated system of child protection.

Alongside the hectic pace of economic and social change over the last two decades, street children have become increasingly conspicuous in China. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s poor children, some homeless, became increasingly visible in urban centres, selling flowers, begging or involved in other activities. By official reckoning there are now 150,000 street children in China (a total unchanged since the mid-1990s).

But defining a 'street child' is a contested issue around the world, and is no less complex in China. In Chinese the term *lin lang er tong* is used for street children, but this means more literally 'vagrant children' or 'floating children'. The notion of *floating* would seem to be nearer the reality than 'street child', since floating begins to encompass themes of separation, detachment, vulnerability, risk, which are dominant features in their lives, but the term also has connotations of bravery or heroism. About 70% are boys, and the main age range is 10-14 years.

The existence of street children is a sensitive issue, an alarming apparent reversion to the days of *san mao* (three hair), an entertaining 1940s cartoon character street urchin illustrating social problems of the past. Recently, press articles, for example in the English language *China Daily* (23rd October 2000), and in the Chinese language newspaper *Hefei Evening News* (19th October 2000) and the magazine *China Women* (June 2000), have revisited the problem, especially on the occasion of an evaluation of the work of the Hefei Street Children Protection Centre, Anhui province, supported by UNICEF. But this highlighting of eastern work, especially the Anhui-Shanghai axis, should not draw attention away from the extent of the street children phenomenon. It spreads across the whole country, its variations require work at many levels of government and this work has included support from international non-government organisations such as Save the Children.

Historical and global context

The situation in China needs to be set in a global and historical context, because the existence of street children is now a worldwide problem. In South America governments have recently admitted killing street children, 'Guatemala owns up to role in death of street children', and formally paid compensation.¹ In several continents the existence of street children has become such a fact of life that the children have formed their own organisations: the fifth meeting of the African Movement for Working Children and Youth was held in Mali in November 2000. The increasing numbers of street children in the late twentieth century was in many countries associated with economic changes such as marketisation, privatisation, structural adjustment. In Mongolia, for example, there was a massive surge of children on the streets, homeless (with and without their families), since the early 1990s, many of whom live in winter in underground service points for communal heating systems.

In Romania, again since the early 1990s, homeless children have notoriously taken to living in sewers. Comparisons of numbers are difficult (because street children generally prefer the safety of less visibility) and for statistical purposes the question of definition is crucial. So as a crude indicator, a figure of at least 5,000 street children has recently been given for Guatemala City,² while some of the busiest centres in China are helping some 2-3,000 children each year. The problem is more recent in China, and the government credited 'with effective work',³ that is, in taking early initiatives. Many would say that one street child is enough and rather than focussing on numbers, look instead at the quality of responses, the nature of social attitudes.

The appearance of numbers of children on the street had been observed as a major social problem in industrialised western countries, such as Britain, in the mid-nineteenth century, but it never really went away. Homeless, separated children in Britain were re-designated 'runaways' especially after the development of the welfare state in 1948. In the 1980s economic policies brought thousands of older children back to living and begging of the streets in British cities, and in 1996 groups of 11-14 year olds living on the street in a northern town in England were highly visible and reported in the press. In China services for separated and abandoned children existed in the past, western observers noting forms of social protection including 'special schools' in the mid-sixteenth century. This long history of street children and their increasing visibility around the world provokes questions over the apparent failure of social institutions to meet children's needs, although this failure must also be seen in the context of changing economic and social circumstances. There is a need for specific local analysis.

Children out of place

The mere existence of street children highlights a range of social issues. Street children are essentially 'children out of place', and as such they reflect contemporary fault lines, problems or cracks in the social structure. The visibility of street children in China may, for example, reflect on the stresses caused by the changing economy, emerging social inequalities, domestic violence, pressures on children to do well at school, as well as the nature of parenting, the lure of the bright lights, and so on. The variety of children's backgrounds and causes of their transition to the street inevitably raises the question, what do we mean by 'street children'? The local situation is important: who are these children? what are their problems? In China the speed and nature of change provides context, but looking at children's views and needs is important.

Who are the children? Their external appearance is a starting point. Flower sellers now seem ubiquitous on Chinese streets especially in tourist areas - often working in groups and under adult supervision. Children begging are also obvious. Doing some work is necessary for survival. Many children (especially boys) go shoe-shining. Some children, especially girls, can be seen around restaurants carrying guitars and a sheet with their song repertoire. Other children, less visible and perhaps greater in number, undertake work on the street or in public thoroughfares, for example at railway stations, collecting empty bottles and other recycling activities. Even less visible are those children, who might not be classified as street children, but who often have similar attributes of vulnerability, risk and exploitation by adults - and who may have been drawn from the street population or trafficked for example for sexual purposes.

Some children are also engaged in criminal activities, such as street theft, and due to the nature of this 'work' street children generally experience social stigma. They are looked down upon and are often deemed to be the cause of their own misfortune. This question of 'blaming the victim' (also common in other countries) not only raises problems for the children themselves, but indicates the need for awareness raising about their situation among the general population of adults and children. But some adults know well the children's circumstances; in all of the various activities above, children

may work alone, children may work in groups, but very often work under control of adults, and may be sad to be economically or otherwise exploited. Such adults may be their parents or relatives (in the case of flower sellers) or unrelated to the children. Some children may be homeless and alone, others in some sort of accommodation with other children or with adults.

Diversity of causes

The complexity and variety of street children's circumstances is only matched by the diversity of their backgrounds and personal history, in short the reason for their being on the streets. It is difficult both to categorise and generalise reasons without denying the individuality of each child.

International researchers have increasingly come to recognise the plethora of differences in any constitution of childhood experience: age, gender, (dis)ability, class/ income/ wealth, social status and so on. If childhood is the period up to the age of 18 years (following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by China and most countries of the world), then clearly the experiences and perceptions of a five year old are likely to be different to those of a fourteen year old, and when overlaid by gender and other factors, provoke the need for a more exacting analysis of childhood and children's lives that is commonly the case. Such work in a country the size of China, even for street children, has yet to come. For now, it is possible only to rehearse some of the reasons for being on the street given by children and officials, bearing in mind that some children will present one key reason, others a combination. The final provocation to running away from home, for example, or being lured away to the local city life, may be given as an argument in the family, but other, preceding factors, such as physical abuse, may be the underlying cause.

Commonly cited causes of children coming on to the street include: family poverty; general parenting problems, which might include drug use, overt maltreatment and neglect, emotional abuse, relationship problems; family breakdown; reconstituted families, domestic violence; physical abuse; school problems, which might include abuse or discrimination by teachers, boredom; pressure to achieve well educationally from parents/ family, teachers, which may be linked to violence (see *China Women* June 2000 for a list of main reasons given by a national official). All of these may be reasons why children leave home themselves. There are also cases of abandonment by parents, even of older children, because of disability but also for unknown reasons (including boys). There are cases, especially of younger children, who become separated from parents. Lost children are particularly at a disadvantage if their family had recently migrated to a new area.

In some cases, such as flower selling, children migrate with family members (or with non-family adults) to engage in work. There are cities with particular links to other areas, such as the flower sellers in Beijing from particular parts of Hunan province. Children working with or for non-family adults, may have run away from home and been drawn into peer groups controlled and often exploited by adults, or they may have been coerced away from home by adults. In cases of coercion, or where children have been persuaded to leave for a better life (which may have included them being told of the possibility of remitting funds home), children generally end up exploited for criminal activities, under compulsion.

Whose definition?

Categorising street children raises analytical problems. New variations arise constantly, such as recent instances of children who left home to other areas to seek friends made over the internet. The problem of formulating definitions around the world has led to a refusal in some quarters to use the term 'street children' because of its lack of precision. Attempts were made in the past to distinguish children *of* and *on* the street. That is, children who were deemed to be on the street being those with

weakened family relationships, for whom the street is a main place of life, work and play but who had accommodation to which to return, generally with family; children of the street are those for whom the street is their main and only place of life and work, without their family. These distinctions are useful in broadening out the focus to include vulnerability on the street, and enable the inclusion of children not working but at risk of exploitation or estrangement from home, such as older boys in groups drinking spirits on the street (observed in south-west cities), or children out of school roaming urban areas and using video arcades, but not working.

But setting children in the overall context of the street has led some academics and practitioners to speak instead of a quest for 'real' street children, variously defined but generally focussed on those who are homeless. This takes the problem of definition away from mere semantics, because it affects the development and delivery of provision. For which of these 'street children' shall provision be made? Limitations in definition may mean dealing only with the end result, and not the cause. Furthermore it is important to consider children's own perceptions; any work on this area has yet to be extrapolated and published in China, but from children's view, the differences between migration, trafficking and being a street child may be minimal or non-existent in terms of daily life and opportunity.

Trafficking and Migration

'Migration', 'trafficking' and 'street children' have been generally used as distinct and separate categories in China. Trafficking received much attention in 2000, with a government run campaign rescuing thousands of women and children. Government and some international organisations run projects which are separately designated as street children and trafficking projects.

The problem of trafficking of children in China seems to be even larger and more significant than was previously realised. The term trafficking may be used to generally describe children and young women coerced or persuaded to leave home for a better life, who find themselves forced into exploitative work, often of a sexual nature. Some children picked up by authorities as street children have often been trafficked within China, and forced into exploitative and criminal activities. There is also the problem of children and young women trafficked out of and into China: this problem should not be ignored in the totality of child movement, migration and consequent exploitation.

The question of migration in China is twofold: registered migrants and those in the 'floating population' who do not register in their new places and are currently regarded as of major social and economic concern. But children on the street, liable to be picked up by authorities, may be children of families in the floating population who are separated from parents, or may themselves be economic migrants (floaters), who have left to seek their fortune, and some have even reported sending money home.

Children on the move

The core of any definition to resolve the complexities of street children for China (and take into account association with migration and trafficking), may in reality revolve around movement and a concept of vulnerability or risk: children on the move, or having moved from one place to another, at risk of separation from parents or already separated, who are vulnerable to different forms of exploitation by adults, out of school and lacking access to health and other social services, and often with precarious means of survival. Which suggests simple categorisations need to be re-examined in order to be inclusive, take a holistic approach to rights and needs of children.

In China the official definition of street children is 'a person aged under 18 who has left his/her family or guardian and lives a vagabond life for more than 24 hours without reliable safeguard for basic survival with the result of falling into dire straits'.⁴ While this would seem to exclude, for example, flower sellers living with their parents, in practice such distinction is impossible - many children have moved with parents or are simply working locally on the streets under family supervision. If the issues of trafficking and migration including where children themselves move large distances, are taken into account, and taking movement and (potential) separation from family as the basis then another context comes into play.

It is impossible to escape the size and diversity of China when considering street children. The different economies of provinces offer a variety of opportunities, as does the question of time and seasonal change. It has been reported that numbers of street children in some central and northern provinces drop in winter, because of the cold weather, and those children instead turn south to more temperate zones. The movement of children is not all in one direction: for example, west to east has been suggested, although eastern areas were an early concern. Children from Anhui do not all move towards Shanghai or Beijing; for example, girls from Anhui have moved to Yunnan, even to the southern areas of Xishuangbanna, and to Xinjiang (possibly trafficked). Other children in other provinces also defy the 'get rich first' lure of the east, providing a map of movements from different provinces in various directions.

While some children on the street have travelled vast distances, for example from the north-west to the east coast, from Urumqi to Shanghai, others engage in equally dramatic movements on different alignments, and yet others may have moved simply within their own province, or even just from the city boundaries to the city centre. One general trend in the movement is clear, however - from rural to urban.

Responses

Formulating responses cannot await final analysis of complexities, if only because of the speed of change rendering academic pontification useless, and humanity requires immediate action. This has already long begun.

The complexities of causes and definitions can be seen in the way in which the problem of street children appears to have emerged and come to the attention of the government as requiring action. By the end of the 1980s there was concern over the numbers of children dropping out of school. Research which indicated a drop out rate of over 4% at primary school and over 6% at junior middle school levels, rising to 10% in poorer rural areas, provoked the question, where have all these children gone? Further research suggested over half were working at home, nearly 30% employed, and the remaining 18% had gone to cities, doing odd jobs or collecting garbage - which would give a figure of several hundred thousand potential street children.⁵

Meanwhile, Civil Affairs bureaux who have responsibility for homeless and destitute people, found they were accommodating ever larger numbers of children who were on their own, separated from family. A first step was to establish separate provision for these children. An early centre was set up in Guangzhou by 1991, as a multi-departments collaboration. A 'warmness shelter' in Jiamusu (Heilongjiang province) was opened in 1994, and a Centre in Siping (Jilin province) followed.

In 1995 a programme of developing Street Children Help and Protection Centres, including new buildings, was initiated by government agencies, and 100 are due to be completed by 2001. UNICEF supported the building of some and supported work in the north-east, and in Hefei (Anhui province) and Shanghai 'which represents the main destination and origination of street children'. (Lauter

1998). In 1998 Save the Children began a programme of collaboration and support on the development of policy and practice work with street children with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and subsequently with many provincial, municipal, prefectural Civil Affairs bureau, and Street Children Protection Centres.

These centres generally fall under the auspices of municipal Civil Affairs bureaux, although some, such as that in Urumqi are provincial level, while in Beijing the responsibility for work with street children rests with the PSB. The role and practice of the centres is developing rapidly in many places. The key principle of work has been to bring children in from the street, and return them to their families. This aim conforms to internationally accepted principles that the best place for children is to be living with their family. There are also issues of guardianship in China, where centres have a duty of care but on behalf of parents. Formal guardianship is not placed or transferred to the Centre and remains with the parent, albeit the children may have been separated from family for some time. This is a tricky area, and one which government is working on to seek appropriate solutions.

The practice of receiving children, providing healthcare, clothing, some education while they are in the centre, and returning them home, ideally within two to four weeks, remains the basis of work. But problems emerged where children were found to have soon returned to the street, and where children could not recall or would not disclose their home address, and where parents could not be found. In addition, there are variations in practice across China, in response to local circumstances, and the nature of children's movements. In Xinjiang, for example, it is necessary for classes to be run in two languages, Uighur and Putonghua, and for attention to be paid to religious diets, but such provision is often difficult for Uighur children taken to centres in other provinces, where Muslim children sometimes refuse to eat much, not knowing if the food is appropriate. The regional and seasonal variation in the numbers of children passing through centres obviously affects the amount of time available staff can spend with them.

Developments

Problems of children returning to the street, children with no families to be found, and the need to develop approaches to working with children, have led to a broadening of perspectives of Centre work from a role simply of collecting and sending back children. For example, the need has been identified for work on strategies of prevention of children coming on to the street, and reintegration of children into families, homes, schools and communities. The need for development of practice with children in the centres, and means of engaging children on the street, are other elements.

In the June 2000 *China Women* article, the Ministry of Civil Affairs highlighted four areas of practice development: work on appropriate family education (to ensure a change in family behaviour, for children to be returned home); the placement in orphanages (welfare homes) of disabled children and small children whose parents can not be found; counselling work for children and families, for children who have left home through neglect; work with children who cannot return home and often have had complex problems and experiences.

As an example of work, in the area of prevention, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Civil Affairs bureau and Xinjiang UAR Street Children Protection Centre have, in different parts of the province, been active in developing community workshops and awareness-raising about street children, child development and children's rights, with support from Save the Children. Workshops have adopted a multi-sectoral approach, including staff from the Women's Federation, University, Social Sciences Academy, Juvenile Justice Bureau. Workshops have been run with parents of street children, and larger meetings with community groups, school teachers, school students and their parents.

The Academy of Social Sciences has been conducting research in collaboration with the Xinjiang UAR Street Children Protection Centre (also supported by Save the Children) on the issue, and to evaluate innovative work. Staff have become interested in ideas of participatory approaches in working with children, and experiential training workshops have been run by SCUK staff. Other Street Children Centres have also taken an interest in developing these approaches.

The use of community networks, such as neighbourhood committees, in prevention and reintegration work has begun in Hefei, Anhui province and these are to be further developed there, and used in other provinces. Unicef supported the idea of 'street help desks' in the north-east; these are periodically set up at railway stations or other key transport points to identify arriving and new street children and return them home immediately. Other forms of street work have been piloted, such as an open shelter/ home for street children in Chengdu, Sichuan province. The Chengdu Street Children Protection Centre is currently piloting branch centres in different parts of the city.

As work develops rapidly in many individual provinces and cities, there has also been development of regional and national initiatives. These include practice training for Street Children Protection Centres staff and Civil Affairs bureau staff, run jointly by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and Save the Children, and involving practitioners and managers from centres in a number of provinces in the north-east, south-west, centre, and west. Networking between centres and provincial Civil Affairs bureau, for the development of practice ideas and sharing experiences, has begun. Here practitioners discuss their work, for example including experiences of study tours to look at welfare practice, especially around street children, in Mongolia and Hong Kong. This networking, currently supported by Save the Children, is one aspect of future developments which are necessary if the complexities of children on the street are to be addressed. Linking up between and within provinces is important for 'lost and found' (missing persons) processes and databases, currently under development in several places.

Future challenges

Apart from the general questions of welfare provision and child protection outlined below, there are at least two significant and developing areas of work related to street children. First, the development of alternative care for street children who cannot return home or whose home cannot be found. This has been emphasised as a need and recent reports (*China Women*, June 2000) noted experiments underway to introduce 'family style' systems of community homes, an idea developed from the work of Save the Children in welfare homes in Guangde, Anhui province, and in three other provinces. At present, younger children whose home cannot be found are generally given a place in a welfare home, but the procedures for older children vary.

Second, the need to provide opportunities and appropriate livelihoods for the children has led to an interest in forms of vocational education in Xinjiang province (derived from their examination of the Mongolian experience) and elsewhere. In Jiamusi and Siping, in the early 1990s, the street children centres cooperated with other institutions to offer vocational training courses. The textbooks used in the education provided at many Street Children Protection Centres have included an element of practical work (such as vegetable growing, raising chickens).

Drawing services together

Just as the street children themselves reflect on contemporary social and family difficulties and problems, so too the development of an appropriate response, in terms of provision, reflects on the

changing nature of welfare in China. In short, the broad issue of street children, that is children on the move, floating, poses questions for the development of accessible health, education and welfare services etc., and how these are to be funded and delivered. In addition, the development of social awareness about the causes and circumstances of street children, and work on prevention and reintegration will inevitably raise the issue of a form of child protection system.

The development of alternative care for those children who cannot return home in particular will require additional expenditure, and it may be that innovations in fundraising and operation of such accommodation will be needed: even the development of local NGOs, but this would require the agreement of care standards and child protection policies and procedures. Alternative care might include fostering. The question of guardianship rights will form part of any initiative. The development of vocational education may also require funding, and its relationship with conventional schooling will demand consideration.

The need for alternative care for street children raises the question of the relationship of different services, for example, welfare homes (orphanages) and street children protection centres. At present these fall under different departments of the Civil Affairs administration, but liaison for service provision will be necessary as the future of street children provision looks to demand multi-sectoral working. The challenge is to link up services and sectors in order to serve all children separated from their family, as well as those on the move, those who are vulnerable and at risk, and those exploited. Placing children at the centre of the delivery of welfare services is a global challenge which the phenomena of street children highlights and awaits.

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