

573,000 Orphans in China

By Joshua Zhong

Exactly how many orphaned children are there in China?

Until recently, no one, not even the Chinese government, knew the answer. Now, however, a one-year study sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, the School of Social Development and Public Policy of Beijing Normal University, and Britain's Save the Children Foundation revealed that there are about 573,000 orphaned children under the age of 18 in China, representing about 0.04% of the total Chinese population of 1.3 billion. The final report, titled "The Current Status of Chinese Orphans and the Challenge We Face," states that this comprehensive national study is the first of its kind conducted since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It covers all 36 mainland provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities.

The report reveals that 86% of parentless orphans are living in the countryside. 450,000 children, or 79%, are living with relatives. Province-wise, Henan has the largest orphan population – about 50,000, followed by Hunan, Jiangxi, and Anhui. The four provinces combined account for about one third of all of China's orphans.

Interestingly, the study showed that fewer than 69,000 orphans are living in Chinese orphanages, compared with 450,000 living with their relatives. More than 50% of children under orphanage care are children with special medical needs. The report defined an orphan as "someone whose parents are both deceased or someone has no parents to care for him or her." It never mentions the term "abandoned child." It is a reasonable guess, based on my personal knowledge of Chinese orphanages, that a very high percentage of the children living in orphanages are abandoned children. It is also a very reasonable guess that some 54,000 orphans (573,000 total orphans minus those 450,000 living with relatives and 69,000 living in orphanages) are living outside the orphanages and belong to the abandoned children category. What is their status? How are they being cared for? Have they been unofficially adopted domestically (the kind of adoption without legal paperwork) or are they living with non-orphanage affiliated foster homes? Or have they simply disappeared into the community? The report does not offer any answers.

The report also fails to provide data on or address the issue of international adoption, domestic adoption, and foster care. The China Center of Adoption Affairs placed approximately 13,000 children for international adoption in 2005. According to a separate estimate by an official in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, around 25,000 children were adopted domestically last year, not including the unidentified number of "de facto" adoptions that are without legal or governmental recognition.

Sadly, the report does point out that the situation is concerning for orphans who have been adopted by their relatives or orphans living with "adoptive families." 21st century Chinese family values are changing enormously. Traditionally, Chinese viewed the adoption of deceased relatives' children as a familial obligation, but this is being replaced by a sense of passive charity or "doing a favor." Therefore, abuse and neglect of these adopted children are not uncommon.

According to the report, fewer than 293,000 orphans – only about half of the China's orphans – receive a basic government subsidy. More than 200,000 orphans receive no regular governmental financial aid. Overall, almost 300,000 orphans, about 55%, need additional help, because "in many

places, the financial aid an orphan receives is less than one quarter of the cost of raising a child. In some cases, the aid is less than 10% of what a child needs to live.”

For example, consider the following table:

Orphanages in these areas:	Receive this amount per child per year:
Municipalities like Beijing, Shanghai, or 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)

During an interview, Anhui Civil Affairs Bureau Deputy Director Ding Sijin revealed that “since the central government does not allocate specific additional funding for this special orphan population and leaves the responsibility to the local government, many local governments are unable to provide consistent and reliable financial aid to orphans. In reality, we can’t help but keep a flexible policy: to distribute some aid irregularly when we have extra funding, and to put the aid on hold when funding is tight.”

The report itself represents a breakthrough in the long Chinese government tradition of information secrecy, especially on sensitive issues like orphans and orphanages. The current leadership headed by President Hu Jintao has been trying to figure out ways to tackle the increasing gap between rich and poor and the unbalanced economic development between urban and rural areas in China. This report is obviously produced in response to President Hu’s call to “create a more harmonious society” by finding out the true status of the Chinese orphan. Will this report generate much-needed political pressure on the Chinese central and local governments to allocate additional financial assistance for the orphans? Will it help to raise the awareness among the Chinese people, many of whom may be learning for the first time the astonishing orphan figures and the overwhelming need behind the curtain of “prosperity,” and respond to the orphans’ need? That is yet to be seen.

As a charity focusing on serving abandoned children living in orphanages and foster families, CCAI, along with its adoptive families and supporters, has been working tirelessly over the past fourteen years to care for this very special group of children, from providing nutritious food, warm clothes, toys, equipment, medical treatment, and childcare training, to supporting children’s education needs. We strongly believe that every abandoned child deserves a loving home and they desperately need one now! That is why our first mission is to “find loving homes for as many abandoned Chinese children as possible.” Adoption is both about fulfilling a family’s dream to have a child, and, most importantly, about making a difference in a child’s life.