

FOSTER CARE IN CHINA

By Joshua Zhong, Co-founder and President

On October 27, 2003, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs published its first-ever national foster care guide, "Temporary Measures on Foster Care Management." Later that month, the Ministry hosted the first National Conference on Foster Care. Orphanage leaders from all over the country and foreign charity organizations and experts, including CCAI, were invited to this historical conference. For the first time in Chinese history, the government has decided to take the lead in promoting foster care and implementing a set of internationally-recognized foster care standards. The Chinese government's unofficial goal is to place 50% of orphanage children with foster families by 2008. This is great news for abandoned children. However, in fully applying these measures and accomplishing this goal, the Chinese government is faced with tremendous challenges. I'd like to share with you CCAI's efforts toward promoting foster care in China and my personal insight into the Chinese foster care problems and solutions.

CCAI's Experience

Two years ago, when we first mentioned to the Hangzhou Orphanage Director the idea of placing some orphanage children with foster families, her response was, "I don't think that's practical." She responded, "People living in the city are too busy to care for an orphaned child, and people in surrounding villages are too poor and uneducated to qualify for providing such care." We went to the nearby county government and shared with the officials our desire to recruit some foster care families. "We are not quite sure how this foster care thing works," they said, "but it seems like it could help our unemployment problem. So go ahead."

To everyone's surprise, as soon as the advertisement went out, several dozen families showed up at the front door of our Lily Orphan Care Center (LOCC), an orphan care unit we have been independently running within the Hangzhou Orphanage (HO) since 2001. It was obvious that some people came with a lot of curiosity and many others just needed a paid job. We selected 10 couples and invited them to participate in a month long foster care training and home study. Seven families survived the ordeal and signed a Guarantee Agreement with LOCC.

The rest is history.

Today the Joint Office of the Foster Care Program at LOCC and HO has 100 trained foster care families currently caring for children. More than half of the HO children are in foster care homes. These children's overall physical and emotional conditions have dramatically improved. Having seen the positive results of a program that not only benefits children but actually reduces the cost of orphanage operation, the orphanage director has become a strong supporter.

Traditional Foster Care System in China

Foster care is not a new phenomenon in China. It has existed for several decades. However, this traditional foster care program, or “*jiyang*” as it is called in China, which means “temporary care”, is fundamentally different from what many westerners understand about foster care. Abandoned children in China are put into *jiyang* families mainly because of two reasons. First, *jiyang* is seen as a way to cope with orphanage overcrowding. Many orphanages are simply unable to take in all the abandoned children who have landed at their doorsteps. Orphanages see *jiyang* as a short-term solution and hope to get these children back to the orphanage “where they belong” when more room or a bigger building becomes available. Second, *jiyang* is used as a method to assist unemployed families as a part of a government welfare program. To deal with rising unemployment some local governments have become very creative by assigning orphanage children to families suffering financial hardship. This has become a part of the government’s “*buzhu*,” a social welfare type of subsidy that has been in existence in China for decades. Naturally as well as unfortunately, a *jiyang* family’s screening, training, and supervision, which are crucial components of normal and reliable foster care practice, are either completely missing or become irrelevant.

Therefore, many children under such care do not experience more obvious physical or emotional improvement as compared with those who are cared for in a regular orphanage. Allegations of child abuse, malnourishment, and neglect are not uncommon. We have seen American adoptive families who were disappointed by the care their adopted child received in a “foster” home, compared with families whose children came from regular orphanages. Because of these problems and limited access to the right foster care knowledge and training, many orphanages either quickly lose interest in promoting a foster care program, or continue using it to deal with orphanage overcrowding.

Orphanage Officials’ Concern and Resistance

Whenever we approach an orphanage official about developing a foster care program, we get similar responses which generally fall into one of four categories. First, since many orphanages in China are located at the far edge of cities and next to relatively poor farming communities (something which was purposely arranged by the government a few decades ago to move the orphanages from public attention, both to protect “national face” and to avoid inadvertently encouraging more abandonment), orphanage officials think that family conditions in the surrounding communities are no better or worse than their orphanages. They conclude that poor and uneducated families are not worthy of caring for their children.

Secondly, they may have had some negative experience with former or current *jiyang* families. They might feel that some *jiyang* families do not properly use the designated money and quality formula for their foster children. These families may use the money for their own financial needs and even consume the formula themselves. The problem is largely the fault of the orphanages. Many *jiyang* families live in distant villages and are seldom visited or supervised by orphanage staff. The lack of accountability between the

jiyang families and the orphanages causes disinterest in *jiyang*, which is therefore seen as inferior to orphanage care.

Among orphanages that have international adoption programs there is a different kind of concern. Some of these orphanages worry that foster parents might build too close a bond with their foster child so an adoption might happen. Their fear lies not in the adoption but rather the likely loss of a \$3,000 foreign adoption donation, something orphanages rely on heavily to build bigger buildings or to add much needed equipment. There is no doubt that many of these orphanage directors sincerely believe that a better facility will do more good for the health and care of the children, but for many others, these facilities are shown off as a matter of personal pride. In fact, in order to prevent foster care families from adopting a child, some orphanages have raised the amount of the domestic adoption fee to the same level as the international adoption fee, which is roughly equivalent to a typical Chinese family's three-year income.

Cost is another concern for orphanage management. Every child living in a Chinese orphanage is entitled to a monthly stipend to cover basic costs of living. This stipend ranges between 180 to 280 RMB (approximately \$22-35) depending on the cost of living in different parts of China. However, the monthly cost to hire a foster care family is about 400 RMB (\$50), plus medical and education expenses. Unable to figure out where to get the additional money, many orphanages feel that it is more affordable to keep the children in the orphanages.

Solutions and Reality

When we first launched the LOCC foster care program, the orphanage officials were utterly convinced that poor and uneducated farmers were not qualified to care for a child and city dwellers wouldn't be interested. Today, of 100 foster care families we supervise, half are farmers and half live in the city. These families, many in their mid-forties with grown children and one spouse unemployed, are so grateful for the opportunity to care for a child and earn a little income at the same time. Traditionally, Chinese love to have a big family with many children. Due to the population explosion in recent decades and the government's determination to keep it under control, most families today can only dream of the chance to nurture more than one child. The foster care program is a near perfect solution to their desire. According to our survey, most of our foster parents say that the child under their care gives them the greatest joy.

The cost concern is simply a bureaucratic miscalculation. Besides providing a monthly stipend for every orphan, the government must also pay for the orphanage employees' salary, insurance and retirement benefits. There is also the cost of building maintenance, administration, water, electricity, and transportation, etc. In reality, the cost of keeping children in the orphanage far exceeds the cost of placing children in foster homes. The orphanages spend more but the children get less personal attention in the orphanage. In addition, the complaint about the cost is misleading because orphanages with international adoption programs do receive a \$3,000 donation for every child adopted. Instead of accumulating the money to build a showy facility where a family environment

is sadly missing, these donations, or at least a portion, should be used to support the promotion and operation of foster care.

The disappointment and frustration many orphanages have experienced with their traditional *jiyang* program is understandable. The solution is to create practical guidelines and make training available. The “Temporary Measures on Foster Care Management” by the Ministry of Civil Affairs is a timely response to a serious need. This document clearly defines requirements for foster family qualifications, the foster care home study procedure, the function and responsibilities of Foster Care Management offices, and implementation of the Foster Care Agreement, foster care supervision, and legal responsibilities. This document ensures that the traditional *jiyang* system must be critically examined, upgraded, or if necessary, abolished, in favor of a brand new foster care system.

However, documentation without implementation is weightless. Only by providing much-needed foster care training can these positive ideas be turned into reality. This is where international assistance becomes urgent. Many wonderful organizations, such as Half of the Sky, Feed the Hunger, Holt International, Care for Children, Mother’s Choice, World Vision, as well as CCAI, have been actively involved in foster care development and training in China since the early 1990’s. The combined effort has not only contributed to the publication of the “Temporary Measures on Foster Care Management,” but has also played a role in creating a better understanding and gradual acceptance of the new foster care system by more and more orphanages.

The benefits of foster care over orphanage care are unmistakable. A carefully selected, well-trained, and closely supervised foster home is better than any orphanage, no matter how fancy the building or diligent the staff. In a loving, though possibly poor, foster family environment, an abandoned child will undoubtedly receive better physical and emotional care, which they deserve. These children will finally have a place they can almost call “home.”