

The Challenge of Charity – Serving the Children Left Behind

By Joshua Zhong

The Chinese government provides orphanages with somewhere between \$20 and \$40 a month for *jiben shenghuofei* (basic living expenses) per child, depending on the cost of living in the region. However, according to most orphanages I have been in contact with in the past twelve years, the \$20-40 per month can only cover food and clothing for an orphaned child. The more expensive items, like medical care and education, are left to the individual orphanages to come up with.

Since 1992, approximately \$15,000,000 in donations from about 50,000 adoptive families in more than twelve countries has poured into some 300 Chinese orphanages in the form of “\$3,000 child rearing fees,” not counting the hundred of thousands of dollars in charitable donations from adoption agencies, adoptive families, and benevolent foundations. International adoption has become a major source of income for many orphanages. As I explained in the “Where Does My \$3,000 Donation Go?” article (published in the July/August 2001 Circle), most of these adoption donations have been put into proper use for children’s needs, such as improving or building much-needed childcare space, hiring additional caretakers, adding childcare equipment and facilities, providing medical service, and sending children to school.

However, the reality is that there are many more orphanages in China that are not open to international adoption. They don’t receive the financial benefit of international adoption and are thus left behind with ever-increasing financial hardship. Compared with “rich” orphanages that have additional “adoption income,” most of the closed orphanages continue their struggle with a higher infant mortality rate as a result of the financial inability to care for severely handicapped children, poor quality of childcare due to the lack of training and supplies or equipment, and lower morale because of non-existent financial incentives for orphanage staff.

Even among orphanages open to international adoption, many are still struggling. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs in China, about 60% of orphanage children are handicapped children. In some orphanages, like Tianjin Orphanage, that number can be as high as 90%. Although the Waiting Child Program established by the China Center of Adoption Affairs has allowed more and more special needs children to be adopted in recent years, the majority of handicapped children in China will never find a permanent home. It is a daunting financial burden for orphanages to care for these special children. Many of the physical conditions that require costly surgery are simply left unattended. In addition, due to various reasons including a lack of urgency, poor cooperation among governmental agencies, or the inability of orphanage leadership, some orphanages can only place a very small number of their children internationally every year. The adoption donations just cannot make any major impact. This is especially true with those orphanages in the countryside or a historically less-developed region, such as Jiangxi, Guizhou, or Shanxi, to name a few. Finally, what I want to address further, is the poor financial management by orphanage leadership as well as the lack of supervision and accountability procedures by overseas adoption agencies and individual donors alike.

In the past ten years, a handful of orphanage directors and a few adoption officials have been caught and punished for corruption, misuse of donations, or poor financial management. The Chinese central government and the China Center of Adoption Affairs have been trying hard to enforce rules and regulations and come down very hard on those who dare to break them. However, the goal of financial accountability will not be fully achieved unless the donating agencies and adoptive families

understand the complexity of the political and social structure in China and take a proactive approach by following a procedure of contribution distribution in China. Otherwise, some donations will continue to “fall through the cracks” and those children who truly need our help will continue to suffer.

CCAI has been following a long-established set of Donation Distribution Procedures when sending money to China:

1. When a donation is designated for a specific orphanage, our Charity Department notifies our local representative in China to contact the orphanage for an official Funding Request.
2. The local rep verifies and translates the Funding Request and forwards it to CCAI with recommendations or suggestions.
3. CCAI's Chinese Children Charity Fund (CCCF) Committee meets to discuss the request and based on our rep's recommendations, approves or disapproves the orphanage's Funding Request.
4. When the CCCF Committee approves the request and authorizes the amount of funding with the signature of the CCAI President and CCCF Treasurer, the Charity Department wires the money to the orphanage (or our rep if the orphanage does not have a foreign currency account) with a specific project completion time frame.
5. During the project, the CCAI local rep makes frequent contact with the orphanage to verify the progress.
6. When the project is finished, the orphanage mails to the CCAI rep all formal purchasing receipts, photographs of the items purchased and the location the items are placed, and thank-you letters to the donors. After carefully verifying the authenticity of the reports, photos, and receipts, the rep mails the packet to CCAI headquarters.
7. The Charity Department mails copies of receipts, photos, and thank-you letters from the orphanages to the project donor(s) and completes the file.
8. The CCAI rep visits the orphanage whenever possible to verify the actual use of the items.
9. The CCAI rep sends a Donation Update Report to the Provincial Civil Affairs Bureau to inform them of our activities and ensure additional supervision.

Through our years of charity work in China, we have found that these steps are the most effective method to hold the orphanages accountable and to maximize the impact of our donors' contributions. Interestingly, we also receive occasional complaints from some orphanages. They feel that it is too hard to get or use donations from CCAI as compared with other agencies because of the in-depth involvement of our China reps during the entire project. I see that rather as a compliment. Our China reps play an essential role in our charity projects and serve as our watchful eyes to maximize our charitable contributions. This is intimidating to those who may be tempted by corruption. It also brings confidence to officials who truly want to use donations to help the children under their care.

It is understandable and commendable that adoptive families desire to contribute to the orphanages where their daughters or sons were once cared for. The historical and emotional connection motivates us to get involved and to make life better for those who are left behind. As a charitable organization, we have been playing a very active and willing role to facilitate and channel these efforts and resources. However, as an agency, we believe that we should focus our general (non-designated) charity funding on those closed, remote, and poor orphanages. Our latest efforts include joining hands with the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs' Project Tomorrow to provide heart

surgery to children in Shanxi Province and cleft lip and palate surgery to children in Qinghai Province.

Every donation, whether one dollar or one thousand dollars, is from a loving family who entrusts CCAI with great expectations and responsibility. We are committed to walking the extra mile to hold orphanage officials accountable for each donation. We don't mind doing things "the hard way," as long as the children in need will have a better life as a result of the donors' kind generosity and our meticulous charity procedures. Once again, I want to thank all of you who have so generously donated to the Chinese Children Charity Fund. I can say with full confidence that every dollar of your donations has and will directly benefit the orphanage children, and most of all, you are truly making a difference in the lives of the children who are left behind.