

Great News for Orphanage Children **By Joshua Zhong**

In March 2001, CCAI took over the Hangzhou Orphanage's infant care unit, housing 85 children under three years of age. It was the beginning of the Lily Orphan Care Center (LOCC). Three years later, the LOCC was recognized by the Chinese government as a "model of orphan care" (Chinese Social Welfare Magazine, April 2003). The success of the LOCC in Hangzhou led to two more LOCC's, but at the same time, it presented a new challenge for us: While several hundred abandoned children are receiving first-class and one-on-one care from our loving and trained caretakers and foster families, what about those hundreds of thousands of children living in other orphanages across the country? What can we do to enable those children to benefit from the LOCC's child-centered philosophy, methodology, and experience?

It's one thing to manage one LOCC, or even three, but there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of orphanages in China that face many major problems:

- Directors may have little or no childcare education or training. The focus of management is not on children but rather on taking care of staffing issues and benefits. The childcare responsibility is usually left to a deputy director who most likely has no real power.
- Caretakers may have very little education, receive minimum job-related training, and are overworked, thus struggling constantly with limited resources and little reward.
- Orphanages may struggle financially. The 150 to 340 *renminbi* an orphanage receives each month from the central government to care for a child is nowhere near the real cost. There is a great lack of additional financial resource to improve current conditions. For many orphanages with international adoption programs, the directors put the adoption donation money into building account. Instead of using all donated money to meet the immediate needs of the children, the money is accumulated and spent on fancier or bigger new orphanages. In fact, there seems to be a competition going on among orphanage directors to see who can build the biggest and prettiest buildings.

To confront these challenges, three years ago I wrote a recommendation report to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, titled "Recommendation on Establishing an Orphan Care & Orphanage Management Training Center." The ultimate goal of the center was to establish and implement child care and management standards geared to the specific needs of the abandoned and handicapped children living in orphanages all over China. As a result, children in all orphanages would benefit from heightened levels of care and better living conditions. To accomplish this goal, the center would invite national and international childcare and development experts, adoptive families, and professional volunteers to provide short- and long-term training to orphanage directors, lead caretakers, and lay caretakers. Ultimately, within three to five years every orphanage director and caretaker would need to be certified by the national training center to be able to serve in an orphanage. Of course, continued training and effective supervision and management would be keys to maintaining the training quality. An equally important goal of the center would be to educate the orphanage leaders with financial management skills. Orphanage directors would understand the immediate needs of the children under their care, the importance of financial accountability, and why in most cases renovating existing facilities would be preferable to spending loads of money on a fancy new building. The central message of my report was: *The true focus of an orphanage's work should be the children. It is time to right the priority through systematic education on a national scale.*

Unfortunately, my report failed to receive much attention until a few months ago in May, when the Ministry of Civil Affairs finally decided to transfer orphan care responsibility from the former bureaucratic Civil Welfare Department to the China Center of Adoption Affairs. In late May, the visionary CCAA Director General Mr. Lu, who had read my report, initiated a private meeting with me in Beijing to exchange ideas on how to accomplish their new mission. I put forward three pieces of advice:

- Conduct national research to gather data on the current childcare situation and problems in orphanages. This would give the CCAA the full picture of the needs facing Chinese orphanages.
- Establish an international working committee to study the data and put forward recommendations for standardization.
- Organize regular national and regional training for orphanage directors and caretakers by utilizing experts from China as well as overseas.

On August 29, 2005, the first National Social Welfare Institute Child Care Training Conference took place in Chongqing, China. Fifty-nine top provincial childcare officials and orphanage directors from all over China, as well as delegations from the United States, Spain, and Sweden witnessed and participated in this historical and unprecedented event. During the three-day conference, participants heard speeches from Chinese experts including Professor Lu Sizhen on “Early Childhood Protection,” Dr. Zhao Congmin on “The Significance of Positive Living Environments for Orphanage Children,” Professor Li on “Early Childhood Development Standards and Meaning,” as well as Dr. Dana Johnson of the Minnesota Children’s Clinic on the “Impact of Institutional Care and Recommendation.” The conference ended with the signing of a *Joint Declaration for Promoting Healthy Development of Children in China’s Welfare Institutions*.

One conference will never solve all the problems confronting Chinese orphanages, and there is still a long way to go to actually materialize the vision and accomplish the goal. However, there is no doubt it symbolizes an unprecedented and critical first step on a national scale toward the goal of creating better living conditions for all the abandoned children in China. As Mr. Lu of the CCAA clearly stated before the foreign delegations, “We are undertaking something that has never been tried in the past. We are facing tremendous challenges and obstacles in the times to come, mainly the closed minds of some officials and orphanage directors and the complexity of social-political structures, as well as the shortage of financial resources. But we are determined to push as far as we can for the sake of these unfortunate children. So please help us!”

As the largest China adoption agency in the world, we believe in and are committed to this vision. We will continue our decade-long effort to create a more dignified and loving environment for all abandoned Chinese children through deep involvement in policy-making, childcare training, and foster care expansion. Seeing the benefit of the first National Child Care Training Conference in August, CCAI plans to join hands with the CCAA and financially sponsor five more national trainings in 2006.

I am convinced that if we steadfastly empower orphanage leaders, caretakers, and foster families with child-centered knowledge and skills, we will see gradual living condition improvement for children, the rapid expansion of foster care, and God willing, the eventual shrinking and ultimate

disappearance of all institutionalized orphanages. May all children live and grow in a family where care is the best and love abundant!