

Families with Children from China Congressional Statement

Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Roundtable on China's Children: Adoption, Orphanages, and Children with Disabilities
October 21, 2002

Families with Children from China (FCC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting families who are planning to adopt, are in the process of adopting, or have adopted children from China. There are 90 chapters across the United States representing thousands of adoptive families. The Greater New York Chapter alone includes nearly 2000 families. Since we were founded in the early 1990s, we have continuously had the opportunity to work with and observe Chinese orphanages. We believe it is important to include in today's discussion the voices of the adoptive community.

China emerged in the mid-1990s as one of the largest sources of international adoptions for Americans. The number of Chinese children adopted into American families is now about 5,000 per year. Across the United States close to 30,000 children have been adopted from China by American families since 1990. China has been a frequent choice because its adoption process has been stable and predictable, infants and children coming from Chinese orphanages have been healthy, and Chinese officials have been open to adoptions by single parents and older parents.

Beginning in 1993, China conducted a major overhaul and consolidation of its adoption policies and processes and set a new, national system in place. Our community has been impressed with the work of the national coordinating agency, the Chinese Center for Adoption Affairs. Graft and irregularities in dealings with foreign adoptions have been extremely rare. The relevant Chinese authorities have been conscientious about consistently and fairly applying the rules. The adoption paperwork requirements and costs have been on a par with, if not better than international practices. China has exhibited none of the problems seen recently with adoptions in Vietnam and Cambodia. FCC families' experiences with China adoption have been overwhelmingly positive.

The circumstances of adoption in China are in some ways unique. The large majority of children in Chinese orphanages are girls. This situation has been caused, by a number of social, demographic, and economic factors. These include a combination of widespread poverty in certain rural provinces, (particularly those inland regions remote from the booming economies of the coastal areas), and the traditional Chinese value of the primacy of bearing sons. The lack of social security assistance in China further fuels the tradition that male heirs, and not daughters, are obliged to provide financial and other care for their elderly parents. Finally, China stepped up its population control efforts at the beginning of the 1980s and established the 'one-child policy.' This policy, from its inception, has been irregularly enforced (strongly enforced in urban areas, and more loosely in rural areas), and is now being revised to reflect the reality that many families have skirted the one-child rule in attempts to bear a son.

FCC families are well aware, having visited orphanage sites in China during the last decade, that there were numerous problems in Chinese orphanages in the early 1990s. These ranged from poor conditions, overcrowding, and lack of resources, to poor management of the institutions. We believe China has made great strides in addressing these problems. They have been very successful at bringing new resources to orphanages. At many of the institutions we have visited, the quality of care, physical infrastructure, toys and equipment, and other conditions have dramatically improved. We have also been impressed that orphanages, working together with foreign and domestic groups, are now embracing foster care as an alternative to long-term institutional care for infants and children. We have been pleased to see significant growth in the number of local Chinese families participating in foster care programs, and the beginning of growth in domestic adoption by Chinese families. This latter development is new for mainland China, which does not have a

tradition of adoption outside the extended family; this is, we believe, the direct result of a fruitful, collaborative relationship between the foreign adoptive communities and China.

While FCC is primarily an organization that serves American adoptive families, we care deeply about the children who remain in Chinese orphanages. Many of us parents felt compelled to find an effective way to do something to elevate conditions for these unadopted children. Increasingly today the children who are not being adopted are those with significant special needs or those who have passed beyond the prime ages for adoption — the same category of children who have been difficult to place in American domestic adoptions.

Since 1996, FCC has been providing support to China's orphanages and helping to improve conditions for children growing up in institutional care. Over the past six years, for example, FCC of Greater New York has raised more than \$850,000 to fund orphanage assistance projects in China. Over \$800,000 has already been distributed to China to fund projects providing direct services to children in more than 40 orphanages in nine provinces. Most of the funds FCC distributes support continuing programs to increase the level of care the children receive.

Working primarily in partnership with a China-based non-governmental organization, the Amity Foundation, FCC sponsors orphanage children for medical treatment and corrective surgery and pays tuition fees for hundreds of children to attend community schools. Two important programs provide professional care within the orphanages, supplementing the work of the regular orphanage staff. The 'Grandmas Project' recruits retired teachers and medical personnel to provide nurturing care to babies and special needs children. In a program developed by FCC, intensive-care nursing teams care for babies and infants at risk and provide therapeutic intervention to special needs children. FCC currently sponsors Grandmas projects in seventeen orphanages, and teams of four to six Chinese nurses in five orphanages.

The development of long-term foster care has been perhaps the most significant advancement in the care of the neediest children, older and special needs children who are not likely to be adopted. Through seminars by organizations such as the Amity Foundation, orphanage directors are recognizing the benefits of loving foster homes over long-term institutional care for these children. FCC has worked with the Amity Foundation to develop quality foster care programs, providing a model of family care within the community with resources to address medical and educational needs, and to promote the advantages of child-centered family care to orphanage directors and provincial officials. The benefits to the children in foster care placements are apparent in the gains in their health and in their physical and emotional development. FCC has also partnered with the Holt Foundation, another organization promoting the advantages of foster care, in providing funds to begin two foster care projects developed by Holt.

In site visits to the orphanages with projects we sponsor, we have seen significant advancements in the conditions and in the level of care. To those who visited orphanages in the first years of significant numbers of adoptions from China, the observed improvements have been most dramatic. Government and business-community resources have been devoted to erecting new orphanage buildings and renovating others, replacing the dismal facilities many of us saw when we adopted our children. Government officials and orphanage directors have been receptive to efforts by a broad range of charitable organizations to improve services to the children, allowing access to the orphanages and training of orphanage staff.

Clearly the needs remain great and much more needs to be done. The trends of greater government attention to the population of orphanage children and to facility improvements, and receptivity to the assistance provided by international organizations as well as emerging charitable groups within China are hopeful signs of continuing positive developments in the care for China's orphaned and abandoned children.

CONCLUSION

Adoption of children from China into American families is one of the most successful examples of

cooperation between our two countries. Despite frequent ups and downs in the relationship between Washington and Beijing, the adoption process has moved ahead with quiet and life-changing effectiveness. The adoption process and conditions in orphanages are one area where China has made impressive and enduring progress, which should be recognized and applauded. China's openness to assistance and its commitment to improvement in these areas demonstrates that China can change in directions that Americans are pleased to see. This suggests to our community that open lines of communication and constructive engagement with China works -- to the mutual good of people in both countries. Families with Children from China urges that both governments do all that they can to allow this overwhelmingly positive story to continue to flourish.

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