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A family in China made babies their business

The lucrative trade in newborns was fueled by an adoption frenzy that saw government-run orphanages paying for children who they then made available to Westerners.



Duan Yuelin and Chen Zhijin, his mother, who get children from the rural poor and adopt them out to foreigners, talk about their business in their home in Changning, China. Chen says the children are better off with their new parents. (Barbara Demick / Los Angeles Times / January 15, 2010)

By Barbara Demick

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Reporting from Changning, China - The telephones kept ringing with more orders and although Duan Yuelin kept raising his prices, the demand was inexhaustible. Customers were so eager to buy more that they would ply him with expensive gifts and dinners in fancy restaurants.

His family-run business was racking up sales of as much as \$3,000 a month, unimaginable riches for uneducated Chinese rice farmers from southern Hunan province.

What merchandise was he selling? Babies. And the customers were government-run orphanages that paid up to \$600 each for newborn girls for adoption in the United States and other Western countries.

"They couldn't get enough babies. The demand kept going up and up, and so did the prices," recalled Duan, who was released from prison last month after serving about four years of a

six-year sentence for child trafficking.

Huddled around a gas stove that barely took the chill out of their ground-floor apartment, Duan and his parents offered a rare look at the inner workings of a "mom and pop" baby-trafficking ring run by members of his family and an illiterate garbage collector with a habit of picking up abandoned babies.

From 2001 to '05, the ring sold 85 baby girls to six orphanages in Hunan.

His story, which is backed up by hundreds of pages of documents gathered in his 2006 court case, shed light on the secretive process that has seen tens of thousands of unwanted girls born to dirt-poor parents in the Chinese countryside growing up in the United States with names like Kelly and Emily.

"Definitely, all the orphanages gave money for babies," said the 38-year-old Duan, a loquacious man with a boxy haircut.

At first, Duan said, his family members assumed that they weren't breaking the law because the babies were going to government-run orphanages. It had been an accepted practice among peasant families to sell unwanted children to other families.

But the police didn't see it that way. Chinese law had been strengthened in 1991 to clearly prohibit commerce in children.

The concern is that not only is paying for babies unethical, it can encourage kidnapping, a rampant problem in China. And when babies are trafficked and their records falsified, they grow up with no sense of where they are from and their heritage.

Although Duan and his family trafficked babies only from the southern province of Guangdong, he says other families were doing the same -- bringing in babies from impoverished parts of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces to the west.

The merchandise may have been human, but it was a trading business like any other. Cash on delivery; prices set by laws of supply and demand. The Duans' supplier in Guangdong would charge extra if a baby was prettier or stronger than the average. The orphanages would often phone in their orders and haggle over the price.

"Sometimes they would give us money in advance to buy the babies. They'd say, 'We'll take this many babies at such-and-such a price,' " Duan recalled.

Duan and five members of his family -- two younger sisters, his wife, sister-in-law and brother-in-law -- were convicted in 2006 of child trafficking. The others remain in prison. Only Duan was released, on the grounds that he needed to support his parents.

Family members complain that they were made scapegoats in the widespread buying and selling of babies. Several orphanage directors involved were promoted afterward.

"The government was making the big money. . . . We only got a little bit, like the dregs of the tofu," said Duan Fagui, Yuelin's 59-year-old father. He said that many other families were selling babies to orphanages -- "the only difference is that we got caught."

It began in 1993 when Chen Zhijin, Yuelin Duan's mother, and the two sisters who remain in prison were hired for \$1 a day to take care of babies for the orphanage in Changning, a town adjacent to the larger city of Hengyang.

At the time, the Communist Party's campaign to limit population size was running strong, and overly zealous cadres would sometimes demolish the houses of families that had more than one child (two for peasants if the first was a girl, because rural families wanted boys to carry on the family name).

It is illegal in China to abandon a baby, even at an orphanage, so people would discard their unwanted daughters in the dark of night in cardboard boxes or bamboo baskets. If they were leaving baby near an orphanage, they often would light a firecracker as a signal for the staff to find the child.

"We'd find the babies all over," recalled Chen, a tiny woman in tattered plaid trousers with short hair hugging her face. "They'd be wrapped in rags, filthy. . . . Sometimes they'd have ants all over their face because babies have a sweet smell and the ants like them."

Because Chen worked for the orphanage, rural people sometimes asked her to take their unwanted babies there. The orphanage would accept some, not all; it didn't have enough caretakers or formula for all the babies.

Then, in 1996 and '97, the orphanages around Hunan began to participate in a fast-growing program that was sending thousands of baby girls abroad for adoption. For each baby adopted, the supplying orphanage would receive a donation of \$3,000 from the adoptive parents.

Instead of rejecting the babies, the local orphanage director began begging Chen to bring in as many as she could, even offering to pay her expenses and then some.

" 'Do us a favor, auntie,' " she said the director told her. " 'Bring us all the abandoned babies you can find.' "

Five other orphanages opened nearby and were making the same request. By 2000, however, the supply of babies was drying up.

Rising incomes, changing attitudes toward girls and weaker enforcement of the one-child policy had combined to stem the widespread dumping of baby girls. Besides, pregnant women who were insistent on a boy would determine the gender with ultrasound (illegal, but common just the same) and abort female fetuses.

But foreign adoptions were in full swing, with more than 5,000 babies heading to the United States in 2000 alone.

"It used to be that you'd get 50 or 100 yuan [\$7.30 or \$14.60] per baby, then 700 or 800, but there was more demand and fees kept rising and they'd bring in babies from other provinces," Duan said.

One such place was neighboring Guangdong, the manufacturing hub of China, with a large population of migrant workers who often couldn't keep their babies.

By chance, the husband of Duan's sister Meilin got a job in 2001 working on a chicken farm in the small Guangdong city of Wuchuan. Nearby lived an older woman by the name of Liang Guihong, a former garbage collector, who for years had been taking in babies. She sometimes had more than 20 newborns in her home, lined up on blankets on her beds.

The Duan family members saw opportunity. They started buying up the babies to sell to the

orphanages in Hunan.

"Liang used to take care of the babies out of kindness, but she turned into a businesswoman," Duan recalled in the interview.

Instead of turning over extra babies to the orphanages in Guangdong, Liang preferred to sell them to traffickers who would pay more to take them to Hunan or adjacent Jianxi province, which also supplied many of the babies adopted in the United States. The Duans say that in addition to the 85 babies she provided them, Liang sold more than 1,000 to orphanages.

The orphanages disguised the origins of the babies, the Duans said.

"They would fabricate the information. They would say that the baby was found at the Sunday market, near the bridge, on the street. Very few of the stories they put in the babies' files were true. Only the director of the orphanage knew the babies were really from Guangdong," Duan's father said.

The orphanages had to comply with a law requiring that they look for the birth parents before putting a baby up for adoption. The Hunan civil affairs department put official notices seeking the birth parents of the babies in a local paper, but they were filled with deliberate misinformation about where the babies had been found.

The well-publicized court case involving the Duans prompted the China Center of Adoption Affairs to suspend adoptions from Hunan and warn orphanages against paying for babies. Insiders in the orphanage community here say the practice continues, but with more discretion.

Deng Yuping, director of an orphanage in Yichun in Jiangxi province, said he pays up to \$75 to cover transportation costs for people who bring in babies, but that many walk away because they can get more from other orphanages.

"It's true, some orphanages are paying bigger 'finder's fees' than we are," Deng said.

Orphanage directors acknowledge that they don't have the resources to make sure that babies brought in had been abandoned.

"We can only take care of the child. It is up to the public security bureau [police] to investigate if that child was really abandoned," said Chen Ming, a former orphanage director who received a suspended sentence in the Duans' case.

The Chinese government acknowledges that each year 30,000 to 60,000 children go missing, most of them abducted.

The Los Angeles Times reported in September that [local family planning officials in Guizhou and Hunan provinces sometimes confiscated babies](#) from families that had violated the one-child policy and then collected money by selling the children for foreign adoption.

There is no evidence, in the Duans' case, that any of the babies had been kidnapped or forcibly taken from their parents. The Duans insist that even if they broke the law, the babies have had a better life as a result.

"Many of those babies would have died if nobody took them in. I took good care of the babies," said the mother, Chen. "You can be the judge -- am I a bad person for what I did?"

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