

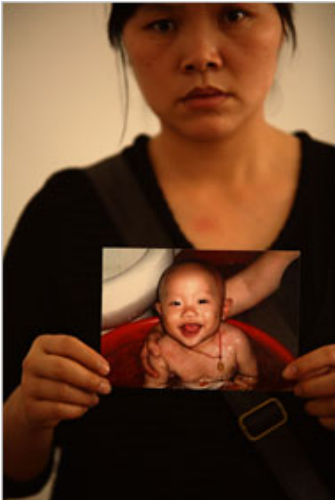
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## Chinese Hunger for Sons Fuels Boys' Abductions

By [ANDREW JACOBS](#)



Deng Huidong's son was stolen from her daughter's grip.

SHENZHEN, [China](#) — The thieves often strike at dusk, when children are playing outside and their parents are distracted by exhaustion.

Deng Huidong lost her 9-month-old son in the blink of an eye as a man yanked him from the grip of his 7-year-old sister near the doorway of their home. The car did not even stop as a pair of arms reached out the window and grabbed the boy.

Sun Zuo, a gregarious 3 1/2-year-old, was lured off by someone with a slice of mango and a toy car, an abduction that was captured by police surveillance cameras.

Peng Gaofeng was busy with customers when a man snatched his 4-year-old son from the plaza in front of his shop as throngs of factory workers enjoyed a spring evening. “I turned away for a minute, and when I called out for him he was gone,” Mr. Peng said.

These and thousands of other children stolen from the teeming industrial hubs of China’s Pearl River Delta have never been recovered by their parents or by the police. But anecdotal evidence suggests the children do not travel far. Although some are sold to buyers in Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, most of the boys are purchased domestically by families desperate for a male heir, parents of abducted children and some law enforcement officials who have investigated the matter say.

The demand is especially strong in rural areas of south China, where a tradition of favoring boys over girls and the country’s strict family planning policies have turned the sale of stolen children into a thriving business.

Su Qingcai, a tea farmer from the mountainous coast of Fujian Province, explained why he spent \$3,500 last year on a 5-year-old boy. “A girl is just not as good as a son,” said Mr. Su, 38, who has a 14-year-old daughter but whose biological son died at 3 months. “It doesn’t matter how much money you have. If you don’t have a son, you are not as good as other people who have one.”

The centuries-old tradition of cherishing boys — and a custom that dictates that a married woman moves in with her husband's family — is reinforced by a modern reality: Without a real social safety net in China, many parents fear they will be left to fend for themselves in old age.

The extent of the problem is a matter of dispute. The Chinese government insists there are fewer than 2,500 cases of human trafficking each year, a figure that includes both women and children. But advocates for abducted children say there may be hundreds of thousands.

Sun Haiyang, whose son disappeared in 2007, has collected a list of 2,000 children in and around Shenzhen who have disappeared in the past two years. He said none of the children in his database had been recovered. "It's like fishing a needle out of the sea," he said.

Mr. Peng, who started an ad hoc group for parents of stolen children, said some of the girls were sold to orphanages. They are the lucky ones who often end up in the United States or Europe after adoptive parents pay fees to orphanages that average \$5,000.

The unlucky ones, especially older children, who are not in demand by families, can end up as prostitutes or indentured laborers. Some of the children begging or hawking flowers in major Chinese cities are in the employ of criminal gangs that abducted them. "I don't even want to talk about what happens to these children," Mr. Peng said, choking up.

### Police Indifference

Here in Shenzhen and the constellation of manufacturing towns packed with migrant workers, desperate families say they get almost no help from the local police. In case after case, they said, the police insisted on waiting 24 hours before taking action, and then claimed that too much time had passed to mount an effective investigation.

Several parents, through their own guile and persistence, have tracked down surveillance video images that clearly show the kidnappings in

progress. Yet even that can fail to move the police, they say. “They told me a face isn’t enough, that they need a name,” said Cai Xinqian, who obtained tape from a store camera that showed a woman leading his 4-year-old away. “If I had a name, I could find him myself.”

Chen Fengyi, whose 5-year-old son was snatched from outside her apartment building in Huizhou, said she called the police the moment she realized he was missing. “They told me they would come right over,” she said. “I went outside to wait for them and they never came.”

When she is not scouring the streets at night for her son, Ms. Chen and her husband go to the local police station and fall to their knees. “We cry and beg them to help,” she said, “and every time they say, ‘Why are you so hung up on this one thing?’ ”

Many parents take matters into their own hands. They post fliers in places where children are often sold and travel the country to stand in front of kindergartens as they let out. A few who run shops have turned their storefronts into missing person displays. “We spend our life savings, we borrow money, we will do anything to find our children,” said Mr. Peng, who owns a long-distance phone call business in Gongming, not far from Shenzhen. “There is a hole in our hearts that will never heal.”

The reluctance of the police to investigate such cases has a variety of explanations. Kidnappers often single out the children of migrant workers because they are transients who may fear the local police and whose grievances are not treated as high priorities.

Moreover, the police in China’s authoritarian bureaucracy are rarely rewarded for responding to crimes affecting people who do not have much political clout. Mr. Peng said the police preferred not to even open a missing person’s inquiry because unsolved cases made them appear inefficient, reducing their annual bonuses.

There are exceptions. In a number of high-profile cases, the police have cracked down on trafficking rings and publicized the results. But such help remains rare, parents say.

### Turning to Beijing

Mr. Peng says that boys' abductions are a growing problem that only the central government can address. He and others have been agitating for the establishment of a DNA database for children and stronger antitrafficking laws that would penalize people who buy stolen children. "If the government can launch satellites and catch spies, they can figure out how to find stolen children," said Mr. Peng, who helps run a Web site called [Baby Come Home](#).

Chen Shiqu, the director of the Office of Combating Human Trafficking, a two-year-old government agency based in Beijing, said the problem of stolen children was exaggerated. He said that, contrary to parent advocates and some news reports, the number of cases was on the decline, although he was unable to provide figures to back up that assertion. "Just say they are dropping by 10 percent a year," he said. He added that if parents were unsatisfied with the police response, they should call 110, China's equivalent of 911.

Yang Jianchang, a legislator in Shenzhen, said he had been trying to get the central government's attention, with little success. Two years ago, he said, a group of local businessmen tried to start a foundation to track missing children. But the government, which requires that the establishment of private organizations be approved, has yet to grant them permission.

Last June, after he sent a report on the issue to the central government and got no response, Mr. Yang started sending the Ministry of Civil Affairs a copy every month or so. "I just don't understand why no one is paying attention to this problem," he said. "We need someone in the central government who will fight for the rights of the people, someone who has a conscience."

For the parents of missing children, the heartbreak and the frustration have turned into anger. Last September, about 40 families traveled to the capital to call attention to the plight of abducted children. They staged a brief protest at the headquarters of the national television broadcaster, but within minutes, dozens of police officers arrived to haul them away.

“They dragged us by our hair and said, ‘How dare you question the government,’ ” said Peng Dongying, who lost her 4-year-old son. “I hate myself for my child’s disappearance, but I hate society more for not caring. All of us have this pain in common, and we will do anything to get back our children.”

### Buyers’ Remorse

In Anxi, a verdant county in Fujian where some of Shenzhen’s stolen boys are thought to have been sold, people focus more on the pain of the families without sons.

Zhen Zibao, a shopkeeper in the Kuidou, said that buying a son was widely accepted and that stolen children could be found in most towns and villages. She and other residents noted that when a daughter married and moved to her husband’s home, it often left her parents without a caretaker in old age. Then there is the dowry, a financial burden that falls to the family of a bride.

“If you have only girls, you don’t feel right inside,” said Ms. Zhen, who has one child, an 11-year-old son. “You feel your status is lower than everyone else.”

Although many Chinese still cherish male heirs, the Communist Party has largely succeeded in easing age-old attitudes about gender. In major cities, where one-child families have become the norm, many parents say they are happy to have a daughter and no son.

Still, in many rural areas, including Anxi County, a resident whose first child is a daughter is allowed to have a second. Having a third child,

however, can mean steep fines as high as \$5,800 and other penalties that include the loss of a breadwinner's job.

A boy, by contrast, can often be bought for half that amount, and authorities may turn a blind eye if the child does not need to be registered as a new birth in the locale.

In some cases, local officials may even encourage people desperate for a son to buy one. After their 3-month-old son died, Zhou Xiuqin said, the village family planning official went to her home and tried to comfort her and her husband, who was compelled to have a vasectomy after the birth of the boy, their second child. "He said, 'Don't cry, stop crying, you can always buy another one,' " Ms. Zhou recalled.

Ms. Zhou and her husband, Mr. Su, the tea farmer, were still in mourning in October 2007 when they spotted a child at a Buddhist temple in their village, Dailai, a picturesque hamlet of 800 people nestled in the fold of steep mountains. "The boy was eating candy like he was hungry," Mr. Su recalled. "Everything he was wearing was too small for him."

A man with the boy claimed to be his father. He said that he was from a nearby town and had three sons, but that he needed money to take his ill wife to the hospital. "I asked how much," said Mr. Su, an earnest man who works long hours in a clothing factory when he is not tending his tea plants.

After some quick bargaining, the price was dropped to \$3,500 from \$4,100, and a few hours later, after borrowing money from friends and family members, they took the boy home. They named him Jiabao, which means "guarantor of the family."

Their love for their new son was boundless. They bought him new clothing and had their daughter drop out of middle school to take care of him. They did not think much of the fact that Jiabao did not understand the dialect spoken in that part of Fujian and seemed indifferent to the

local cuisine. Mr. Su insisted that he never imagined that the boy had been stolen.

Last August, Mr. Su learned the truth after the police in Sichuan Province arrested the man who had sold them the child. The man, part of a ring of seven people who had abducted 11 children, had sold four of them to families in their township. The man, according to the police, has since been given a 12-year sentence.

By the time the couple got home from work the day they got the news, their son and the three other stolen children in their village had already been taken away by the police. The couple was inconsolable. “We were lied to, we were swindled,” Mr. Su said as his wife’s eyes welled up.

There was, however, a small consolation. A sympathetic policeman in Sichuan, the province where the boy was stolen, helped put them in touch with his birth parents. The two couples have since been in frequent contact; Mr. Su said the real parents held no grudge, acknowledging that the family had cared for their son well.

The father was so grateful, he told Mr. Su he would be on the lookout for local families who had two sons but were too poor to care for them. “He said that way I don’t need to deal with child traffickers anymore,” Mr. Su said.