

Leslie K. Wang

University of California, Berkeley

Paper: Intimate Labors Conference, October 4-6th, 2007, University of California, Santa Barbara

Cultural Conflict and Cooperation: Instilling Western Values in a Chinese Orphanage

Since the late 1970s, the government of the People's Republic of China has instituted wide-ranging family planning regulations (most notably the one child policy and its subsequent reformulations) as well as sweeping market reforms. Stringent restrictions on fertility and a cultural preference for sons in China have combined with economic privatization to produce an escalating abnormal sex ratio among infants and the abandonment of countless female and disabled and/or ill children to state care. Throughout this process the central government has retreated from its role as major social welfare provider, instead displacing responsibility onto the shoulders of local governments and individual citizens. As a result, in order to obtain the financial resources and medical knowledge to care for the considerable and growing numbers of abandoned children, within the past decade local Chinese governments have begun to welcome collaborations between western NGOs and a small percentage of the nation's estimated 5000-plus state-run orphanage facilities.

Due to the nation's increasing openness toward foreign cultural influence and NGO involvement in domestic social issues, thousands of westerners—most of them white and many of them deeply religious—are now coming to China annually to live and work with orphans in state-run institutions. They bring with them not only considerable financial and medical resources from abroad, but also western ideologies of children and childcare that frequently conflict with the views of their Chinese counterparts. Western ideas and cultural practices have arguably become hegemonic within the Chinese public sphere. However, their importation into a private, politicized institutional setting such as orphanages where native cultural understandings of care are already employed often leads to major struggles over power and authority between western and Chinese collaborators.

This paper is based on two months spent living and working in a western infant special care unit housed on one floor of a large state-run orphanage in central China. The unit uses western medical knowledge, practices and medications to care for the orphanage's most severely ill or disabled children. Funded and managed by white, western Christian volunteers, the unit cares for roughly 40 children at a time and employs more than 50 ayis (Chinese for "nanny"). Based on ethnographic observations and informal interviews with both western employers and Chinese staff, this paper analyzes both the cultural cooperation and conflict I witnessed that provide a lens through which to view the consequences of importing a western ideology of care into a non-western setting. Unlike many recent studies that focus on the global migration of poor laborers—mostly women of color—into first-world countries (see Ehrenreich and Hochschild, et al. 2002), my research analyzes the cultural negotiations and social inequities which are highlighted when processes of globalization enable affluent westerners to become embedded in the local dynamics of developing countries.