

Population

The mystery of the Ch

By Beth Nonte Russell

China has always limited foreign adoptions, and it does not publish reliable statistics on the number of children in its orphanages

ACCORDING to a State Department report released this week, American citizens adopted 6,493 children from China in 2006, a decline of 18 percent from the previous year's total of 7,906. And yet, just over a month ago, this newspaper reported that China had prepared strict new criteria for foreign adoption applications because the country claimed it lacked "available" babies to meet the "spike" in demand.

China has always limited foreign adoptions, and it does not publish reliable statistics on the number of children in its orphanages. So how is one to know whether the decrease in adoptions reflects a lack of supply or a lack of demand?

In the week following the report on the new guidelines, more than one bewildered person said to me, "But I thought there were lots of babies in orphanages in China!" My response was to helplessly reply, "So did I." My understanding of this was based not on conjecture, but on having been to China twice to adopt, having seen orphanages with my own eyes, and on research and other eyewitness accounts. Many hundreds and perhaps thousands of orphanages operate in China, most of them full of girls.

According to a February 2005 report in *The Weekend Standard*, a Chinese business newspaper, demographers in China found a ratio of 117 boys per 100 girls under the age of 5 in the 2000 census. Thanks to China's one-child policy, put into effect in 1979 in order to curb population growth, and a strong cultural preference for male children, this gender gap could result in as many as 60 million "missing" girls from the population by the end of the decade, enough to alarm even Chinese officials.

And what happened to these girls? According to the International Planned Parenthood Federation (a term that takes on a whole new meaning when referring to China), there are about seven million abortions in China per year, 70 percent of which are estimated to be of females. That adds up to around five million per year, or 50 million by the end of the decade; so where are the other 10 million girls? If even 10 percent end up in orphanages... well, you do the math.

A few months ago, in a conversation with my friend Patrick Mason, executive director of the International Adoption Center at INOVA Fairfax Hospital in Virginia, I confessed a growing fear: that China, the country from which my two daughters were adopted, would sooner or later shut down its international adoption program. Dr. Mason immediately dismissed my concern, saying, "The number of orphans is just too great."

And yet, I continued to wonder whether, as

China increasingly asserts itself on the world stage and prepares to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, allowing Westerners to adopt thousands of infants each year would fit the image it wanted to project. I suspect not, and China's new restrictions lead me to believe that national pride is more important than getting these children into loving homes.

The issue of abandoned children remains a taboo problem the government acknowledge exists. The in to stem partly from emb from fear of revealing th abuses the one-child p

The issue of abandoned and institutionalised children remains a taboo subject in China, a problem the government does not even acknowledge exists. The impulse to hide it seems to stem partly from embarrassment and partly from fear of revealing the grave human rights abuses the one-child policy has produced; surely, watching a parade of well-off foreigners cart off thousands of babies would make the Chinese authorities

Chinese baby shortage

understandably uncomfortable.

But the answer is not to stop the foreigners from adopting; it is to put an end to their reasons for doing so. My fondest hope, and the hope of thousands of parents who have adopted from China, is for all the orphanages there to close because there are no more abandoned children to put in them. This will be accomplished only when

restrictions for foreign journalists in preparation for the 2008 Olympics. Perhaps this will allow reporters to look for answers to some basic questions: how many children are there in institutions in China? If there is nothing to hide, why do visitors need approval to visit orphanages? Why are only certain orphanages allowed to participate in the international adoption program, and what is going on in the ones that are not?

The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, to which China and 69 other countries are signatories, goes a long way towards ensuring against child abduction and trafficking; but it does not include provisions that would require member countries to report such information as the number of children housed in institutions or the criteria used for selecting "suitable" children for adoption.

The treaty states that "for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality," each child should have the opportunity to grow up in a "family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding." Indeed, it requires that each signatory take "as a matter of priority, appropriate measures to enable the child to remain in the care of his or her family of origin." One could argue that China's one-child policy directly violates the treaty by ensuring that many children will not remain in the care of the family but be relinquished to the care of the state.

Under the new Chinese adoption guidelines, the international adoption celebrity Angelina Jolie could not adopt from China (she's not married, and alas, she and Brad have more than two divorces between them, which is a no-no); nor could the actress Meg Ryan (again, not married). Another person who is not eligible is yours truly. My husband is over 50, so I would have to trade him in, marry again, wait the required five years (another new rule) before beginning the adoption process, and by that time I would be sneaking up on 50 myself.

It is comforting to know that Madonna is still eligible, at least until she turns 50, gets fat (the new regulations call for a body mass index of less than 40), gets divorced or goes broke (anyone with a net worth of under \$80,000 is excluded).

The Chinese have asserted that the demand for adoptions far exceeds the number of babies it deems "available", based on criteria that have never been made public. We can only wonder how many babies will be left behind by Beijing's new policies — perhaps spending their lives in institutions because of these arbitrary and artificial limits. COURTESY THE NEW YORK TIMES

Beth Nonte Russell is the author of the forthcoming "Forever Lily: An Unexpected Mother's Journey to Adoption in China" and the co-founder of the Golden Phoenix Foundation

China decides that there is no economic or political justification for the magnitude of suffering that has resulted from the one-child policy. The government must openly acknowledge the problem, in part by publishing verifiable information about the status of its orphaned children, and take real steps to correct it. To do so would go a long way toward building the international trust and respect China seems to want so badly.

China has announced the lifting of