



Overwhelmed teachers offer loving hand to China's 'left-behind' children

Aileen McCabe
CanWest News Service

Saturday, November 24, 2007

ZHU SHAN ZUI, China -- Ou Lanying was six months old when her parents left this small rural community two hours east of Changsha, capital of southern Hunan Province, to find work in the city. She's not seen them since.

The solemn 12-year-old has spent her life with her grandparents and it's been a difficult experience for all of them. Ou is sullen and unsmiling. Her grandparents are struggling, almost too old now to care for her.

Enter Dai Chaowei. He's a short, solidly built teacher at Shantian School who can't stand seeing what is happening to "left-behind" kids like Ou.

He watched them get into trouble, cut classes and drop out of school, but the situation came to a head when one after the other, two students at the school died - senselessly. One was killed in a fight in 2003; a year later, a young girl, drank poison after she found out she was pregnant. Neither had parents at home to look out for them.

"Those incidents really shocked us," Dai says as he sits in the teacher's room between classes.

He's of an age where he could have been father to either student and as he quietly talks it is evident how moved he was by them - moved to action, that is.

Ou is now firmly under his wing. He's raised money for her tuition and living expenses, but more importantly, he makes time to see and talk to her every week. She isn't exactly thriving yet, Dai laments, but "her heart is more open."

Shantian School is experiencing in microcosm one of China's most tragic social problems. Of the 716 students at the school, 275 have two absent parents, migrant workers who sometimes send home money, but rarely, if ever, make it back themselves.

Across China there are an estimated 20 million left-behind kids growing up without their parents.

No one here blames the parents for leaving. The tiny plots of terraced rice paddies that climb the foothills into the Mufu Mountains can't support them.

Those who stay barely eke out an existence.

Jobs in the "new China" are in the big cities. Mega cities like Shanghai and Beijing are being built with the sweat of 150 million migrant workers. Shanghai, for instance, has an official population of 17 million, but anyone on the street will tell you it is actually about 22 million if you include migrant workers.

The Olympic venues will be brought to you by these farmers' sons who have traded grinding poverty for unskilled construction jobs that pay less than RMB 930 (\$125) a month and still look better than life at home in Hunan or Anhui or Sichuan Province.

It was in the early 1980s, soon after China opened to the world, that young adults began to abandon their babies in Zhu Shan Zui village to find work in the cities.

Kids without parents seem almost normal to many people now, Dai says.

When the magnitude of the left-behind problem hit home, Dai organized the teachers at Shantian to do a survey. "We visited each student's home to try to understand his or her family situation." The findings were grim.

"We found out that year (2004) that 70 per cent of our 560 or so students were left-behind children, that is with no parents at home at all or just one," Dai said. The teachers found "some children had almost lost their memory of their parents."

The teachers discovered that the parents of the boy who was killed in the fight had left him years before in the care of his grandparents. They couldn't cope and passed him to his aunt. She in turn sent him to an uncle when he became too much to deal with.

Survey results in hand, Shantian School appealed to the government for funds and in 2005 built a dormitory for the left-behinds and opened its doors to primary students for the first time. The younger left-behinds in the area had nowhere else to go.

That turned out to be only a Band-Aid solution, Dai explains. Monday to Friday, the teachers kept an eye on the "orphans," but weekends were a disaster.

"Five plus two equaled zero," he said. "That five days of effort was erased by the two days off."

So it was back to the drawing board and the beginning of Shantian's "Family Love Project."

The flowery name is typical Chinese hyperbole, but the program itself is pure pragmatism. Each teacher, 46 in all, agreed to "foster" two, sometimes three or more, left-behind kids.

"We form a family for the left-behind children, we hand out forms and the students can choose who they want to be head of their family," Dai explained. If they don't get their first choice teacher, they get their second or third. Once everyone has a spot, the first order of business is to take a "family portrait." It is a first for most of the kids and the first entry in the album each foster parent keeps for his or her ward.

Dai pulls out dozens of these albums and flips through page after page of meticulous records, interspersed here and there with photos and memorabilia.

Everything about the child's life is recorded. Parties and picnics they attend are noted as carefully as their grades and the number of times they are late for school.

At a minimum, each guardian agrees to one talk with his ward a week, one evaluation per quarter and one birthday party a year.

Zhou Weilan, 23, barely looks old enough to be a teacher let alone the guardian to three teens. But most days after dismissing her English class she now searches out "her" kids to chat and help with their homework.

"There are some students who call teachers dad or mom, but I am just a little older than the students, they just call me sister," she says.

Dai is the first to admit the program he's put so much effort into isn't perfect.

"Since the families we form here are not real families, we just borrowed the concept, it's not easy to draw the family members close. It's not absolutely sure that the kids will accept you even if they have chosen you."

As for the teachers, the time they spend with their left-behind kids is volunteered, the money they spend is mostly their own and the effort is as frustrating as it is rewarding. But none of them are backing away.

Dai sheepishly admits he has almost no time left to spend with his own 10-year-old

daughter, but her mother dotes, he says, and fortunately she's an only child who likes having "brothers and sisters."

"She's always asking me to bring them home so they can play together."

© CanWest News Service 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.