

Commentary

The Situation of Children in China:

by Michael Sloboda, M.M.

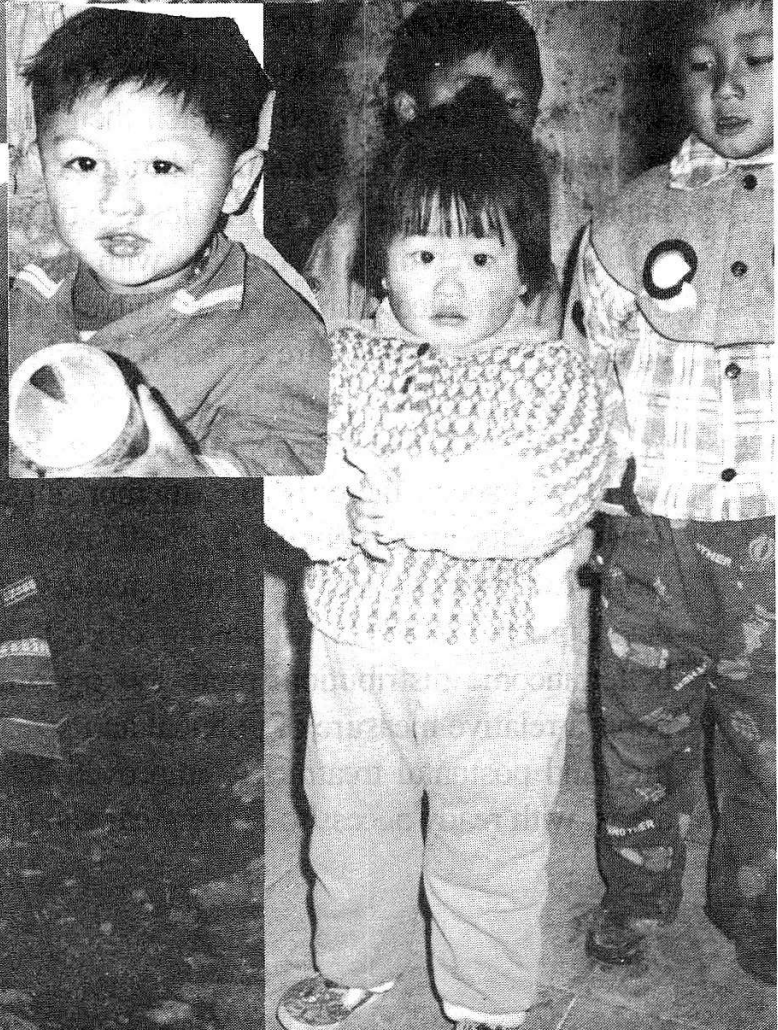
The Chinese government has just published a White Paper on the present condition of its children.¹

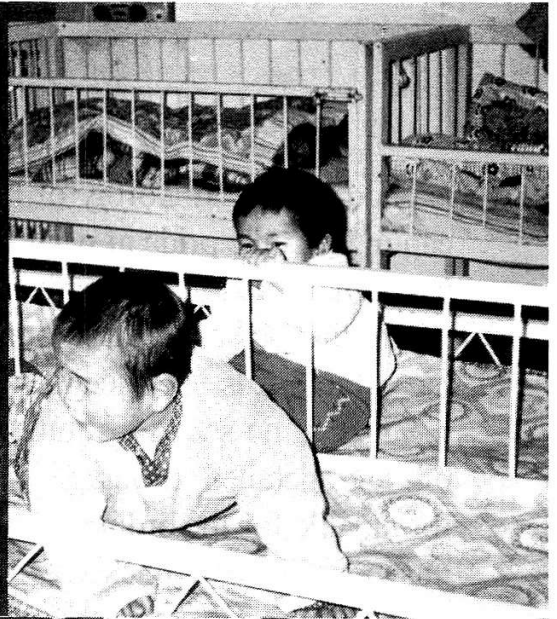
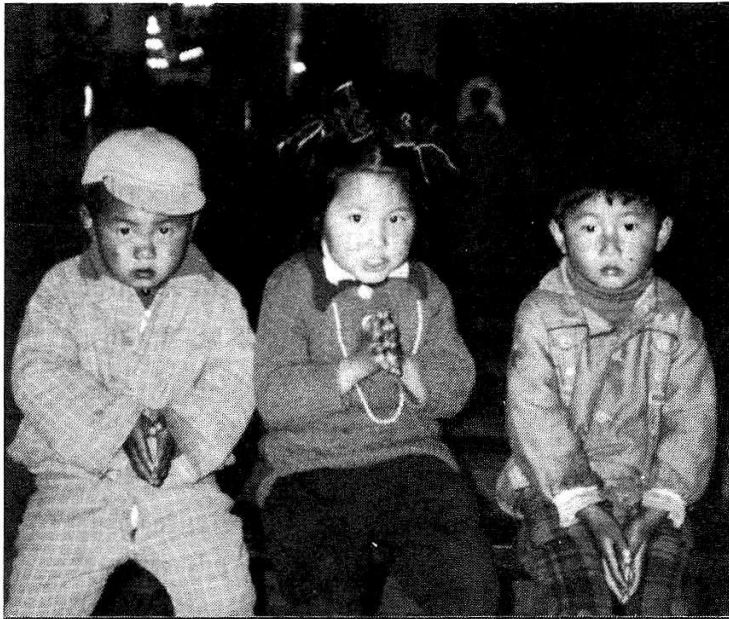
It is an exhaustive study, and serves in part as a response to the extensive foreign media coverage late last year of alleged child abuse in two Shanghai orphanages. The study examines each phase of child development from birth to the age of 15 in great detail. Statistics on birth and infant mortality rates² head the table of contents.



China can boast of having one of the lowest infant mortality rates among the world's developing nations. Of the 20.63 million babies born in 1995, only 780,000 failed to reach their first birthday. While the loss of even one child is indeed a sad and tragic event for the family, and without intending to down-play such a loss, still in all, this ratio of 33.79 per 1,000 compares most favourably with the 1991 world rate of twice that number.³ Granted that conditions have improved significantly since then and newly born babies are at less risk today, 9,000,000 infant deaths out of the 140,000,000 born in 1995⁴ is a numbing statistic, and entirely unacceptable. While China's progress has been upbeat when compared to world statistics, there is no attempt in the report to capitalize its achievements, even though it is a well known fact that a diminishing infant mortality rate speaks to other related areas of a nation's social development. It points to, among other things, higher living standards, better income distribution, more job opportunities, a safety net for the poor, a relative measure of political and social stability, the availability of pre- and postnatal treatment, improved health programmes in the rural areas, with ready access to nursing care and the latest medication. All this

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is good news and worthy of high commendation, and the Chinese people can indeed take pride in what has been achieved. If the White Paper has a fault, it is in its length. The desire to give credit where credit is due means that no social institution of children's welfare programmes escapes a fault, it is in its length. The desire to give credit where credit is due means that no social institution of children's welfare programmes escapes full and detailed coverage. The amount of statistics alone is quite formidable for the ordinary lay reader to cope with. But having mentioned this possible drawback, it must also be said that there is much to be learned from the impressive amount of information gathered here in one report.

Section one is concerned with the legal system. It includes a review of all the constitutional and local legislation passed in recent years to insure the protection of children's rights. When it comes to criminal punishment, one learns that juvenile offenders are dealt with more leniently. In the eyes of the law, youth affords some protection. More severe punishments are meted out to the adult offenders on the grounds that adults should know better than to commit a crime. Information on children's rights and services are also given much publicity, reaching members of the general public through the myriad of mass organizations that are a feature of Chinese collective society. In recent years China has become a major participant in many high-level international movements, especially through the agency of the United Nations, which has as its concern setting norms to meet child welfare needs on a global level.

Section two, which deals with health and nutrition, is basically a long footnote to the chapter on births and infant mortality. Progress in this area is also very impressive, and there is much here worthy of emulation by other developing nations. One must keep in mind, however, that China is more fortunate than most Third World countries in that it is free from foreign debt. This means it can use its limited financial resources to feed and care for its children, rather than having to divert needed monies away from its poor in order to repay debts owed to foreign investor banks. This means that in China the vulnerable portion of its population, which includes its children, is better served by its government when compared to many other developing countries.

The section on education (Section III) may seem to the reader to be overly burdened with statistics, but what comes through is evidence

that in this area, there remains much more that still must be done. Universal education from kindergarten through ninth grade is the rule, but its implementation varies from place to place. The quality of education often depends on the financial health of the local economy. Many rural areas are, quite simply, unable to afford the increasing cost of quality education. Programmes such as Project Hope and Spring Buds try to fill the gap between city and country by subsidizing school fees for rural children, especially girls who have had to drop out of school because their families just could not afford it. Such programmes are financed by donations from the private sector. However, while the quality of schooling is uneven and in many places quite rudimentary, still 98% of all the girls and 99% of all the boys of primary school age were enrolled in China's schools in 1995⁵. This is quite an achievement, and it shows how seriously the Chinese government is committed to the education of the next generation.

The report also manifests its concerns for handicapped children. It provides information on steps taken to protect them legally, and it also outlines the variety of remedial and rehabilitation programmes now open to serving their special needs. I will return to this subject later.

Meanwhile, Section V provides ample statistics on care for orphans and other homeless children. At present major efforts are being made throughout the country by government and private groups to rejoin children who have been separated from their families. One has only to walk around any modern Chinese city to verify government claims that much progress is being made in this area. The hordes of homeless street urchins that roam the neighbourhoods of most of the world's major cities are nowhere to be found in the cities of China. Also it is in this section, in a special index, that one finds a lengthy refutation of the alleged child abuses in the Shanghai orphanages which were mentioned at the beginning of this article. The report calls into question the integrity and credibility of those responsible for the expose. It states that such claims were groundless, and budget figures are cited to show to what extent monies have been spent on these children, on their care and welfare. But I did fail to find any statistics dealing with what eventually happened to these children. How many orphans were accepted into these orphanages, how many of them had left through adoption, graduation or just died. What the statistics do give, however, is the general impression that orphans are

better cared for in cities than in the rural areas. And this is true all over the world.

The special care and regard for children found in the Christian tradition, which is rooted in gospel values and the way Jesus loved them and made them models of the Kingdom of God, finds resonance in Chinese culture. Children in China are traditionally revered in the family and raised with love and affection. The current policy of the government directing society at large "to protect and educate children, to set an example for them, and to take care of them in practical ways" is also a reflection of this traditional concern for children's welfare. Yet juxtaposed in the very same paragraph is a phrase that calls for "improving the quality of the population",⁶ and this kind of language can raise serious questions about what it means and how it is to be understood. Is it inferring that children are not to be valued in their own right as human beings but merely for what they might eventually contribute to society in the future? Yes, children are indeed "the future and the hope of humanity", and, yes, the cost of their education, health care, legal protection, and the other necessities is an investment that society hopes will pay dividends in the future in the form of a happier, healthier and more productive adult population. But what of those children who lack the potential to contribute to the gross national product, or who will be unable to pay their own way in the adult world? One does not need to be a Christian to affirm that handicapped children also are in need of, indeed are worthy of love, and respond in kind to those who respect them and treat them with affection. This is the universal teaching of every tribe and nation that such children should find a warm and secure place in the societies we foster. There will always be a small percentage of children born into our world who will never be able to make a quantitative contribution to our national economy. But this does not indicate by any means that they are human beings of a "lower quality" or that their "quality of life" is somehow inferior to the physically sound. I hasten to add that no where in this White Paper is such an attitude given direct expression. And indeed the treatment of the Three Recoveries Programme and other community rehabilitation services for disabled children clearly demonstrate that love is the motivational force behind such programmes.⁷

Why do I feel uneasy, then, after reading this report? Perhaps because it nudged my memory and reminded me of an incident that happened more than a decade ago in Taiwan. Some missionaries opened a

special education school for exceptional children in one of the islands major cities. The centre was well supported by the local community. One day it happened that a government official came to present a plaque in recognition of the centre's services to the community. "You do a wonderful thing by caring for these retarded children," he said to the gathering, "But wouldn't it be even more wonderful if in future we could prevent such children from ever being born at all?" The teachers, among others, were outraged by his insensitive remark, for they had come to respect the children and to love them dearly.

This raises questions that beg for answers on a deeper level. It involves how one looks upon children. Are they really precious gifts from God, or merely the chance result of the genetic draw? Are they the fruit of a love between husband and wife, or only cyphers to be used for industrial planning and market projections for the consumer society? Will the worth of a child one day be reduced to just another marketable commodity subject to "quality" control? In many nations the "quality of life" is used as a measure to justify a great deal of activity that is for the well-being of society, but when used to justify abortion or euthanasia, then it becomes morally questionable. The Catholic Church, for one, states that the true worth of a human life cannot be measured by marketplace values. Here, perhaps, is an area for a continuing Church-State dialogue...a dialogue of some urgency that must begin now, lest the bad dreams of our worst fears soon become our future reality.

Endnotes

¹ "The Situation of Children in China," by the Information Office of the State Council, April 1996, complete English translation in *Beijing Review*, vol. 39. #17 (April 22-28, 1996), pp. 20-30, hereafter cited as the White Paper.

² White Paper, p. 24

³ *Population Today*, June 1991, p. 10.

⁴ My calculation based on data in the *1996 World Almanac*, pp. 737-776, 785-839 *passim*.

⁵ White Paper, p. 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.