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Japan's Forgotten Children

By **Cynthia Ruble** / June 11, 2012

It was Saturday morning and time to go to the orphanage again to “teach” English. I wondered who would come to the class this week and if an adult would help me. My goal was modest...make this class a positive experience for the children. I had failed many times before. Fights would often



break out. Fits of anger would ruin the class for everyone. Sometimes I was the target of aggression. More often the weakest in the class was bullied. Why did I keep going? The answer was simple. There was one little boy who looked forward to my coming and tried his best to learn. He would often be waiting at the door for me. I couldn't let him down.

Once while I was there, I saw something I will never forget. A little boy had been brought over from the baby orphanage to join the 3-to-18-year-olds' orphanage. This is the way the system is set up here. Suddenly uprooted from the only home he had known, he was plopped down into a big building full of older boys. Though I had just walked into the room and he was seeing me for the first time, he clung to me for all he was worth and would not be comforted. I've rarely witnessed anything as pitiful.

There were 36,450 children in the orphanage system in Japan in March, 2011. Only 12% or 4,373 were adopted or placed in foster care during the preceding 12 months. Orphanages abound here; there are 14 within the Nagoya city limits alone. You may wonder why there are so many children without parents in Japan. The fact is that the vast majority of children in orphanages here do have parents. Parents are allowed to put their babies/children in orphanages for any number of reasons. They don't even need to visit them. They can leave them there, and often do, until they reach 18 years of age. The government will not proactively sever their parental rights.

Last month, a Chukyo Television director who was documenting this problem, asked a high government official why Japan had such a system, as opposed to promoting adoption and foster care like other developed nations. The man, whom I respect for his honesty, basically said that after the war there were many children without parents. At that time, many orphanages were built. So, that became Japan's system to this day. Let me translate that for you...There are many jobs involved in this system. Plus, we don't like change.

Orphanages receive government funds based on the number of children they have and are thus not motivated to try to get children adopted or into foster care. And to be fair, they have their hands full, especially because many of the children have been abused by their parents. I have found orphanage workers to care very much about the children but also to be overwhelmed by the task. An orphanage where I taught for two years was very well run. But even there, the workers admitted there were many problems and they worried about the children who had to leave at age 18 with no support system.

The issue the government doesn't seem to want to face is the negative impact on children who grow up in institutions. Tokuji Yamanta, a former child welfare worker in Aichi prefecture and well-known champion of Japan's children, told me recently that the children who live in orphanages for many years are hurt in deep and complex ways. Some who eventually end up in family environments can develop reactive attachment disorder in which they regress to behaving like a baby. Some years ago, Britain did a study of children who grew up in orphanages and the findings were so disturbing that they shifted their policy to ensure more children were cared for in foster families. The Japanese government doesn't study this issue, in Mr. Yamanta's opinion, "because it doesn't want to know the truth and thus be forced to change."

When you consider that there are so many couples in Japan who want to adopt, it is hard to understand why the government opts for a system that keeps children, even babies, in institutions. An underlying reason is that many in Japan have a hard time believing that adopted children can be happy. (While abortion became legal in the 1940s here, adoption wasn't legalized until 1988.*) When I asked a Japanese friend if Japanese people think that children who grow up in orphanages are happy, she said that no one's thinking about that, as most people aren't even aware of the system.

The government hopes that once children grow up and leave the orphanage, they can return to their parents where they belong. Hence, the government doesn't force parents to either

meet certain conditions to get their children back or eventually lose their parental rights. Children end up waiting for parents to visit and hoping to go home...for years. Sadly, as Mr. Yamanta pointed out, when he worked in child welfare, 80% of the time the children no longer had a connection with their parents by the time they left the orphanage.

In Japan, there is a saying that the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. But I know another saying, "You can't keep a good man down." In my next column, I will write about Mr. Yamanta's unwillingness to go along with a bad system and the ray of hope that is dawning for Japan's forgotten children.

*Before 1988, adoption did exist in Japan, but primarily among relatives, especially for the purpose of having an heir. In 1988, adoption for the benefit of the child, where the rights of birth parents are terminated, became legal.