

Tom Hilditch  
A Holocaust of Little Girls

from the South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), repr. in World Press Review,  
September 1995, p. 39

Mei-ming has lain this way for 10 days now: tied up in urine-soaked blankets, scabs of dried mucus growing across her eyes, her face shrinking to a skull, malnutrition slowly shriveling her two-year old body. The orphanage staff call her room the "dying room", and they have abandoned her for the very same reasons her parents abandoned her shortly after she was born. She is a girl.

When Mei-ming dies four days later, it will be of sheer neglect. Afterward, the orphanage will deny she ever existed. She will be just another invisible victim of the collision between China's one-child policy and its traditional preference for male heirs. She is one of perhaps 15 million female babies who have disappeared from China's demographics since the one-child-per-family policy was introduced in 1979.

Yet Mei-ming's brief and miserable life may not have been in vain. Before she died, she was discovered by a British documentary team that entered her orphanage posing as American charity fund-raisers. The footage the team shot, through a concealed camera, would provide the first video evidence of the existence of dying rooms. And when the documentary, *The Dying Rooms*, was shown in Britain in June, over the protest of China's embassy in London, little Mei-ming's dying cries for help were heard around the world.

Two years ago, the South China Morning Post gave the world evidence of dying rooms at Nanning orphanage, in the Guangxi autonomous region. Staff and regular visitors freely admitted that 90 percent of the 50 to 60 baby girls who arrived at the orphanage each month would end their lives there.

Nanning orphanage was then overhauled, and the dying rooms there ceased to exist. Sadly, though, the British team's harrowing report suggests that attitudes toward baby girls so prevalent at Nanning two years ago are rife elsewhere.

The birth of a girl has never been a cause for celebration in China, and stories of peasant farmers drowning new born girls in buckets of water have been commonplace for centuries. Now, however, as a direct result of the one-child policy, the number of baby girls being abandoned, aborted, or dumped on orphanage steps is unprecedented.

It is impossible to overstate both how crucial the one-child policy is to China's stability and how rigidly it is enforced. Everyone agrees that if the population, already at 1.2 billion, is allowed to grow, the result will be economic collapse, environmental ruin, famine.

But while most Chinese citizens can accept the mathematics of the problem, the population continues to rise. Every year, some 21 million children are born. In March, President Jiang Zemin was forced to set new, tougher population-control policies and tougher punishments for those who ignore them.

According to author Steven W. Mosher, coerced abortions, sometimes just days before the baby is due, are now commonplace, as are reports of enforced sterilization and of hospitals fatally injecting second babies shortly after their birth. This means, Mosher says, that "however overcrowded China's orphanages are now with baby girls, the problem is going to get worse. Very much worse."

For Kate Blewett, producer of *The Dying Rooms*, the investigation was a journey into the heart of darkness: "I did not know human beings could treat children with such contempt, such cruelty. Some of the orphanages we visited were little more than death camps."

To protect those who helped the team gain access to orphanages and whom Blewett interviewed, the documentary does not name any of the orphanages. In one, a dozen or so baby girls sit on bamboo benches in the middle of a courtyard. Their wrists and ankles are tied to the armrests and legs of the bench. A row of plastic buckets is lined up beneath holes in their seats to catch their urine and excrement. The children will not be moved again until night, when they will be lifted out and tied to their beds.

"They had no stimulation, nothing to play with, no one to touch them," says Blewett. In one scene, a handicapped older boy walks up to one of the girls tied to a bench and begins head-butting her relentlessly. The girl doesn't move or make a sound. Such is the lack of stimulation for the children that few of them will ever learn to speak. An endless rocking is the only exercise, the only stimulation, the only pleasure in their lives.

An official of the orphanage tells Blewett that last year, the orphanage had some 400 inmates. They were kept five to a bed in one airless room. The summer temperatures soared to around 100 degrees. In a couple of weeks, 20 percent of the babies died. "If 80 children died last summer, there should be 320 left," Blewett says to one of the assistants, "but there don't appear to be more than a couple of dozen children here. Where are the others?" The girl replies; "They disappear. If I ask where they go, I am just told they die. That's all. I am afraid to ask any more."

Brutal neglect is the common theme of many of the orphanage scenes. In one sequence, a lame child sits on a bench near the orphanage pharmacy. It is full of medicines, but none of the staff can be bothered to administer them. The child rocks listlessly back and forth. The camera focuses on her vacant face, trails down her skinny body, and settles on her leg. It is swollen with gangrene. The worst orphanage, the home of Mei-ming, was in Guangdong, one of the richest provinces in China. When the documentary team arrived, there were no children to be seen or heard. Then from under one of the blankets laid over a cot, there was the sound of crying. Lifting the blanket and unwrapping a tied bundle of cloth, Blewett found a baby girl. The last layer of her swaddling was a plastic bag filled with urine and feces. The next cot was the same, and the next and the next. Many of the children had deep lesions where the string they were tied with had cut into their bodies. One child, described by staff as "normal," was suffering from vitamin B and C deficiencies, acute liver failure, and severe impetigo on her scalp. All the non-handicapped children were girls.

The Chinese government was approached several times, both in Beijing and at its London embassy, to provide comment or an interview for the film.

Eventually, the documentary's producers received a two-page letter from the London embassy.

"The so-called dying rooms do not exist in China at all," the letter read. "Our investigations confirm that those reports are vicious fabrications made out of ulterior motives. The contemptible lie about China's welfare work in orphanages cannot but arouse the indignation of the Chinese people, especially the great number of social workers who are working hard for children's welfare."

The day after the program was shown, questions were raised in the House of Commons about China's one-child policy and its dying rooms.

Predictably, however, no one has raised the subject of providing massive aid for a collapsed and famine-ridden China in the event of its population rising to, say, 2.4 billion if this generation is allowed to have two children per family.

"We don't want to criticize the one-child policy," says Blewett. "But we want to focus on the problems it is causing which can be solved." The documentary features a tour of a privately run, locally funded orphanage where the children are happy, healthy, and loved. "We were very keen to show what can be done with the right attitude," says Blewett. "No child should suffer the kind of neglect we filmed."