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Loving Others' Rejects

An elderly Chinese couple can always find room in their shack, and their hearts, for another castaway child -- 42 of them in 17 years.

July 27, 2005 | Ching-Ching Ni | Times Staff Writer

ANDING, China — Chen Shangyi makes a living as a scavenger. He prides himself on having a good nose for unusual finds. So when he saw a crowd clustered around a white bundle at the local train station one day while he was hunting for empty soda cans and soy sauce bottles, he couldn't resist taking a peek.

It was a baby, wrapped in a thin sheet.

"Everybody was just looking. Nobody would do anything," recalled Chen, who was 65, already retirement age, on that bitterly cold, snowy day 17 years ago.

"When I took her home, she was frozen stiff. My wife and I wrapped her in a burlap bag.... We started a fire. We fed her soup and put some old clothes on her. A while later, she started to wiggle." Chen named her Ling Ling.

Today, the sturdy 82-year-old with deep lines on his sun-baked face still makes a living as a scavenger in this remote Chinese town of 460,000 people on the edge of the Gobi Desert. And he is still bringing home children -- 42 in all, at last count.

Many were abandoned because they had been born with some form of physical disability. Over the years, Chen has developed such a reputation as a keeper of castaway kids that even the local officials send them his way. They know Chen would not reject any youngster, no matter what imperfections the child had.

"Nobody else wants them because they are afraid of trouble," said Chen's 81-year-old wife, Zhang Lanying. "They think these children are dirty. But I pity them. They are human beings."

As the most populous nation, China is home to the largest disabled population in the world: about 60 million. Despite a 14-year-old anti-discrimination law that guarantees equal rights, society's attitude toward the disabled has been slow to change. Disabled access in public places is rare. Employment prospects are grim.

In recent years they have made up only about 5% of the general population, but mentally and physically disabled people account for about one-third of the unemployed, and their living conditions are worse than those of able Chinese.

For some Chinese parents, the prospect of watching their disabled children experience a lifetime of stigma is too terrible to bear. According to recent media reports, Beijing police took in more than 400 children abandoned in the Chinese capital alone last year, about 80% of them born with physical deformities, organ abnormalities or mental impairment.

"I'd say 99% of the children here were abandoned because they were born with severe disability," said Shi Guihua, a staff worker at a welfare center in a Beijing suburb that pays foster families to take care of about 600 children. "Many of them were left on hospital benches by parents who can't afford to treat them."

Towns such as Anding, in northwestern China's impoverished Gansu province, don't have such welfare centers, which are funded by the state and corporate donors.

Local officials say they send castaway children to Chen because they have no other way of caring for them. A new orphanage sits empty -- it takes too much money to operate it.

Instead, the officials pay Chen and Zhang to do the work for them: less than \$80 per month for the eight children the couple now care for.

That meager sum, plus the little cash Chen earns picking trash and all the love the couple can muster, has been enough to save a number of children from certain death.

Chen, who has only a first-grade education, worked as a laborer for years. After the economic reforms of the late 1970s, he started peddling tea drinks at the train station and collected garbage on the side.

After becoming a full-time parent, he gave up the tea business.

His first wife left him long before that, taking their two children, who are now in their 60s. He married Zhang more than 50 years ago. They have no children of their own. But they say they have cherished every one of the youngsters who have come into their three-room brick shack across the street from the train station.

Their oldest now is 12-year-old Yuan Yuan. She was born with a lump on her skull the size of a peach. Someone had left her in the yard of the municipal building. No one wanted anything do with this scary-looking child, probably then a year old.

Chen took her home.

Chen and Zhang finally saved enough money to pay for an operation three years ago to remove the growth and allow Yuan Yuan to live a more normal life. It cost about \$80. Like the other children, she calls Chen and Zhang Grandpa and Grandma, or yeye and nainai.

"We love our grandparents. They work so hard for us," said Yuan Yuan, who during a lunch break from school helps out washing the dishes, pouring hot water into thermoses and bringing chairs for yeye and nainai. "I don't miss my parents," Yuan Yuan said. "They are so cruel. They left us because they knew we were sick."

Their youngest child is 2-year-old Ling Ling, named after the baby Chen found at the railway station. The baby never recovered fully from being left in the snow and suffered from frequent coughs and seizures. She never crawled or walked, and died when she was 4.

Chen found Ling Ling's namesake crying in an alley. Born with a hunchback and uneven legs, she was just days old. Now the round-faced girl with big, pretty eyes loves to cling to yeye and nainai and keep them company while most of the older children are in school.

"If you throw a puppy out on the street, someone might pick it up, but throw a baby out on the street and no one bothers," Zhang said as she cuddled Ling Ling close to her chest.

The sickest child in the household is 9-year-old Long Long, paralyzed and suffering from liver disease. Chen found him one day when he went to fetch water for the household. Long Long, then a baby, was in a paper box under a blazing sun, crying.

"I came home and told my wife. She said, 'We already have too many children; we can't take on any more,'" Chen recalled. "I sat on my stool and just couldn't get over it. So I went and brought him home."

While Long Long requires a walker to get around and needs help for virtually everything, Jin Jin, 4, can't sit still.

Chen found the boy sleeping on a hospital lawn. He was 3 or 4 months old and naked. Nothing appeared to be wrong with him. The older Jin Jin got, however, the more his problems became apparent. The mentally impaired child needs help eating and going to the bathroom, and he often leaps from his seat without warning and dashes into the street.

The other children are used to taking care of him. When he darts out, they drop their own food to go after him. Then they help hold him down on a wooden stool so Zhang can continue feeding him.

Another child in the couple's home, Quan Quan, was born with a harelip. Chen found him when he was about a year old at the farmers market, crawling in the dirt, eating rotten vegetables.

"Everybody knew he had been abandoned for days and was starving," Chen said.

"He couldn't walk yet, and his neck was this thin," Zhang said, shaping her thumb and forefinger into a ring.

Today, 6-year-old Quan Quan performs well in school and loves to help his brothers. When not keeping an eye on Jin Jin, he plays with a kitten and 10-year-old Qiang Qiang, an undersized boy with a bad heart.

Of the 42 children Chen and Zhang have taken in over the years, 21 turned out to be healthy or suffered from very mild disabilities and were adopted. Thirteen very sick children died.

The loss of Ling Ling, their first child, still hurts the most.

"She was very pretty," Chen said, pointing to a wall of collage photos showing all his "grandchildren." One photo shows Ling Ling, with pigtails, dark eyes and a happy smile, sitting on the bed next to yeye and nainai.

"We buried her in a ditch by the river," Chen said. "We couldn't afford cremation. Of course we were sad. She was our first child."

Even when the children are doing well, it's not easy to support such a large family on the income of a scavenger.

Baby formula is expensive. So Chen and Zhang mix it with flour. Food is expensive. So they often serve only plain rice. In recent years, they've met kind people who have donated money for some daily necessities and medical procedures, but the family still lives frugally.

Now Chen worries that local officials may take his children away on the grounds that he is too old to be their caretaker. He believes a recent flurry of media reports about the children that suggested official negligence have embarrassed the officials.

Wang Yanfu, deputy head of the district civil administration bureau, said officials are prepared to rent a house and hire two workers to feed and care for Chen's children.

"We sent him the kids before because he was young, in his 60s. Now he is too old," Wang said by phone. "We are trying our best to convince him [to quit]. But if he doesn't want to, there's nothing we can do. It has to be voluntary."

Chen says he can't trust the government to do what's best for the children. He said local officials continued to offer him abandoned children until only a few years ago.

"I don't understand policy," he said. "All I know is that when they were little, no one would come and help them. They say I am too old. I say I will raise them as long as I can."

"They'll have to kill me first before I'll let them take the kids away."