



China's packed orphanages can offer British couples the baby they yearn for

The babies bought for love... but AT WHAT COST?

Many British couples adopt babies from China. But what they don't realise is that they could be helping to fund a massive trade in child trafficking **by Toni Court**

Over the past year, little Kai Ya Cowan has changed from a shy two-year-old to a cheerful three-year-old who thinks nothing of answering her parent's requests with a confident 'No!' For Bill and Jane Cowan, Kai Ya's flourishing independence confirms that they made the right decision to adopt her.

When they first set eyes on Kai Ya, she was a tearful, frightened and confused baby of 18 months. She had been living in an orphanage in China since she was found abandoned at two days old. There is no doubt that the Cowans acted with the best of intentions when

they adopted her and saved her from an uncertain future.

Jane decided to adopt, rather than try for a baby of her own, when she became broody at the age of 34. A TV documentary called *The Dying Rooms*, which Jane first watched in 1991, had

left her certain she only wanted to adopt a child from China.

The programme told the harrowing story of China's strict one-child policy, which has led to the abandonment of around 100,000 baby girls a year. In a country where boys traditionally look after their parents in their old age, everyone wants a son while girls are dispensable.

Incredibly, these abandoned babies are considered the lucky ones. An even greater number of baby girls are aborted, or murdered at birth. Sadly, many

people feel they have no choice but to kill baby girls because the one child policy is so strictly enforced by 200,000 so-called child catchers. These are government officials who prowl the country, seeking out and fining families who break the rules.

'In the programme, I saw a long cot full of Chinese babies,' says Jane, 38, a police officer. 'Some of them were lying covered in their own urine and vomit, and one was dead. I knew that one day I would adopt and change the world for at least one little girl.'

'Bill and I didn't try for our own baby because it's important to me that ours grew up knowing this



Kai Ya with her parents Bill and Jane Cowan

THE TRUE COST OF ADOPTION

was our choice – not a decision we'd been forced to take because we were unable to have our own children.'

The road to adoption took Bill and Jane three and a half years and cost them over £10,000.

And they are not alone. Every year, more than 10,000 babies are adopted in China – most by couples from the US, Britain and Europe – each spending around £10,000 in the process.

All are decent people who believe they are rescuing their adopted child from a life of misery. But there is more to this tale than just a happy ending for girls like Kai Ya, 'rescued' by caring Westerners.

Chinese officials have been quick to realise that there is money to be made from selling babies to Westerners and a thriving industry has sprung up as a result. So-called 'adoption weekends' are held at five-star hotels, where children are bused in for prospective parents who must each make a cash 'donation' of around £2,000.

More than 50,000 Chinese children have been adopted in the US and over 1,000 in Britain, netting £20 million a year in adoption fees. With so much money to be made, many orphanages actively prevent Chinese people from adopting.

Officially, the money is given to orphanages as reimbursement for

the cost of caring for the babies, or used to improve facilities. But like many government-run services in China, orphanages are prone to financial abuse.

More worryingly, this well-oiled adoption machine is transforming baby girls into commodities worth stealing.

Now, it is difficult for adoptive parents to be sure they have not unknowingly received a stolen

doesn't cost anything.'

Orphanages then buy the babies from traffickers for around £200 and sell them on, at a higher price. Adoptive parents view the money they hand over as a donation to the orphanage but often they are simply paying the market value for the baby.

Of course it is true that without couples like the Cowans, babies such as Kai Ya would face an uncertain future. But by adopting from China, British couples are buying into a murky trade. As long as there is someone willing to pay for a baby, there will always be an incentive to the traffickers.

Little Kai Ya has bought delight to her family. And her mother is adamant she made the right decision.

'If she hadn't been adopted, she would have stayed in the orphanage, probably till she

was about 16 years old, with minimal education,' says Jane. 'Then she'd have gone into a sweatshop to make clothes for 50p a day. That's the reality.'

'A month after Kai Ya arrived, we were walking by the river and she kept saying, "Adair, adair". We went into a Chinese restaurant and asked what this meant, and the waitress told us that she was saying, "I'm happy".

'Kai Ya is so loving and thoughtful. I can't believe how lucky we've been.'



Chinese babies are put on display at five-star hotels

child. If not snatched, many of the infants are bought by traffickers for as little as £30 from their desperate parents who struggle to survive in remote rural villages, where the average wage is £1 a day.

Women from the poorest communities have become full-time baby machines.

'Before, we made money by raising pigs,' says one 23-year-old woman who sold two babies just days after they were born. 'But it takes a year to raise a pig. A baby takes only nine months and

was about 16 years old, with minimal education,' says Jane. 'Then she'd have gone into a sweatshop to make clothes for 50p a day. That's the reality.'

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THE BIRTH MOTHER'S STORY

For every Western family that experiences the joy of adopting a Chinese child, there's a desperate mother grieving for her lost baby...

On her way to work one winter morning, radio show host Xinran Xue spotted a crowd standing around a small bundle of clothes. It turned out to be a baby girl who had been left for dead.

'She was frozen blue, but her tiny nose was twitching,' recalls Xinran, who whisked the baby off to a local hospital.

On her radio show that night, Xinran, who now lives in London, told the story of the baby. A few days later she received a message from the child's birth mother. Choking back tears, the

woman explained how she'd been forced to give up her daughter because she and her husband needed a boy to continue the family tree.

'If you can, please tell my girl in the future to remember that no matter how her life turns out, my love will live in her blood and my voice in her heart,' she said.

This is the sad reality of the guilt felt by the mothers of China's orphans forced to abandon their own flesh and blood.

So many baby girls are abandoned, nurses find it hard to cope



China's one-child law has left orphanages full of unwanted baby girls

THE ADOPTIVE MOTHER'S STORY

On the other side of the world from China, another group of women are facing their own struggle – to have a baby before it's too late...

BBC correspondent Emily Buchanan adopted Jade, six and Rose, three from China, after having three miscarriages.

'Adopting from China was a big adventure with huge emotional ups and downs,' says Emily. 'The process seemed to take forever, but finally, we picked up Jade and a couple of years later, returned to collect her sister Rose.'

'There are genuine fears about the market for babies for international adoption – I reported on baby trafficking in Paraguay for the BBC and trafficking stolen babies can be a lucrative business.'

'But we mustn't be too quick to emphasise the negative aspects of a process which is often successful. Rural life in China is still very tough and overseas adoption has been set up as a way to solve a social problem. Much of the money made goes towards caring for the abandoned children.'

'When we picked up Jade, she was healthy and well fed. Our money had contributed to her wellbeing and to care for the children who aren't lucky enough to be adopted.'

'The real question we should be asking is how long overseas adoption goes on for. As China encourages domestic adoption



Emily Buchanan, husband Gerald and their daughters Jade (left) and Rose

and as fewer babies are abandoned, it will most likely be phased out.

'The fact that foreigners are taking an interest in Chinese girls brings these issues to the world stage, and puts the Chinese government under pressure to make changes.'

'Adoption ensures girls like Jade and Rose have a family and a home. Isn't that what matters most?'

• Emily's book, *From China, With Love* is on sale, price £8.99.

ADOPTED BABIES THE FACTS AND FIGURES

- **50,000** Chinese children have been adopted in the US
- **1,000** in the UK
- The Chinese government makes **£20m** a year in adoption fees