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Morality on the Margins: Fostering Disabled Children in Contemporary China

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**MORALITY ON THE MARGINS:
FOSTERING DISABLED CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

Erin L. Raffety

**A DISSERTATION
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OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

This dissertation challenges scholarly claims that suggest that Chinese society and Chinese families are in moral decline by detailing creative family-making processes by individuals living on the margins of society. While the turn of the twenty-first century boom in international adoptions and China's surplus of baby girls have drawn attention from scholars and the general public, the recent disproportionate abandonment of children with physical and mental impairments, numbering in the millions, remains unexamined. This ethnographic research, based on fieldwork carried out in the Guangxi Autonomous Region between 2010 and 2012, shows how through foster care, poor, elderly women and abandoned, disabled children, both on the fringes of China's kin-oriented society, establish alternative family bonds that are economically and socially meaningful. Foster relationships, in their unique ability to create mutual obligation among strangers that transcend blood relations, challenge foundational state and societal boundaries of kinship in China. Therefore, this dissertation posits that modernity might not be necessarily destructive, but rather, instrumental in shaping new kinds of family.

While literature in China Studies tends to emphasize social change, social immorality, and the influence of the Chinese state, this dissertation also draws attention to moments of continuity in Chinese childrearing practices, morality that has surfaced along the margins of China's modern society, and the potential of ethnography to illuminate the humanity of state actors and complicate monolithic theories of the state. Despite the social disability that impaired children and poor, elderly women experience due to their social abandonment in a kin-oriented society, this dissertation shows that the bonds they develop through fosterage reintegrate them into family and society, recuperating their social personhood and rehabilitating their social status. Despite certain legal and cultural limitations of this personhood, these bonds of fosterage often exceed the bounds of contractual kinship, thus unsettling normative understandings of family held by state orphanage officials and INGO caregivers. Therefore, despite their seemingly marginal character, foster families powerfully disrupt mainstream ideas of about what family means in China today.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>page</i>	iii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>		v
<i>Preface</i>		xi
Introduction		1
Chapter 1: Abandonment as Social Disability		37
Chapter 2: Becoming Obligated: Filial Piety and Intergenerational Friction		72
Chapter 3: Becoming Family: “Kinning,” Play, and Personhood		105
Chapter 4: Remaining Marginal: Limits to Fosterage Relationships		139
Chapter 5: Becoming Persons: Redefining Family in Contemporary China		172
Conclusion		201
<i>Bibliography</i>		211

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We were both so inspired by the foster families' special love for their special children that we returned from China with a desire to have our own. I dedicate this work to those families, my husband, and to our own special child, Lucia.

Preface

I remember sitting with my Chinese professor in his office in Princeton explaining my intent to go to Southwest China to study foster families in 2009. When he heard Guangxi his ears perked up, and he bellowed a guttural laugh, “*I don’t even understand a thing they say there, ha! Good luck!*” I remember not only the cacophony of languages and accents upon touching down in Nanning, but the pervasive smell of mildew, the sea of e-bikes stretching across the broad avenues, and my first forays through neighborhood markets searching for foster mothers alongside a friend who swore they could be found.

I met not a single foster mother that first summer. Instead, I met many people, all Chinese, who told me emphatically that they did not exist. Most people who I met in Guangxi apologized obsessively for the “backwardness” of their region, and they urged me to go somewhere of more importance in China. Chinese professors of anthropology wondered how what I was studying could be called anthropology if it did not concern the Zhuang minority culture for which Guangxi was known. They misunderstood the focus of my research to be international adoptions, because as they and many others stated matter-of-factly, there was no Chinese culture of adoption.

But in March of 2011 all of my fledgling questions brought me to an unassuming concrete office in the middle of the city, where a small international non-governmental

organization (INGO) staff, Mercy Care,¹ assembled and told me that they supported hundreds of families in Nanning and thousands outside of the province who took orphaned and abandoned children into their homes. That April, in a nearby city orphanage, an elderly woman with a kind smile told me how she'd started foster care projects in Guangxi in the early 1990s out of necessity, poverty, and concern. Guangxi, it turned out, despite the naysayers, was at the center of a disperse, yet expansive foster care movement.

When you're sitting in classrooms and carrels imagining anthropological fieldwork, you can only think in systems and power and theories. It was no different for me, and despite the draw of foster mothers' joy and pain, I imagined a China in which movement of children from public orphanages to private homes represented an unprecedented receding of the state from private family life. I conjured a sophisticated state, modern cities, and rapid social change.

But instead what I found is time nearly standing still in the cinderblock homes of foster families, whether they lived in the capital city or off the rice paddies between mountains where people plowed with water buffalo, a rickety tool, and their own two hands. I learned that despite the narratives about the strength of the Chinese state in my textbooks, power was always locally negotiated. Despite the myriad of books on China's urban centers, the people of Guangxi remain poignantly and literally, "down to earth" (Fei 1992[1947]).

And I discovered that despite the literature on families and family life in China, nothing prepared me for the sudden expressions of emotion I would encounter on the

¹ Mercy Care is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of the INGO.

inside—the secrets people confided in me, illegitimate children, illegal adoptions, and how they clung to me briefly and then physically pushed me away. So powerful and yet fleeting were these displays of emotion that I often wondered whether I imagined them, or if they did occur, what it was inside of me or between us that elicited such rawness, even as I relished the intimacy. Even if you know in your heart that you are dealing in the realm of truths and the sacred, there is, for the anthropologist, always the concern for what will someday make it onto the page and into the readers' conscience. And the fact that your informant is not so or never so concerned with representation in these real moments, but only concerned with living itself, often yields a sinking, slithery uneasiness.

I once read a warning from another writer about the tendency to make the people we meet abroad and learn from and love, “poor, little tragic characters in the story of me,” and the phrase struck real fear into my anthropologist soul. Even as I write these words now back in the ivory towers of Princeton University, it's been hard but necessary to come to terms with the fact that what I write will inevitably be a sort of fiction—irrelevant and inaccurate—because these people, these friends, are not characters I invented, but people whose lives go on, quite independently, quite functionally from mine after I've left China.

For every anthropologist of China there is this sense that you become irrelevant once you leave and China goes on changing at the speed of light. And for every human being who has ever done fieldwork or loved another they've left behind, there is also this hope that while others will go on living, that you'll never, ever be the same.

Introduction

A Field of Contradictions

Above the famous, old market down the street from our modern high-rise in Nanning, China, stood a sterile supermarket, and above that a national hotel chain. The open air market, lined with tropical fruit vendors and awash with the smell of fresh fish and the sound of the sloshing fishmongers' galoshes contrasted with the gleaming linoleum tile in the supermarket above, the quiet, unpopulated aisles and the produce squashed into neat packages sealed with cellophane and styrofoam. On my runs through the city at five or six in the morning, I'd often see men from the countryside hauling in hogs, freshly slaughtered and splayed across their motorbikes, and women in the market told us they brought their produce from counties along the outskirts of the city. Old women urged me to only shop these open air markets where the produce was fresher and cheaper, although they cautioned me that I should wash the vegetables with salt, given that these days you can't trust its true origins or that it's free of pesticides. Inside the modern supermarket, women in starched uniforms scanned items to an incessant, metered beep; downstairs the sound of chatter rung out as customers eagerly haggled with vendors to save a penny on greens harvested from the banks of the river.

The layers of the market and the supermarket suggest that despite appearances the modern and the pre-modern comingled in this, like many other, populated Chinese cities.

Inside the train station one afternoon I encountered an older man, weighted down by his earthly belongings strapped to his burdened back, trembling and hesitating in front of the escalator. Taking his elbow in my arm, I whispered, “Uncle, let me help you,” and guided him onto the steps of the electric stairs. It was likely the first time he’d ever seen an escalator.

He and other migrants, as they traveled, were often distinguishable by their tattered clothes, large plastic bundles, and homemade food, but in Nanning, nearly everyone dressed this way. Everyone spoke in heavily accented Mandarin, spat on the sidewalk, held their children to pee over the gutter, cut in line, pushed and shoved their way through crowds, and boasted browned skin from years of farming in the sun. Even my husband’s colleagues at the nearby teaching college, and the professors who dined with us from the local Minorities University, all bemoaned that they, along with Guangxi were “backward,” and “uncivilized.” True to Chinese sociologist Xiaotong Fei’s mid-century proclamation, the permanent dirt under city dwellers’ fingernails, their calloused hands, their propensity to uncontrollably mix Mandarin with the local dialect, and their willingness to name allegiance to any number of small towns before the capital city, all suggested that Guangxi people were firmly “of the soil” (Fei 1992 [1947]).

It was at once a sincere humility, a deep connection to the countryside and their minority roots that compelled them to speak this way, and also a profound sense of inferiority that Nanning, despite its fecundity, could not compete with the modern Shanghais, Beijings, or even Shenzhens of the country. Beyond the capital city, these humilities contrasted even more starkly with the extravagant beauty of the Guangxi landscape. Banana farms and the trees with their red, green, and yellow fruits stretched

to the horizon. Majestic karst domes rose up to nestle towns that consisted of a few garage storefronts and one solitary street. Along that street men and women cradled babies in their laps as they squatted, drinking tea, cracking walnuts, and chatting in the sing-songy canton of the local *baihua*, or the exotic lilt of the Zhuang dialect. Farmers with reed hats bent over the shimmering rice paddies and guided water buffalo along terraced fields that cohabitated with the mountainous features. During the tomb sweeping festival, graves were marked with brightly colored streamers, dotting the edges of the countryside with dignity and simplicity.

But despite the beauty of the countryside and the allure of the bustling cities, there were people in both who had been abandoned not only by modernity, but by their very families. Though they were rarely seen beyond the walls of orphanage institutions, tales circulated of children with crippling disabilities, whose unlucky parents discarded them in parks, public squares, or in boxes at the gates of the orphanage. In rural villages, elderly women and men eked out a living, while their grown children toiled thousands of miles away in factories. Their children returning but once or twice a year, these seniors found themselves without pension or family, fending for themselves in the backbreaking labor needed to earn a living on the farm.

Yet, when I traveled out to the countryside with young orphanage monitors and international non-governmental organization (INGO) workers to visit Chinese families, Huilan, the orphanage foster care monitor, Mo *jie*,² the physical therapist, and Suling, the INGO foster care monitor,³ all began to relax and breathe a bit deeper as this familiar

² *Jie* is a Mandarin term of respect and also some intimacy, meaning older sister.

³ In order to protect the identities of children, foster parents, as well as orphanage and INGO personnel, I use a pseudonyms. Additionally, Daling, which refers to the county seat, as well as the small village where the foster care project in Guangxi took place, is also a pseudonym.

landscape took shape. Once off the bus, they'd fill their backpacks with mounds of pork, tofu, and pickled lettuce, touting their authenticity because they'd purchased them from old ladies who'd set up rickety tables alongside the dusty streets in the little town. To these transplanted city folk, the food, the people, and the mountain air was cleansing, pure, and distinct. To them, these trips felt like coming home.

However, what troubled Huilan, the orphanage foster care monitor, and Liu *laoshi*,⁴ the INGO director, beyond the vulnerable children in their care, was the upbringing of their own children who they left behind each day in Nanning in the care of their aged parents. Despite their college-educated and relatively middle-class status, they relied on their parents to raise their young children. But their parents were growing old, they were poorly educated, and their methods of discipline were outdated. They cited a certain immorality that pervaded city life in Nanning, and they envied the simpler lives of the folk who lived beyond its purview.

On one such trip out of Nanning, Huilan, Mo *jie*, Suling and I clamored down from the bus, toting bags of medicine and supplies and a little walker, and made our way along the back roads to a small village, tucked up against a stream laden with garbage, the sounds of chickens clucking and the smell of sour and hot peppers wafting toward our noses in the hot sun. We found the villagers laying out their livelihood, the brilliant red peppers to dry, as they chattered leisurely to one another in the local language. Young boys sat on a bench, snickering to one another; babies were strapped to parents' backs in brightly colored, hand-woven fabrics, and children and parents alike worked alongside one another.

⁴ The Mandarin word for teacher and a title of respect that I used to refer to this older woman in the field. Throughout the text I use italics and footnotes to reference and translate Mandarin titles and phrases.

But despite first glances, this was no ordinary village, just as these were no ordinary parents or children. As I drew closer I noticed the curved backs and wrinkled hands of the parents marking them as seasoned and aged. Gradually it became clear to me that these were not parents at all, but elderly foster parents rearing China's young in the countryside. Likewise, I noted that many of the children walked with limps characteristic of cerebral palsy or displayed a distracted gaze specific to autism. The older boys' wide faces and smiles revealed Down syndrome, while still others were hard of hearing, blind, or weakened from disease.

The apparent contrasting harmony, morality even, of these families in the countryside was rife with contradiction. Here new families were being created from the residue of those who found themselves abandoned by their biological kin. Children who were once sequestered in institutions were being farmed out to elders in both the city and the countryside in order to lift the burden on the state orphanage, so numerous were these discarded children with disabilities. Elderly women, finding their finances and their empty homes wanting, were the only ones willing to take in diseased and disabled children forsaken by their own parents. And while these families, made up of social outcasts were hardly families in the traditional Chinese sense, they were radically disruptive to Hulian, Liu *laoshi*, Mo *jie*, and Suling's convictions and those of the Chinese state they represented. For while foster families were contracted by the state and compensated for their care, the bonds that developed between elderly parents and their disabled children were anything but temporary. Instead the significant effects of a newfound personhood achieved through fosterage relationships began to assert itself in real emotion and kinship. And not only for foster families, but for orphanage workers

and state officials, such personhood did not remain marginal and contractual, but exceeded its boundaries, complicating distinctions between persons and nonpersons, families and strangers, and state and society.

Morality on the Margins: Kinship, Filial Piety, and Personhood in Fosterage

My dissertation challenges scholarly claims that suggest that Chinese society and Chinese families are in moral decline (Yan 2011a,b), by detailing creative family-making processes by individuals living on the margins of society. While the boom in international adoptions from China and a surplus of baby girls have drawn attention from scholars and the general public (Anagnost 1995; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Johnson 2004), the disproportionate abandonment of children with physical and mental impairments, numbering in the millions, remains unexamined (Hu and Szente 2009). My ethnographic research based on fieldwork carried out in the Guangxi Autonomous Region between 2010 and 2012 shows how through foster care, poor, elderly women and abandoned, disabled children, both on the fringes of a kin-oriented society, establish alternative family bonds that are economically and socially meaningful. I demonstrate how foster relationships, in their unique ability to create mutual obligation among strangers that transcend blood relations, challenge foundational societal and state boundaries of kinship in China. In so doing, I posit that modernity might not be necessarily destructive, but rather, instrumental in shaping new kinds of family.

Therefore, while literature in China Studies tends to emphasize social change, social immorality, and the influence of the Chinese state, this dissertation also draws attention to moments of continuity in Chinese childrearing practices, morality that has

surfaced along the margins, and the potential of ethnography to illuminate the humanity of state actors and complicate monolithic theories of the state. I do not deny that the marketization of Chinese society has been accompanied by dramatic changes in family structure (Davis and Harrell 1993) and poignant shifts in social values among young people away from family loyalties to future prosperity (Yan 2003). In my own fieldwork, the abandonment of impaired children and elderly parents by middle-aged couples speaks to a context in which profound social, political, and economic pressures have remarkably stressed and challenged intergenerational relations and family systems.

However, in Southwest Guangxi these shifts in family life took place in the context of enduring virolocal patterns of residence and the persistent expectation of the family (rather than the state) to provide child and elder care (see especially Chapters one and two). Most dramatically, in foster families, as well as for nearly 58 million children in “skipped generation families” (families where grandparents are serving as primary caregivers to grandchildren because parents have fled rural towns for work in the cities), Chinese elders are rearing the next generation of Chinese children (Tatlow 2012; Ye and Murray 2005). Nearly fifty years ago, anthropologist Margery Wolf demonstrated that childrearing was one of the slowest sites of cultural change for Taiwanese families because it was administered and authorized by elderly women who remained cloistered from the public sphere and wed to traditional methods (Wolf 1970). While Chinese women are certainly much more active in public life today, my fieldwork documents (see especially Chapter three) the persistent authority of elderly parents in childrearing and discipline (despite the pushback from younger generations) and their remarkably traditional patterns of caregiving. Hence, while it is certainly important to acknowledge

the profound changes to contemporary Chinese family life, my research also makes childrearing, as well as its intergenerational ties, and virolocal forms, apparent and paramount as a site of continuity in Chinese patterns of cultural life.

Secondly, my study takes issue with the pivotal conversation regarding the immorality of Chinese society in the anthropology of China (Kleinman, et. al 2011; Zhang, Kleinman, and Tu 2011), especially the work of Yunxiang Yan (2003, 2010, 2011 a,b). In *Private Life Under Socialism*, Yan recounts a rather cautionary tale about the fall of patriarchy, socialism, and the extended family alongside the rise of the conjugal unit, marketizing youth, and the “uncivil individual” (2003). A parallel focus in China Studies on individuals who have been systematically excluded from the PRC’s campaign for *suzhi* (“human quality”) and modern state-building project also highlights the increasing immorality of Chinese social life (Anagnost 1997, 2004; Bakken 2000; Friedman 2006; Greenhalgh 2010; Jacka 2009; Murphy 2004; Sigley 2009; Wang 2010a,b).

Since *Private Life*, Yan has drawn attention to the increasingly immoral aspects of moneymaking, fraud, and deception in Chinese society, touting the ramifications of an individualism that has flourished in the absence of social trust (2011a). Leslie Wang, in particular, argues that the abandonment of disabled children in the present era is demonstrative of the way in which children’s value is increasingly market-based (Wang 2010a: 40). Yan astutely describes this new environment as an entanglement of old and new ethics (2010a: 71), and points to some of the surprising “moral” trends among youth in China, such as volunteerism. However, especially when it comes to kinship, he also suggests that immorality manifests by further breeding distrust and dividing strangers and kin.

While my own research with children who have been abandoned largely because of physical and mental impairments seemingly corroborates claims that Chinese society and individuals have become increasingly immoral in the present era, the bonds of kinship that develop between strangers suggest otherwise. Whereas foster parents cite a multitude of financial, personal, and social reasons for fostering, these strategic moves, like those of other seniors who provide childcare to their grandchildren (Zhang H. 2005), represent a reinterpretation of traditional modes of filial piety. Despite their disenfranchised social location, foster mothers are personally and socially rehabilitated in the eyes of society and the state, even as they take in children that no one wants. As I attempt to show in the following chapters, the relationships that develop between poor, elderly foster parents and abandoned, impaired children create bonds that while contractual and temporary, also establish profound changes in personhood. As foster parents and foster children come to see themselves as family, and therefore social persons with obligations and rights, they unsettle the biological boundaries of family previously conceived by Chinese culture and the state. In fact, I demonstrate throughout the dissertation, but particularly in Chapter five, how the moral acts of these foster families disturb state and INGO actors' own understandings of family and personhood.

Third, my dissertation contends with the centrality of the state and the pervading Foucauldian theoretical framework in the current anthropology of China. Modern China Studies have largely taken the family for granted, tending to focus on trends such as migration, transnationalism, and marketization (Ong 2006: Zhang L. 2002). Even studies that emphasize relations through the individual lives and emotions of family members, such as Yan's *Private Life*, tend to make the state, rather than these persons, their object

of study. In Yan's ethnography, it is the state with whom we become acquainted as the primary longitudinal actor rather than families or individuals. This problem is emblematic of the overwhelming Foucauldian lens employed by many in China studies of state power (see for example Kipnis 2011; Naftali 2014; Ong 1999, 2006; Zhang, Kleinman, and Tu 2011), which often competes with ethnographic aims and claims (see Sangren 1995; Yang M. 2013). To explain, when anthropologists take the state as their object of study, rather than pursuing an understanding of the state through the actors that comprise it, they forfeit their expertise in portraying embodied social life through an embodied (participating and observing) methodology.

As my ethnography demonstrates, even as the practice of foster care is located within the state and mostly controlled by state actors, those state actors have requisite family lives, which stand in tension with their own commitments and understandings of the goals of the state. Hence, my dissertation aims to contextualize the moral politics of family ethnographically, for instance, by illustrating how fosterage represents both a failure of some families to value and care for their disabled children and a reinterpretation of traditional models of filial piety by others, which recuperates the social status of socially disabled elders and children by reintegrating them into family and social life. By presenting the extremes of foster mothering, from women who work the system by obtaining multiple children and stipends from various orphanages to women who have fostered fifteen children over the years and talk about each one's departure with tears in their eyes, I demonstrate the complicated nature of contractual kinship, a kinship that is monitored by, and yet, often even exceeds the boundaries of the state. By showing both some of the failures of these families to obtain personhood in the eyes of society and the

state and their inspiring triumphs on behalf of their impaired children, I suggest that even as foster families often remain marginal, their personhood can challenge normative ideas of family circulated by culture and the state. By portraying the complexity of middle-generation state actors' ambivalence and vulnerability and their intertwined relationships with "marginal families," I attempt to complicate these claims regarding morality and the increasing social distance between kin and non-kin in Chinese society.

Finally, in addition to qualifying the discussion of social morality in China Studies, my research demonstrates the importance of studies of kinship to understandings of contemporary family, personhood, and the state. Fosterage and adoption have long been anthropological topics of interest, because, like marriage,⁵ they create kin relations beyond the confines of biological lines (Carsten 1997; Goody 1969; Malinowski 1913; Rivers 1968 [1914]; Waltner 1990; Watson 1975; Weismantel 1995; Wolf and Huang 1980). Anthropological studies of kinship were widely discredited in the 1970s and 1980s, as scholars, most notably David Schneider (1980, 1984), began to question the archetypal position of the field on the grounds that it falsely imputed Western biocentric notions of kinship onto other cultures and peoples. However, anthropologists of adoption have especially returned to notions of "kinning" (see Chapter three), motherhood, and global citizenship given their ability to trouble the naturalness of biological kin relations (Dorow 2006; Franklin 2001; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Howell 2006; Marre and Briggs 2009; Strathern 1992; Yngvesson 2001).

Likewise, the foster families that I introduce in this dissertation disrupt the biological ideal of Chinese family through their ability to create affective, meaningful

⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, in his theory of alliance wrote that while culture is powerless before descent, in marriage, "nature for once has not already had the last word" (1971 [1949]: 31).

relations between strangers. While this ideal may be a biocentric cultural model rather than a biological reality (see Schneider 1984; Yan 2003), the argument of this dissertation is that foster families are nonetheless disruptive and provocative, because the bonds of kinship they create between marginal actors (poor, elderly women and abandoned, disabled children) rival (and in some cases exceed [see Chapter five]) the affections and emotions of biological families and challenge state actors' normative ideas about kinship.

Not surprisingly, these articulations of family are fundamentally linked to what it means to be a person in contemporary China. Perhaps the most famous expression of the subject of personhood within anthropology is that of Marcel Mauss, who traced its "social history" from the Pueblo Indians to the Greeks and Christians in 1938 (Mauss 1985). Despite its evolutionary schematic, Mauss contributes a paradigmatic concept of the person as a philosophical and legal individual, but also one who varies across cultures. My own description and definition of personhood is grounded in a transformation I saw occur, as a result of these fosterage relationships, for both foster mothers and foster children, and a personhood that often became problematic for the middle-aged state orphanage and INGO caregivers. While I argue that foster mothers and children became social persons through their reintegration into families and society through fosterage relations, I also name aspects of increased individualism (demonstrated by the parents' willingness to advocate for their children and themselves, as well as the children's increased awareness of their own feelings and desires) as features of their social personhood. Hence, drawing upon Marshall Sahlins' definition of personhood, which furthers the work of anthropologists of kinship by theorizing relatedness as transpersonal experience, beyond biology, and "mutuality of being" (2011a,b), I

nevertheless ground this concept in a Chinese cultural context of social obligation and a rapidly changing modern society. Therefore, in Chapter one, I build on historical and contemporary scholarship (Baker 1979; Cohen 1976; Fei 1992 [1947]; Freedman 1966; Guo and Kleinman 2011; Potter and Potter 1990; Wolf M. 1968; Yan 2003, 2010, 2011a,b), advancing a definition of Chinese personhood as fulfillment of one's obligation in social networks, through which one gains moral status (see Chapter one).

To that end, this study complements the robust discussion of Chinese moral personhood (see Kleinman, et. al 2011) and the vacuum in scholarship on the modern family in China by showing how in alternative families built through the state-sponsored work of foster care, social outcasts or nonpersons are able to substantiate their social personhood in surprising, unconventional (non-biological) ways. This personhood has consequences for Chinese foster families and the state and societal actors with whom they interact. To expand, through distinct practices of what anthropologist Signe Howell calls “kinning” (see Chapter three), foster parents and children become related to one another and are mutually constituted as persons to one another (2003, 2006). While in some instances such personhood finds its limits of recognition in society and the state (Chapter four), Chapter five describes some of the ways in which orphanage caregivers (state actors) are confronted and challenged by the personhood of these extra-biological family relationships. Wary of their own shortcomings as parents alongside the affection and care displayed in foster families, they begin to examine some of the cultural limits of a biological model for family that in turn, narrowly defines personhood. Thus, foster families both affirm and subvert conventional understandings of Chinese personhood today.

Therefore, I suggest that foster families are not so oppositional or marginal to social life in that their bonds of affection and trust begin to challenge the biological bonds of “mainstream” families (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1982; Weston 1991). Such relations are not so much being eroded by migration, family planning policies, conjugal intimacy, or grandparenting, as transformed. What it means to be moral person in Chinese culture means having a child, while having a family is what makes one a child. The very definitions of family and children, alongside those of personhood and morality, have at once shifted and stayed the same. Yet, what it means to be a person in China is being rewritten from some of the most unlikely places.

Disability and Difference: Shifts in the Practice of Foster Care

In what follows I present a brief history of foster care in China, highlighting how the challenge of caring for disabled children pits institutional and private models of social welfare against one another, failing to resolve the vulnerability of disabled children.

When I visited the offices of Mercy Care in a dark apartment building on a cold, rainy March day in the center of Nanning, the banners of the faces of healthy children hung on the walls, their Caucasian board members, and the photo albums of adopted families seemed faded relics of the past. As Liu *laoshi* spoke in her soft voice, I realized that the work of Mercy Care had altered as the purposes and practices of foster care had shifted from readying healthy children for international adoption to rehabilitating children with physical and mental impairments.⁶

⁶ In Chapter one, I review the historical and cultural perception of disability in China, and theorize disability in China as a social experience that extends to all children who are abandoned (whether

Liu *laoshi* started as one of Holt International's (America's largest and most prominent adoption agency, whose original Christian mission had been to rescue war orphans from Korea in the 1950s) first employees in the 1990s. She'd left her job as a government Chinese teacher to try out the private sector, and while attending a local English corner, became a Christian. When she first began working for Holt, she relished working for a Christian organization, but noted that accompanying foreign families through the adoptive process was hard work.

The bonds she formed with these families, however, were lasting. When Liu *laoshi* traveled to Oregon with Holt to do some training in early childhood education, she reunited with some of the families who adopted from Guangxi, and they questioned whether she and others had received the tens of thousands of dollars in donations they had made to Holt over the years. Liu *laoshi* said Guangxi had never received that money meant for their programs; it must have gone to the general funds of the Holt Company. This fact, coupled with Liu *laoshi*'s increasing disillusionment with the company's straying from its Christian roots (they were now hiring non-Christian staff) led her to contemplate the formation of a new INGO with these adoptive parents that might work locally to promote foster care in Guangxi. Liu *laoshi* initially got one of her church friends to organize the operations, but when she kept running back to her for advice, Holt became annoyed. Liu *laoshi* eventually quit her job with Holt in 2004 and went to work full time with Mercy Care, joining the board, alongside three American adoptive parents,

physically or mentally impaired, or not) due to the stigma associated with being without family in a kin-oriented society.

and gradually gathering a Chinese staff of six to supervise the foster care placements the organization would grow to support in Guangxi and five other provinces.⁷

The work of INGOs in China has been pivotal to the implementation of the national policy and the development of the practice of foster care. Even though INGOs were expressly prohibited from entering and registering in China following the 1990s media storm,⁸ with the opening up of China to international adoptions in 1995, domestic-international partnerships between adoption agencies, and INGOs alike, became a feature of the landscape. Although government policies toward INGOs are still limiting (Shang 2011), the practice of foster care today represents a confluence of both Eastern and Western attitudes toward children, childrearing, adoption, and disability given the partnerships forged between state institutions and INGOs (Dorow 2006; Keyser 2009; Wang 2010a,b).

Most literature, including Yuping Wu, Xiaoyu Han and Qin Gao's treatise on urban foster care in China (2005), Xiaoyuan Shang's extensive mapping of child welfare services (2011), and Catherine Keyser's recent review of INGO partnership in children's welfare (2009), stresses the growth of foster care in tandem with the rise of INGOs.

Given the prevalence of INGOs working in Guangxi and the intervention of adoptive parents, I initially thought that foster care must have been a Western transplant.

⁷ Mercy Care was not officially registered in China, but had 501c(3) status in the United States and was widely recognized for its work within China. Because of the strict registration laws for INGOs within China, this arrangement (even the fact that the Chinese staff were all registered as workers in a bakery and drew their insurance and pension from there) is not unusual. Donations from the United States made up nearly 100% of the Mercy Care's operating budget, with which they paid the wages of six Chinese staff members and supplemented the stipends state orphanages were required to pay foster moms. In the dissertation, Suling, a foster care monitor, and Liu *laoshi*, a board member and the Chinese director of Mercy Care, are the two primary informants who represent the INGO, Mercy Care. I would often travel with Suling to conduct routine visits to foster homes that mirrored the visits the state orphanage also conducted.

⁸ See my description of these events on page 11.

However, when we traveled to Yulin, one of Guangxi's urban metropolises in April of 2011, I met an elderly auntie in the orphanage who was credited with piloting local forms of foster care as early as the 1990s. She described, as did others, that such measures were taken to ease the burden on understaffed, overcrowded, and poor orphanages. The orphanage simply could not afford to care for the children so they farmed them out to local families. A year later in Hubei province we heard similar stories of foster care developing locally in the mid-1990s, but many of the orphanages had little or no accounting practices of the families involved. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that foster care also developed locally as a solution to poverty and the failure of the institutional model of child welfare in parts of China. In the breakdown of government services in the transition from Communism to a market-based economy, families once again stepped in to fill the void (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

One afternoon as we traipsed into Daling from a visit to the foster village, Suling, a Mercy Care foster monitor, and Mo *jie*, the orphanage physical therapist, questioned Huilan, a long-term employee of the Nanning Municipal Orphanage about the conditions of the orphanage during the 1990s.

“Did you ever see a child die?” Mo *jie* asked with a shudder.

“I held dying children in my arms,” Huilan replied bitterly. “In those days, you’d be holding a baby in each arm and bathing them in buckets of bitter cold water. The orphanage was so crowded; there weren’t enough beds to go around. We would rush out of the room when we suspected a child of dying, because, of course, we were afraid of ghosts, but someone had to prepare the bodies eventually for burial.”

Anthropologist Kay Ann Johnson, who has also documented the desperation of those early years, describes the fragility of baby girls who were left to the elements, and who were sent, out of overcrowded, understaffed hospitals to understaffed, overcrowded orphanages, essentially to die (2004). Their plight was made public by Western journalists posing as INGO workers who made their way inside the walls of the concrete orphanages and documented infants, especially girls, tied to cribs and deprived of food and medicine (“The Dying Rooms” 1995). Human Rights Watch launched a series of detailed reports documenting these crimes against infants, and the Chinese government vehemently denied the abuses, barring all INGOs from the country for a brief period (“Death by Default” 1996).

Eventually, however, by the 1990s, the strictness of the domestic adoption law, coupled with China’s recent entry into participation in international adoptions opened the floodgates. It became observable to adoption agencies that children coming out of Chinese institutions manifested considerable developmental delays. In the early 1990s, Holt International, Liu *laoshi*’s former employer, partnered with the Chinese government to create some of the first organized foster care programs. Foster care became a staple for readying and making babies attractive to international adoptive families who paid a standard \$3000 “donation” to the local orphanages. Whereas many local orphanages had developed some of their own foster care programming, the influx of Western adoption agencies and INGOs contributed to its increasing development and systemization. The UK Charity Care for Children began to utilize its connections with national officials to put pressure on the Chinese government to nationalize foster care in the early 2000s.

The height of foster care practices coincided with the Temporary Policy on Foster Care issued by the Communist Party in late 2003 and extended until the peak year for international adoptions from China in 2005. Although by this time foster care had been established as a strategy of poor orphanages to compensate for scarcity of caregivers, as well as a strategy for rich, urban orphanages to ready children for international adoption, the policy officially mandated the development and participation of all state orphanages in foster care projects. It also clarified the terms of the arrangements: foster parents were to have ample space and an income commensurate with the local average, be between the ages of 35 and 65, and possess the time and the abilities to care for children (Wu, et. al 2005). In exchange for their services foster parents would be paid a monthly stipend commensurate with local standards of living,⁹ but children would remain wards of the state until they were returned to the orphanage or adopted.

Despite the longevity of the projects and their gradual expansion over the years, Liu *laoshi* remained cautious about the future of foster care in China. “The support for foster care in China across the board is quite little, even shallow,” she said, a grimace briefly coming to her face as she spoke. She remarked that the government model for child welfare remains quite institutional even though Care for Children, with over twenty-five years researching foster care, has proven that family foster care is by far the most effective form of care for vulnerable children. Noting the increasing number of children with impairments both in Mercy Care’s programs and government orphanages, she added, “And when it comes to disability, the government has done two main things: bolster the *kangfu* (physical therapy) centers and create institutions within institutions.”

⁹ For a detailed discussion of this compensation see Chapter two.

In his review of the government's attention to disability in China, Matthew Kohrman describes the importance of these therapy and rehabilitation centers, and the way in which they represent a medicalized approach to eradicating disability, much like any other "disease" (2005) (see Chapter one for more on disability in China). As orphanages have recently become overburdened with children with impairments, the government has launched the Blue Sky Program, to partner with the INGO, Half the Sky, to build therapy and rehabilitation centers to provide assistance to orphans with impairments (China.org.cn). The plan, announced in 2005 and implemented in 2007, received mixed reviews from orphanage directors because it seemed to be leading back toward a residential, institutional model of caregiving and thus, conflicts with foster care programs.

As the government stepped into the foster care arena, several major INGOs, as well as adoption agencies, (World Vision, Amity Foundation, Half the Sky, and Holt International) have gradually stepped out, reduced their programs or shifted their focus to rehabilitation, group homes for children with physical and mental impairments, or schooling for migrant children. While the number of orphans in institutions has gradually fallen since 2005, the reduction of INGO support for foster care has also prompted government orphanages to shut down or severely decrease their foster care programming.

Whereas recent press reports the government is expanding its welfare efforts to provide stipends to the large number of orphans living outside institutions and with kin in rural areas (Wang 2011), in my own travels within Guangxi I noted both how little national money trickled down to county-level orphanages, and how remarkably swayed these orphanages were by foreign money. In April 2012 when I spoke with an American

member of Mercy Care's board in Shanghai, he remarked that as China and its social welfare institutions become wealthier, foster care is actually becoming more difficult. As we traveled through Anhui, Hubei, and Hebei that month, visiting Mercy Care's foster care projects at small county orphanages in the countryside and major municipal orphanages in the cities, the challenge to foster care became apparent. Massive, concrete buildings with therapy facilities were being constructed, and in many cases children, who had previously lived locally with families, were being moved back into the orphanages where they could be closer to the therapy and educational resources being offered.

They were essentially creating "institutions within institutions" as Liu *laoshi* had called them. Half the Sky's programming, which focuses on providing highly trained staff to rehabilitate children with physical and mental impairments within the orphanage walls, also stresses this group home model. They often hired couples to serve as parents to six to eight children who lived together in a simulated family (*moni jiating*) environment within the walls of governmental orphanages in large cities. While Half the Sky's programming is largely concentrated in urban areas, the group home model was also popular in the countryside. When we met with a compassionate orphanage director from Yizhou, a small county in Guangxi, he noted that although he firmly believed in the foster care model above the group home (he himself had fostered children), the pressure and funding from an independent INGO had caused him to move some of the children back into the orphanage. In another small county orphanage, the director bemoaned how burdened he felt when Holt International discontinued its foster programs just a few years back and he had to scramble to find funding to keep the children in their homes. Behind his back, however, Mercy Care staff relayed that it was rumored that the same director

had been known to drag foster children into the orphanage when prominent officials were on charity rounds during the spring festival. Many county orphanages complained that without children in their walls, their purpose became murky to the government, and with funding cuts, they would have to fire long-term staff.

Despite the national commitment the Chinese government has made to foster care and the widespread support from INGOs beginning in the 1990s, today the position of foster care as a practice of caring for vulnerable and abandoned children is tenuous. The government is torn between Communist symbols of modernity, such as orphanage institutions, therapy centers, and special education efforts, and the evidence backing foster care as a healthy option for orphaned and abandoned children. A recent book by Xiaoyuan Shang and Karen Fisher (2013) argues that most international coverage regarding orphan care in China is dated and ill-informed, especially about foster programs throughout the country, and a mixed welfare system, where the state supplements family care, is a promising direction for Chinese orphans. However, such an analysis overlooks the slippage that often takes place between not only competing models of care, but also the delegation of responsibilities between state and family caregivers. According to my fieldwork, the government is strapped to manage and provide for the special needs of impaired children alongside continuing to participate in profit-making endeavors such as international adoption, thus waffling between a commitment to institutional or family-based models of care. Moreover, given the emerging bifurcation between institutional care for children with impairments and family-based care for children without, socially disabled children such as Dengrong, Meili, and Pei Pei, whom I describe in the dissertation, often face a precarious future.

Framing the Field

In the summer of 2009, I traveled to four Chinese cities in order to survey adoption and foster care programs and locate a field site for my dissertation study of the intersection between these practices and Chinese family life. Given the persistent secrecy surrounding practices of adoption in Chinese culture,¹⁰ as well as the extra-legal problems associated with adoptions,¹¹ not to mention rampant misunderstandings regarding the purpose of my study (later in this section I discuss the problematics of my own subjectivity as a young married, white woman researching abandoned children in a country where international adoptions are ubiquitous), I chose to focus on the less widespread and well-known practice of foster care. In my initial survey trip I learned that foster care practices had developed indigenously and relatively early in Guangxi (see Preface). Despite Guangxi's "Wild West reputation," Nanning was a mid-size city by Chinese standards (population nearly seven million) with a smaller and more approachable social network than large metropolises. Therefore, I chose to locate my study in the capital city of Nanning and surrounding cities, towns, and rural villages in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of Southwestern China.

¹⁰ Kay Ann Johnson's findings of a sizeable amount of secrecy among adoptive parents (2004), which resonate with my own field experiences, denote the extent to which these children's pasts are not only a problem for the children themselves, but for parents and individuals who seek to incorporate them into Chinese family life.

¹¹ Although the Nanning Orphanage frequently facilitated official adoptions, the adopting couples almost exclusively came from wealthy households outside of Guangxi. As my time in Nanning lengthened, friends and acquaintances started to confide in me that the few adoptions I knew of in the area where, in fact, extra-legal, or facilitated through the varied channels of social networks (*guanxi*) individuals had with orphanage workers and other government officials. In one case, a local woman who had given pregnancy out of wedlock gifted her baby to an acquaintance, who because of her relationships with the orphanage, paid considerably less than one would have paid for a legal adoption and secured the proper paperwork for her child. Given the sensitivity of these extra-legal proceedings, I realized that early on it would be potentially dangerous to my informants to investigate and write about these adoptions, and quickly shifted my interest and topic to the newer and less heavily scrutinized practice of foster care.

The first six to eight months of my two year stay in Nanning involved continued language study at the local education college, networking with local scholars of Anthropology at the Guangxi Minorities Institute, a survey of local, national, and international INGOs involved in child welfare services, and relationship building with individuals from each of these entities toward gaining access to the foster families associated with programs through the Nanning Municipal Orphanage. Communicating, even with extremely educated individuals about the focus of my project proved to be quite challenging for several reasons.

Learning the Language of Foster Care

For one, *jiyang* (寄养), the official, yet obscure government word for foster care, is virtually unknown. Many times when I stated that I was interested in studying foster families, listeners assumed I'd spoken incorrectly due to limited language skills or that they'd misheard and offered the terms, *shouyang* or *lingyang*, the two words more commonly translated for adoption in Mandarin reserved for official arrangements. Even when I was able to explain that I was less interested in adoptive or official adoptive relationships, but rather concerned with children who are traditionally housed in orphanages but raised temporarily by local caregivers, the identifying properties of my own subjectivity, comingled with cultural resonance (many of these foster children are often adopted to the West), often led listeners to assume that I was a Westerner coming to China, like so many, to *shouyang* (adopt) Chinese children.

When I began partnering extensively with a local INGO in the later stages of my research, their propensity for bringing Western adoptive parents on their tours of

orphanages and foster homes often led orphanage personnel, foster parents, and children to automatically impute this identity of a prospective or a past adoptive parent to me. Virtually every initial interaction I had with foster parents and children, then, was overshadowed by their misunderstanding that I desired to adopt their children, or at the very least, that after returning to the United States, I might serve as a conduit for funneling information from them to adoptive families. Ironically, it was often very difficult and very confusing to explain to the foster parents that I, too, lived in China, and that I was not interested in adopting these children, but rather researching their lives and the lives of their children! Despite these challenges and misunderstandings, as Rena Lederman has helpfully pointed out, informed consent is not only often a series of misunderstandings, but also an ongoing, rather than one time feature of participant observation-based research (2013). Therefore, it became important not only for me to continually restate my identity as a researcher with intentions to study rather than adopt children, but also vital that I use these misunderstandings to interpret the rules of engagement within these fostering communities, as well as the cultural perception of foster care and adoption within the wider public.¹²

In fact, yet another reason for the lack of resonance my research topic drew was the public's scant knowledge regarding the widespread practice of foster care. During the first summer in 2009 when I traveled extensively within China, the most frequent response to my queries among locals, even those involved in the arena of social welfare, was that foster care does not exist in China. Even as the practice of foster care in China is relatively new and nominal, I suggest that the public's lack of familiarity with the topic

¹² In a recently published article, I reflect on the importance of these misunderstandings in the process of ethical research with children, which aims to minimize *social distance*, rather than simplistically minimize *social difference* (see Raffety 2014).

illustrates the effects of the marginalization of orphans due to socialist institutional care. Especially as social welfare institutes were conceived of and operated since their foundation as total social institutions, offering care, medicine, education, and other services, individuals housed in these homes were rarely seen or allowed to venture beyond the walls of the institution. Perhaps the starkest illustration of this is that children who are abandoned into such institutions have their household registration relocated to that of the orphanage for the rest of their life, provided they never move out, become adopted, or find a job of their own. In Chapters four and five especially, I explore the ramifications of these institutional marginalizations on the personhood of orphans and elderly individuals, arguing that though they remain marginal as citizens within the Chinese landscape, through foster care, they become social persons, who importantly recover and challenge the limits of these institutional conventions.

Contrary to its lack of public resonance, foster care is a highly regulated practice in China, and because of the federal government's tight control over orphanage workers and the children they oversee, it took me nearly six to eight months to build the necessary relationships requisite to gaining access inside the orphanage institution and to the foster families it employs. Whereas in the first six to eight months I visited and shadowed many local and international NGO workers in Nanning, none of them were directly involved in promoting the work of fosterage. For the most part, these organizations addressed the needs of vulnerable children through more circuitous routes that afforded them a certain freedom from government surveillance as they conducted camps, schools, projects, or group homes for abandoned or disabled children outside the walls and purview of the government. What is interesting in these scenarios is that despite their

eagerness to operate without government interference, these foreign-funded entities all acknowledged the need to please and interact at least on a surface level with government officials in order to ensure the continuation of their work within the highly controlled context.

When I befriended Liu *laoshi* and her organization, Mercy Care, about six months into my research, I also gained a window into the precarious stature of non-governmental charity work in contemporary China. On the one hand, Mercy Care operated openly and in partnership with the state orphanage to facilitate foster care placements for children in China with the overseas funding. On the other hand, Mercy Care, not unlike many small INGOs in China was not a registered charity, but rather legally registered all their employees as bakers under the guise of a local uncle's business, because it would be exceedingly difficult to acquire health benefits and institutional support from the state. As Catherine Keyser mentions in her studies of these tenuous partnerships between INGOs and the state, the Chinese state has become increasingly open to privately funded INGOs and their work that benefits society, but is reticent to recognize, cede control to, or formally support these groups (2009). Even as Mercy Care employees maintained amicable relationships with local orphanage directors and monitors, they often bemoaned that they were at the mercy of their policies, rather than possessing complete freedom to initiate placements and adoptions as they saw fit. They also struggled to encourage and implement foster care within an environment that practically undermined its existence (see page 19-22), and harbored doubts and bitterness toward the orphanage staff.

A final challenge in learning to “speak the language of foster care” came from the plurality of languages and the southern ilk of Mandarin spoken within the Guangxi region.

In 2009, when I first stepped off the plane into the humid airport and surveyed the people and intoned the local Mandarin, I felt as though I'd landed not in China, but in Vietnam. The Zhuang ethnic group, who form nearly half of the population of Guangxi, speak a language more closely associated with Vietnamese, than Mandarin, which was given a Roman script during the early Maoist efforts to classify and code the customs and languages of China's varied minorities. Today the Zhuang, who speak multiple languages that vary across Guangxi and Southeast Asia, are known as one of the most "Haninized" of minority groups, in that many no longer speak the Zhuang dialect or maintain ethnic customs. Many have intermarried with the Han majority and actively downplay their minority ties. Far from constituting a cohesive group, Katherine Kaup in her historical review of Guangxi Zhuang history, argues that the Zhuang, like other minority groups, were an invented collectivity, subordinated to the Communist goals of unification (2000).

Besides Zhuang, Guangxi boasts a bevy of distinct languages, but the other two dominant ones include the local *baihua*,¹³ which is similar to Cantonese, and the national standard of Mandarin. Throughout my fieldwork, and especially in the rural areas, many people, the majority of them elderly, did not speak Mandarin, or would not speak Mandarin, and only conversed in Zhuang and *baihua*. Because the two heritages and languages, one being a southeast Asian ethnic group and the other an affiliation with lineages from Guangdong are so distinct, speakers of both groups often rely on Mandarin as a common language. However, for almost everyone in Guangxi, Mandarin constitutes a second, or even third language, and especially for older individuals who did not learn Mandarin in school (although Mandarin became the official language of China with the

¹³ *Baihua* is Mandarin for vernacular.

founding of the PRC in 1949, it was not implemented in schools until the late 1970s). Because of this, even when people speak Mandarin, they often speak it with a strong southern, or Cantonese-infused accent, and even blend together characteristics of *baihua* and Mandarin, making it difficult for extra-provincial folks to understand.

For these reasons, I came to Nanning relatively early to concentrate on language acquisition and became relatively confident and fluent in the local Mandarin after about six months on site. While I came to understand about 60% of the local *baihua* during my time, the varied orphanage and INGO workers with whom I traveled often spoke *baihua* or Zhuang and were able to translate. However, the multiplicity of languages and subcultures present often caused confusion and even tension. In Chapters two and four, I revisit some of these language differences, drawing attention to their hierarchies and the relationship they had to generational and class differences.

Common Ground and Ethnographic Distance

As I mention in the preface and the previous section regarding the history of foster care, my ethnographic exploration of foster care opened dramatically when through mutual contacts, I befriended the organization, Mercy Care. Initially the municipal orphanage required that I visit only children that they approved and that a Mercy Care employee always accompany me. Eventually they saw it mutually beneficial for me to visit older children who were soon to be adopted to the United States in order that I could quiz them on their English and “socialize” them for adoption. I felt indebted to provide a certain level of service to both Mercy Care and the orphanage, being in debt to their willingness to grant me access to the families with which they worked. However, while I

occasionally agreed to some much-needed English tutoring and engaged in conversations about America with children soon to be adopted, these were not my primary activities during my time spent with families, and I reiterated to both parties that I was an anthropological researcher, rather than a psychological expert or a teacher. As time went on and I traveled to Daling along with the state orphanage monitors and spent much time in staff meetings and along on visits, they gradually acquiesced and said that I could visit any of the children in the Mercy Care program, whether accompanied or not by a Mercy Care employee.

The politics, dynamics, and qualities of supervised versus unsupervised visits were quite different. For one, both the orphanage monitors and Mercy Care employees (who conducted visits separately and monthly and quarterly, respectively) had their own questions they needed to ask of the foster parents and evaluations to complete regarding the quality of the bonds between parent and child, as well as the development of the child, for government data or foreign sponsors. While I could collect a lot of data from observing these interviews, they were formats where the orphanage or the INGO monitor assumed a position of authority vis a vis the parent and the child, and the contours of the conversation were relatively scripted. In the slippages between interview and interviewee, foster mothers and foster children occasionally asserted their agency, or orphanage and INGO monitors expressed their own ambivalence toward parenting, but the roles remained relatively confined. In contrast when I traveled on my own to visit families, while they initially presumed me to be an agent of the INGO or the state, eventually they began to articulate their criticisms of these actors and institutions, and I was also able to

accompany the families in their daily activities (children doing homework, families going to the market), rather than being confined to an interview setting in the home.

The variations of these dynamics, coupled with the ample time I spent with INGO and orphanage monitors, as well as the foster families, led me to include the three parties in my study, and to observe the interesting interactions between the three varied social and political groups. Especially on the long trips to Daling, or the bus rides to families on the outskirts of the city, orphanage and INGO monitors talked to me about the demands of their daily lives, alongside the stress and the joys of their jobs. It was in these ways that the more marginal lives of the foster families began to comingle with the concerns of the families of the orphanage and INGO monitors, exhibiting interesting tensions and entanglements.

Specifically, I did an average of five visits to urban households per week, two or three of which were accompanied, and at least one trip to Daling for two to three days to observe the rural pilot foster care project. Additionally, I attended periodic trainings, as well as medical and psychological evaluations of children and families on the orphanage premises or in local parks and facilities, as well as both of Mercy Care's two-week board trips, which included travel both inside and outside of Guangxi to various orphanages and foster homes. Sometimes visits would last just a half an hour to an hour, while at other times, families invited me alongside the daily activities in their lives, and I lingered late into the evening hours, eating with them, snacking on food and watching television together after dinner. When I was invited to dinner or I spent sustained time with a family over a given time period, I compensated them with small gifts for the children, or in a few cases, offering limited English lessons to older children. Most families were

extremely curious about me, given the limited number of foreigners in Guangxi and their lack of exposure to Western culture. As I mentioned before, many foster parents relished my ability to converse with them in Mandarin and peppered me with lots of questions regarding previous foster placements and children who had been adopted abroad. Overall most foster parents were extremely eager to talk, and commented that they were quite lonely in their old age, relying on these children and the surrounding neighbors to keep them company. Many foster parents were surprisingly open about their own social histories, which relayed fascinating stories of coming of age in the Cultural Revolution and seeing China modernize before their very eyes. I reminded the foster parents, many of whom were uneducated and illiterate, that my project consisted of research and I was recording these interactions. In many cases, I articulated my identity as a researcher over and over, because they did not seem to understand my interest in their lives or my project, but in every case they were certainly willing to allow me to participate in their lives and in the lives of their children.

While I began by taking notes in a notebook, my propensity to take notes in English proved too distracting to these interactions, and especially impractical when trying to interact with children, so I eventually resorted to taking notes on the bus on the way home from visits. I was forbidden from recording any video or voice of our interactions, but because photography is such a popular phenomenon within China, no one ever objected to my taking photographs of children and their family. For my own purposes, however, I choose to only feature photographs of children where their faces are obscured given that their consent is an ongoing process.

On that note, while IRB approval was something of a challenge for me, given the obvious sensitivities of doing research with disabled children, in China, Mercy Care's permission and their relationship with the state orphanage eventually facilitated my IRB approval. Because of the authority of the orphanage, once I was granted access to their programs, they granted me unlimited access to parents and children under their purview. Despite this culture of authority, I made attempts on my own to secure consent in conversation from parents and children, especially involving children in articulation of their own experiences. Because the culture of respect of children for parents is still very much intact in China, in orphanage and INGO interviews, children were not often consulted for their opinions or viewpoints and remained silent while their parents answered on their behalf. Of course, many children asserted themselves, while parents talked over them or attempted to couch their comments in logic. The practice of doing research with children, especially children with limited cognitive and physical abilities, caused me to reflect on cultures of communication and my own assumptions (see Raffety 2014).

As I visited with families, I was regularly asked to hold babies, assist children with special needs in feeding, toilet training, and speech therapy, and consulted for my opinion on the developmental progress and needs of these children by INGO, orphanage personnel, and foster parents. On the one hand, these parties often mistook my Western, educated identity for one of a child psychologist or development expert, and I hesitated to step into an authoritative role. On the other hand, the work of parenting these incredibly impaired children under less than ideal conditions sometimes led to real crises of health, care, and concern. I was repeatedly asked to intervene on behalf of children whose fragile

condition threatened their health and their very lives, and in many of these cases, I responded instinctively and humanely, rather than with a researcher status in mind (Scheper-Hughes 1993). There were children who died while I was in the field and children whose critical condition precipitated stays in the hospital and eventual removal from foster care.

There were certainly situations of misuse of medicine, beliefs about disabled children's incompetence, and moments of rejection of children by families and parents (see Chapter four) that troubled the ethics I brought to the field. However, there were many circumstances in which parents utilized local medicines to intervene in disabled children's care in profound ways (see Chapter five), moments when articulations about disabled children's competence actually represented attempts to wrestle with the complex dynamics of human relationships (Chapter three), and circumstances where the removal of a child, despite its callous nature, were perhaps in the child's best interest (Chapter four).

Throughout the dissertation, I have tried to note ways in which my own cultural ideals interacted or intervened with those of the children and foster mothers. But as any ethnographer and human being would, I necessarily intervened by way of my foreign presence in a relatively closed community. The fact that I was solicited for advice and opinions I believe demonstrates the extent to which children, parents, and employees came to trust me. The fact that I struggled to couch these responses in the local language, not always successfully, speaks to my multiple identities as an anthropologist, an American, and a sympathetic participant observer.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation follows the lives of three primary children, Dengrong, Pei Pei, and Meili, who are abandoned into the Chinese state orphanage system and placed in foster care.

Throughout the dissertation I reflect on how their differing social circumstances and eventual fates reference both the advent of moral crisis in China and the moral intervention of foster families from the margins. In Chapter one I argue that despite Dengrong, Pei Pei, and Meili's differing social backgrounds, all three are socially disabled by their abandonment as they constitute nonpersons in a society that defines individuals by their familial ties and ability to fulfill social obligations. In Chapter two I establish the parallel social disability of these foster children's unlikely caregivers who are disproportionately poor, elderly women. While such elderly women's motivation to offer foster care is complex, their willingness to foster abandoned, vulnerable children constitutes a reinterpretation of traditional models of filial piety and a rehabilitation of their status in the eyes of the community and the state. Chapter two also highlights the ambivalence and vulnerability of the orphanage and INGO workers who facilitate these contractual foster care relationships as they both admire and undermine these elderly women's ability to provide care.

Chapter three explores the transformative process of "kinning" that occurs at an intersubjective level between foster parents and foster children by way of traditional modes of caregiving such as playful teasing and community-brokered discipline. Again middle-aged INGO and orphanage caregivers struggle to control the modes of caregiving offered by the elderly. However, the personhood constituted through these relationships

begins a transformative process that exceeds the boundaries of the temporary, contractual fosterage relationship. In Chapter four we see some of the efforts by INGO and orphanage monitors to dictate the boundaries of urban and rural contexts of foster care and some of the limits of this transformative personhood in practice. Finally, Chapter five highlights the ways in which the personhood conveyed through fosterage challenges orphanage and INGO worker's notions of family and challenges the state to recognize these families alongside biological ones as legitimate, rather than merely temporary, contractual forms.

Chapter One: Abandonment as Social Disability

In the 1990s, roughly ten years after the advent of the birth planning policies, the Chinese government launched a national counter-campaign to champion the value of girls. In southwest Guangxi, where I did my fieldwork, fading red characters, bearing the message, “girls are human beings, too,” can still be found on city walls and sprinkled throughout the countryside. And through a combination of an overall improvement in standards of living, shifting cultural attitudes, and economic evidence that employment and income rates for girls tend to benefit families just as much as boys, much has changed. The horrific abandonment rates for infant girls in the early 1990s have plummeted, girls are going to school, and opportunities for women in general are much brighter today than they were just a few years ago. In short, China’s orphanages are no longer crowded with infant girls.

Instead, today they are home to disabled children, seemingly abandoned because of their physical or mental impairments. There has been no equivalent government campaign to challenge social attitudes regarding disability. Much as the “one child policy” put pressure on parents with traditional attitudes to prefer boys over girls beginning nearly thirty years ago, today parents privilege healthy children over those with disease or impairments. Of China’s estimated over one million orphans, only 78,000 are in institutional care, and the overwhelming majority are mentally or physically

impaired (Shang, Wu, and Li 2005). Meanwhile the rates of birth defects, presumably due to pollution, are skyrocketing. The number of birth defects has grown forty percent since 2001, with one million affected children being born each year (Hu 2007).

While the government promotes “high quality” families and children,¹⁴ these are the children, quite literally, left behind. In a country where children are legally required to care for their parents in old age and where only one child is allowed,¹⁵ children who may struggle to care for their aging parents have little sociocultural value. They are also expensive, as government support for families with children with disabilities is slim; although schools are legally required to accept and support these children, they are often rejected outright, if not heavily discriminated against by institutions and communities (Shen Q. et. al *in press*).

While the number of children abandoned because of impairments is admittedly small in comparison to the total population, some orphanages now boast populations of almost ninety percent disabled children. Especially in small county orphanages, where infrastructure is poor and resources are limited, the steady influx of disabled children can be devastating. I watched an orphanage director from Hepu, a small county in Guangxi, reduced to tears as he talked about the stress of caring for these infants who were frequently dropped at the doorstep. Fearing a sick or severely diseased or impaired child

¹⁴ This emphasis on high quality (*suzhi*) employed by the Chinese government in population campaigns to express that the goal of modernity is not only to decrease the population size but also to improve the population quality has been widely studied (Anagnost 1997, 2004; Bakken 2000; Friedman 2006; Greenhalgh 2010; Jacka 2009; Murphy 2004; Sigley 2009; Wang 2010a,b).

¹⁵ Just prior to the publication of this dissertation, the Communist Central Committee named the relaxation of the one-child policy one of its 60 initiatives following a four-day meeting in Beijing in November 2013. Proposing the first significant relaxation of the family planning policies since the 1970s, if fully operationalized (the changes have been introduced in six provinces as of February 2014 and are expected to be extended to 20 more provinces by the end of the year), urban families, in which either the husband or wife is an only child, would be allowed to have two children (Buckley 2013). Interestingly, early reports suggest that few couples are taking advantage of the new policy, citing increasing costs of childcare (Levin 2014).

would die, he would often pay for her medical care out of his own pocket, only to receive another dropped by the police at the orphanage a month later. Across the country orphanage directors worried not necessarily about the number of children with impairments, but the disproportionate number being abandoned into their institutions and their capacity to care for them, especially into adulthood.

It was only through time spent with these young children and their foster parents that I began to see the social element of abandonment on which this chapter focuses, and the complicity of the state in its (re)production. Through state-sponsored legislation the child has catapulted to the center of Chinese social life in an unprecedented way in modern China. And yet, it is a certain kind of child who is privileged, whose quality is championed, and who carries on his or her shoulders the hope of the nation. These are not those children.

Chapter Summary

This chapter describes the recent (1990-present) abandonment of children with and without physical and mental impairments in the Guangxi autonomous region of the PRC. Through the abandonment histories of three illustrative children in the Nanning fosterage system, Meili, Dengrong, and Pei Pei, I establish local definitions of *impairment* and *social disability* based on ethnographic data. Somewhat paradoxically, these children's stories show that impairment doesn't merely lead to abandonment, but that abandonment also creates the conditions for social disability. Because what it means in Chinese society to be a person is to be connected to a family and a community in which one fulfills his or her social obligations (Fei 1992 [1947]; Guo and Kleinman 2011; Potter and Potter

1990), I suggest that abandoned children are rendered vulnerable due to their lack of familial and social connections. Thus, foster care, in contrast to institutional care, offers these children an opportunity to regain social personhood through family relationships.

Daling and Dengrong

Cases of abandonment for children like Dengrong, whose young bodies, crippled by disease, become too much for struggling families to bear, are seemingly clear cut. Leslie Wang and Xiaoyuan Shang (2010; 2008) have both documented the recent shift in Chinese child abandonments from baby girls to children with physical and mental impairments, a trend Wang especially feels is “symbolic of the ways in which children’s social value is increasingly measured according to market principles” (Wang 2010a: 40). In fact, evidence in Yunxiang Yan’s work citing the increasing conjugal intimacy coupled with incivility and immorality (Yan 2003, 2011a,b), government campaigns and individuals’ internalization of what it means to be a “high quality” individual, let alone orphanage statistics¹⁶ all appear to support Wang’s claim. Indeed, China’s orphanages are no longer crowded with infant girls, but home to children presumably abandoned due to their mental or physical impairments. However, in addition to the market politics of impaired children’s abandonment, I want to make a case for and explore the social politics that are also at work. While all disability is socially experienced (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013; Kasnitz and Shuttleworth 1999), I am drawing attention to the social-cultural experience of abandonment in modern China that renders children vulnerable due to their lack of familial connections. My contention is that such experiences have not only been

¹⁶ Of the estimated over one million orphans in China, about half of whom are in institutional care, as many as 80.5% are mentally or physically impaired (Shang, Wu, and Li 2005).

overlooked in broad claims about neoliberalism, marketism, and immorality in modern China, but also offer us a window into further understanding the complex context of personhood in modern China.

During the course of my eighteen months of fieldwork in Guangxi, China, many of the children I met had similar stories of abandonment to Dengrong, yet few would be so lucky as to find a coveted home in the new foster care project in the countryside, just outside of Daling, which was opened in October of 2011 by the Nanning Municipal Orphanage. Government-sponsored foster care, which had existed in Nanning since the early 1990s frequently funneled children into private family homes which the orphanage contracted and paid a stipend commensurate with local income levels, in order to ready children for domestic or international adoption. While the orphanage retained legal guardianship of these children, foster parents became responsible for all the children's needs (except medical expenses, which were reimbursed by the orphanage), and orphanage caregivers generally acknowledged the significant physical and social benefits of family versus institutional care. Orphanages in Guangxi and elsewhere involved in foster care also partnered with the small INGO Mercy Care (see Introduction), which provided funding to supplement, and thus, encourage foster care placement. Orphanage and INGO personnel conducted monthly and trimonthly visits respectively, to ensure that the placements were proceeding smoothly. Most placements lasted just a few years, until the children, normally placed into foster care between birth and age two (although placements sometimes happened later, early placement was optimal), became eligible for international or domestic adoption. Many foster parents I met over the course of my research had been fostering for twenty or thirty years and had fostered ten or fifteen

children, one after the other. Whereas in the 1990s and early 2000s, most of these children were baby girls, adopted to the West (Johnson 2004), since 2005, most healthy children have been adopted within China, while children with mild to moderate impairments have been almost exclusively adopted internationally (Crary 2010).

However, many orphanages were reluctant to place children with impairments outside the orphanage walls for fear they were not hardy enough to thrive away from specialized caregiving and medical services within the orphanage.¹⁷ Many foster families with children with severe impairments that I saw in urban placements seemed to be struggling themselves with the limited resources, space, and mobility that the city seemingly constraints (see Chapter four). Foster parents, as well as orphanage monitors, also grappled with the purpose of providing foster care to children who, because of their severe impairments, would likely never be adopted, but return to China's institutional social welfare system that houses, in addition to children, adults with mental and physical impairments and elderly without family to care for them. These children, those with cerebral palsy, autism, mental retardation, and Down syndrome, were more frequently returned to the orphanage because of behavioral problems or removed from their placements because of abuse than children who presented mild or few physical or mental impairments.

For some of these reasons, the Nanning Municipal Orphanage decided to launch a pilot foster care project specifically for children with physical and mental impairments in a small village outside the county seat of Daling, a three hour and a half drive away from the capital city of Nanning. Dengrong was one such child who had been delivered on a

¹⁷ For more on Chinese orphanages' medical services and specialized caregiving, see my discussion of the mixed modes of care (Shang and Fisher 2013; Shang and Wu 2011) in China's child welfare system in the Introduction, Chapter two, and Chapter four.

bus with twenty-four other children into the tiny village outside Daling in October 2011. On my first trip to visit her in her new home a few months later, Huilan, one of the orphanage foster care monitors, whispered to me that Dengrong was five or so when she was abandoned and still remembers it. Dengrong was now eight and had spent the last few years of her young life on the special needs floor in the orphanage before being moved to Daling to be granted a family.

We ambled around the winding dirt roads, past the stream cluttered with trash, onto one of the main residential streets where the familiar smell of sour peppers drying in the afternoon sun and sounds of children shrieking and playing in the streets greeted us. Suddenly, Hongmei, an eight year-old girl with limited vision and cognitive impairment, who had been removed from a problematic foster placement in Nanning a few months prior, came running out of one of the houses, greeting us each eagerly with an, “*Ayi hao, jiejie hao! (Hello, auntie, big sister!)*”

“Hongmei!” Suling, the Mercy Care monitor, exclaimed excitedly. “How are you doing? Which one is your house?” And Hongmei proudly led us over to a steep concrete step, introducing us to her new grandmother and her foster sister.

“My mother’s out back harvesting peppers,” she told us.

“Do you like your new home?” Suling asked.

“Yes,” Hongmei replied.

We circled the rest of the homes on the two wide streets that made up the main thoroughfare, poking our heads in and greeting children and foster mothers who were busying about their days. Huilan came alive with each child she greeted, and Mo *jie*, the orphanage’s physical therapist, poked and prodded at the legs of the children with

cerebral palsy, admonishing or congratulating the parents on their progress doing physical therapy within the home.

At Dengrong's house, Mo *jie* and Huilan deposited the tiny walker they'd carted on the bus that morning and eagerly showed the rather despondent Dengrong how to steer it across the concrete floor. Dengrong's serious little face intensified as she put every ounce of her strength into moving the walker from the center of the cold, barren room to her tiny, wooden chair, where she finally retired.

"She's lazy," her new foster mother said, her eyes twinkling. "I've tried to get her to walk, but she says she's too tired, it's too hard, she prefers to be carried."

It was hard to tell what import the foster mother's comments carried. On the one hand, children from the orphanage often became dependent on their caregivers and refused to take responsibilities for themselves if they were moved relatively late in life into foster homes. On the other hand, Dengrong appeared quite weak. In addition to her cerebral palsy she struggled with asthma and had contracted some dangerous upper respiratory infections in the past. Over the course of my research I heard many foster mothers refer to their children, those with and without impairments, and whom they loved very much, as lazy. It was not always a serious critique,¹⁸ but a way to subject children to the necessary criticism that mothers felt would develop a strong work ethic within them. It was certainly disturbing, however, when the critique was applied to

¹⁸ See Chapter three and my analysis of these cultural interactions between parents and children. What some have called threats, I following Jean L. Briggs, label "play" (1998, 2000), the intersubjective development of relationship (see Howell 2006) between parents and children that thrives on retorts and questions and often contains layers of complex, cultural meaning.

children with impairments for whom moving across the room was not an altogether simple task in everyday life.¹⁹

Huilan and Mo *jie* began to explain Dengrong's condition to her mother, especially the ways in which cerebral palsy makes the muscles in the arms and the legs tighten and difficult to move. They implored her new foster mother to encourage rather than critique her—Dengrong had known a lot of hardship in her young life, and she needed to hear that she was loved and wanted within this household. The mother smiled as she received these comments, but continued to protest that Dengrong was often solemn and quite sullen.

"You have to talk with her," Huilan admonished, and, turning to Dengrong, slumped in her chair, asked, "Does mama tell you she loves you?"

Dengrong weakly shook her head.

"Do you love your new foster mother?" Huilan continued.

"No," Dengrong chirped.

"What about your father?"

"No."

"And [foster] sister?"

"No."

"Dengrong," Huilan cooed, squatting down and placing a hand upon her slight shoulder. "You know you need to try to be good and loving to your new foster family so they will love you back. Do you want to go back to the orphanage?" Huilan asked.

Dengrong didn't respond.

¹⁹ Again, see my discussion of these techniques in the particular dialogue with children with impairments in Chapter three.

“You want to go back to the orphanage? When you have a family here that loves you? C’mon, don’t you like it here?”

Again Dengrong remained silent.

Huilan stood up and let Mo *jie* take over, trying to prod Dengrong into speaking while she pointed out Dengrong’s confusion, further admonishing the foster mother.

“She needs to hear that you love her, she needs to be held, kids like this who have no family, they need to be convinced that their new family really loves them. Tell her you love her,” Huilan commanded the foster mother.

“Mama loves you,” the foster mother hollered from across the room.

“Not like that!” Huilan protested. “Go take her in your arms and tell her.”

The foster mother flashed an embarrassed grin and strode across the room, scooping Dengrong’s bony body into her arms. “See, mama loves you, you know. I tell you, don’t I?” she alleged in a raspy voice.

Dengrong turned her head away.

Suddenly there was a screeching noise just outside the door. Dengrong’s foster mother cried, “*Baba*’s²⁰ home from work.” Her husband drove a small taxi cart, transporting people to and from the village to the county seat.

“Hello,” Dengrong’s foster father said, swatting playfully at Dengrong’s foster sister and joining us inside.

“I was just telling your wife,” Huilan continued, “that children like Dengrong who have been abandoned need a lot of verbal encouragement. Like they really need to hear you say that you love them. Here, *Baba*, take Dengrong in your arms and hold her and tell her that you love her,” she pushed.

²⁰ Mandarin word for father.

The foster mother transferred Dengrong to her father, who smiled at her sweetly and said, “There, Dengrong, how’s that?”

“Tell *Baba* you love him,” *Mo jie* and Huilan urged Dengrong.

Dengrong shook her head.

“C’mon Dengrong, *Baba* goes out everyday and works so you can eat. Can’t you see he loves you? Don’t you want him to love you? You don’t want to go back to the orphanage, do you?”

Dengrong’s beady eyes filled with heavy tears, and as the young women continued to prod, finally she lurched forward, thrusting her arms around her father’s neck and screeching, “*Baba!*” as she let out great, full-body sobs.

The parents seemed positively embarrassed, but the orphanage monitors were quite satisfied. “See how much it means to her, when you hold her and you show her you care?” asked Huilan, gently stroking Dengrong’s back as she burrowed her tears into her father’s chest.

Impairment and Disability

Unlike many children, Dengrong suffered only from the physical effects of cerebral palsy, but cognitively, she had all the abilities of a normal eight year-old child. As an INGO caregiver had once remarked, she was “trapped in a body that failed her.” As we see in the incident above, however, Dengrong’s abandonment, orphanage tenure, and introduction into a new household with foster parents had profound psychological effects. One might argue that Dengrong’s psychological wounds, in fact, ran much deeper than

cerebral palsy or asthma, as they cut to the core of who she was in the eyes of Chinese society, others, and herself.

In his treatise on disability in China, Anthropologist Matthew Kohrman traces Confucian ideals of bodily perfection, efforts by Chinese bureaucrats to codify and count disabled persons, and the medicalization of disability and persistent stigma against the disabled in China today (2005). Pigeon-holed into certain professions, discriminated against in social life (Kohrman particularly cites disabled men's difficulty finding spouses 1999), and even abandoned by their own families, individuals with impairments find themselves not only on the boundaries of Chinese society, but on the boundaries of what it means to be a person within that society.

In his exploration of the social concept of stigma, Erving Goffman names three types of stigma: 1) bodily (including abominations and deformities); 2) blemishes of individual character (record of mental disorders, imprisonment, etc.); and 3) race, nation, and religion (1963:4). In the field, my informants, including INGO, orphanage staff and foster mothers, interchangeably used the terms *teshu de haizi* (special needs children), *canji haizi* (disabled children), or *you zhili zhang ai de haizi* (literally, children with mental obstacles). Most foster mothers employed the specific terms of medical diagnosis which the orphanage had relayed to them, such as *zibi zheng de haizi* (autistic children) or *naotan de haizi* (kids with cerebral palsy), when referring to their own foster children, though they did not always have a clear idea of what these terms meant or the special needs associated with them.²¹ Orphanage and INGO personnel were particularly

²¹ In Guilin, Guangxi, I met with several foster mothers who told me that the municipal orphanage had not told them that the children they had begun to foster had cerebral palsy until they noticed delays and inquired when the children were around three to six months old. They relayed that the orphanage had been afraid they wouldn't agree to take the children had they known they suffered from impairments. The

sensitive and negative toward foster parents who referred to children as *sha* (demented), and often complained, and, in fact, facilitated a change of foster households if they heard children referred to this way.²²

However, despite the rather careful monitoring of language in regards to disability within foster care settings, as Xiaoyuan Shang notes in her research with children in kin fosterage, parents often casually referred to the children's bad fate (*ku ming*), or accepting one's fate (*ren ming*) as a result of their abandonment in front of the children (2008: 210). As in the previous case of Dengrong and Huilan, the orphanage monitor, and the stories that follow, one will note that *Yima*²³ speaks plainly of Meili's abandonment in her presence, and it is Pei Pei's orphan status, perhaps even more so than her speech impediment due to a cleft palate, that draws discrimination from her peers at the public school. Hence, I will go onto argue that children with impairments are pointed out and pitied not only because of their perceived functional limitations, but also their lack of social connections, their inability to engage with society, and their lack of obligations to family or others.

The case of a boy I met in the orphanage in Hubei is particularly illustrative of the distinctions I establish in this section between physical and mental impairment and social disability. When I traveled with Mercy Care to Qichun, Hubei in spring of 2012, I

parents were understandably frustrated by this deception, because they felt it had delayed their ability to do therapy with the children from the beginning, and in this case they were not dissuaded by the children's impairments.

For a discussion of the discourse of medicalization and the priority given to diagnosis, see Chapter four and Peng Fei's story.

²² For a discussion of the Chinese party-state's efforts to replace *sha* and the ideogram *fei* (associated with notions of waste and uselessness) with the couplet, *can ji* (*can*, a verb, meaning to injure, spoil, to destroy, or oppress and *ji*, a noun, meaning sickness, disease, or pain) see Kohrman's footnotes 10 and 11 in his 1999 article, "Grooming 'que zi': Marriage Exclusion and Identity Formation among Disabled Men in Contemporary China."

²³ *Yima* is a Chinese kinship term, meaning maternal aunt, by which Meili referred to her foster mother.

met a young boy who had been abandoned at birth by his parents because he had been born with his bladder outside his body. As the orphanage director and his associates described his condition at length to the Chinese employees and Western board members of Mercy Care, they wondered what results surgery could produce for this child. One of the board members, who had adopted a young girl from China with the same medical condition, repeatedly assured him that with surgery, it would be possible for the little boy to lead a relatively normal life. Despite these assurances, the director and his employees hesitated, finally disclosing in hushed voices that their concern was really over whether the boy would ever be able to have children when he grew up. Without this ability, they concluded, no one in China would want to adopt him.

<i>Impairment</i>
◆ Individuals experience physical or mental problems, illnesses, conditions, disorders, syndromes or differences (may or may not experience functional limitations).
<i>Disability</i>
◆ Individuals experience discrimination or stigma on the basis of perceived functional limitations.

Such an account speaks to both the distinction between impairment and disability and the social construction of personhood in Chinese culture. In this case, and many others, the boy's impaired condition may or may not have presented functional limitations for his daily life. However, the perception that his impairment might prevent his ability to conceive and thus fulfill a fundamental obligation of Chinese personhood to

family and society resulted in a social disability, to which his abandonment was likely tied. Jinhua Guo and Arthur Kleinman argue that the nonpersonhood assigned to individuals with HIV/AIDS or mental illness in Chinese society “is both a telling instance of extreme stigma and a reverse mirror for better understanding what a person is in Chinese culture” (2011:238). Building on other scholars’ (Fei 1992 [1947]; Potters 1990) assertions that personhood in Chinese culture is fundamentally social, Guo and Kleinman write,

In the Chinese view, no one is born a full person. That is to say, no one is born with the right to be a person; instead, one has to learn to be a person and also to act as a person to prove his or her personhood...Being a person implies an obligation to engage appropriately in interpersonal exchange relationships, build social networks, and maintain a moral status (face) (Fei 1992; Tu 1987). Acting as a person is to fulfill his obligation. Whether or not one should be treated as a person with rights is based on whether or not one has fulfilled the obligation of acting as a person. Rights come after obligations. One has to exchange the fulfillment of social obligation for the claim of personhood and the rights of being treated as a person. (2011:243)

Thus, those who lack the ability to fulfill their distinct social roles lack moral status, belong nowhere, and can be treated as nonpersons (243). At least conceptually, then, this status of nonpersonhood helps explain how parents in China could abandon their own children. Suggesting that a study of stigma (and here they present multiple cases of individuals whose families are discriminated against because of their illness, or individuals who are abandoned by their very families because of illness) shows that what really matters in Chinese society today is security (2011:257), Guo and Kleinman help explain how children who are perceived as lacking the ability to care for their parents in old age can be so callously discarded.

Guoji

Abandonment is crippling for children in China because it is done anonymously: children arrive at the orphanage stripped of the family names, the connections, and perhaps most importantly the obligations and interdependence that make one human in Chinese society (Potter and Potter 1990). The gravity of this social abandonment is clear when one considers the vast number of adoptions that are constituted between kin in China today. People are legally bound and usually willing to take in children of relatives, because life-giving human obligations and ties are at stake. Almost everyone in China has a story of a brother, a sister, a father, a mother, an uncle, a daughter, who was raised by their aunt or their grandparents, but they don't call that fosterage or adoption. They call that *guoji*.

One afternoon as I sat talking with my friends and colleagues, Luli and Xiao Wang from Mercy Care, they told me that despite the fact that they had each had trouble conceiving with their spouses, their elderly parents would never allow them to adopt. When I asked them why, Luli and Xiao Wang let on that they'd never asked their parents outright, but to them, an adopted child wouldn't be their own child, and beyond that their parents wouldn't need to provide another reason.

Xiao Wang mused that if you adopted and then gave birth to a child of your own at some point you'd have to split the assets, or the inheritance, and he wondered aloud how one would make such a decision, and whether the birth child wouldn't always resent the adopted child. Luli said that a woman at her church who had a biological child had adopted because she wanted her child to have a sibling and has admitted that she's had trouble truly accepting this child as her own. Both Luli and Xiao Wang admitted that they wondered, too, if they could ever accept an adopted child as their own.

“It just goes against our traditional culture to adopt,” they protested. I pointed out that to my knowledge adoption actually happened a lot historically in China (Waltner 1990; Watson 1975), and Xiao Wang retorted that that was way back when people had “tons of kids.” But then I pointed to kin adoptions, which I knew were really quite commonplace (Shang, Saldov, and Fisher 2011).

“Oh those don’t happen much anymore,” Xiao Wang dismissed.

“I believe they do in the countryside,” I replied, and then I told some stories I’d heard from friends about people who had passed an overquota birth onto their sister to be raised as her own, or who out of poverty needed to pass their last born off to a relative.

“Actually my father was *guoji*,” Xiao Wang blurted out suddenly. “Yeah, it was due to poverty, kind of like some of the orphans, I guess. My grandfather gave my father to his brother’s family when he was ten to care for, because he was the youngest and his brother and his wife didn’t have any children.” Then he described how at age 23 his father had come back to live with his birth family, and though his relationship is amicable with the uncle who raised him during his teenage years, it remains understandably strained with his birth father.

Guoji, *guo*, which means to cross or pass on, and *ji*, which means to inherit, continue, or succeed, was so woven into the fabric of Chinese social life that it was hardly detectable, let alone recognizable as a form of adoption, even to those who facilitate foster placements and adoptions for a living. While Luli and Xiao Wang eventually recognized the parallel between *guoji* and adopting an orphan, they struggled to articulate precisely why prospective parents didn’t consider the personhood of orphans commensurate with those of biological children. Meili’s story of abandonment, which

follows, demonstrates the critical importance of family to Chinese social personhood, because even as a non-impaired child she goes onto experience social disability as a result of her abandonment.

Meili's Abandonment

I met Meili as a shy eleven year-old one afternoon when I visited her and her foster mother's seventh story apartment with the Mercy Care monitor, Suling. Unlike most children I visited, Meili showed no signs of physical or mental disability, and at eleven, she was nearly a young woman. I wondered what it would be like to talk with a child who might remember her abandonment and who would be able to more clearly articulate her own opinions and feelings.

However, as with the younger children, Meili's foster mother did most of the talking. *Yima* eagerly grasped at my pudgy arms, commenting on how lovely and fat I was, especially in comparison to her skinny frame. She mentioned her own illnesses that sucked the life out of her and left her gaunt and weak. And she indulged herself and Meili, her foster daughter, in daydreaming aloud of what life might be like in America.

In comparison, Meili was reserved, pensive, and aloof. Although she asked the occasional pointed question about my background, she was clearly embarrassed by her foster mother's scurrying around to make her guests comfortable, her forward questions, and the way she seemed starved for attention. When Suling (who accompanied me from the INGO) began the usual interview she did with foster kids, trying to glean the relationship between mother and child through a series of questions about schoolwork, hobbies, friendship, and behavior, Meili compliantly and sparsely answered the questions,

while her foster mother interrupted frequently to provide clarification. She might like math, but that doesn't mean she's good at it. The reason Meili doesn't do much on weekends is because her foster mother is fearful of strangers, and Meili is becoming a little rebellious as she gets older. To this Meili began to protest.

"What about the bathroom door?" Suling started in, "at the orphanage," she continued. "Why did you go into the bathroom and lock the door? Didn't you do that?" By now I'd become accustomed (though not completely comfortable) to these inquisitions, not only with older children, but also with children as young as two or three. Children were not being consulted for information, but rather tested for cultural understanding. Did they understand that they were to be obedient to their parents at all costs? Did they understand the ways in which that obedience is communicated? If not, sometimes the questions would turn to scolding and shaming, other times they would lighten toward questions in which the children themselves would choose fictitious options or consequences.²⁴ In this case, Meili's foster mother came to her aid.

"No," Meili replied, bewildered.

"No, she wouldn't do something like that," her foster mother added.

"Hmm, must be a mistake," Suling says as she scrawled in her notebook. When Suling asked Meili if she remembered her friends at the orphanage or the orphanage itself, she looked equally bewildered.

"She was too young," her foster said quickly. "She doesn't remember much, she was only five or six when she was abandoned," she insisted.

Were it not for these words, Meili might pass for just another eleven year-old girl growing up in a cramped apartment with an overbearing mother. But when I came back

²⁴ See my discussion of Briggs 1998 in Chapter three.

by myself on the cusp of the month-long break for the Chinese new year to visit her and her mother, excitement over red envelopes, games of badminton, and going to see *waipo* shifted abruptly to questions from Meili's foster mother about whether I was going to be her new mother.

"I've told the orphanage I want you to be, because you're kind."

I didn't know how to respond, glancing awkwardly at Meili and then back at the wide grin of her foster mother. This was not the first time I'd been bluntly asked to adopt kids and take them home with me. But whereas the comments were usually directed playfully, with mischievous smiles or as taunts to misbehaving children, I sensed the desperation in this foster mother's voice and worried this request was for real.

"Oh Meili is wonderful, but you know I'm still studying, doing my doctorate, I'm really in no position to raise a child. I'm too busy studying." I repeated this excuse several times throughout the conversation as Meili's foster mother referred to me as *Meiguo mama* (American mommy). Finally Meili interrupted and corrected her—"Not mother, older sister," she said. I sighed a bit, thankful for her intrusion.

It was during that same, expansive, dizzying conversation that Meili's foster mother began to whisper her abandonment story to me, even though Meili was sitting right there, chomping away on some of the candy I had brought her.

"Well she really wasn't at the orphanage very long," she said in a hushed tone, "she was around five or six when she was abandoned and she remembers a bit. Her mother and father had divorced and so the mother had no choice but to leave her, and then it was a bad situation with the step mother, and they had a new baby boy, and it was

the step mom who beat her on the head, I think she still has a scar,” she said, brushing Meili’s hair from her forehead. Meili turned away.

“So eventually she abandoned her to the orphanage. I keep thinking her birth mother must wonder about her, wonder what happened to her. I tell her that sometimes and I think about putting up an announcement and maybe she’d come after her. But if she could be adopted to the US that would really be best, because Americans have money and it’s a developed country, and they could really take care of her permanently,” she reasoned.

Meili barely looked up from the book cradled in her lap. She was an avid reader. Perhaps she used reading as an escape from the harshness of her past life and from the uncertainty of her future. Despite how removed she appeared, despite hardly a flinch in facial expression in the very room where her foster mother told how she had been cruelly misled to believe her stepmother was just running out from the market to buy something, but instead left in the back seat of the cab, I knew there was much beneath her stoic expression.

I knew, because Meili had remembered these circumstances, when her foster mother had taken her home reluctantly (she recalled how sickly and dirty she was, and with the deep gash on her forehead, no one wanted her), so much so that every time she saw a police officer, for years afterward, she would chime, “there’s the car that brought me to the orphanage.” Whether she hid these experiences from herself, she couldn’t hide the feelings. What’s more, Meili’s abandonment would have taken place in 2005, roughly the peak of international adoptions from China. And so the orphanage had eagerly begun her paperwork. But when they questioned Meili nearly a year after she’d

come to live with her foster mother, she'd said she didn't want to be adopted and she didn't want to go to America. The orphanage worried she'd run away and try to find the family that had abandoned her so they stopped pushing. They stopped her paperwork for international adoption.

Meili and her story of abandonment continued to fascinate me in the field, because even though she wasn't physically or mentally impaired, she'd been ostracized from her birth family and found her way to a similar fate. The fact that Meili was left behind by her birth mother following divorce is a regularity in China. In her work on child welfare in China, Xiaoyuan Shang shows that, commensurate with the Chinese tradition of partilocal residency, and the bride leaving her natal family, many children classified as orphans by the government are actually children absorbed by the husband's family, and in most cases, the husband's brothers' families (2008). In rural China, Shang found that the definition of orphan varied based on socio-cultural assumptions: an urban definition meant that the child had lost both parents; a patriarchal definition meant that the child's father had died and the mother had left to remarry; only the orphans who fell into the government category of the "three no's" (no parents, no capability of looking after themselves, or no other relatives who were legally responsible to care for them) were entitled to formal state benefits (2008:205).²⁵ In fact, in her numerous surveys of over 56 counties in China, Shang found that the most common reason for children becoming orphans was the death of a father and the departure of a mother (2010: 82-92).

²⁵ Given the myriad of cultural definitions of what it means to be an orphan in contemporary China, statistics regarding the number of orphans in China are often variable. For instance, the statistics vary considerably whether one counts only children in state institutional care, or children in kin fosterage, as well as street children and children of the incarcerated. For more on these definitions and their import, see my argument on the following pages regarding the relevance of considering the cases of orphans, street children, and children of the incarcerated together, in order to further characterize and understand the consequences of abandonment, as well as social disability and personhood in Chinese society today.

Especially in divorces decided outside of court, women are often forced to leave children with their husband's family due to social conventions and pressure, or knowing that they will face much discrimination and financial difficulty if they try to remarry already having a child, or raise children as a single mother, they leave children behind reluctantly.

Historically, in families such as Xiao Wang's, an abundance of siblings, children, and extended family, however, created a climate where kin adoption was not only prominent, but also amply possible. Xiao Wang's grandfather had a brother, and probably several, who were willing to care for his father for a period of time. However, the fact that Meili couldn't be absorbed into a larger family network on her father's side, as would be the traditional patrilocal responsibility, suggests that decreasing family size, increasing economic costs of childrearing, and a social policy that permits only one child per couple may be coalescing to create a disincentive against kin adoption for families caring for children of divorce (Shang 2008; Shang, Saldov, and Fisher 2011). Given the enforcement of the birth planning policies beginning in the 1980s, Meili's father, likely born during that time period, may not have had any siblings to help care for her. If Meili's birth family practiced patrilocal residence, like most families in Guangxi, Meili's father's parents would have lived with them and likely had few resources or little say over whether they could provide care to Meili.²⁶ With the birth of a new son to Meili's father and her stepmother, her fate was sealed. There was simply no place for her any longer in the family that she was born into, and no role for her to play in the new one.

²⁶ See my discussion in Chapter two on the conditions of the elderly in post-Mao China.

◆ *Abandonment as Social Disability*

- ◆ Orphans experience discrimination and stigma on the basis of perceived social limitations, due to their abandonment and lack of family.

◆ *Social Personhood*

- ◆ Fulfillment of one's obligations in social networks, through which one gains moral status.

Abandonment as Social Disability

Meili, unlike Dengrong, Hongmei, and the last child profiled in this chapter, Pei Pei, had no physical or mental impairments. Indeed, scholars of child welfare in China traditionally divide vulnerable children into three groups: 1) orphaned or abandoned children; 2) children of prisoners; and 3) street children (High 2013; Keyser 2009; Shang 2008). However, I consider Dengrong, Meili, and Pei Pei's stories together, because I believe they help us to better understand the collective experiences of social disability that stem from abandonment in contemporary China.

Meili's story in particular helps support my observations that social disability is a consequence of abandonment rather than a necessary implication of physical or mental impairment. As Guo and Kleinman put it, "stigma follows and results from nonpersonhood in China, and not the other way around as stigma theorists contend" (Guo and Kleinman 2011: 248). In other words, in order to protect personal and familial interests, people exclude certain individuals from family and society, who are thus stigmatized by their lack of social connections, or their nonpersonhood. Hence, "in the

Chinese context, stigma breaks down social relationships and reveals the boundary of social networks. The excluded exist beyond the boundary of friendship, kinship, and community” (Guo and Kleinman 2011:250).

Thus, I argue that the concept of social disability²⁷ is particularly relevant to understanding the experience of abandoned children in China today. For instance, using the case of Ru Lin, a woman with a hunchback, who marries Xing, a schizophrenic, Kohrman shows how Ru’s social isolation from her natal family which results from marrying Xing and moving in with his family, coupled with her inability to have children, make her more socially disabled than her impaired husband in the eyes of the villagers. Both her “precarious family situation” and her inability to fulfill her social role by bearing children deem her “abnormal” and “not fit to be a wife,” more than her hunched back (Kohrman 2005: 158-59).

Like the adults in Kohrman’s portrayal, it is not primarily abandoned children’s physical or mental ailments that immobilize them from participation in society, but the social poverty of being abandoned that forces them to the fringes of Chinese social life. In many cases, not unlike Ru Lin, children whose impairments prevent them from not only functioning as “normal” children, but also from fulfilling their social obligations to care for the parents in old age, lose value in the eyes of the parents, potential adopters, and the wider community. In other cases, children without physical or mental impairments, like Meili, find themselves on the outskirts of Chinese kinship circles, because of increasing trends of pregnancy out of wedlock, divorce, and the diminishing size and influence of extended family units. Following Kasnitz, and Shuttleworth’s

²⁷ This concept is informed by an analogous concept of social psychosis developed by Biehl 2004 and related to “social suffering” in Bourdieu et. al 1999; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Mauss 1979.

definition of disability (“disability exists when people experience discrimination on the basis of perceived functional limitations” [1999: 4]), abandonment becomes a perceived functional limitation toward becoming a full Chinese person. Deprived and removed from the social obligations that make Chinese people human, these children find themselves on the fringes of Chinese society. Hence, I argue, children who are abandoned, regardless of whether they are physically or mentally impaired, are socially disabled in China today.

Pei Pei and Xiaoyuan’s Stories

The first time I met Pei Pei, it was an early winter weekend morning, and everyone except her foster mom was sleeping soundly. “Go in and wake them up,” Li *ayi* ordered cheerfully, and Suling, the Mercy Care monitor, and I enjoyed tickling and rousing little Yuping and Pei Pei from their bunk beds in the other room. They trudged with sleep in their eyes and steps into the dark, cramped living room, and it was only then that I noticed the deep scar across Pei Pei’s upper lip. She took Yuping affectionately into her lap, and as Yuping wiped the sleep from her eyes, Pei Pei slipped a heavy sweater over Yuping’s head and fitted it over her delicate arms.

The house slowly came to life as Li *ayi*’s eldest (and only biological) daughter entered the room, and Suling began to ask about school, sisterhood, and what they normally did on the weekends. As Pei Pei spoke, her sweet, polite words came out halting and garbled, vestiges of a speech defect due to a poor cleft repair. Li *ayi* complained that she doesn’t raise her hand much in class, despite how smart she is.

“I don’t raise my hand because no one can understand me,” Pei Pei protested.

“I don’t get it. The teacher says she can’t understand her, but we can understand her just fine so that can’t be it,” Li *ayi* puzzled. “I think she gets nervous, and then she doesn’t speak clearly and then no one can understand, so I guess it’s a waste of time for the teacher to call on her when the class is only forty minutes,” Li *ayi* reasoned. Pei Pei had been picked on at school and beaten up, even though the teacher insisted that the other children didn’t know she was from the orphanage, so the beatings were random and not related to her status as an orphan.

Suling began to take photos of the girls, scrawling in her notebook. When Pei Pei ran into her room to get one of the books she loves to read, Li *ayi* turned to Suling in a hushed voice and asked, “So tell me what’s going on. Is she going to be adopted out? Have they done the paperwork?”

“I don’t think so,” Suling said, furrowing her brow. “I thought her mother was still around, just mentally ill. If she has a mother, she can’t be adopted, right?”

“Well, does she have a mother?” Li *ayi* asked, exasperated. “The orphanage doesn’t tell me anything!”

“I don’t know,” Suling replied hesitatingly, wondering aloud to me whether she’d confused Pei Pei with another foster kid.

“I wasn’t going to tell her anything,” Li *ayi* continued. “I didn’t want to confuse her.”

And suddenly Pei Pei was back with the book, blissfully unaware of the conversation.

Over the course of subsequent visits, I learned that Pei Pei’s mother was indeed alive, mentally ill, and incarcerated. Given that her mother was unavailable to care for

Pei Pei, one might imagine that like other abandoned children her guardianship would be relinquished to the orphanage, the foster system, and she would become eligible for adoption. But as I got to know Pei Pei, her foster mother, and her foster family, I discovered that children of the incarcerated occupy some of the most precarious positions in Chinese child welfare. Because these children have legal guardians, they are not eligible for state welfare, nor can they be adopted, and they often end up on the streets if relatives do not take them in. Catherine Keyser describes the interventions of private individuals and INGOs in the 1990s to create the Sunshine Villages, a network of private foster homes for children of the incarcerated, but notes their vulnerable position, given that INGOs are not always welcomed by the Chinese government (2009).

The fact that Pei Pei was in foster care in the first place was surprising. In cases such as hers, children were at best doomed to life in an institution, and given that fate, orphanages rarely saw fit to expend time and resources to place them outside in a foster family. In fact, the orphanage began to doubt their investment during the time that I knew Pei Pei, her foster mother, and her foster family.

A few months later, on an evening where cool breezes blew through the streets of Nanning, Pei Pei, her younger foster sister, Yuping, Li *ayi*, Suling, and I clamored down the stairs and walked the few blocks to the park at the end of the street. The air was festive as children rode blinking bumper cars in the town square, women danced, and men played chess in the concrete pavilion.

Yuping began to hassle her mother for tickets to ride the carts. “Oh, I forgot them at home,” Li *ayi* muttered. “Stupid me! Oh well, Yuping, you and Pei Pei will just have to play on the equipment.” Yuping began to pout, but Pei Pei grabbed her hand and led

her over to the monkey bars, where the older girl proceeded to dazzle us with her gravity-defying abilities.

“You try, Suling!” she gestured, and Suling slipped off her high heels and with great gregarious giggles scaled the rungs to the monkey bars. “Ahh!” she exclaimed, slipping off the bars, and turning to Pei Pei, began to tell her how strong she was in comparison.

“Now you, Jialin *jiejie*,” Pei Pei beckoned in her quirky speech. “Oh, alright,” I conceded, scaling a few rungs before I dropped off, too.

Li *ayi* clasped her hands together in delight. “Pei Pei’s the best!” she squealed.

As Pei Pei sidled off to lift Yuping on top of the lower bar, helping her somersault around it, Li *ayi*’s eyes brimmed with tears.

“It isn’t fair what’s going to happen to Pei Pei,” she whined. “She’s part of our family now, she’s doing so well here, but the orphanage says it’s a waste of money to keep her with us, they want to take her back when she’s twelve, when she starts going to middle school.”

The orphanage reasoned that it would be more cost effective to send Pei Pei to the local orphanage school rather than continue her foster placement and pay the school fees for a placement out of district. In Pei Pei’s case, while she was once abandoned, perhaps in part due to her impairment, she was now doubly abandoned, because she was tied to a legal guardian, and yet, a mentally ill and incarcerated one. Even if Pei Pei could be declared legally abandoned and absorbed within the orphanage system, it may be unlikely that anyone would wish to adopt her, given the stigma for children of the incarcerated within China (Keyser 2009).

Not unlike children who have been trafficked, locals are reticent to adopt children who, like Pei Pei, technically have families, because they fear one day their birth families will come to reclaim them. The legal requirements for orphanages to post finding ads in the paper and to wait for two months before declaring the child an orphan are quite clear, but the problem of child trafficking is also becoming one of grave proportion in modern China.²⁸

The assumption is that birth families have ultimate claim to children, and is perhaps best demonstrated by the phenomenon known as *chuxian*, literally translated as “to appear.” It is a situation in which birth parents show up to the orphanage to check in on, but not to claim, an abandoned child. In the event that this happens, the child in question can never be adopted, not within China, or internationally, but is instead, confined and, one might argue, doubly abandoned to life as an orphan and in many cases, within an institution.

I have memories of orphanage and INGO workers whispering under their breaths that children were *chuxian*. What a shame it was that their parents had shown up just that one time at the gate of the orphanage, for were it not so, they, like their lucky peers could be adopted to a warm home in China or in America. I remember walking with Suling down the dark sidewalk one evening as we came home from a visit with a family in the capital city. “Just once,” she had said with angst and anger. Just once is all it took for a child’s fate to be sealed.

²⁸ While the Chinese government suggests around 10,000 children are trafficked every year, some experts estimate that number may be as high as 70,000. In the past two and a half years according to government statistics, 54,000 children have been rescued from child traffickers (McDonald 2012). In Guangxi, the poverty of neighboring Yunnan and Guizhou provinces, as well as the porous border with Vietnam, presented a particularly precarious situation for trafficking, and during my time there numerous busts of elaborate child trafficking circles were reported by the local police (Yan Z. 2011). Charlie Custer’s documentary, *Living with Dead Hearts* (2013), follows families whose children have been abducted and children who find themselves growing up in strange homes.

Of course, parents knew not what they did. They'd show up years after the abandonment, in some cases surprised and overjoyed to find that a previously unhealthy child had survived, in others they'd meant to check in on a child without the orphanage knowing that they were the parents, but their odd mannerisms and teary eyes betrayed them. The Mercy Care Director remembered one case in which the parents had wanted the child, now eight years old, "back." "Of course the orphanage was infuriated," Liu *laoshi* told me. "The orphanage were the ones who had reared this child, taken care of him all these years at great expense, so they told the family they'd need to pay for those eight years in order to get the child back. And the family wouldn't or couldn't do so, so they left empty handed."

On my last visit to Guilin, we'd visited a foster family with a beautiful little girl named Yang Xiaoyuan. Suling and I had walked the narrow paths between the rice paddies to the traditional-style home on the outskirts of the city, where chickens scattered in the courtyard as we pushed open the rusty gate and Xiaoyuan's foster mother came bounding down the stairs to greet us. "Come upstairs," she beckoned. "We'll have some watermelon, Xiaoyuan and her brother are watching television. It's been so long since you were last here, just wait until you see how smart and strong she's grown," Xiaoyuan's foster mother boasted.

The atmosphere was jubilant as the five of us sat in Xiaoyuan's living room, sweet country air wafting in through the second floor windows, which overlooked the fields her family farmed for a living. Xiaoyuan sang for us, slurped down watermelon, and even her teenage brother, who slumped moodily against the slope of the wooden sofa playing games on his phone, looked up from time to time and smiled adoringly at her.

Xiaoyuan's foster mother brought apples and oranges and added them to the stack of fruit on the coffee table, and slipped the child onto her lap as she carved into the fruits, peeling them and handing them to us.

"Does Xiaoyuan want to go to America?" she asked sweetly.

"No!" Xiaoyuan cried out petulantly.

"And why not?" her foster mom said, feigning exasperation.

"What about you, mom?" Xiaoyuan asked hesitantly.

"You could call me, call me up and say hi mom, I'm in America with my new mommy and daddy. You could call me anytime!"

"Maybe...maybe I could text you," Xiaoyuan stammered, and we all laughed.

Full of fruit and joy, we walked down the steps, through the courtyard, and out the gate, Xiaoyuan's foster mother clinging to our arms and thanking us for coming. She leaned against the gate and began to whisper.

"You see how extraordinary she is, how beautiful, how smart. And yet she can't be adopted, can she?"

Suling nodded, trying to console Xiaoyuan's mother as the tears began to creep into her eyes.

"I just want her to go to a great family, to give her what we can't give her. This isn't a rich household, I'm not a great mother, my own son doesn't even listen to me..." she trailed off, smiling pleasantly, but the tears were tumbling down her cheeks now.

"No *ayi*, you are her family, you love her, you care for her, you are the one she should be with," we tried to reassure her. "This is her great family, you are it," we said. But no amount of reassuring would give her solace. Yang Xiaoyuan had been abandoned

as a little baby with a cleft palate, now fabulously repaired. Neither Suling nor her foster mother knew the whole story, but somewhere along the way her parents had shown up at the orphanage to check in on her, and she'd never be adopted because of it.

Down the street, we visited Xiaoyuan's neighbor, Honghuan, who also dangled her legs off her foster mother's lap and hesitated when we talked about her going to America. Her siblings and neighbors teased her, "Do you want to go? Will you go? You're so lucky!"

Her mother jokingly said, "Yeah, I don't want you anyway!" Honghuan buried her head in her mother's chest, but her fate was sealed as well. Unlike Yang Xiaoyuan, her parents had never returned after abandoning her many years ago, and her paperwork had already been matched with a family thousands of miles away in a foreign country.

"Your new mother will look just like this auntie," her mom said motioning to me. "Go take a picture with her."

Honghuan looked at me suspiciously, and we all laughed.²⁹

Social Abandonment and the State

Pei Pei and Xiaoyuan's cases reveal how the state can often be complicit in the abandonment of children by excluding certain individuals from vital familial and societal relationships. By keeping children of the incarcerated like Pei Pei and *chuxian* children like Xiaoyuan in administrative limbo by binding them to biological families that fail or are unwilling to care for them, the state prevents certain children from being fostered or permanently adopted. By relegating such children to lives in institutions, the state

²⁹ In Chapter three, I explore how these "playful" interactions between foster mother and foster daughter, while often appearing cruel or disinterested, actually serve to cement the affection and emotion of bonds of kinship between the two parties.

perpetuates and legitimizes the social disability of abandoned children. The very fact that an orphan's household registration (formally referred to as the *huj*i system and colloquially referred to as the *hukou*) resides permanently in the orphanage is yet another signifier of their abandonment, which often results in social disability. Not only are orphans stigmatized by their lack of social connections (recall the teasing Pei Pei endures at school as a result of her known orphan status), but also *hukou* designations have historically classified individuals into distinct, socially stratified groups (Cohen 1993). Citing the state's *hukou* restrictions against rural laborers and their children, which prevent them from legally relocating to cities in search of jobs or sending their children to urban schools, Guo and Kleinman argue that social exclusion, although universal, has been fostered by the Chinese government as a powerful means of social control (2011:256).³⁰

In this chapter, I have described the abandonment of three children, Dengrong, Meili, and Pei Pei and the category of social disability that is ascribed to them, not primarily because of their status as children with impairments, but rather as children without the vital social connections that constitute being a person in Chinese society.

³⁰ Another important political force behind child abandonment in China, especially in the modern era, is the careful structuring of the birth planning and domestic adoption laws that make it very difficult to legally relinquish a child (for adoption). In fact, although it is rarely prosecuted as such, several Chinese statutes explicitly list abandonment as a crime, including the Marriage Law, the Adoption Law, the Protection of Minors Law, the Protection of the Disabled Law, and the Law Protecting the Rights and Interests of Women and Children (see High 2013: 133-4). The domestic adoption law, first published in 1990, states explicitly and upfront in the general provisions that "adoption shall not contravene laws and regulations on family planning" (*Zhongguo Gongheguo Shouyangfa* [Adoption Law of the People's Republic of China], Chapter 1, Article 3). In fact, Chapter 2, Article 18 further clarifies, "Persons having placed out a child for adoption may not bear any more children, in violation of the regulations on family planning, on the ground of having placed out their child for adoption." However, as the conditions for placing a child up for adoption, the law ambiguously states that parents must present "unusual difficulties" that leave them unable to rear children (Adoption Law of the People's Republic of China, Chapter 2, Article 5 (3)). These conditions are variously interpreted by local officials, who especially in autonomous regions like Guangxi, have jurisdiction to develop their own implementation policies for these types of laws, and overall, make it very difficult to legally relinquish a child.

Through the use of ethnographic and literary materials, I have established definitions of social disability (discrimination and stigma based on perceived social limitations, due to abandonment and lack of family) and social personhood (fulfillment of one's obligations in social networks, through which one gains moral status [Guo and Kleinman 2011:243]) that are unique to the cultural context of contemporary China and have particularly dire consequences for orphaned children. Finally, I have described how for some children, like Pei Pei, the state can be complicit in both social abandonment and social disability.

However, through foster care, children who have been abandoned by their parents and to some extent by the modern state, have an opportunity to experience social personhood through family bonds. In the next chapter, I illustrate how orphaned children's experience of social abandonment is mirrored by the elderly women who, because of their own social poverty, are willing to take in children with impairments and without family. I suggest that state orphanage and INGO personnel find the pairings at once optimal and also problematic in that they draw attention to zones of social abandonment condoned by the state.

Chapter Two

Becoming Obligated: Filial Piety and Intergenerational Friction

Introduction

At nearly every orphanage I traveled to, and with nearly every INGO worker I talked to, I heard the complaint that “good foster mothers are harder and harder to find.” Whereas the overall number of children in orphanages had diminished since the 1990s, the proportion of children with impairments in China’s institutions had increased dramatically (see Chapter one). INGO and orphanage workers cited the difficulties of enticing families to take in children with special medical needs and the stigma of social disability. However, the complaint that “good foster mothers were hard to find” surprised me given the praise I’d heard from orphanage and INGO staff.

They often heralded foster parents’ great sacrifices for children with serious impairments who they claimed sincerely loved the children “as their own” (*gen tamen qinsheng de haizi yiyang*).

However, in many of the communities where women had fostered for five, ten, or fifteen years, more and more women were refusing to take in another a child after the previous one was adopted. Now in their seventies and eighties, many complained that they were too old, their health was failing, and they had trouble keeping up, especially with the younger children. Orphanage staff nagged them to reconsider each time they visited, commenting, “I’ll find a beautiful one or a well-behaved one, just for you!”

While it was certainly true that many of the experienced foster mothers were growing older and “retiring,” just ten or twenty years ago, they’d been youthful parents in their thirties, forties, and fifties, some raising foster kids alongside children of their own. What the INGO and orphanage seemed to be saying is that a certain desirable type of parent, a youthful parent with young children of her own (and precisely not an elderly one), was increasingly hard to find. Secondly, these parents were hard to find, because people of the orphanage and INGO monitors’ generation, the current middle-aged parents, refused to foster.

Besides the praise orphanage and INGO staff often heaped on elderly foster parents, they also had been known to whisper under their breaths that they could never imagine taking in “these types of children”³¹ themselves. Although they showed compassion and connection with the children in their daily work, they often commented solemnly to one another that it was understandable that a parent would abandon “such a child.” Additionally, they doubted how the foster parents’ motivations could be anything but financially driven. As one INGO worker commented, “those old ladies who take in the cerebral palsy kids, why else would they do it except for the money?” They alleged that elderly parents did not understand the emotional needs of children, but rather simplistically concentrated on feeding and clothing. Finally, differences in education, social status, and childrearing philosophies between elderly foster parents and middle-aged orphanage and INGO staff created tension and misunderstanding.

On the one hand, orphanage and INGO staff were convinced that elderly foster parents and abandoned, socially disabled children created the perfect alliance. The

³¹ See Chapter one for an understanding of how children enter the foster system and how they become socially disabled.

former had time to spare, needed the money, and relished the reprieve from their loneliness that the children provided; the latter benefitted from foster parents' constant attention and affection, and were hardly valuable or attractive to anyone other than "needy old women." On the other hand, they were often starkly critical of foster parents' methods of discipline, lack of education, and financially driven motives.

While foster parents were largely men and women in their sixties and seventies who grew up under Communism, the INGO workers and orphanage monitors were middle-aged women with young families, many of whom were only children and came of age during China's prosperous reform and opening period beginning in the 1980s. Today's senior generation were by and large raised in rural areas alongside siblings and cousins, and by multiple caregivers, including grandparents, uncles, aunts, and parents. However, as family life shifted from rural to urban areas, and family size decreased, nuclear families moved away from their extended families. Middle generation children experienced a solitary childhood, in which their understandings of personhood became further detached from the temporal and social obligations of extended family life. I demonstrate that these varied Chinese generational and cultural concepts of childhood and family permeate the practice of foster care, because young INGO workers and orphanage monitors and elderly foster mothers disagree about practices of childrearing.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I further describe the phenomenon of elderly abandonment in China that leads seniors, like abandoned children, to experience social disability. Given the structural similarity between these two populations, foster care primarily attracts,

benefits, and creates kin-like obligations between poor, elderly women and abandoned, impaired children. I suggest that foster parents' motivations to foster represent a reinterpretation of traditional models of filial piety, which recuperate their social status by reintegrating them into family life (albeit through non-kin relations) and rehabilitate their relationship with the state via contractual caregiving. What is surprising is that while middle-aged orphanage and INGO staff recognize the benefits of these alliances, they are also highly critical of senior foster parents' motivations, philosophies of parenting, and social status. Therefore, I show how considerable intergenerational conflict arises as middle-aged orphanage and INGO staff allege that foster parents foster primarily for money, wield inappropriate or dated parenting philosophies, and lack the education to raise children with impairments.

Thus, this chapter shows how foster care, on the one hand, provides a contextual and innovative reinterpretation of traditional filial piety (Zhang H. 2005; Yan 2003, 2011) through seniors' efforts to recuperate their social standing via reciprocal and obligatory relationships with non-kin and vis-à-vis the state. My findings support others who have found that despite family convergence and modernization theory's predictions that extended family relationships may be waning and generational resource flows may be changing direction, the elderly remain important contributors to family sustenance and mobility (Chen, Lu, and Mair 2011; Croll 2010). On the other hand, the intergenerational ambivalence between middle-generation parents and seniors suggests this reciprocity remains uneasy and tenuous. While scholars have noted that intergenerational ambivalence is prevalent as families respond to the pressures and conditions of modernity (Goh 2011; Pillemer and Luscher 2004), such an observation lacks specificity and

interpretation. Hence, I suggest that as middle-generation orphanage and INGO workers are confronted with the social disability of senior foster parents and foster children, they recognize some of their own vulnerability in China's modern society. Because no socialist or market logic has stepped in to replace filial piety, they feel torn between filial obligations and present-day pressures. Ultimately, the middle generations' insecurity both underlines and foreshadows the power of these non-kin foster relations to unsettle longstanding assumptions about the primacy of biological relations in Chinese family life (Chapter five).

Elderly Abandonment as Social Disability

Yima, on the cusp of sixty, was one of few³² who spoke openly and brazenly about hardships during the Cultural Revolution. She bemoaned the Maoist years, because her youth was taken away from her when she was sent to the rice paddies in Longzhou, close to the Vietnam and Yunnan borders during her teenage years. She was made to work for two *mao*³³ a day, and despite their hard work, everyone went hungry. She talked about how everything, including oil was rationed, and how “you had these tickets you had to use, you couldn't just go to the store and pick what you wanted and buy something, and if it weren't for Deng Xiaoping, all of China would still be like that.”

One of five children herself, *Yima* recalled the laws that came into place that established the marriage age at 24 for women and limited her to only one child. She'd married at 24 and had her daughter at 27, who was now close to my age and had recently

³² For the way in which experiences during the Cultural Revolution produced fragmentation of the self and internal censorship which cause many individuals to keep silent about their suffering, see in particular, Kleinman et. al's “Introduction” in the recent volume, *Deep China* (2011).

³³ Mandarin slang term for *jiao*, a hundred of which are equal to one *yuan*, roughly .165 USD.

married, gotten a job with a telephone company, and was living with her in-laws. Her husband had passed away some fifteen years ago from heart disease, and she preferred not to talk about him, she said, tears creeping into her eyes. “He was a good man.”

She was, by contrast, a simple, uneducated woman she always said, gushing about how good I was to come to visit she and Meili so often. Despite her skinny frame, *Yima*’s eyes danced when she talked, rapidly and eagerly, reaching out for my hands, taking my arm when we crossed the street, thrusting money into my hands for the bus, even though I protested that I had some, and wrapping up *baozi*³⁴ or leftovers for me to take home to my husband.

The last time I saw *Yima* and Meili, *Yima* shoved a bulging bag of peanuts she’d brought back from the countryside into my purse, and insisted on walking me, as she always did, across the six-lane highway to the bus stop. She began to talk about how she felt quite lucky in her life given how poor she’d grown up—five children with only one pair of shoes to share, what had happened during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, all those who’d died or now had no insurance or pension. I remember very clearly as we stood by the side of the crowded road, traffic rushing by, exhaust pouring out of the noisy buses, that she looked quite content when she said that she knew from experience that she was living in the best times in China and she doesn’t take it for granted.

However, I also remember the disdain on the face of one of the INGO workers when I described how much I enjoyed talking to *Yima*. The INGO worker made it clear that *Yima* hadn’t always been the most compliant foster parent and that she found her

³⁴ Chinese steamed buns.

existence pitiable and her ways of speaking coarse. This INGO worker, like many of the orphanage monitors, had her suspicions of the motivations of foster parents like *Yima*.

Yet, when *Yima* spoke about her decision to foster, her narrative reflected multiple motivations that developed and shifted over time. Like many other parents, through observation of neighbors' experiences, *Yima* gradually became interested in fostering:

Well, you know my neighbors had fostered children, and I became curious. And I thought, to have a child, you know I could do that, it's just me, and the government doesn't pay me much in retirement, so I also thought of the money. And so I had one child, and she had to go back to the orphanage. But by that point I was used to having her around, and then I took in Meili, and she's been with me for six years. And you develop feelings you know, you want more for them, like me, what can I give her, really? Of course, I love her, but I want an American mother to adopt her to give her everything she deserves... (Fieldnotes 1/7/12)

Yima's rationale for why she chose to foster begins with the motivation of curiosity; next she mentions her [presumably physical and emotional] ability to do so and the financial incentive of fostering a child; additionally she comments on the process of getting used to having a child around; and finally, she expresses the development of feelings for her foster daughter, Meili, and her desire to give her a better life. In their book on foster care in urban Beijing, Yuping Wu, Xiaoyu Han, and Qin Gao also note these multiply situated and emerging motivations stressed by the majority of their foster parent interviewees (2005).

However, these multiple motivations were often dismissed by middle-aged INGO and orphanage staff, who simplistically attributed seniors' motivation to foster to their lack of finances and social status. Recently a great deal of research has been conducted on the issue of elderly abandonment in China, noting how vulnerable survivors of the

Communist Revolution are in the post-Mao reform era. This vulnerability stems from the collapse of supporting structures for the institution of filial piety, the disintegration of the collective economy that makes old age support almost entirely the responsibility of family members, the inability of the elderly to take advantage of the economic reforms of the 1980s which were implemented after or as they retired, and the lack of effective intervention mechanisms for parental neglect (Zhang 2004: 84). Both Hong Zhang in her work on elderly abandonment in China, and Xiaoyuan Shang (along with Xiaoming Wu) in her work on social welfare, have shown that China's elderly constitute some of the most vulnerable in contemporary society, because the familial system of generational caregiving is breaking down, especially across increasing distance and failing extended family bonds (Shang and Wu 2011; Zhang H. 2004, 2005). As Yunxiang Yan and others remark, the rural elderly are particularly vulnerable in that there is no socialized system of support for this population which is nearly 60 million strong (2000 Census) (Yan 2010).

As Yunxiang Yan notes in *Private Life Under Socialism* (2003), since the post-Mao era, the conjugal unit has triumphed, and the elderly have lost not only their financial security, but also familial and social functions, as well as status. No longer operating as heads of the household within the family or publically within the village community, patriarchy in its historical and traditional sense in China has all but disappeared. Angela Zito's observations, though historical in nature, seem applicable here. Noting that fathers were actually quite passive in the Chinese social contract, and that it was in the sacrificial role of the son that power resided, Zito argues that "filial action is the means by which Chinese patriarchs constructed themselves as empowered

subjects while representing themselves as filial sons” (1987: 23). That construction, according to Yan and others, no longer reigns paramount, because the elderly have lost their historical and social import.

Furthermore, in his work on disability, Matthew Kohrman describes the stigma by which individuals in China, impaired and otherwise, are labeled disabled. Regarding the important national category and symbol of ability (*nengli*) that emerged in the modern era and contrasts with the term *quezi*, meaning crippled or lame, Kohrman remarks that it is not only the physically and mentally disabled in China who have become increasingly lame in the modern era. “The ‘lame’ (whatever their gender),” Kohrman writes, “...are not the only persons to whom Chinese today negatively apply the concepts of *neng li*; there are many (including children and the very elderly)” (1999: 894).

For elderly foster parents like *Yima*, the practical implications of this shift in social perception, left her particularly marginalized and socially disabled. First, *Yima* was the parent of an only daughter who had recently married, moved in with her in-laws, and begun the process of starting a family of her own. She was a widow, who received a small monthly pension from the state and lived alone in a seventh story apartment, and her extended family lived hours away in the countryside. *Yima*, like many elderly in China, was limited due to her only child’s family situation and her own financial situation, in the social networks that she had to rely upon. For rural seniors especially, the lack of pension for farmers makes them almost entirely reliant on family members for care in old age. For all seniors, the early mandatory retirement ages in China (55 for women and 60 for men) often rob elderly of their earning abilities and their social status in family decisions as well as the wider society.

In her 1970 treatise entitled “Child Training and the Chinese Family,” Margery Wolf described the Taiwanese child rearing environment as one “teeming with adult relatives” (1970: 51), wherein power was vested in the senior generations of the family, or the grandparents (39).³⁵ Grandparents showered and spoiled children with affection, while parents withheld displays of love, affection, and praise in order that children might acquire the utmost respect for their parents and commit themselves to hard work (44). However, Chinese children today, in both urban and rural areas (due to population policies and migration) are no longer born into environments “teeming with adult relatives,” in many cases grandparents have become primary caregivers, and considerable intergenerational conflict has arisen between parents and grandparents.

As I walked around villages chatting with foster families, or even in the capital city, the story was always the same. These foster parents’ grown children had migrated to bustling cities to find work in factories, and depending on how far away, they returned on the weekends, monthly, or just once a year. In a society in which children are meant to care for their parents in old age (Potter and Potter 1990), many elderly (despite fulfilling their sociocultural obligations to their children and society) found themselves physically and/or emotionally abandoned by children or other relatives who had left them behind to forge a future in more prosperous cities.

³⁵ While Wolf’s research took place in mid-twentieth century Taiwan among Hokkien speakers, I believe her observations and assertions are insightful for this contemporary dissertation, because as Wolf and others have noted (Goh 2011) childrearing is often the site of slow cultural change, and many of the attitudes and practices (and variations thereof) Wolf mentions in her chapter can still be observed among grandparents and grandparent-aged foster parents in Southwest Guangxi today. Finally, Wolf’s conclusions, 1) that childrearing will change more slowly as long as its authority resides in the senior generation; 2) that the Chinese are not particularly open to Western influences; and 3) that childrearing authority was beginning to pass from grandparents to parents as early as the 1970s, prove particularly challenging for contemporary consideration.

As a result, these grandparent-aged women and men had become primary caregivers to abandoned children, many of whom had physical or mental impairments. This was at once a strategy for financial and physical survival for the elderly (Zhang H. 2004, 2005) and also a method by which they could become recuperated as obligated, vital members of a family, and productive members of society. While beyond the bounds of biology, these families nevertheless resemble the structure and function of the uterine families Margery Wolf observed in the 1970s in that women and children develop strategic bonds to forge their social survival. Hence, the village to which I traveled in the previous chapter, a tiny hamlet about twenty minutes drive from the county seat of Daling, and three hours outside Guangxi's capital city of Nanning, is a place where the old were raising the young.

In Southwest Guangxi, these villages are perhaps more commonplace than one expects. Across the region, like much of rural China, young people have fled the countryside for work in the cities' factories, and nearly a third of all grandparents are part of a senior generation almost single-handedly rearing China's next generation (Ye and Murray 2005; Tatlow 2012; Zai 2011). Even in urban China, an exemplar of modern growth and progress, and considerably wealthier than its rural counterparts, this pattern of family life, grandparents raising grandchildren, prevails in a quarter of all urban households. Grandparental participation in childrearing is hardly a new phenomenon in Chinese families (Goh 2011), but the prevalence of grandparents serving as primary caregivers in "skipped generation households" is a modern trend that foster families also illuminate.

Furthermore, many foster parents cited the psychological benefits of having these children as companions who could ease the loneliness, boredom, and even, depression, of their daily lives. As I spoke to senior foster parents I found that they themselves generally had between three to five biological siblings and were raised by multiple caregivers. This large family experience seems to have contributed not only to their concept of childhood and family, and their desire to foster a child after their children were grown, but also the way in which they raised these foster children, which simulated a large family experience. When I visited urban foster families, there were often several clustered among a few apartment buildings, and during the warm months they would be outside the building, chatting, playing *majiang*, as well as letting their foster children interact with one another, and play with other children in the small courtyard. In fact, it was often difficult to tell which child belonged to which parent, as they seemed to simulate their own childhood experiences of multiple caregivers. Senior foster parents disciplined children other than their own, held and fed one another's children, and encouraged children to call one another brother and sister as is the Chinese custom. When I asked one foster parent about this practice she commented, "We're like a big family, and those of us who foster, we foster all the children. Having children in our lives brings joy into our homes and into the community here."

Even more so, however, raising a child clearly gave these retirees purpose and a heightened sense of self-worth. Taking these children to the market, to the playground, or just out into the public courtyard gave foster parents an excuse to engage with their neighbors and their community. As foster parents developed pride and protective qualities over their children, they began to see themselves as valuable to community and

society. Foster parents often proudly cited the work they were doing for these “pitiful children” as an act of *gongxian*, or civic sacrifice or duty. They felt that caring for a child, especially a child abandoned into the institutions of the state, recuperated their self-worth as active and important members of Chinese society. Most importantly, however, the obligations created between children and foster parents reintegrated them into distinct social roles in family life, as they now became primary caregivers in family-like relationships. Although many of these children, especially because of their impairments could not or would not be able to offer the foster parents much care now or in old age, the reciprocal intergenerational contract, wherein these children and parents offered emotional comfort and solace to one another in the face of abandonment by their biological families, should not be overlooked.³⁶ However, not only were they beginning to be recuperated in the eyes of the state and society (see Chapter five for more on this), but their reintegration into foster families as mothers and primary caregivers began to create tension amongst middle-aged INGO and orphanage workers.

Orphanage and INGO Families: Middle-aged Ambivalence and Insecurity

While the alliances achieved through foster care between elderly women and vulnerable children were often acknowledged by orphanage and INGO staff as mutually beneficial, they were also subject to a high degree of scrutiny. Intertwined with the genuine concerns INGO and orphanage staff had for these vulnerable foster children were the concerns they had about raising their own children, whom they saw infrequently because of the demands of their work with the orphanage or the INGO. In this next section, I

³⁶ In the next chapter, I describe the intersubjective processes of kinning that occur within these relationships, through which social personhood is constituted.

introduce some of the family dynamics at play for the biological families of the INGO and orphanage staff who I studied in order to provide a broader context for the intergenerational disputes I unpack in the following section. As I explore the particular nature of these conflicts, I reflect on the way in which foster care illuminates broader trends in Chinese family life, like the prevalence of grandparents as primary caregivers, the ambivalence and vulnerability of the middle generation, and the subsequent high degree of intergenerational conflict.

During the course of my fieldwork I spent almost as much time with foster families as I did with INGO workers and orphanage staff. These staff introduced me to many of the families I interacted with, and they also welcomed me into their meetings to discuss the progress of foster families, the logistics of caregiving and monitoring, and the viability of placements, some of which ended in children being returned to the orphanage and others which ended in domestic or international adoption.³⁷ Finally, they often confided in me regarding the difficulty of their jobs and the concerns they had about their relationships with their own biological families. Far from purely market-motivated (Wang 2010a,b) or remarkably uncivil (Yan 2003, 2011a,b), I observed that these “sandwich generation,” middle-aged parents were struggling against political and economic pressures as well as traditional and modern ideals of childhood and child-rearing. While they fought the senior generations’ philosophies of parenting and were often critical of their lack of social status and ways of discipline, they were also actively

³⁷ Xiaoyuan Shang has written about the contradictory temporary nature of foster care in China, pointing out that for many severely impaired children who will never be adopted, foster care actually connotes a long-term, relatively stable placement (2002). In my own work, there were also children who remained in their foster homes from ages 2-3 until adulthood. The official policy is that children cannot be adopted domestically or internationally after age 14, and are thus, to be returned to the orphanage, which still retains their registration, or *hukou* (see Chapter one). However, as I describe in Chapter five, foster parents often become advocates for these children and fight to keep them in the family well past the age of 14.

working out their own conflicted understanding of childhood and childrearing in the workplace, as well as the home (Goh 2011; Naftali 2014).

In her forties, Liu *laoshi*, the Director of Mercy Care, had just given birth twenty days before I met her to a healthy baby boy, and was often overwhelmed by motherhood despite the substantial care her live-in mother provided alongside her husband, who worked minimal hours at another INGO. As in most Chinese arrangements, Liu *laoshi*'s baby slept with her mother during the night so she could get more rest, and her mother also provided childcare during the day. Although Liu *laoshi* and her mother enjoyed an amicable relationship, she often complained that as was typical of people in her mother's generation, her mother did not respect her infant son and often called him names as she was disciplining him or was critical of him. Even though Liu *laoshi* and her mother were both college-educated, Liu *laoshi* often looked down on traditional Chinese methods of childrearing and education, idealizing psychological approaches to child development, as well as American board members' lives and families. Liu *laoshi*'s relationship with her husband, who was ten years her junior, was tumultuous, and she complained about him whenever we traveled together. I remember distinctly on more than one occasion when she remarked, "It takes at least three people to raise a child, two just won't cut it."

Huilan, one of the foster care monitors at the orphanage, who was promoted to the Director of Foster Care shortly after I left in summer of 2012, was in her thirties and had a six-year old daughter. She and her husband both worked full time and relied on their in-laws, whom they lived with, to provide transportation, meals, and full time care for their daughter. While Huilan staunchly defended the advanced age of some of the foster mothers, commenting that it was not their age that mattered, but their willingness to do

the job and love the children, she also frequently questioned the care her in-laws were giving to her young daughter. Even in her early thirties, Huilan complained of fatigue, weight gain, and the stress of her job and urban life. She'd grown up poor in the countryside alongside many brothers and sisters, and it was a childhood that she described nostalgically, wistfully noting how the rice noodles she and her family made from scratch were so much better than the cheap, mass-produced ones we often bought on the street. When she spoke of her father who had recently passed away, tears poured uncontrollably from her eyes. Meanwhile, she worried that her in-laws were spoiling her daughter and she was developing bad habits in their care, but felt she had little recourse. This complaint of the elderly grandparents spoiling the young was a common refrain among middle-aged parents throughout the course of my fieldwork.

Finally, Suling was a young, single woman in her twenties who loved children and had joined the staff of Mercy Care just shortly after graduation from college with her degree in social work. Despite Suling's unattached status, she struggled to make ends meet on the meager salary Mercy Care provided and eventually moved into one of the rooms in the Mercy Care office to save on rent. She was the youngest of four sisters, and the rest of her family remained in the countryside where she'd grown up. Being the only family member who had gone to and graduated from college, Suling's family was pressuring her to join the Communist Party and take the exam to become a government official. During the time that I did my fieldwork, Suling spent her spare time studying for the exam, passed, and left Mercy Care to go into government service. After just a few short weeks, however, she came back to her old job at Mercy Care, complaining that she couldn't deal with all the drinking, dealing, and corruption. She mentioned that her

parents, who lived separately, helping their daughters raise their children, were angry that she returned to a job that they felt held little compensation, prestige, pension, or hope for the future.

These middle-aged women struggled with ambivalence regarding their childhoods, their own parents' childrearing customs, and social and economic pressures. In the next section, I describe how some of this ambivalence stemmed from recognition of their own vulnerability and was displaced as criticism onto elderly foster parents, highlighting their socially marginable status.

Certain Kinds of Parents

"How many of you here have said something like this to your child—if *you keep acting naughty, I'll send you back to the orphanage!*" Liu *laoshi* shouted to a room filled with foster mothers. "How many of you have said this? Raise your hands."

Knowing smiles appeared on the withered faces of grey-haired women as they sheepishly raised their hands, and broke out into lively chatter. "Quiet, quiet please," Liu *laoshi* called out. "Now, how many of you have said things like, *I'm so lucky to have you, I'm so happy you're my child?* Raise your hands again." This time, only a few hands gingerly threaded the air, and the chatter reduced to a low murmur. Liu *laoshi*, flanked by two blonde European women, began to stress the importance of positivity and encouragement in disciplining and raising foster children.

From my seat within the crowd, however, I overheard enduring protests from the foster parents. "So when a child misbehaves you're supposed to praise them?" the foster mothers muttered. "That'll never work!"

“We all say those things,” another whispered feverishly. “If we say the opposite, children will get the wrong idea, they’ll never behave.”

Meanwhile, in the corner of the seminar room at the orphanage, a young foster child began to act up, and her foster mother began to yell and threaten to strike the child if she continued to misbehave. “*Ayi*,” Liu *laoshi* addressed her, exasperatedly, “Can you please take the child outside? We’re trying to run a lecture in here.”

Every few months or so, I attended a training such as this one at one of the large state orphanages put on by INGOs, and often in partnership with foreign volunteers. The content varied from parenting seminars to sexual harassment and disability training, but the exchanges above were typical of efforts by INGO and orphanage staff to train foster parents to relinquish some of their “bad habits” and become better parents. These “bad habits” ranged from accusations that 1) the older ladies spoiled the children; 2) they had little education and thus, lacked the skills to parent effectively, especially in areas such as nutrition and hygiene; 3) they were self-interested and only motivated by the money to foster; 4) they disciplined with too heavy a hand and were too critical of the children; and 5) they did not understand the special needs of the children with impairments adequately enough to provide appropriate daily therapy or training.³⁸ In these next sections, I group the complaints into three types, beginning with varying philosophies of parenting (which I further discuss in Chapter three), foster parents’ lack of understanding of children’s needs or impairments, and financial motivations. I suggest that these complaints are interrelated in that they reveal vastly different experiences of family and childhood among generations. These experiences, which cause resentment among middle

³⁸ Given the breadth of these critiques, I address the first three in this chapter, and the last two in the next chapter.

generation parents, are often displaced onto foster parents, and also represent the middle generation's discomfort with their own vulnerability which is exposed through interactions with foster care's socially disabled populations.

Philosophies of Parenting

In the scene above, Liu *laoshi*, the Mercy Care Director, communicates to the foster parents in no uncertain terms that certain forms of discipline (praising and encouraging children) are preferable to others (shaming or threatening children). The foster parents are notably confused and unconvinced that praise is a preferable option to criticism, especially in a disciplinary situation. Such broad differences and disconnects in parenting were frequent in interactions between middle-aged INGO and orphanage personnel and elderly foster parents.

For instance, in May of 2012, Director Wang (the Director of Foster Care at the Nanning Municipal Orphanage) accompanied Huilan and I on a visit to the village in Daling to celebrate children's day. Early on the first afternoon, we gathered all of the foster mothers and a few fathers with some of their children in Yang *jie*, the village monitor's living room. Director Wang and Huilan began their address with high praise for the foster mothers, stating that the rigor of the efforts showed in the improvements of the children under their care. Huilan highlighted the work of a few mothers in the community, many of whom were new to fostering.

"It's not that you all aren't doing a good job," she said, "it's just that these families are doing even more." Huilan and Director Wang practically talked over one another in their excitement, interspersing practical tips regarding parenting, "bend from

the knees when you lift these kids as some of them are getting heavy,” with seasonal announcements, “now that it’s getting warmer the families whose children can’t use the squatty potties in the home should buy a small toilet that disabled kids can start to use themselves.”

When Director Wang and Huilan implored the group for their feedback, however, they fell rather silent. “We don’t feel we can express ourselves in Mandarin,” one mother muttered under her breath. A side conversation drifted into the frustrations families were having with disciplining their children with impairments. One mother, Lu *ayi*, complained loudly that her child wouldn’t sleep through the night, but there was no way around it, since his mental impairments left him with relatively little cognition. “He really can’t do anything,” she complained. “He doesn’t understand anything.”³⁹

Overhearing, Director Wang and Huilan seized the opportunity as a teaching moment. “Don’t say that,” they scolded the foster mother. “Never put your child down, especially in front of others. Children understand more than you know. You may be frustrated, but you can’t talk that way,” they continued. Lu *ayi* looked at the cement below her feet sheepishly.

A few minutes later, Director Wang and Huilan implored Yang *jie* to get up and give a small speech about the progress she saw in the community, but the village monitor also left her eyes downcast and muttered that she didn’t have anything profound to say,

³⁹ This phrasing is reminiscent of the complaints of the *ayis* Leslie Wang observes in a special needs orphanage within central China (2010a). American staff are miffed at the staff’s attention to merely the children’s present and physical needs, as they prefer to see each Chinese child as an individual with unique preferences and future goals. While Chinese and American caregivers attributed these differences to culture, Wang attributes them to class, arguing that certain views of childhood are commensurate with variances in class. While class necessarily comes into view here (the middle-aged orphanage and INGO staff are college-educated and middle class, while most foster mothers have a middle school education and represent lower income levels in Guangxi) (also see the analysis of this in the following pages and Chapter four), I also attempt to understand how such intergenerational friction represents competing cultural-historical experiences of childhood.

and merely thanked the mothers, Director Wang, and Huilan for their support, sitting down abruptly. When Huilan began insisting that each child in the community has her own way of communicating, “like Xiao Pan communicates with her eyes,” the mothers gradually spoke up, proudly, but still under their breaths, listing the accomplishments of their children.

A day later when we were concluding our visit in Yang *jie*’s home she brought an item to Director Wang and Huilan’s attention, saying that Lu *ayi*’s foster son, Wei, was “acting proud,” not asking his mother for permission to do things, while the other foster son, Zihao was misbehaving. Yang *jie* complained that his behavior had gotten worse, because when she tried to discipline him herself, Lu *ayi* told her that Huilan had told her not to scold him, so she refused to reprimand him, even at night when he threw off the covers on purpose and pooped in the corner of the bedroom. Huilan protested that she’d never given such instruction, only that she’d said with autistic kids it was best to be more encouraging, but Zihao had Down syndrome.

Then, Yang *jie* pointed out that the previous day in the meeting Lu *ayi* had tried to ask about the problem, but they scolded her for putting down Zihao in front of everyone. Huilan and Director Wang protested that when a child misbehaves, of course he must be disciplined. Yang *jie* said that she’d tried to get Lu *ayi* to strike Zihao on the knuckles when he threw off the blanket at night, but Lu *ayi* wouldn’t take Zihao out of the house because he had started eating from the garbage and she couldn’t control him. Director Wang and Huilan remarked that because of that Wei thinks his mother is favoring him and he’s trying to take advantage of the situation.

“She needs to take Zihao out to teach him right from wrong,” Huilan sputtered. “It’s actually more dangerous for him to be in the house without her,” she reasoned, as Director Wang nodded. It was decided that Yang *jie* would speak with Lu *ayi* and Huilan would also address the problem when she came back to place more kids in Daling a few weeks later in mid-June.

These discrepancies indicated differences in parenting philosophies between middle-aged caregivers and foster parents, and also highlighted the position of authority of the orphanage vis-à-vis the foster parents and their skepticism that foster parents adequately understood the various impairments and special needs of children in Daling. First, Director Wang and Huilan single out Lu *ayi* when she comments in a peripheral conversation that her son won’t sleep through the night and he doesn’t understand her. They admonish her for speaking negatively about her son in front of others, pointing out that “children understand more than you know.” Later, when it is eventually revealed by Yang *jie* that Lu *ayi* actually refuses to criticize or discipline Zihao, because she believes Huilan told her not to scold him, Huilan and Director Wang interpret this as a sign that she has misunderstood their disciplinary instruction, because she confused her son’s impairment (Down syndrome) for autism. Lu *ayi*’s misunderstanding of Huilan’s instruction is strikingly similar to the foster mothers at the orphanage’s misunderstanding of Liu *laoshi*’s parenting advice. In both cases, foster parents misunderstand the context of the emphasis on positivity and encouragement and thus, conclude that it is either inefficient, or overuse it in certain contexts.

Context, in fact, especially the issue of linguistic and communication differences, is central to these miscommunications. The foster mothers comment repeatedly that they

don't feel they can adequately express themselves in Mandarin, and fall rather silent, or resort to side conversations. Meanwhile, the orphanage workers continue to conduct the meeting in Mandarin, making few adjustments despite the foster parents' protests. When I followed the physical therapist in Daling, I noted that most foster mothers there could barely sign their names, yet the orphanage insisted that each parent fill out monthly records of the child's therapy schedule. This bureaucratic priority emphasized both the authority of the orphanage and underlined the contractual nature of the relationship between the orphanage, or the state, and the foster families.

I also noted a general disdain and prejudice toward non-Mandarin communication. For instance, in an autism evaluation that took place at the Nanning Municipal Orphanage between a foreign psychological expert, orphanage staff, INGO staff, and a foster mother, middle-aged orphanage and INGO staff complained not only that the mother refused to speak Mandarin, but that instead of answering the questions that were translated, she "went on and on with story after story" in the presence of the "foreign expert" (see Chapter four). In fact, orphanage and INGO staff complained incessantly that they couldn't get many of the mothers to speak Mandarin; interviews and conversations inevitably drifted into the local Cantonese vernacular, or worse, the seemingly infinite variants of the Zhuang minority dialect. An anthropology professor from Hong Kong who had also done research in Guangxi commented to me that many people seemed unable to avoid mixing Mandarin and *baihua* as they spoke.

However, for most staff, this was not a problem of comprehension. Director Wang, Huilan, Mo *jie*, Liu *laoshi*, and Luli all spoke *baihua*, the local dialect fluently, and Suling, Xiao Wang and others spoke variants of Zhuang. In most cases, staff

members were not complaining about language differences because they could not understand the content of the conversation, but they complained because speaking Mandarin denoted a certain status and education level, an everyday ability to live a modern Chinese life. In refusing to speak Mandarin, these women were not merely communicating a certain lack of ability or education, but an unwillingness to conform to the language of the state orphanage's processes and protocols, and perhaps a certain defiance toward modern ways of life. However, these women's inability to speak Mandarin, or their lack of communication skills were attributed to their lack of education, which often caused orphanage personnel to question their abilities to parent children with impairments.

On another visit to a foster home one afternoon, after a foster mother had been complaining that her child had had nothing to eat, because she'd had a cold, Suling asked, "has she been eating porridge?"

"Yes, but only porridge," the mother replied, "she hasn't eaten any rice." After we left Suling went onto complain that foster parents often communicated imprecisely: here the mother was saying the little girl had had nothing to eat for days, when she'd actually had porridge. These communication issues were often chocked up to the women's lack of education, or even their "backwardness," but such misunderstandings seem to reflect tangible differences in childhood experiences and thus, philosophies of childrearing. It was certainly true that many of these women lacked education, and that their education was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. Some of them were illiterate, many could hardly use cell phones or computers, and almost all of them complained that they could not even help their foster kids with their homework. However, their different

communication styles became a problem primarily in their interactions with middle-aged caregivers who sought to reform their speech and actions to modern, coherent forms.

Middle generation parents, Liu *laoshi* and Huilan included, often complained that they had lived a solitary childhood. This was surprising, especially because both Liu *laoshi* and Huilan both grew up in the countryside and with siblings. However, because their parents prioritized education, they often split residence to support one or two to get an urban education. Many children from the countryside began attending boarding schools from the time they were in middle school to minimize travel and take advantage of educational opportunities. Another Chinese foster care volunteer remarked, “I was, in a sense, raised by the school. I hardly lived with my parents from the time I was ten or so, because our home was so isolated in the countryside that I spent all my time in the dorms. My parents called to remind me to study hard.”

Liu *laoshi* and Huilan recalled childhoods spent bent over desks studying into the wee hours of the night, goaded by parents who piled their hopes for a bright future upon their slight shoulders. “Our parents weren’t nurturing or understanding or kind. They were hardened by their own experience during the revolution and determined to make something out of us,” another informant commented. “Their love was contingent on our success and we knew it, so we studied hard. We treated it like a job.” These middle-aged women were bitter that they had lost their childhood to schooling, and they blamed their parents for the loss.

The discontents and disconnects of the middle generation INGO and orphanage staff were often supplanted onto foster parents, who were at once criticized for being too indulgent, and at other times too strict (see further discussion of this in Chapter three).

The INGO and orphanage staff worried when foster parents couldn't help their foster children with homework, but they also resented that their own parents had never been there to help either. Their concerns about spoiling, meanwhile, mirrored the critiques they had of their own live-in grandparent caregivers regarding their only children. They charged that elderly foster parents weren't rational thinkers when it came to discipline. They repeatedly alleged that it was important for parents to *jiang daoli* (reason with children), but older parents did not necessarily see kids as rational beings who could be reasoned with. Instead, to the older generation, repetition, force, and shaming, were effective tools for sometimes teaching a lesson.⁴⁰

In Chapter three, I revisit these threats among elderly parents as a socialization technique that paradoxically expresses ideas about Chinese belonging and family social hierarchy. My point, however, in placing these intergenerational conflicts alongside one another is to demonstrate the way in which middle-aged parents' concerns with their own families were intertwined with critiques of elderly foster parents, and how these middle-aged parents, given these insecurities, attempted to wrest childrearing control from the senior generation. In this next section, I describe the ambivalence of these efforts, and finally, some of the ways in which such intergenerational friction reflects a recognition of vulnerability on the part of the middle-aged parents and a present void in cultural logic regarding intergenerational Chinese relationships.

Middle-Generation Ambivalence in Parenting

There was certainly an ambivalence to these complaints: the middle generation simultaneously feared and admired the control the senior generation had over children,

⁴⁰ See Chapter three.

because they themselves felt lacking in that authority. Several times when I came over to provide English tutoring to foster child, Pei Pei and her older sister, Kaili, Li *ayi* asked if her niece could sit in as well. So the four of us sat in the Li's cramped living room at the short table in miniature chairs as I struggled to get the three girls to complete their homework. I had begun to tutor the three girls when Li *ayi* complained to me that her daughter was falling desperately behind in English, but she didn't have the "big money" as she called it, to pay for the expensive training schools. Pei Pei, who was a good student, joyfully joined in the fun. But Li *ayi*'s niece was clearly the star student. She whipped through books that the other two girls couldn't begin to understand.

On one occasion when Li *ayi* and her younger sister-in-law, Hu *nushi*,⁴¹ walked me down the stairs and into the alleyway, the sister thrust a bottle of face lotion into my hands, complaining that they had nothing to give me for all my troubles. Then the two women began to hound me about their daughters, but the concerns were slightly different. Hu *nushi* often asked me about the nature of my communication with her daughter. On another occasion when Li *ayi* was not present, Hu *nushi* confided in me that she felt quite sorry for Pei Pei and her younger foster sister, but also for Kaili, who she felt was often neglected because of the challenge of raising three children. She described Li *ayi*'s situation as pitiable, because she had to take in so many children to make ends meet, and yet her own eyes welled up with tears when she lamented the many hours she and her husband both spent working that meant they barely knew their own child.

She could not imagine raising "children like Li *ayi*'s" she said (both foster children had mild physical impairments), and yet, she worried that her daughter had become spoiled, because she had no one with whom to share or communicate on a daily

⁴¹ Mandarin for Ms. Hu.

basis. She complained that her daughter was getting rebellious and their communication was strained. Indeed, I'd heard the young girl mock her mother's poor Mandarin, and Kaili and her cousin often whipped out their phones and giggled behind their mothers' backs. Did I know anyway to prevent this type of rebellion? the tearful young mother asked. Always wary of being put in these positions of authority, especially with no children of my own, I replied that I thought it was natural for young girls to be a bit rebellious, but nothing seemed to assuage the young woman.

While Li *ayi* worried about some of the same concerns, commenting that in her day, rebellious children would have been beaten, she mostly troubled over Kaili's grades, Pei Pei's precarious foster care situation, and her youngest foster daughter, Yuping's impending adoption. She noted that a young couple had come by to meet Yuping, but the orphanage hadn't told her anything about whether or when she'd be adopted. When on one of the numerous occasions she complained to me that Pei Pei might be sent back to the orphanage, I implored her to speak with the orphanage officials about her concerns. She scoffed. "To them, we're nothing more than *baomus* (domestic servants)," she replied disdainfully.

I gloss these scenes to further highlight the differences in authority and concern between a younger mother and an older foster mother, which respectively, and perhaps, surprisingly index experiences of vulnerability and security. While Hu *nushi* worries about her daughter's solitary childhood and her lack of time to invest in it, she also pities her older sisters' large household, in which she worries that children suffer from poverty and neglect. Meanwhile, Li *ayi* concerns herself with the relationships of these children within and outside the family unit, specifically their emotional security. Such a paradox

suggests that while middle-aged parents have been wont to assume seniors foster for financial gain, it is their own financial insecurities that are often being displaced onto others.

Elisabeth Croll notes that there has not been a complete reversal in resource flow from parents to children in the intergenerational contract in East Asia as some demographers predicted (2010). However, a general increase toward nuclearization of the family and resource flow from parents to children nevertheless suggests that, as opposed to “generalized reciprocity,” parental investments into children in adulthood are often calculated as long-range self-interest (2010:479). Therefore, there is often competition for care between generations (2010:483), a stress that middle-aged parents (“the sandwich generation,” with simultaneous responsibilities to children and elderly parents) feel with particular poignancy. Hong Zhang stresses that the new logic of intergenerational reciprocity is “contingent upon parental investment in children’s well-being” (2005:64). Thus, it is middle-aged parents, rather than the elderly who often feel the financial and emotional stress of this reciprocal reinterpretation of the filial contract, agonizing over the calculated investments they put into their children, and frustrated by the lack of reciprocity they observe between their elderly parents and themselves.

While senior foster parents ascribe to a new logic of “generalized reciprocity,” middle-aged orphanage and INGO workers nevertheless doubt the future investment of their own children in their security. Hence, the foster mothers’ social disability and reintegration into the foster families in the role of mother highlights the middle generation’ own vulnerability. Because these seniors are both filial and reciprocal in their behavior, they threaten middle-generation parents. They also reveal the extent to

which Chinese intergenerational relations are caught between market-driven and reciprocal logic. In these foster arrangements (as we will see in Chapter five), the sacrificial seniors become “problematically” empowered, while the middle generation falters.

Conflicts about Money

Perhaps owing to the experience of being raised with very little, elderly parents like *Yima* often spoke of fostering a child in a casual manner. “To raise a child, to feed and clothe and bathe the child—one child—it’s not really difficult,” they waved me off, laughing gaily. “How is it difficult? You tell me. To care for their physical needs? Please! They bring so much life into the house.” Even when I would protest, asking, what if the child misbehaves, or what of the cost, parents would brush me off, saying, “kids are all naughty, but to feed, clothe, care for a child is not much. With the money from the orphanage, I can actually save quite a bit every month,” they boasted. In addition, most foster parents often took in two children at a time, as the orphanage was happy to place up to three in one household. To these foster parents, their frugality demonstrated their abilities as parents to be effective, capable managers of time and resources.

In contrast, when I spoke with staff in their thirties and forties, like Liu *laoshi* and Huilan, from the INGO and the orphanage, they bemoaned the difficulty of raising one child. “It’s not easy you know, it’s really tough. Not only the financial cost, which is huge, but the emotional work of raising a child and the child’s needs.” Born in the mid-1970s or 1980s, these parents were only allowed to have one child and yet they constantly complained that their finances, resources, and time were barely enough to

parent one child. When I relayed to them the differing responses of their parents' generation regarding the costs and the benefits of raising a child, the middle-aged parents responded that the older generation only considered the physical needs of a child and neglected the emotional or psychological side of raising children.

Indeed, throughout my fieldwork, foster parents' discontent over money, complaints, and requests for higher wages were ubiquitous. In Guangxi, where moderate incomes measured around 1000 *yuan* per month (the rough equivalent of 165 USD) the stipends of 700 *yuan* for healthy children and 800 *yuan* for children with impairments paid by the orphanage (and in part by Mercy Care) were comparable salaries with the median incomes of other professionals, and commensurate with many state pensions. Even as the orphanage discussed these requests for higher wages at their quarterly meetings, they complained that with their own budgetary limitations (the state provided them 1000 *yuan* per child per month), they could hardly afford to pay the foster mothers more. They also mused that if they were to continue and expand foster care programs, they'd have to let long time internal orphanage staff go, and sometimes these moves, especially if staff were relatives of cadres or had political connections, could be controversial.

However, the main disconnect between the foster mothers' requests for higher wages and the orphanages refusal to comply, reflected a difference in understanding as to the purposes of the wages themselves. While orphanage personnel viewed the wages as reimbursement for children's expenses and meager supplemental income for foster parents (as they were required to meet a minimum income level in order to foster), few parents who fostered either met the minimum income level or had other income (from

pension) of their own. Foster parents were not only interested in covering their expenses, but being paid for their labor, and for many without family or government assistance, this was a primary source of income. As mentioned above, perhaps owing to their experiences of scarcity during the Maoist era, foster parents also believed their frugality, or ability to conserve funds in their spending as far as the children were concerned, demonstrated their effectiveness and competence as parents.

It is not surprising that dramatically different experiences of childhood and family life have contributed to differing cultural values and have thus impacted generational practices of childrearing in the present. However, I believe these differences in attitude toward compensation also reflect intergenerational tensions regarding filial piety and reciprocity. Scholarly consensus suggests that it is the senior generation in China who wrestles with financial insecurity given their meager savings and their historical reliance on the grown children (Yan 2003; Zhang 2005). However, the ethnographic material in this chapter demonstrates that the middle generation was vastly more preoccupied with their children's futures, and in turn, their own security, while the senior generation looked to fostering as a mutually beneficial experience for the child, themselves, and society. Senior foster parents' relationships with their children (given state compensation and their own motivations) were at once reciprocal and also seemingly sacrificial. Even as these women were poor and vulnerable, their increasing social capital threatened middle generation parents. If bonds of fosterage truly resembled family ties, what would prevent foster parents from advocating for these children, trying to keep them, and thus, challenging the power of the state? And if foster families were creating reciprocal bonds

that mainstream families lacked, how might this affect the everyday experience of family life for those middle-aged careworkers like Liu *laoshi*, Huilan, and others?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I describe the surprising, persistent importance of seniors to the Chinese family system and some of the transitions in social and family life that have resulted in many grandparent-aged seniors becoming primary caregivers to foster children. Foster parents, like many of China's elderly who find themselves abandoned by biological family, financially challenged, and ultimately socially disabled, create strategic alliances with abandoned and socially disabled children which recuperate them within family and social life, providing much needed social security. However, considerable intergenerational conflict between middle-aged INGO and orphanage workers and elderly foster parents regarding caregiving demonstrates the rapid social changes in experiences of childhood and family in China in the modern era. Additionally, these conflicts show how middle-aged careworkers' own concerns and anxieties about childrearing, their elderly parents, and their social vulnerability, are often displaced onto foster parents. For foster parents, however, motivations to foster are complex and elementally social: even as fostering provides them with financial incentive, it more importantly rehabilitates them as valuable members of family and society.

Chapter Three: Becoming Family: “Kinning,” Play, and Personhood

Introduction: From “Ugly Children” to Foster Families

Yima talks about how when she initially saw Meili, a child who had no cognitive or physical impairments, she was dissuaded by how sickly, yellow, and dirty she was.

When she recalled the great scar that ran across Meili’s forehead when she came to live with her, she often shook her head with disgust, remarking how ugly the gash made the little girl, rather than voicing compassion for the suffering she’d experienced at the hands of her stepmother prior to being abandoned. Many foster parents expressed similar reactions to children both with and without impairments, children who drooled uncontrollably, children who were dark-skinned and ugly, or children who couldn’t communicate or communicated through awkward grunts and groans.

When I visited various foster households, foster parents snatched up toddlers who ran in circles to demonstrate and detail their deformities in front of the children and the community. “Look at how ruined his foot is, he can’t hardly run!” they’d exclaim despite the fact that the child in question had been blissfully scampering about the courtyard. Many parents confessed fear or discomfort with the appearances of children with cleft palates. “I could hardly look at them when the orphanage placed them with me. I wanted

them to take them back, but they said these were the children who needed a home, and they wouldn't take them no matter how often I complained," admitted one foster mother.

One afternoon I spoke with a particularly jolly and warm elderly couple who fostered a young girl with cerebral palsy alongside caring for their granddaughter, and who spoke plainly of their rejection and discontent with the child in the beginning. "I remember how I used to go to the orphanage, because I'd fostered many kids and they'd all been adopted to America, none of them had been disabled, so I used to always tell the director to send me another beautiful one, like those on the wall," she said gesturing to the photos adorning the living room of she and her husband with a myriad of young toddlers. "And I'd seen Ren Ren there. She was always dirty and pitiful and I used to ask the director, 'who will ever adopt Stinky Ren Ren?' I called her Stinky Ren Ren!" she laughed, playfully brushing the twelve year-old girl's shoulder.

"But then one day the director called and she said, 'I want you to take Ren Ren.' And I was like, 'Stinky Ren Ren? No!' And I didn't want to take her home, but she said she didn't have any healthy, beautiful children left, and so I took her home, all dirty and stinky, and I could barely stand to look at her. And gradually we realized that she wasn't developing normally, that she wasn't walking when all the other kids were, that her legs weren't steady, and I wanted to bring her back to the orphanage, because I thought, *what am I going to do with this child that can't walk?* But my husband said that we needed to give her a chance, we just needed to be patient and give her more time."

"I knew she would walk," Luo *ayi*'s sweet husband chimed in. "We just needed to be patient."

“Well, I wasn’t,” snapped Luo *ayi*, “so I called the orphanage and said, take her back, and they told me she had cerebral palsy, and I didn’t know what that was, but they said, it’s a disease that affected her legs, and so we began to take her to therapy, and when she was three years old, she eventually did walk.”

While such harsh words disturbed me from time to time as I visited with foster parents, in many previous interactions, I recalled how vigorously Ren Ren’s foster mother had both criticized her shy nature and advocated for “such a wonderful child” to find a permanent home in America. Her foster father’s affection for her was more obvious in the kind eyes and smile he held while speaking of their relationship. Ren Ren’s belonging within this little family was evident in the way she cared for the couple’s granddaughter and the way her family easily talked of how her presence had impacted their lives in both ordinary and extraordinary ways: they’d become convinced that children with cerebral could be clever even when their legs failed them, they couldn’t take long car trips because Ren Ren was prone to motion sickness, and they hoped to count Ren Ren among the collage of photos Luo *ayi* and her husband gazed adoringly at and had fostered over the years.

But how did these shifts in relationship take place? How did foster parents go from “hardly being able to look” at their children or being repulsed by their appearances to considering them like their own? What kind of practices and processes are integral to building kin relations among foster families, and how might these families simulate or differ from biological ones?

Chapter Summary

The previous chapter concluded that young parents' ambivalence about their own childhood not only affected their interactions with their parents, but was also displaced onto these foster parents who they supervised via the INGO or the orphanage.

Furthermore, middle generation parents' ambivalence reflects a discomfort with their own vulnerability, encountered via their relationships with the socially disabled populations of elderly foster parents and abandoned, disabled children. Finally, I suggested that foster care represents an agentive and creative effort by seniors to recuperate their diminished status in contemporary Chinese society and form alternative family bonds that advance personhood.

In this chapter, I examine how those family bonds of belonging and obligation are formed and how today's foster parents sustain or interrupt normative cultural practices of parenting. I provide ethnographic examples of a process I call "kinning." I draw this term from anthropologist Signe Howell's work with international adoptees (2003; 2006), in which she defines kinning as "the process by which a foetus or new-born child [or previously unconnected person] is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom" (2003: 465-67). Detailing three primary practices of families with transnational adoptees in Norway (the sending of photos with Norwegian characteristics to donor institutions in their children's birth countries, the wearing of Norwegian national costumes, and roots trips to the children's country of origin), Howell concludes that kinning is an intersubjective process that recreates both adoptive parents and their children, effectively negating the separation between the social and biological aspects of kinship.

I suggest that kinning is an appropriate concept to apply to Chinese fosterage, because as established in Chapters one and two, both foster children and foster parents find themselves socially disconnected and disabled following familial and societal abandonment, and through foster care, are brought into “significant relationship” with one another, which is framed through kinship idioms. Whereas Howell’s concept of kinning was limited to the three performative signifiers mentioned above, my use of the term is somewhat different in that I argue that kinning occurs primarily within the everyday interaction between foster parents and children. Hence, in this chapter, I examine discipline, caregiving, “playing,” and displays of affection between parents and children. While the chapter focuses heavily on foster mothers’ practices of child training, there are several other figures in the background.

First, because abandoned children often first go to an orphanage before being placed into foster care, orphanage personnel are responsible for monitoring foster families’ care for children and children’s development. Additionally, various INGO actors who partner with the orphanage to provide finances, care, and oversight visit the foster children and their families every few months. During my eighteen months of fieldwork, I observed both the orphanage and INGO staff’s efforts to facilitate the kinning process, as well as interactions between foster parents and their foster children without orphanage or INGO personnel present.

Second, the children themselves respond in varied ways to the processes of “kinning,” illustrating that they are not passive recipients of cultural knowledge being socialized, but active participants in the formation of these relationships of care.⁴²

⁴² In her foundational contemporary work on intergenerational caregiving, Esther C. Goh argues for a bidirectional model of caregiving in order to supplement previous models of studying Chinese family

Indeed, I show that foster parents are often very forthright about their own needs for the children's companionship and care, and thus, the foster relationship is not merely authoritative, but also mutually obligational (see Chapter two). However, the aim of this chapter is neither to examine the children's agency (or lack thereof) nor highlight the socializing efforts of the foster mothers, but rather to unveil and understand the intersubjective processes that eventually make them kin to one another. Another goal of this chapter is to clarify the ways elderly foster parents and middle-aged orphanage and INGO personnel understand the personhood of the foster children in their care. In illustrating these differences in concepts of children and childrearing among adults, I explore the formation of children's understanding of social isolation, social roles, and obligation, crystallizing the meaning of becoming family among foster parents and foster children in contemporary China.

I argue that unlike other traditional practices of Chinese adoption (see introduction and Chapter one), relationships of foster care demonstrate a unique ability to create mutual obligation among strangers that transcend assumptions about the primacy of blood relations to becoming family in contemporary China. Ultimately, this argument about kinship, that bonds are formed primarily through social experience rather than biological connections, is not new, but its novelty is demonstrable in a country where non-kin adoptions remain extremely limited and the family system remains by and large,

relationships which focus unilaterally on parental transmission of values and behaviors to children, rather than children's active participation in caregiving (2011: 16-17). While Goh's argument here is instructive, given the lack of focus in scholarship on Chinese children's personhood and agency, I think her paradigm of bidirectionality emerges primarily from the theoretical debate rather than her ethnographic or quantitative data. In fact, bidirectionality can be misleading in that it does not specify in what way, when, or how relations between parents and children proceed in reciprocal ways, and thus obscures the authority many Chinese caregivers ultimately retain with respect to their children. My aim here is to draw attention to one element of bidirectionality—the mutual constitution in personhood that occurs between Chinese foster parents and abandoned children that occurs through these specific practices of kinning—amidst a paradigm in which authority in childrearing still very much rests with the senior generation in China today.

closed. Finally, despite the (often) temporary nature of fostering relations, I argue that these interactions nevertheless have significant effects in creating kin-like relations and constituting personhood for the parties in question (also see Chapter five).

Threats and “Play”

In the previous chapter, I noted that middle-aged parents often criticize their parents’ or foster parents’ childrearing strategies as being either too loose or too strict. When I first began my research, I was exceedingly puzzled by this contradiction: how can grandparents be at once too harsh and also accused of spoiling the children? However, over the course of my research, I found that these harsh parenting techniques were not exclusive to the senior generation. In fact, threats, name-calling, and bribing were often a part of the orphanage’s attempt to speed up the kinning process between parents and children.⁴³

In Daling, many of the interactions between newly placed foster children, as well as Huilan, the orphanage foster care monitor, and Mo *jie*, the orphanage’s physical therapist, were of a “teasing” or “threatening” ilk. As we sat, playing on the bed in the back room of one foster mother’s house with a little boy with autism, Mo *jie* nuzzled him, cooing, “*Huai bao bao, huai bao bao* (Rotten baby, rotten baby),” over and over in a sing-songy voice. As we ran across eight year-old Hongmei outside her new foster home,

⁴³ See Chapter one’s dialogue between Huilan and Mo *jie*, orphanage personnel, Dengrong and her foster parents. Huilan and Mo *jie* pressure Dengrong to tell her parents that she loves them or she may go back to the orphanage, also encouraging the parents to show more affection. When Dengrong finally responds by calling out her father’s name, her reaction is accompanied by great sobs, which embarrasses her parents but seems to satisfy the orphanage staff. “See how much it means to her, when you hold her and you show her you care?” responds Huilan, gently stroking Dengrong’s back.

a few old ladies had clustered to ask whether we'd come to take her back to the orphanage. "Only if she misbehaves," replied Mo *jie* with a smirk.

That evening over steaming piles of noodles in a *kuaican* diner off the quiet, dusky streets of the county seat, I asked why people tend to ask the children whether they want to go back to the orphanage or threaten them with this fate. At first the young women assumed I was asking about elderly foster parents and replied that they didn't know any better, that they say all sorts of things without thinking, but then Huilan looked pensive. She muttered abashedly, "But we say it, too, and we really shouldn't. I think that's one of the reasons that Hongmei wasn't as happy today, because the orphanage kept coming up."

"I think foster mothers say it to demonstrate that they're good parents," Suling, the Mercy Care foster care monitor commented, "you know, to show that the child is happier in their care, that they don't want to go back to the orphanage."

I struggled to distinguish aloud between one technique being a threat versus the other which is more of a demonstration of affection or an opportunity for the child to participate in the discussion. After all, however bullying the attempts to elicit a response from Dengrong in Chapter one, they were, in fact, accompanied by retorts to her foster parents to express more affection. However, Suling, Huilan, and Mo *jie* dismissed any threats, especially those that involved the orphanage as bad, because they likely bring up bad memories for the children.

Over time, however, I began to observe how for the most part, these "teasing" dialogues were sometimes playful, and at other times quite serious. They also served as rather sophisticated mechanisms of socialization whereby the child, through his or her

active participation, learned and internalized valuable lessons about belonging, authority, and personhood in Chinese culture. Drawing on her own extensive fieldwork with Inuit peoples, Jean L. Briggs explains that questions adults ask of children often place children in personally threatening scenarios and then dramatize the consequences children choose in order to demonstrate the consequences of emotion and behavior in the larger context of Inuit social life (Briggs 1998, 2000). Furthering that children are often spoken to in exaggerated voices (fear, disgust, saccharine persuasion, tenderness, etc.), Briggs notes the incredibly difficult job for children to disentangle or parse relationships between content and emotion in Inuit language and culture (2000: 162).

Through multiple, nuanced scenes of “teasing,” a term Briggs rejects for its negative connotations and replaces with that of “play” (2000: 161), she shows how these interrogations can straddle the boundaries of saccharine affection and socialization:

For the adult, the interaction is part idle pastime, part serious teaching device, and part test of how much understanding the child has developed; and more often than appears to *our* ears, it is a celebration of a child’s existence and dearness. It is also frequently a means by which adults can vicariously enact their own interpersonal dramas, expressing, and perhaps reliving, their own concerns and problems. And all three motives exist in continuously shifting combinations. Uninitiated children, who don’t understand that adults don’t mean exactly what they say, may be severely challenged by the questions, especially as the interrogations are often focused on transitions, even crises, that a child may be going through: weaning; adoption (very common in Inuit society); or perhaps the birth of a new sibling. When children have learned to disentangle the playful from the serious in a particular drama, and when they can no longer be drawn into the trap that the adult is setting, adults will stop playing that game with them. (2000: 161).

It is rather uncanny, what parallel the transitions Briggs describes have with the rhythms of foster care, and how insightful her analysis of these multivalent dramatizations proves for the Chinese context, so foreign to that of the Inuit. Even the translations of the opening lines Briggs provides, which question whether a particular adult or the child in

question is good, or whether a child would like to go live in the home of a stranger or a relative, were almost perfectly echoed in my own research (see Briggs 2000).

However, the culture that Briggs describes could hardly be more differentiated from that of the Chinese. Whereas the Inuit value their autonomy, avoid conflict, and are ambivalent about attachment, the lessons communicated through these pivotal Chinese parent-child exchanges have to do with the perils of social isolation, the important social roles children are to assume in deference to others, and the all encompassing sense of obligation a Chinese child and parent must develop toward one another to truly become family. In the next section, I will describe how the consequences of social isolation are communicated through such creative and interactive “play” and in the context of a culture in which (hierarchical) social relationships, particularly those within the family, are the building blocks of social life.

“Playing” Foster Families

Contrary to common ideals and portrayals of Chinese children as quiet and obedient and parents as commanding and authoritative, interactions I observed between foster parents and children often took the form of play that Briggs describes. Chinese parents and foster parents alike with grins on their faces, often questioned children as to whether they were good or bad (*guai bu guai?*), whether they were willing to share or not (*gei bu gei?*), or whether they wanted to go live in the house of a friend, relative, or stranger (*qu bu qu?*). Children’s differing responses dramatically shaped and transfigured the structure of these dialogues: especially with small children the imperative to give a toy or a piece of fruit to another child or a parent was loosely enforced. Parents found the stinginess of young

children to part with items hilarious and harmless just as often as they eventually corrected the disobedient behavior by reprimand or physical force (rarely spanking or slapping, but merely grabbing the aforementioned object out of the hands of the child in question).

As Briggs mentions, the dialogues were often casually constructed, good-natured efforts by parents to carry out a curiosity or desire to illicit a reaction, enjoy the child's naiveté, and only secondarily test the child's abilities or teach a lesson. For instance, one afternoon when *Yima* and I returned with Meili and her friend from a visit to the street food market, we bumped into another foster mother, Liu *ayi*, and her nearly two year-old grandson, Wei Wei, who she had strapped to her back.⁴⁴ She told us that she'd been out shopping with her older foster daughter and her young grandson, buying them new clothes, and she'd gone home immediately to put one of the new shirts on her grandson, laughing about how adorable he was and how excited she was to dress him up, and showing us some of the other clothes she had in her bags.

We chatted on the street corner for a bit, and Liu *ayi* took Wei Wei to pee behind a tree on the side of the road. When they decided they needed to head home, *Yima* tried to hand the little boy the bag with his new pants inside that she'd been holding for the other foster mother. When he wouldn't take it, she replied, "Okay, I won't give it to you. But *waipo* (a term for maternal grandmother, referring to herself) will wear your little pants then!" When she again got no response, she continued, "Well then give me some of your *baozi* (steamed bun that the boy was munching on leisurely)."

⁴⁴ Although the two mothers in question are foster mothers, Liu *ayi* is Wei Wei's biological paternal grandmother, and thus this interaction straddles the boundaries of play within foster families and biological families.

“Yes, give some to *waipo*,” his foster mother encouraged. When Wei Wei silently refused, Liu *ayi* removed his stuffed bear from another bag and asked, “Then why don’t you give this to *waipo*, *hao bu hao* (okay)?”

Finally, Wei Wei began to whimper, and walked over, snatching the stuffed bear out of his foster mother’s hands and murmuring “*bu gei*” (“no,” or, “I won’t give it”). Both women chuckled.

“We better get going,” Liu *ayi* responded, and we all called out goodbye to them as they walked down the street to their apartment building.

In this light-hearted exchange, the older women seem relatively unconcerned with Wei Wei’s noncompliance in holding the bag he’s given, sharing his steamed bun, or handing over his stuffed bear. Instead, the emphasis is on providing a playful, low stakes environment for Wei Wei to practice making decisions regarding the demands of authority figures and also relative strangers. Wei Wei doesn’t understand that *Yima* doesn’t really want to, nor can she wear his little pants, or that she probably has no use for his steamed bun or stuffed bear, so he plays along, finally becoming disturbed at the thought of parting with the bear to the point of whimpering and audibly refusing. Both women seem delighted and satisfied with his sour reaction. The point had seemed to implicate the young boy in an exchange that caused him to scrutinize his own choices and behaviors and eventually express himself through speech, however defiant!

In other light-hearted exchanges parents asked children with whom they wanted to sleep with at night (grandma or [foster]mama?), and feigned hurt at being rejected or rewarded children with affection when they were chosen. As Briggs dramatizes three year-old Chubby Maata’s progression from babyhood to girlhood, interactions between

parents and children like Liu *ayi* and Wei Wei above also serve to implicate the child in choices that demonstrate his or her social role vis à vis the family (2003). For instance, while Wei Wei refuses his grandmother and *Yima*'s requests, he's not shamed for his noncompliance, but rather his behavior is treasured as a feature of his naiveté and babyhood. As Briggs suggests, such interactions can contain multiple motivations, one being "a celebration of a child's existence and dearness" (2000: 161). Moreover, as Wei Wei grows and his grandmother and other adult figures can no longer tempt him into such games or dialogues, he will also find his social role as a young boy and finally, a young man. Despite their argumentative or teasing nature, then, these scripts are often imbedded with the importance of family harmony in Chinese society, wherein each individual plays his or her role and relates to one another accordingly. Wei Wei, a baby, is not expected to speak up for himself or comply with each and every request that is made, and his interactions vis-à-vis the adults confirm that he is to be treasured for his babyhood while it lasts (Briggs 2003).

Similar to the interactions Briggs observes, many playful dialogues had to do with offering children the choice of going to live with a relative, neighbor, or stranger, or staying at home with mom and dad. Owing to the futures the orphanage, these parents, and their children imagined in the United States or other foreign countries, my intrusion as a foreign face in the group often steered the conversation to news of America. Foster mothers retreated into their apartments to unearth photos of Chinese children with white parents, letters they couldn't read or understand, and presented these to me, wanting to know how "their children" were and asking if I'd come to adopt these little ones, who tottered about the concrete courtyard, currently on loan from the local orphanage.

At first, I was incredibly uncomfortable with the foster mothers' pleas for me to save their pitiful children whose future was not in China but in the United States. I was even more uncomfortable when elderly women would sidle up beside me and whisper in raspy voices, "which one do you want?" or foster parents would ask children, "do you want to go with this auntie back to America?" "No!" the children would protest and scream, as their parents playfully pushed them toward me, smirking, "I don't want you! Go!" And the children, gasping in sobs, clamored away from me to cling to their chuckling parents (see next page).

However, gradually I discovered that these questions were but variations on an attempt by foster parents to establish communication with their children, and subtly transmit cultural ideas about authority, social roles, and social belonging. To be sure, these interactions were also a great source of knowledge given that the foster mothers prescribed a role to both the children and myself that we, in turn, resisted. The foster mothers interpreted my difference as one that constituted power, even imperialism, and the children were implicated in this complex relationship. This expressed not only the foster mothers' ambivalence to my power and participation in their community, but also subtly underlined the power dynamics between Chinese parents and children. I learned that my social role as an adult was constituted both by the hierarchical relations between Chinese parents and children, and by my cultural association with adoptive parents who signified fear, uncertainty, and the disruption of foster relationships.

Let us recall the dialogue that Xiaoyuan's foster mother initiated with her, a child who because her parents had reappeared at the orphanage years after her abandonment could never be adopted abroad (see Chapter one). I want to suggest that paradoxically,

these playful dialogues are just as important in establishing children's belonging and role within a family as initiating a particular transition associated with fostering and adoption. As Xiaoyuan's mother asks her foster daughter, "Does Xiaoyuan want to go to America?" the dialogue is oddly scripted, with mom feigning surprise when Xiaoyuan refuses, as if they've rehearsed this many times. It is true that Xiaoyuan's foster mother hopes, against all hope, that she can one day be adopted, but she also takes great pleasure in Xiaoyuan's reticence to go to America if her mother can't come along, and her childish responses to the questions ("Maybe...maybe I could text you," Xiaoyuan stammers finally, and we all laugh). Xiaoyuan and her foster mother's dialogue asserts bonds of obligation and belonging between mother and daughter precisely because the fictional transition of adoption is approached with such dramatization.

Meanwhile down the street, Xiaoyuan's neighbor, another foster child, Honghuan, is teased by her siblings and neighbors about going to America, "Do you want to go? Will you go? You're so lucky!"

When her foster mother jokingly replied, "Yeah, I don't want you anyway!" Honghuan buried her head in her mother's chest. "Your new mother will look just like this auntie," her mom said motioning to me. "Go take a picture with her." Honghuan eyed me suspiciously, and we all laughed.

In this short exchange, there's a threat of isolation ("Yeah, I don't want you anyway!"), but the foster mother continues to hold the child, and the community finds Honghuan's suspicion of me understandable and endearing. Much like Wei Wei's refusal to share his items with *Yima*, Honghuan's "disobedience" is encouraged by the laughter, establishing that despite Honghuan's uncertain future, her present home is very

much secure with her foster mother and this gaggle of neighbors and siblings. In the next section, we see how commonplace threats of isolation, like the one above, also serve to communicate distinct ideas about what it means to be a Chinese person, given foster parents' unwillingness to ever truly leave a child alone.

Isolation and Belonging

A common threat almost all Chinese parents make to their children is “*wo bu li ni*,” or, “I’ll ignore you,” meaning, “I’m not paying attention to you or I refuse to acknowledge you (as a result of your behavior),” and even, “I don’t care.” In response to disobedience or noncompliance, a parent will casually and nonchalantly offer this phrase, accompanied by the action of turning one’s back briefly to the child, or pretending to walk away. When emotions are heightened, the phrase may be yelled at the child in question, the first or last in a series of piled on threats (see Brown 2002: 247), which seek to reform the child’s bad behavior. Because the opposite of belonging is isolation, I initially took these proclamations, like those inviting children to come back to America with me, as primarily manipulative or cruel.

However, what is starkly ironic in these very frequent exchanges between parents and children is that these threats to ignore are hardly ever carried out. Instead of ignoring the child, parents do just the opposite. While the child’s mother may pretend to walk away in order to get the child to follow, or turn her back for a brief moment, these threats of isolation are usually followed by more retorts, threats, or reprimands, in which the child becomes the object of much social attention, rather than the promise of being ignored.

Out in Daling one afternoon, one of the elderly foster mothers was becoming frustrated with her two year-old with cerebral palsy, who kept sagging to her knees when the mother attempted to place her on a chair in the courtyard. One of the ladies in the neighborhood came up and threatened, "If you keep misbehaving like that, you're going to go back to Nanning with them!" She gestured to Huilan and Mo *jie* from the orphanage, as well as me. Huilan remarked to the older woman that she really shouldn't be saying that, to which Hongmei's foster mother chimed in, "They say those things all the time."

Huilan then turned to the foster mother of the child who she was getting ready to interview. As they turned their chairs away from the child she told the foster mother to ignore her, not to draw more attention to her child or her misbehavior. One of the other older ladies quipped to the little girl who was still kneeling on the ground, "Yeah, if you're like that, we don't want you!"

Huilan turned, exasperated, reprimanding, "Not like that, just ignore her!" And by then the little girl had started to smile again. "See!" Huilan asserted.

But then a couple minutes later, when the foster mother and Huilan still had their backs to the little girl and were firmly enthralled in the interview, she pushed the chair over the gutter, where there was a large crack in the middle of the alleyway and tumbled at least three or four feet into the sludge beneath. We all gasped and I lifted her out. Thankfully it was pretty clear that she was okay, and her sweet foster father gathered her up, taking her inside to help change her dirty clothes and handing her a leg of chicken. Meanwhile, however, after Huilan had gone inside with them, the older ladies in the

courtyard began to mutter, “See that way of discipline is ridiculous. You can’t ignore a child, see what happens!”

In this scene, Huilan, the orphanage foster care monitor, urges the foster mothers to use ignoring the child as a disciplinary technique. What is interesting is that the content of the foster mothers’ threats (“If you keep misbehaving like that, you’re going to go back to Nanning with them!” and “Yeah, if you’re like that, we don’t want you!”) tend to suggest a similar fate, or threat of social isolation. (The threat, “*wo bu yao ni*” or “I don’t want you,” is typically piled onto like threats of “I’ll ignore you,” or “I’ll leave you behind.”) But to Huilan, it is not enough to simply threaten, and in fact, it is detrimental to do so (Huilan makes two attempts to get the foster mothers to stop threatening the little girl with consequences of her behavior and instead, actually ignore her); she communicates that the proper response is to turn one’s attention from the child, either permanently or temporarily (she doesn’t specify) and physically ignore her. While the initial results of this technique are promising (the child begins to smile and play quietly by herself), eventually the child tumbles into a deep trench, where she could have been seriously injured. Not surprisingly, the foster mothers conclude that ignoring a child is a ridiculous and even dangerous method of discipline.

The contrast in disciplinary techniques presented in this scene correlates with Daniel Y.H. Wu’s observation and emphasis on the importance of *guan*, or observation, monitoring, and control in Chinese parenting (1996). Among both rural and urban parents of varying ages and education levels, Wu found that obedience was still heavily desired by all, and the dwindling numbers of children in Chinese households often led to contemporary child training in which children were even more highly subject to control

and surveillance by numerous adults. Given philosophical understandings of children as being born without willpower or conscience and Confucius's emphasis on early education, many Chinese parents feel that children need constant supervision and training relatively early to succeed. Hence, these very verbal, involved, and social methods of discipline are quite commonplace in small communities, especially where grandparents serve as primary caregivers to grandchildren.

I suggest that the intent is to inform children about the effect and the consequences of social isolation, without ever truly isolating them, which may not only have negative, but as seen above, uncontrolled effects. For instance, one afternoon when we were hanging out with several families who lived in the same subdivision nearby the Guilin Orphanage, a relatively young foster mother was trying to fend off the pesky behavior and requests of her three year-old foster daughter, Yuanhui, who is mute. The little girl kept snatching toys from other children, tugging at her mom's shirttails to give her cookies (to which mom begrudgingly obliged), and trying to commandeer the camera Suling had brought along with her to take some photos of the foster children. Suling, becoming exasperated with the little girl's persistence, suggested that the foster mom slap her daughter's hand away to discourage bad behavior, since she and the toddler communicate largely through gestures. A few moments later, the young mother, in a fit of rage grabbed the little girl's arm and slapped her three times. Yuanhui started howling and another foster mother, the veteran of the community at 65 years of age, seated nearby who had been complaining about the little girl's behavior, got up.

As the young foster mother threatened to ignore her daughter or take her home, the elderly woman strode across the courtyard, and grabbed the little girl by the arm,

exclaiming “you act like that, *I’m* gonna take you away!” The little girl began to shriek loudly, kicking and screaming as the woman pulled her across the courtyard to where she had been seated. She set her on a stool next to her, and when the little girl looked over at her mom with her tear-stained face, her foster mother told her to stay put. As she sobbed the elderly woman threatened, “If you keep crying I’m going to get a stick from this tree behind me and hit you!” When the little girl did not stop crying, she tugged a branch off the tree and waved it at the little girl saying, “You just keep crying and see what happens!”

The young girl’s foster mother remained standing across the courtyard and said very little, but Suling and the other foster mothers began to laugh and compliment this *ayi* on how much control she had. A couple of times, the older woman only turned to the little girl and frowned and she burst into tears. Finally, when the older woman’s husband came back from the market with pork and she went to greet him, the little girl bounced up and ran to her mother, whimpering her only words, “*Mama, Mama,*” and the foster mother popped her up on her lap. Suling began to criticize the mother that she was too gentle with the kids, she needed to be more like this elderly foster mother, more forceful. She didn’t need to beat her kids all the time, just once in awhile so they would know she’s serious.

Here, the threat of isolation the young foster mother makes, given her overindulgence of her daughter, falls on deaf ears, and another elderly foster mother intervenes to make sure the young girl’s bad behavior is properly corrected. The threat of isolation made by her own foster mother is complimented by the threat and the playful enactment of actual isolation from her mother by another woman in the community. The

young girl's relative obedience to sit beside the elderly woman and gradually refrain from sobbing are seen as a result of the elderly woman's masterful control and manipulation of the child. As in the previous example in Daling, the community conspires to teach the child a lesson, multiple adults weighing in on the disobedient behavior of a child.

However, what is interesting about this incident in Guilin taken alongside the previous example in Daling, is that the orphanage and INGO monitors' responses vary. In contrast to Huilan, the orphanage monitor who undermines the foster mothers' authority by questioning their idle threats, Suling, the INGO monitor, is awestruck by the elderly foster mother's ability to command obedience over the young girl's behavior. Far from contradictory, I think such variance is consistent with the ambivalence middle-aged caregivers felt toward foster parents, their own parents, and their own childrearing philosophies as described in Chapter two. Additionally, while Huilan may have been questioning the methods of discipline among foster mothers in Daling, both she and Suling do not seem to question the importance of a parent's authority with his or her children. Likewise, in Chapter two Lu ayi's middle-aged sister-in-law, Hu *nushi*, is at once admiring and skeptical of her older sister's command of her (foster) children; in contrast, she bemoans her own inability to speak to or command respect from her daughter who mocks her Mandarin. Taken together, these kinning efforts on behalf of the orphanage suggest that authority and respect for elders, as a cultural value, are very much alive in the context of childrearing.

In her famous chapter on the uterine family, Margery Wolf comments that it was not only isolation, but also estrangement from family that constituted the essence of social death in Chinese society. She writes, "Chinese children are taught by proverb, by

example, and by experience that the family is the source of their security, and relatives are the only people who can be depended on. Ostracism from the family is one of the harshest sanctions that can be imposed on erring youth” (1972: 35). I am suggesting in coupling together threats of isolation (“I’ll pay no attention to you”) with threats of being taken from one’s family (“I’ll take you away!”) that the emphasis is on teaching children the relationship between obedience and social roles within the family. It is highly significant that despite the manifold references these threats may have for children who have been previously abandoned, the foster parents continue to employ them.

I suggest they do so, because it is these threats that normalize the experience of family for these children. Despite the fear they drive into the children’s hearts, they paradoxically serve to establish the permanence, rather than the temporary nature, of these family bonds. Only a child who belongs to a family, who plays the social role of a real child, who is at once treasured, and yet, oft disciplined, can truly be thrown out, ignored, or unwanted. The implication in these threats, though subtle and often seemingly subversive, is that the child, in question, is in fact, very unlikely to be ignored, very much wanted, and very much treasured.

Kinning Impaired Children

What remained questionable and problematic to both orphanage and INGO careworkers, however, was whether children with physical or mental impairments could interpret the sophisticated social cues their parents used to teach these important lessons of obligation, belonging, and social personhood. For instance, as referred to in Chapter one, parents like Dengrong’s often interpreted and expressed their children’s inability to walk or

comply with basic commands as “laziness.” One afternoon when a foster care volunteer and I visited a very poor urban household where two sisters were caring for four severely impaired children from the municipal orphanage, an older foster mother referred to her blind and mentally impaired child as “lazy” when she wouldn’t take the spoon in her hand to feed herself. The foster care volunteer corrected the older women, suggesting that the child was not lazy, but struggled with tasks that might be very basic to us primarily because of her mental and physical impairments. Similarly, at another poor household on the outskirts of Nanning, an elderly neighbor referred to a boy with severe mental and physical impairments due to cerebral palsy as a “rotten egg,” because he kept spitting out his food rather than swallowing the rice porridge he was fed.

Orphanage and INGO careworkers alleged that these types of comments were indicative of a lack of understanding of the needs and abilities of these children due to foster mothers’ limited education and “lack of sophistication.” They frequently commented that these types of comments were also evidence that older foster mothers problematically prioritized the physical needs of children over their psychological well-being. While I, too, was uncomfortable with the assertions that children with impairments were lazy, I think these utterances expressed a willingness on foster mothers’ parts to try to characterize and therefore, understand their children’s confusing or noncompliant behavior. In the scene where Dengrong’s mother complains that she is lazy and would rather be carried (Chapter one), we also see that Dengrong and her foster mother are experiencing a lack of psychological connection due to the severity and lasting emotional effects of Dengrong’s abandonment as a child. While characterizing impaired children as “lazy” is admittedly crude, I suspect these utterances represent

efforts on the foster mothers' parts to communicate psychological and social disconnect with their troubled children.

As we see in Chapter two, in the face of orphanage or INGO authority, foster parents were often uncomfortable communicating, especially in Mandarin, their thoughts. Moreover, their methods of communication were often criticized by orphanage and INGO workers as overly verbose or curt. As I further suggest in Chapter two, such differences in communication styles likely reference varying historical and generational experiences. As Sulamith Heins and Jack Potter (1990), Andrew Kipnis (1997), and Yunxiang Yan (2003) have noted, relationships of intimacy, between which few words were once spoken during the Socialist time period, have expanded to include romantic expressions of love and affection. It is possible that foster mothers fall back on expressions like "lazy" and "rotten egg," because they lack not only the medical vocabulary and understanding of impairment, but the social training to express their frustration and inability to communicate with their impaired children.

In addition, it is not only elderly foster parents, but also orphanage and INGO personnel themselves who struggle to incorporate impaired children into these sophisticated modes of play and cultural training. For instance, on children's day, the orphanage foster care director, Director Wang, as well as Huilan and I made a special series of visits to Daling, where we conducted a meeting regarding the village foster parents' progress and handed out cakes and sweet buns to all the children from the orphanage being fostered in the village. When we entered the alleyway where several families were clustered, we happily distributed the two sweet buns and one small cake to each family on behalf of each child.

When we approached a teenage boy with Down syndrome, Director Wang presented him the small cake, in addition to two buns, that she placed in his outstretched hands. She told him then to give the buns to his young uncle standing nearby. When he gestured toward his uncle, the young man rejected the offering, and Director Wang began to argue with the uncle that he should take them, because the whole point of the interaction was to teach his foster nephew how to share. Visibly confused by this series of interactions, the foster child with Down syndrome began to forcibly try to thrust the buns toward his uncle and a neighbor, but refusing to give them, yelling, “*bu gei!*” (“I won’t give them!”) and then stomping off with his cake and the buns angrily into the house. The other foster mothers who stood nearby began to yell, laugh, and berate him, and Director Wang followed him into the house, imploring him that his behavior was incorrect, and he needed to learn to share.

Finally, he came out of the house and handed one bun to his uncle and another to his foster mother proudly. But then suddenly, catching sight of Hongmei, an eight year-old foster girl across the alleyway who was chomping on a bun, he pointed accusingly at her and began making noises. He wanted everyone to see that she had bread and he didn’t. The foster mothers tried to soothe him by saying, “You still have your cake in the house,” and pointing toward it, but the young man remained transfixed, pointing and glaring at Hongmei. Everyone observed how mad he was, and Director Wang replied that everyone should just ignore his incorrect behavior, though on the way out of the village, she could see that he was still sulking, pointing at the buns of the other children, and even refusing to take back the buns that were being offered to him, and so she began to sheepishly utter “sorry” to the foster mothers as she left.

Taken at face value, such an incident confirms the difficulty that concerned orphanage and INGO personnel like Director Wang regarding impaired foster children's inability to interpret sophisticated social cues and the inherent danger of dismissing their impairments and treating them no differently than ordinary children. However, Director Wang's social lesson in sharing may also be ineffective, because she overrides the cultural norms of the community and the established social relationships in her efforts toward proving a point. For instance, Director Wang's frustrations initially fixate on the uncle, whose lack of acceptance of the buns from his nephew may cause the nephew to misunderstand the value of sharing in community. However, the uncle's refusal to accept the buns may actually be a recognition that his nephew's social role is that of a young child, rather than young man. As we have seen with Wei Wei, authority figures do not always demand items to establish compliance, but rather to implicate the child in assessing his or her social position vis-à-vis the authority and even celebrating the child's naiveté or babyishness. While it is unclear what relationship the uncle has established with his nephew, it is certain that he does not see his acceptance of the buns as crucial to his nephew's social belonging.

When Director Wang attempts to rectify the situation, the young boy becomes visibly confused, frustrated, and upset, eventually removing himself from the social situation. However, in obedience to Director Wang, he ultimately returns and hands the buns to a neighbor and his uncle only to find that another child in the community is snacking blissfully on her buns. Feeling a sense of injustice, he points at her, grunting, and when the other foster mothers try to soothe them, Director Wang implores them to ignore him, and eventually apologizes and leaves.

It is relatively clear that whatever the misunderstanding, the nephew understood himself as having a parallel social role to Hongmei, another physically and mentally impaired child, and accordingly, foster parents from the community tried to soothe and pacify his frustrations. From the perspective of kinning, the nephew's rather astute understanding of his social role and the foster parents' attention to the impaired boy suggest that playful dialogues with impaired children are not necessarily problematic in and of themselves, but can certainly run awry outside of the context of these kin relationships. In fact, the boy's insistence that he be treated similarly to another foster child, however crude, demonstrates a distinct sense of belonging and adherence to the rules of the community and his proscribed social role.

Further evidence for the effects of kinning among impaired children to communicate belonging and social personhood came in the form of affirmation of the children's abilities rather than proclamation of their inabilities. As we returned to Daling over many months foster parents began to proudly list their children's accomplishments rather than bemoan their impairments. "Jinnan knows how to communicate when she's wet herself and needs her diaper changed," one foster mother repeated over and over when we visited, gesturing to how the child pointed toward her bottom with her outstretched hand. "Xiao wei may not be able to speak, but when she was watching soap operas with her Dad the other day, her eyes welled up with tears during one of the emotional scenes. We knew she understood!" parents exclaimed.

While these proclamations can be somewhat attributed to the conventions of the orphanage and INGO monitors' evaluations (they often asked what improvements the child had made or what she or he had learned in the past month), the volunteering of such

information stands in stark contrast to the foster parents' aforementioned emphasis on children's ugly appearances or physical deficiencies when children first came to live with them. Additionally, such proclamations suggest that despite applying similar treatment and discipline to children with impairments, foster parents also developed communication strategies that were attuned to both the abilities, as well as the physical and mental limitations, of impaired children.

In Chapter five, we will further consider how these utterances illustrate transformations in personhood, but for the moment, I want to suggest that these changes were produced through the daily process of kinning and living alongside one another, through which not only impaired children experienced changes in ability and aptitude, but foster parents also gained an understanding of the limits of impairment and the perceived limits of their ability to love such children. Foster parents who were once unconvinced of children's value ("I could hardly look at them when the orphanage placed them with me. I wanted them to take them back, but they said these were the children who needed a home, and they wouldn't take them no matter how often I complained") began to know these children intimately as sons and daughters who were not only beloved, but belonged, distinctly within the boundaries, of these makeshift families.

Security and Social Personhood

On several occasions when I accompanied the Mercy Care monitor to *Yima* and Meili's home, *Yima* responded dryly to Suling's question about Meili's strengths by concluding flatly and coolly that she had none. When Suling pestered her, she began to list Meili's faults to us—she never helped with the chores, she wasn't very good at math, she

struggled in English, she was lazy—rather than her strengths. Finally, when Meili left the room, her foster mother whispered that she was really a very good child, but she'd caught her playing with matches recently in the living room, and if she praised her in front of her, she'd be liable to burn the whole house down!

Another afternoon we huddled in their chilly apartment, crisp winter air wafting in from the windows, as is the Chinese penchant to reap the benefits of cool air even when it's bone-chilling. We were warming our hands around the tiny space heater propped on a bench and chatting about religion and China and America, planes and Obama, these dichotomous topics, when I pointed over to the tiny altar with its pile of ashes in the corner of the room and asked *Yima* what significance it held.

She nervously replied that it was just superstition, they only pray to the ancestors on the holidays now, maybe cut up some fruit over the Chinese new year or during the moon festival and say some prayers for their future, but "it's silly, nonsense," she said, hastily. But Meili, always eerily serene despite her broken family history, and with a faraway look on her face, thoughtfully replied, "No, it's not superstition. It represents the search for security, what every Chinese person is looking for."

A few months later, when we had learned that Meili would soon be adopted, *Yima* had wanted me to translate a letter to the adoptive family that she'd written about the woman Meili was becoming. The letter, which I ultimately had to refuse to deliver, because it had to first go through the orphanage, was filled with *Yima*'s honest and earnest efforts to rear Meili as best she could. She tearfully implored me to simply memorize the words if it wasn't possible to deliver it to the adoptive mother. As she took

my arm as we walked down the sidewalk, she whispered in my ear, her voice cracking, “You know I want to spoil her just a little bit before she goes.”

Yima’s progression from criticizing Meili incessantly in front of her, to whispering with emotion behind her back about her desire to spoil her, are consistent with Margery Wolf’s observations regarding Chinese child training nearly forty-five years ago. Quoting Taiwanese mothers, Margery Wolf notes the old adage, “You must not let a child know you love him or you will not be able to correct his behavior,” connoting the belief that children will not respect obviously loving adults, but will certainly fear stern and authoritative parents (1970:44). Similarly the Chinese phrase that my informants often repeated as an antiquated child rearing philosophy (“*da shi qing, ma shi ai*”), “the strike of the one that loves you is akin to a kiss and curse is a sign of love,” confirms deep-seated beliefs among many that the Chinese tradition of child training, or *xiao xun*, is associated with strictness and demands for obedience.

Ruth K. Chao points out that whereas for Americans strictness in parenting is often associated with parental hostility, aggression, mistrust and dominance, for Asians, obedience and strictness may be positively associated with parental concern, caring and involvement (1994:1112). Furthermore, Chao argues that rather than dominating the child, the motivation and intention of Chinese parenting is associated with familial harmony and integrity (1994:1113). Finally, following Bond and Hwang (1986), Chao emphasizes that Chinese parenting philosophies are built on essential aspects of Confucian thought, which can be summarized as follows: “(1) a person is defined by his or her relationships with others, (2) relationships are structured hierarchically, and (3)

social order and harmony are maintained by each party honoring the requirements and responsibilities of the role relationships” (1994: 1113).

Such underlying philosophical beliefs not only confirm the importance and effectiveness of kinning practices that establish children and parents’ social roles vis-à-vis one another, but also explain the widespread practice among both INGO and orphanage monitors and foster parents of comparing children to one another. Whereas comparisons ran the gamut from encouraging friendly competition (“Jinnan, you need to keep practicing standing, so someday you can beat Dengrong in a race!” chirped Huilan to one of the foster families) to rather crude contrasts regarding appearances (“I wish you had come yesterday before the beautiful white baby left, now all I have is this ugly black one,” complained one foster mother), the effect was to place foster children in hierarchical social relations with one another, affording them security in the social positions and making them cognizant of their social responsibilities to parents and one another. Often when young parents complain that only children will become spoiled within the household due to their central position, they are also tacitly acknowledging the importance of these social hierarchies in the family and outside of it for the harmony and structure of Chinese social life.

Conclusion

For decades the anthropological function of family was understood to be the raising of children into productive adults who could contribute to society (Fei 1947 [1992]; Malinowski 1930; Parsons 1955). While the anthropology of kinship has by and large moved away from such functional analyses (Carsten 2004, 2000; Collier, Rosaldo,

Yanagisako 1982; Schneider 1984, 1980; Weston 1991), there is arguably something universal about the training, instruction, discipline, and care that parents in all societies provide their growing children. In this chapter, I drew upon anthropologists of Norway and Canada, in order to understand what features of Chinese child rearing might be universal and what experiences are unique.

I have suggested that despite the less obvious biological differences between foster parents and foster children, and the lack of permanency (in most cases) for the parties involved, like Howell's findings with international adoptees to Norway, kinning practices in foster care in China have similar effects of intersubjective recreation in personhood for both the foster child and the foster parents. Whereas Howell looked at relatively public practices and performances (photos, costumes, and trips), I suggested that the work of kinning in foster care occurs in both the public context of orphanage monitors and their efforts to initiate and encourage relationship-building between foster parents and children, and the more intimate, ordinary, and arguably impactful context of everyday practices of childrearing and "play" between foster parents and children. Building upon Howell's rather cursory examinations of the relationship between popular cultural practices and kin relationships, I showed how these intimate relationships are formed, over time, and with some ambivalence and interference, between strangers. Additionally, by considering the kinning work to be not only limited to the foster parents but expanded to include orphanage and INGO actors, I highlighted the multiple allegiances and ambivalences of these actors, who are often parents themselves (see Chapter two).

Despite the vast differences in geography and culture, there are affinities between the Norwegian kinship system that prioritizes not only blood relations, but also a “shared history” (Howell 2003: 472), and Chinese beliefs that make family bonds notoriously difficult to transcend and abandonment akin to social disability (see Chapters one and two). I suggested that whereas culture often becomes reified and superficialized within the transnational kinning practices Howell examines (2003: 476), cursory understandings or biases toward abandonment and impairment are often replaced with more nuanced understandings by foster parents through foster kinning practices.

The poignant moments above from some of the primary and final interactions I had with *Yima* and Meili demonstrate the development of their relationship and the importance security continues to play for those like them, who find themselves without family in a society which so privileges and prioritizes these blood relations. Social personhood, in this case, family roles, are constituted in the everyday kinning practices of parents and children, whereby foster parents and children, like Meili and *Yima*, come to understand themselves as mutually obligated in this hard work of family-making. When *Yima* denies Meili's strengths in front of her, but then later writes that she is proud of the woman she has become, and whispers her intent to spoil her, we see the range of child training practices that go into kinning, and that ultimately recreate relationships of family among those unrelated by blood.

In response to my query with which this chapter began, foster parents are both harsh and spoiling with their foster children, because their efforts to socialize children make use of dialogical play, a technique that implicates children in a total social world, but also often celebrates their place within a distinct social order (Briggs 1998).

Additionally, these seniors have stepped into the role of primary caregivers. No longer can they merely spoil grandchildren as would have been their social right and role in earlier times (Wolf 1970: 49), but they have become the parents who are responsible for preparing these children to become social beings in a society in which they will be expected to play obedient, proscribed social roles. For foster parents who raise abandoned children, their own social importance as parents is intimately intertwined with the making of these children into obedient, humble, yet capable social beings. They see children's social importance not abstractly, but in relation to this family to whom they come to belong and what they may give back to society, much as they have been trained to do.

Finally, their own security, what Meili says every Chinese person seeks, remains precariously tied to these relations, not only in a financial sense, but also in a social one. While praying to the ancestors may be framed as superstition, having a family to call one's own in contemporary China is a very real concern for both foster parents and foster children. Because the obligations between the senior generation and the middle generation have been strained by migration and intergenerational difference, these senior foster parents lack obligation in a society where one's indebtedness to others remains paramount. Similarly, foster children, abandoned and disabled, lack these lasting social connections to family. Hence, these temporary relations, despite their often truncated nature, represent the security and obligation both crave and achieve through family-like relations and the daily work of kinning, thus, becoming kin.

Chapter Four

Remaining Marginal: Limits to Fosterage Relationships

Rural Purity and the Crisis of Urban Morality

Mrs. Wang, the foster care director of the Nanning Municipal Orphanage, was proud of the people of Daling. After all, her own husband had grown up in the small village outside of the county seat. He, like over 90% of people in Daling county, spoke the Zhuang language that Mrs. Wang, herself a speaker of the Cantonese-style vernacular (*baihua*), found so *buhao ting* (unpleasant to listen to). But she laughed knowingly as she said this, and the foster moms did not seem to fault her for her opinions, or at least their discontent did not show in the way they coddled and cuddled the children with physical and mental impairments that now combed their village streets. Since October of 2011, Mrs. Wang, the director of foster care at the Nanning municipal orphanage, and the orphanage monitors had placed twenty-four kids with mild to moderate impairments from the municipal orphanage into foster homes in a small village outside Daling. These orphanage officials felt that in contrast to the city, the rural environment would benefit these children with impairments.

“Out here in the countryside in Daling,” Huilan, one of the foster care monitors, said, surveying the expanse of green rice paddies nestled between Guangxi’s famous karst formations that jut toward the sky, “our hope is that the children can learn some life

skills. They can farm alongside their parents, they can sweep and help out around the house and become members of the community.” In contrast to the complaints about city folk, the familiar refrain uttered by the municipal orphanage workers and INGO staff was that the people of Daling were different; they were “special.” “They’ve really loved these kids when no one else would,” smiled Mrs. Wang. “I don’t know why they’re different, but they just are. They love these kids just like their own.” This exhortation and the success of the Daling project traveled rapidly across the region. When I visited orphanages in neighboring Qinzhou city and Yongning county just six months later, I found they’d all heard of Nanning City Orphanage’s Daling project.

In contrast, Mrs. Wang, Huilan, and Mo *jie* (the physical therapist), all complained that kids with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, developmental delays, and autism, were hard to place in the capital city. According to orphanage officials and INGO personnel, the city was a busy, cutthroat place where prospective foster parents were only motivated by the small stipend the orphanage provided them to take in such disabled children. Because they only permit two foster children per family, orphanage monitors complained that some foster mothers went behind their backs and applied for children from both the municipal and the local county orphanages and then hid the kids in different households when officials came to visit. As one INGO worker alleged bitterly, “those really old ladies who take in the severe kids with cerebral palsy, why else would they do it if not for the money?”

Given the cramped and high-rise nature of city living and the lack of accommodations for individuals with physical impairments, some kids would rarely venture out from the fifth, sixth, and seventh story walkups. Eventually, as they grew

older and developed behavior problems or it became impossible to for elderly foster mothers to carry them up the concrete steps on their backs, they would be returned to the orphanage having learned few life skills.

Scholarly literature has demonstrated the historic and political nature of the urban-rural divide and the inferior status of peasants in China (Cohen 1993; Solinger 1999; Whyte 2010). Hence, literature on the widespread illegal immigration patterns within modern China from the poor countryside to the affluent cities report the institutionalized racism of the government household registration system, the deplorable conditions for such migrants once they reach the city, and the plight of children who are left behind in the care of elderly grandparents while their parents toil in urban factories for meager sums (Ye and Murray 2005; Zhang 2002). However, what was perplexing about this refrain regarding the optimal nature of foster care in the countryside and the depraved nature of such placements in the city is that it seemingly reversed established trends of immigration, convention and prejudice. Whereas rural peoples were usually disdained for their backward and uncivilized customs, here they were being praised for their moral purity and innate ability to care. Meanwhile, orphanage monitors decried a moral crisis in the cities where families were supremely motivated by greed, rather than altruism, to care for vulnerable children. Were these state actors revalorizing rural peoples as they cast their care in moral and superior terms to families in the cities? Was this the apparent and striking reversal of established prejudice that it seemed to be?

The crisis of morality that orphanage monitors pointed to in the city echoes some of Yunxiang Yan's observations regarding both the public perception of a moral vacuum in modern China, and the emerging organization and institutionalization of immoral

behaviors (2011). While Yan cites instances of immorality in both the countryside and the city, it is the larger scale food and medicine scams involving the distribution of faulty or contaminated products, in which the government and private enterprise are often complicit, that threaten social trust (2011: 56-9). Distinguishing between the social trust that needs to develop in a modern society between strangers and the more highly developed Chinese moral code of personal trust (the bonds between individuals and kin in a limited social circle with distinct social roles [2011: 59]), Yan argues that the lack of social trust in China's highly modern and mobile society is cause for alarming concern (60).⁴⁵ In Yan's terms, while personal trust in foster care projects might be effectively cultivated outside of biological family bonds (see Chapter three), orphanage careworkers bemoaned that absence of social trust in city environments, while highlighting what they felt to be a robust and particularly promising, intact network of personal trust in the countryside.

But are these moral contrasts real or imagined, or some combination thereof? What are the characteristics of urban and rural foster care that substantiate these differences? What is at stake in the maintenance of the dichotomies between the two contexts, and what relationship do they have to the bubbling perception of moral decline in contemporary China? Finally, how are these divisions maintained in the face of the complex nature of foster family relationships and with what consequences?

⁴⁵ Yan draws upon Xiaotong Fei's descriptions of societal and personal relationships in China (1992[1947]) to establish these definitions of social and personal trust.

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter, I described the transformative, intersubjective character of foster care relations, which afford social personhood to both elderly caregivers and disabled children through the process of “kinning.” However, according to the orphanage caregivers above, the relative security fostering relations provide is threatened due to external and internal factors plaguing urban areas. In this chapter, utilizing two case studies, I examine the treatment of children with impairments in urban and rural foster care. In turn, I highlight a contrast between the emphasis on medical diagnosis of disability and specialized education in the city versus the power of love, care, and the purity of people in the countryside as healing for children with impairments. While foster care for vulnerable children is administered differently within urban and rural settings partly due to structural barriers, I suggest orphanage monitors’ earnest praise for rural foster parents and ardent critique of urban foster parents serves to maintain these dichotomies and inequalities.

I draw attention to the ways in which orphanage workers attempt to resolve the crisis of morality they experience in the city is actually maintained through the dismissal of immoral behavior (grown children who refuse to accept their parents’ willingness to care for impaired children, or entire communities who reject impaired, older children who are unable to fulfill their social roles) that also reflects real limits of the acceptance of foster care models in the countryside. These dichotomies are problematic because while they happily extol the intrinsic moral virtues of the countryside, they also render rural China, and to some extent disabled foster children, persistent obstacles to modernity, because the Chinese state is not willing to invest in education and medicine for rural

peoples. In contrast to the previous chapter's emphasis on the transformations in personhood afforded by the kinning relations of foster care, this chapter presents some of the remaining obstacles to becoming family for these marginalized actors. Not only are there internal cultural obstacles to the practice of family among strangers in villages in China, but also the apparent valorizing of the rural by state actors actually serves to render these families and their foster children marginal to modern family and social life.

"Are Children like Peng Fei really adoptable in the United States?"

It was a rainy, dreary day when we entered from the bustling street in the middle of one of the older neighborhoods in the center of Nanning into a dank courtyard to the welfare housing building. I climbed the seven flights of steep stairs with the Mercy Care monitor to Peng Fei's family's apartment. Once inside there was the pungent smell of sour milk and mildew. Each time I would return there would be a different cluster of aunties or the couple's teenage children helping tend to the babies with cleft palates in the back room.

"*Ayi*, you're so generous, two babies and Peng Fei, wow you really are impressive!" the Mercy Care worker chuckled, smiling.

"Impressive! Ha!" the old woman scoffed. "As soon as one leaves, the orphanage thrusts another one into our arms, and how can we say no? They're so pitiful, these children," she said, resting one of the babies on her lap as she crouched in the sparse living room. Meanwhile, Peng Fei, a blind, gangly boy of eight years moved awkwardly about the room, clinging to the dingy walls, slapping his palms against them, and slapping his mother as he fumbled for her gaunt form in the doorway of the tiny kitchen.

As Peng Fei's mother spoke, her voice shook, and tears entered her eyes. She took Peng Fei into her lap, cradling him as she fed him. She told us she had to restrain him to feed him so that he wouldn't choke or hurt himself and so that he'd eat. The family had cared for him since he was only a few years old when he'd started to speak and then suddenly stopped. She simply didn't know what more they could do for him, how they could help him. She said someone at the orphanage had mentioned he might be autistic. "What is autistic?" she asked. "Is he autistic?" she asked the Mercy Care worker. When he said he didn't know, she asked me for my evaluation. "What do *you* think?" she said urgently, "what does it look like to you?"

For months, Peng Fei's mom protested that he needed to be re-evaluated and re-diagnosed. She complained, always tearfully, that he attended school at the orphanage, but the teachers ignored him, because they didn't know how to interact with him. Finally, at the monthly meeting at the orphanage, the Mercy Care workers, orphanage foster care monitors, and I discussed Peng Fei's case. There was an American psychologist coming in a month, and it was decided Peng Fei's mother would bring him to the school to be evaluated.

The meeting was a cacophony of English, *baihua*, Mandarin, medicalization, rehabilitation and the wailing of a blind boy. Peng Fei spent most of his time bolting to the door, swinging it open and closed and rejoicing in the muffled sound. The psychologist did the one thing no one wanted: she refused to deliver a diagnosis, instead encouraging Peng Fei's mother, offering affirmation and creative ideas for how to stimulate the boy. Peng Fei's mother annoyed the orphanage staff by answering each of the psychologist's questions with stories that meandered in and out of Mandarin and

baihua and attested to the difficulties and joys of raising him. The orphanage staff annoyed me by scolding her for these long diatribes and neglecting to translate an ounce of the encouragement or affirmation the therapist offered. Peng Fei's mom was anxious and perplexed as to why an American therapist couldn't or wouldn't offer a decisive diagnosis and frustrated that she was constantly being goaded to speak Mandarin when Mrs. Wang spoke *baihua* just as well as her. By the time the grueling evaluation was over, Mrs. Wang and the exasperated orphanage staff demanded to know two things: did Peng Fei belong in a foster home or in the residential autistic school at the orphanage and did kids like Peng Fei really have any hope of being adopted in the United States?

I employ Peng Fei's evaluation as an example of foster care in an urban context. I suggest it shows two things. First, while at a glance, Peng Fei's condition and his mother's indignation appear to reflect the failure of the state to care for vulnerable children in urban settings, orphanage workers link the problems associated with urban foster care to the moral deficiencies of urban settings and people. Second, the emphasis on institutional education for impaired, urban children competes with and undermines the holistic model of foster care.

The Morality of Medicine and Education: Foster Care in Urban Contexts

Mrs. Wang's questions and the orphanage staff's attitudes toward Peng Fei's mother both during the evaluation and leading up to it reflect increasingly articulated beliefs that foster care does not work well in urban areas, because city folk are hardened to the needs of children with impairments and foster primarily for the money. Even as the relatives caring for the orphanage babies in Peng Fei's household suggest they care for them

because they are pitiful, the orphanage also knows the family needs the money and hence, continues to pass babies into their care. Like many families in Nanning, Peng Fei's family did not meet the minimum income requirements to foster, but the orphanage, who complained they often struggled to find such children with severe impairments homes, chose to turn a blind eye. Whatever the real motivation of the family, by placing impaired children into a low-income family's seventh story walkup, the orphanage perpetuates the scenario it criticizes: foster care in urban contexts is immoral because poor city folk provide inadequate care for financial compensation.

Furthermore, the moral deficiencies of Peng Fei's mother are subtly linked to the failure of urban foster care. To explain, while Peng Fei's foster mother's advocacy appears to be the emblem of moral protest (see Chapter five for multiple examples of such advocacy), Mrs. Wang and the orphanage staff subtly undermine her valor. While Mrs. Wang and the other orphanage staff did not blame Peng Fei's mother outright for his developmental delays, they critiqued her modes of communication, from the language she spoke to the stories she told. Her stories were inappropriate in a clinical setting, where the importance of the interaction was a diagnosis coming from a Western expert rather than an articulation of the modes of caring provided by a poor woman who lives in a seventh-story walk up.

The commitment to the clinical diagnosis (despite it never coming) by Peng Fei's mother, the orphanage caregivers, and myself shows a bias toward Western medicalization in urban areas in China when it comes to children with impairments. Whereas the rise of foster care in the early 1990s appeared to signal a shift away from the institutional model of welfare in urban areas, the overwhelming number of impaired

children in welfare centers today (Hu and Szente 2009), Western ideas about medicalization brought by Western INGOs and adopted by the Chinese government (Wang 2010a, b), and the lack of provision for such children in public schools has shifted the focus back toward institutional models of care for children with severe impairments (see Shen, McCabe, and Chi *In press*).

In this instance, the orphanage was trying to discern whether Peng Fei should continue to be fostered and attend the school for ordinary, unimpaired orphanage children (as he was currently doing), or enter the orphanage's program for autism that consisted of residential, specialized education. In order for Peng Fei's family to continue to foster him, he had to attend the orphanage school, because both his parents worked and did not have the money to send him to a private special education school. However, the orphanage would only cover the cost of specialized education if Peng Fei entered the residential autism program housed at the orphanage. Thus, while the orphanage was technically supportive of both foster care and special education, Peng Fei's family found themselves unable to both seek the specialized care they believed he needed *and* continue to foster him.

Matthew Kohrman, in his treatise on the institutionalization of disability services (2005), describes the Chinese government's incongruity between treating disability as a curable disease and designating disabled citizens as an exceptional population. The conflict between state of the art institutional specialized rehabilitative and education programs continuing to develop in orphanages and the government's tacit commitment to foster care roughly resembles this policy divide. On the one hand, children with impairments are to be diagnosed, treated, and institutionalized within the walls on the

orphanage. On the other, through foster care, the government attempts to reintegrate them into society (*huigui shehui*), establishing a place for them in modern Chinese life.

While the orphanage monitors tended to regard the medical and educational services of the institution as optimal for impaired children like Peng Fei, they displaced the gap between these and children's need for socialization onto urban families. The discourse of the urban area as a modern yet cutthroat place is upheld while Peng Fei's family is tacitly blamed for his failure to thrive. Taken together then, the questions from Mrs. Wang express both the supreme effort to cure disabled children through institutionalized medicine and education and the inability to absorb these children into the Chinese nation, making them only adoptable abroad.⁴⁶ Mrs. Wang's questions establish the precarious character of foster care in urban areas as a consequence of the city's moral depravity, a city that is certainly no place for a child like Peng Fei.

"These Kids Aren't Smart Enough to Go to Kindergarten"

Meanwhile, when we returned a month after the children had been placed in rural Daling, orphanage staff were overjoyed to see children with Down syndrome popping the tops off hot peppers alongside their foster parents, autistic children pulling out chairs for adults, as well as kids with cerebral palsy beginning to communicate, walk, and talk. Orphanage staff also paid special attention to the bonds developing between parents and children and talked feverishly amongst themselves about which parents were particularly caring and provided insistent reminders to those who were lackadaisical when it came to daily therapy or discipline. Finally, they spent time evaluating the needs and abilities of the

⁴⁶ See both Leslie Wang (2010 a,b) and Sara Dorow's (2006) theorizations of the international market's revaluations of disabled children.

children, weighing and measuring all the children with cerebral palsy or other physical disabilities, and providing medicine or therapeutic expertise to parents who needed extra attention.

The mood in Daling was celebratory: the new project was showing rapid results, and orphanage staff quickly attributed this success to the foster moms' efforts. Among other aspects, orphanage staff were particularly impressed with the foster moms' commitment to doing physical therapy with their children inside their homes. The hopes that were talked about in rapid Mandarin amongst orphanage staff were that these children were being accepted into a loving community where they could learn skills that would eventually make them productive members of society.

However, the children and their impairments were incredibly varied. Some children had tentative diagnoses of autism, others had severe physical impairments due to cerebral palsy but hardly any mental repercussions, while still others were developmentally delayed. Eight year-old Hongmei was the product of several urban foster care placements gone awry. With minimal deformity to one of her eyes, Hongmei was small for her age and had what the orphanage had described as numerous learning disabilities. Hongmei had performed poorly in urban schools, but she'd also attended school sporadically because her urban foster mother had been negligent. Given her experience in the city, orphanage officials felt she was a prime candidate for life in Daling.

Just a few months after being placed in Daling, Hongmei was thriving. She'd come to her foster placement in Daling with what everyone called "bad habits," given that her previous foster mother had encouraged her to lie to orphanage monitors. When

she'd first arrived in Daling, she ate out of the garbage, lied to her foster parents, and exhibited a lack of social and cognitive skills. However, after just a couple months of living with her new foster parents and foster sisters, her foster mother happily reported that she was able to "reason with her," and Hongmei showed interest and aptitude in learning simple spelling and math.

However, the same day that Hongmei proudly wrote her name for us on a scrap of paper, introduced us to her new *nai nai*⁴⁷ and rattled off some new phrases in the local Zhuang language, I stood with a Mercy Care worker and a neighbor as they talked about her progress.

"I think she's ready for kindergarten," Suling, the Mercy Care worker chatted excitedly.

"Oh, I don't know," the neighbor, herself a foster mom to two older boys, one with severe cerebral palsy and the other developmentally delayed, replied with a shy smile.

"Why not?" Suling asked.

"Well she's too old for kindergarten," the neighbor replied.

"But she's developmentally delayed so she needs to work at her own pace. She'd be fine in a kindergarten classroom," Suling urged.

"But these types of kids, they're different, like my Hengwei. If they were in the classroom, it really wouldn't be fair to all the other kids. They would bring all the other kids down," the foster mom replied. "I just don't think it's possible for them to go to school." Suling kept pressing, but the mother giggled nervously.

A month later personnel from multiple INGOs, Mrs. Zhou, the deputy director of the orphanage, and several others rode in on the bus with us to Daling to celebrate the

⁴⁷ Mandarin term for paternal grandmother.

new foster care placement and treat the mothers, children, and local Daling officials to a lunch to thank them for their cooperation. It was a wild afternoon of struggling to shove chopsticks full of duck and chicken into the kids' mouths, toasting with *bai jiu*⁴⁸ and beer, and affirmation from all sides of their commitment to the foster care project. Over and over the refrain rang out from Mrs. Zhou and others that Daling people were special, because they loved these kids just as if they were their own.

As she commended the village head on his willingness to support these children and their families, the deputy director dipped her tiny goblet, as was customary, to clink below the gruff man's glass in a sign of respect.

"These children couldn't walk or talk when they first came to Daling," the village head bragged. "But now, look around the room, listen to the chatter, did you see them, sturdy and strong on their way in? These things that they couldn't do, they've come to Daling and now they can!"

A minute later the deputy director leaned in and asked the village head about when these children would start attending the local kindergarten. He fumbled for his words and then hastily muttered that he just wasn't sure if these kids were smart enough for kindergarten, he'd get back to the orphanage staff on that, he'd have to ask around.

Earlier that month a similar conversation had quickly escalated over a meal of *kuaican* in a local eatery. Huilan, Mo *jie*, Suling and I were exhausted after a full day of visiting with the foster families and had gone into Daling to spend the night. We ordered steaming plates of food and discussed the events of the day together. When we began to talk about Hongmei's much improved status, Suling spoke up.

"Hongmei should go to kindergarten," she said.

⁴⁸ Rice wine liquor served at celebrations.

“I don’t know,” Huilan wavered. Mo *jie* shook her head.

“The foster mom should at least go to the school and ask. She hasn’t even done that, and Hongmei really wants to learn. She needs to be around other kids, normal kids, not hanging around with those older Down’s boys down the street all the time.”

“But you don’t know the history of this project,” Huilan complained. “I’m not sure we can ask the parents to push the school. Hongmei will stick out, she’ll be uncomfortable there. She’s so much older. Can you imagine the pressure? Do you remember what the pressure was like when we were kids? She can’t take that kind of pressure!”

“You can’t protect her from things like that,” Suling shot back. “You can’t protect her from life. This is the real world, don’t you want her to live in it?”

“But I know what these kids can handle,” Huilan retorted. “I’ve grown up with them in the orphanage. I can ask about kindergarten, but I’m not sure anything’s going to change. I’m not sure about the upper limits of Hongmei’s abilities, and neither are you. I don’t want her to get hurt and to fail and for this community to suffer. I just want what’s best for her, too,” Huilan said.

Suling turned her eyes away.

In these ethnographic scenes from Daling, one gets a sense for orphanage caregivers’ real and imagined transformative power of rural settings, as well as some of the limits of those transformations. I show how urban orphanage caregivers and others circulate the idea that Daling is special. I suggest that the special care that Daling foster mothers give to children with impairments is constructed as a positive, moral difference that sets them apart from urban foster mothers. However, I prove that this construction

also effaces aspects of the foster mothers that are immoral, specifically the examples of their prejudice toward impaired children's education. Hence, these ethnographic scenes from Daling illustrate how the education of impaired children in the countryside is subordinated to the "specialty" of rural foster mothers' caregiving, which is imagined as morally superior.

The "Special" and the Morally Superior: Rural Foster Care

In the introductory scene of this chapter, Mrs. Wang refers to the people of Daling as *hen tebie* (which can be translated as special, particular, or even unusual). Orphanage workers frequently contrasted the people of Daling with others as *hen bu yiyang*, meaning completely different, or other, and commended them for being a *bangyang*, or a (shining) example or model to other foster parents. By all standards then, Daling people were construed as peculiar, yet extraordinary: orphanage workers described over and over how they didn't understand why Daling people were so exceptional and so much more willing to love these children as their own.

As previously stated, the level of comparison in Chinese culture between city folk and country folk is far from unusual. However, the hyperbole between the two and the moral terms in which they were being cast appears a vast reversal between traditional archetypes that designate the peasant as inferior and the urbanite as civilized or sophisticated (Cohen 1993; Jacka 2009). Meanwhile, the complaints of orphanage workers in Nanning mark urban peoples as morally impoverished due to their association with problems of greed, cramped space, lack of time, stress, and immorality. Hence, orphanage workers were frustrated by Peng Fei's mother's meandering stories and refusal

to speak Mandarin (both markers of her difference); however, in Daling, orphanage workers assert difference in a positive way. Although Mrs. Wang scoffs at the unpleasant sound of the Zhuang language, she and Mrs. Zhou, the deputy director, also draw attention to how lovingly the Daling people treat these children with special needs. The village head marks the changes in the children, specifically walking and talking, that have come as a result of being in the Daling environment.

In other words, people from Daling are portrayed as moral because of their ability to care. As orphanage staff and local officials claim that the people of Daling are special because they provide care as if these children were their own, and such care is inexplicable, they suggest that these rural people have a certain morality unmatched by people from the city. Furthermore, they imply that innate qualities regarding the ability to care differ among parents in the countryside versus parents in the city.

However, what proves the construction of these categories are the ways in which rural people behave “immorally” and the orphanage workers’ efforts to elide these deficiencies. As suggested by the village head’s remarks regarding the children’s education, and as I will go onto show, orphanage workers often sublimated rural foster parent’s prejudices toward their own children in order to maintain the integrity of their care, their image, and the Daling project. That is, orphanage workers actually had their fair share of problems with foster parents in Daling (just as they did in urban placements) who they felt were noncompliant in doing therapy with foster children, failed in areas of basic hygiene or discipline, or lacked the leadership or education to parent effectively. Although children had actually been placed in Daling six years prior to 2011, they’d been removed because the death of a child in their care made the local government question

the ability of rural people to care for orphanage children. During the course of my fieldwork, a mentally retarded fourteen year-old was removed from Daling in the most cruel fashion because her elderly foster mother couldn't effectively rear and discipline her and she was causing problems for the entire community.

These substantial problems, not unlike the issue of Hongmei and other children's education, were glossed over, however, in the popular discourse. Hence, orphanage workers constructed rural care as moral in contradistinction to urban fosterage. In the case of Peng Fei, not only were urban families not good enough or willing to provide the special care that impaired children need, but also the rehabilitative and educational techniques of the institution were considered superior to home-based care. However, in the countryside, where both structural inequalities and rural prejudice existed toward education for impaired children, a foster mother questioned the appropriateness of education for Hongmei demonstrating that despite the acceptance of these children within the community, there were limits to their inclusion in society and their achievement. Similarly the village head implied that school may not be the appropriate place for these impaired children.

Yet, it is the foster care monitor who made an exception for the community of Daling. Huilan not only questioned the upper limits of Hongmei's and other children's abilities, but she also questioned what one can really ask of these rural parents. While the rural foster parents cannot or will not do certain things for the impaired children, like advocate for their rights to education, the orphanage workers still strove to maintain their construction as special, superiorly moral individuals. In the next ethnographic example, I demonstrate how the maintenance of these differences represents an effort by urban

orphanage workers to both cope with their own disillusionment regarding the moral crisis of city life and preserve a moral alternative among the life and people of the countryside.

Rejection by Grown Children

On one visit to Daling, Mrs. Wang, Huilan, Yang *jie*, the village monitor, and I had wandered the back roads, past the tiny primary school, visiting some families who live in the next village over and were hoping to foster. All three women reminisced about their childhoods which took place in villages like these as they fingered the roadside plants absent-mindedly, playfully disagreeing about the taxonomy and the uses of the plants.

When we disturbed some chickens collected at the bend in the road, Huilan chased after them excitedly. “*Tu ji!*” she exclaimed, pointing to what she thought was a field chicken. “We used to raise these on the farm,” she cooed. “And that one looks so tasty,” she said laughing and pointing.

“That’s not a field chicken!” Mrs. Wang snapped. “If you were a real country girl you would know field chickens are never that fat. They’re skinny and bony, not like that one. That one’s raised to be eaten. You can’t raise field chickens, you silly girl,” she muttered, smirking to Yang *jie*, who laughed aloud at Huilan.

As Yang *jie* gestured to some land that the government had seized to build a sports court for the nearby town, Mrs. Wang asked whether the families who had owned or resided on the land had been compensated by the state. When Yang *jie* scoffed, Mrs. Wang insisted that her husband’s family had once been so compensated in a similar circumstance.

As we entered the dark, wide room of a home clustered alongside others and tucked behind the rice paddies, an older couple greeted us, the crowd's feet lining their eyes crinkling as they smiled widely and shook our hands. They had signed up with Yang *jie* to foster a child, and Mrs. Wang began to show them photos of some of the children on her digital camera.

"Of course, I can't guarantee it will be any of these children, or that there will even be children available," she said briskly. "All of the children have some kind of disabilities, and you should know it's not easy. We have to know that you're willing to make the commitment to these special children and the needs that they have, that your space is adequate," she said, giving a cursory glance around the dusky room. "You don't have stairs, that's a good thing," she commented.

The older woman smiled sweetly. "We would take any child that you have available," she commented quietly.

"What about him?" Huilan asserted, and gestured to her husband. "We have to be sure that both parents are ready and willing."

"*Suibian! Suibian!*" the old man chuckled, "*Suibian dai haizi!*" he boomed, (meaning something like, "However, whatever! It's easy, simple to raise children!"). The women laughed heartily, but as we left, Mrs. Wang, Huilan, and Yang *jie* all expressed apprehension. They recalled placements that they'd facilitated where even though the couple was in agreement, older biological children returned from boarding school or working in factories many towns away to find children with Down syndrome or cerebral palsy in their parents' care and jealously implored their parents to kick the children out.

In many of these cases the older couples, dependent on their children's incomes for support, felt they had no choice but to relinquish the children to the state.

These consequences had caused Mrs. Wang and Huilan, despite their insistence that people from Daling were “special,” to approach these new placements cautiously. They were three and a half hours away from Nanning and found it incredibly difficult to monitor and accommodate these tricky balances between parents and grown children's jealousies or misunderstandings of impairment out in the countryside. On that same visit, when I had asked Mrs. Wang candidly what the greatest obstacles were to foster care in China, she had replied that they had to do with people's limited education and lack of acceptance for children with such disabilities. While things were changing she mentioned that because many of these children would have been institutionalized during her lifetime, people in her generation and the subsequent one had little exposure to people with disabilities.

What is interesting is that both Huilan and Mrs. Wang identified firmly as rural people, so much so that they argued fiercely over their knowledge of a field chicken as they walked the back streets and knew the local taxonomy intimately. We'd often stay over in Daling on our visits, and then hitch a ride in one of the rickshaw-like taxis into the village, where life moved at an altogether different pace. We'd eagerly drink in the fresh air on those rickshaw rides that revealed the unique beauty of Guangxi—the wide, green rice paddies nestled between karst peaks, farmers and merchants traversing the raised roads—none of which is visible from the likes of Guangxi's cities. As mentioned in the first chapter, Huilan would often comment that when we went to Daling she felt as though she was “going home.”

While in Nanning one was wary of being labeled a peasant or a farmer, Huilan and Mrs. Wang were also determined to assert these identities from time to time and not simply when mobilizing them gave the foster care project or their jobs legitimacy. They argued over field chickens for the sake of field chickens and little else. As educated women who had moved from rural areas through education and into an urban lifestyle, they possessed a complicated nostalgia and disdain for rural peoples. Not unlike the filial nationalism Vanessa Fong observes among China's urban teenagers (2004), Huilan and Mrs. Wang were at once "of the soil," belonging with much loyalty to a rural China, and yet ardently critical of its simple and backward cultural attitudes (see Fei 1992[1947]).

Still, when in Daling, I argue that they instrumentally subordinated these criticisms to their concerns about the burgeoning state of immorality in urban foster care. While it was not necessarily a conscious move, such a subordination enabled them to preserve their memories and nostalgia for the countryside by imagining a purer alternative (in Daling) to the difficulty of arranging and implementing foster care in China's modern cities. Even when Yang *jie* insists that the government had not compensated people in Daling adequately for their land, Mrs. Wang recalls her family's own compensation and happily maintains the orderly simplicity of rural life. In order to further maintain such a dichotomy, the orphanage workers dismissed the discrimination toward rural children's education among Daling people, ignored the limits of acceptance of children with impairments on the part of many of the foster families' elder biological children, and as I will show, allowed certain children to be scapegoated by the community in order to ensure the success of the rural foster care project.

Jiaqi's Rejection

It is these backward attitudes that were credited by Huilan and Mo *jie* to the single most disturbing experience for me in the field, the rejection of a young fourteen year-old mentally impaired girl named Jiaqi who was being fostered in Daling. I'll never forget Jiaqi, her chubby, pimpled face, the tattered sweater that hugged her round belly, and her gruff voice. Jiaqi had an awkward way of following us about when we'd come, an awkward habit of staring and pointing, and sometimes she'd drag her little sister so brusquely she'd all but have her face in the mud before the teenager noticed. She couldn't be trusted to do childcare or any of the other tasks older children in villages like these are often expected to do, but then, neither could her foster mother, an aging woman, whose hair had long gone white and whose husband was always off working in the fields.

Jiaqi's foster mom had taken her and two year-old autistic Lili in the previous October, but Lili, like any other autistic kid, refused to make eye contact, and showed no signs of hearing or heeding her foster mother's speech, running up and down the dirt path through the town, and from door to door, leaving her foster mother far behind. When we'd come to visit the family months before the foster mother had not been especially critical of Jiaqi, albeit a little mystified—she didn't seem to understand that her mental capabilities were that of a small child, not a young woman of her stature. The foster monitors noted that Jiaqi had grown plump in the home of this aunty, and the foster mother proudly commented on what a good eater her foster daughter was. Just as the orphanage placed babies into homes to be fattened up, Jaiqi's roundness was a sign of being cared for by a mother who bothered to place steeping and heaping bowls of porridge in front of her morning, noon, and night.

Jiaqi was so happy in the village. She relished her freedom of going door to door, calling out “*ayi*” and “*jie jie*,” the simple kinship terms that expressed her hopes of finding a family and a place to lay her head. Jiaqi had been in the orphanage much longer than the other children. The first time she’d really left the institution’s walls was to come here to the little town nestled within the craggy mountains. Hence, there were elements of her newfound freedom that she’d come to abuse, creeping out of her home at night and standing outside the modest homes of the neighbors, calling from the street for her friends to come out and play. She’d begun to hang around a group of Down syndrome boys her own age who lived around the corner, and as these developments had been reported back to the orphanage by the village monitor the orphanage had begun to worry.

And so that morning over noodles at a hole in the wall in the middle of the county seat, the women from the orphanage had told me that they were thinking of taking Jiaqi back with us that day. When I asked them why, they mentioned the concerns for her safety and that she’d become disruptive. I complained that it was a shame, but for them, it wasn’t the first time a foster placement hadn’t worked out, that a child who they knew had to “come home” as they called it.

The morning proceeded much like that any other, but this time Huilan and I were accompanied by Mo *jie*, the physical therapist, as we combed the short streets of the little village, ducking in behind the shops to find life carrying on, feeding and changing, laughing and crying, in the concrete walls of the narrow homes. But when we’d begun to weigh the little children in Yang *jie*’s crowded living room, Jiaqi had wandered inside

and stepped on the scale. The foster mothers and fathers crowding around with their little ones, who they steadied and cradled in their firm arms, began to chastise her.

“She’s so fat, nobody wants her, she doesn’t listen, she’s not obedient, you should take this one back to the orphanage!” Even Mo *jie*, the physical therapist, commented on how fat little Jiaqi was as she perched on the scale, eerily silent in the face of all the flying accusations. Mo *jie* responded to the threats ringing out in the air by confirming, “She doesn’t listen, does she?” And then turning to Jiaqi, “You need to do what your foster mother tells you.”

Gradually it became apparent to me that the decision had been made at least a month ago, and the women were merely waiting for the right moment to execute their plan. The elderly foster mom came and stood in the doorway dragging bewildered Lili by the hand in her brightly printed smock, and complained to no one in particular, “She [Jiaqi] runs about the streets at night and I’ve had it with her. She’s disobedient. You need to take her back to the orphanage. Take her back and exchange her for another one!”

Huilan, the orphanage monitor, quietly took her aside, and said, “Yes aunty, but we’ll talk about it later.”

So after a few minutes the old lady and Lili wandered back in and Huilan tried another tactic saying to Jiaqi, “How would you like to go on a trip for the day and have fun with this pretty lady (referring to Mo *jie*)? Would you like that?” And she prodded Jiaqi until she grunted, “*hao, hao* (okay, okay).” So Huilan took the foster mother aside and explained that she was going to take Jiaqi back to the orphanage because if anything

happened to her, it would be on her and Mo *jie*'s shoulders. She told her that they should go over to the house so Jiaqi could collect her things and say goodbye.

They began to walk Jiaqi, with her foster mother and little Lili down the street to her home, and gradually a crowd of foster mothers and children and neighbors began to follow exclaiming, "*let's go, look, they're taking Jiaqi back to the orphanage!*" The crowd filed into the home behind Jiaqi, her foster mom, and the women from the orphanage, peering into the little window to her room as Jiaqi packed her things. Not wanting to be part of the spectacle or the group of spectators, I took little Lili, whom the foster mom had left to her own persuasions, and we sat on the steps. Lili slumped to the step and was eerily still, nestling into my arms for the first time since I'd met her, seemingly stunned by what little she could grasp of the situation.

I could hear the orphanage women's chorus of "*Kuai yidian,*" urging Jiaqi to hurry up and gather her things and get dressed to go quickly. When Jiaqi emerged from her bare little room, the crowd stood watching. Huilan and Mo *jie* asked her, "Well do you have anything to say for yourself? Anything to say to your foster mother?" Gradually their questions turned to commands, "Say something to her, at least tell her goodbye." And when Jiaqi didn't say anything, they commanded, "Say goodbye," to which Jiaqi, in her wooden gait, grunted "bye bye," hardly raising her head to look at her foster mother.

The scene repeated itself as the crowd followed us into the street, with Huilan and the neighbors now goading Jiaqi to say goodbye. The foster mom began wailing about how unthinkable and ungrateful it was that Jiaqi didn't even want to say goodbye, *how could the girl be so callous, after everything she had done for this child?* Huilan

physically moved Jiaqi to face her mom again and say “goodbye.” Huilan kept saying to Jiaqi as we walked off that we were taking her to Daling to have fun, but meanwhile the neighbors murmured about her bad behavior and how she had to go back to Nanning.

Later the village monitor would murmur to Huilan about how the old woman’s husband had gone into Daling to work in a factory and how without him around she could hardly keep track of Lili running about. And Huilan mentioned that she doesn’t understand and wants another child, but how they needed to look for another family for Lili. When Jiaqi wandered up, Yang *jie*, the village monitor smiled sweetly, asking her if she wanted to stay with her foster mom or go with this big sister, and she persisted asking over and over again even when Jiaqi didn’t answer. As we led Jiaqi down the country path, by the river and out of the town, out of her old home, we saw the chubby chicken that Huilan had remarked would be so tasty, and Mo *jie* smirked at how it waddled. She told Jiaqi, “That’s what you’re going to be like when you get older if you keep eating,” and she and Huilan laughed.

We stopped in a rice noodle shop to grab lunch, and the women asked Jiaqi repeatedly whether her foster mother had fed her. She vehemently denied she’d eaten, but when the bowl of noodles was placed in front of her she finally said that yes, she’d already eaten lunch. Exasperated, the women told her to eat up anyway, and we all hurriedly scarfed down the soggy bowls of noodles, pressed for time to make the bus back into the big city. While we sat there, Huilan remarked that Jiaqi had made a lot of progress in terms of speaking and becoming more outgoing in the village, but she just wasn’t right in the head, so when it came to sex and getting older, they just couldn’t take the chance of having her out here, this far from the orphanage.

We got into a rickshaw with Wei and Zihao's mother and Yang *jie*, and they all began to pepper Jiaqi with questions about whether she would go back and see her foster mom, and when she finally said no, they all chuckled. When one of the women said something about Nanning, Jiaqi asked about Daling, and Huilan hurriedly replied, "We're going to Daling and then somewhere further." Wei and Zihao's mother started to tell a story about how Jiaqi was out one night and went to one of the older boys' houses (Hengwei's brother), and was yelling at the corner for him over and over waking everybody up. Huilan mentioned that she thought the thin woman the village monitor had taken her to see would be a good new foster mother, and wouldn't discriminate against the kids.

Shortly after we got onto the bus, Jiaqi, seated next to Mo *jie* began to throw up, and Mo *jie* gasped, gathering up plastic bags, and scolding Jiaqi, "you don't understand, you have to hold the bag like this, oh it's so hard to teach her anything!" And when Mo *jie* got off the bus to go to the bathroom, Huilan, who was feeling carsick herself, produced some tangerines from her bag and wordlessly slipped them to Jiaqi.

As the bus started moving and Jiaqi threw up again, Mo *jie* chastised Huilan, "why would you give her those?" And Huilan replied weakly, "But she was crying," and Mo *jie* snapped back, "So let her cry!"

A few weeks later I inquired about Jiaqi and how she was readjusting to the orphanage environment after what I considered to be a traumatic experience. "Oh, she's used to it here, this is where she grew up, she's doing fine," was the brusque response. I never saw her again.

But I thought of her often. I thought of how the gossiping around Jiaqi's unsightly appearance and her disobedient behavior served to unify the community against those who do not play by the rules, or the misbehavior of those who cheat, or are unable to fulfill their social roles, even though, in this case the transgressor was a child. It was Jiaqi whose child-like behavior at the age of fourteen was misunderstood and unappreciated in a tight-knit community where each individual was evaluated by whether he or she fulfilled his or her social role. Although Huilan and others from the orphanage acknowledged that one of the major reasons they didn't want to keep Jiaqi in the community any longer was because her foster mother couldn't provide the necessary care that she needed, outwardly Jiaqi was blamed for her disobedience and her poor behavior—even her appearance became a subject of criticism.

The orphanage monitors tried to keep the proceedings under wraps, but they also didn't intervene to stop neighbors from crowding around and taunting the little girl, and they actively forced her to bid her foster mother goodbye. They also abided by the rules of this community, the collective rules that made a little girl the scapegoat for a foster care placement gone awry. Not only could the girls not disgrace the older woman in public (the village monitor, who was younger, and the orphanage staff privately discussed her failings as a parent), but they seemed convinced that because Jiaqi had already been rejected by the community it would be better for her to go back to the orphanage. Getting rid of Jiaqi solved the problem for everyone, despite how it may have affected her well being. What was best for the community, was presumably best for Jiaqi.

Less than a month later, I went back to the village, and Huilan and I visited the new family that had begun to foster Lili. She'd only been with her new foster mother and

father and foster sister for a month, but as Lili picked up toys and pounced on her mattress in the back of the narrow home, she seemed altogether different than when she was in the other woman's care. As Lili sped by, her new foster mother scooped her up, holding Lili up to her face and snuggling their noses against one another. Lili squirmed, giggled, and remarkably tolerated the kisses and the caressing, even seemed to like it. And then I realized what was different about Lili, and goose bumps shot up my spine. She was smiling, and it was only then that I realized I had never before seen her smile.

Jiaqi's rejection, along with the rejection of foster children by older siblings, illustrate some of the less obvious socio-cultural barriers in China to foster care. In contrast to the kinning practices I describe in Chapter three and continue to describe in Chapter five as so transformative in terms of personhood, the relatively late placement for Jiaqi into foster care and the lack of exposure among community members to fostering relations or children with impairments demonstrate some of the limits of these efforts to extend family beyond biological ties. While early placement into foster families allows kinning practices to create mutual knowledge and obligation on the side of both parents and children, older children, especially ones with impairments, like Jiaqi, come to the community with neither family nor obligation, and thus, experience rejection when they are unable to fulfill their proscribed social roles. Jiaqi was unable to care for her younger sister, Lili, and she was unable to interact with friends and neighbors appropriately. Thus, her ample weight, ironically a symbol of care and health among younger children, became the object of scrutiny among the community. While it is most accurately a signifier of her foster mother's neglect, no one dares to question the foster mother, an insider and an elder's lack of fulfillment of her social role. Instead, Jiaqi's weight

becomes a symbol of her own undoing, her own lack of control, obedience, and excess, for which she is ostracized from her family and community.

Conclusion

Such hierarchical relationships of community social roles complicate the personal trust that Yunxiang Yan emphasizes in rural communities. As Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack Potter remark in their 1990 ethnography, *China's Peasants*, children are not born with intrinsic value, but find value through the fulfillment of social relationships. Thus, "child care is a means to an end, a form of long-range self-interest" (1990: 229). Contrasting the humanity that makes even *The Pirates of Penzance* sympathetic to the plight of the orphan in Western literature with the pity of the bandits for an old woman who will be left helpless in the world if they kill her only son in *The Book of Filial Piety*, the Potters remind us that in China the moral emphasis is on caring for the old, while in the West it revolves around caring for the young (1990: 228-9). In their words,

[In China] to have children is to be protected from the pitiable situation, analogous to being orphaned, of being left without care in one's old age. When villagers speak of having children so that old people may be taken care of, they are invoking a whole complex of cultural ideas embodying a definition of happiness resting on dependent security. (1990: 229)

The Potters stress that these cultural ideals in China exist at the level of cultural assumptions which saturate, often subconsciously, everyday life for villagers. While their ethnography was written nearly twenty-five years ago and much has changed in the way of traditions of filial piety and family relations in China (see Introduction, Chapter two, also Yan 2003), Jiaqi's rejection in Daling reveals the extent to which these assumptions regarding social hierarchies remain relatively in tact.

Hence, while personal trust between villagers in Daling may preserve a certain moral culture that orphanage workers observe to be eroding in the highly modern and mobile city, this moral culture necessarily makes its own exclusions based on individuals,' even children's abilities or inabilities, to fulfill their social roles. On the contrary, the contrasts between the city and the countryside maintained by the orphanage workers are not as stark as they might prefer and attest to some of the ways in which local ideas of family and kinship that are not as remarkably flexible as they appear.

Additionally, the consequences of Jiaqi's rejection for her psychological well being, which go largely ignored by the orphanage workers in their efforts to not only save face for her foster mother, maintain the integrity of the Daling foster care project, but also maintain these divisions between urban and rural moralities, have broader ramifications. As Leslie Wang argues in her work with disabled children within institutions, these children have been deliberately excluded from the categories of national progress, sequestered in orphanages, and largely hidden from view (2010b). While moving children with impairments from the municipal orphanage into the countryside is at once a progressive effort to consider the best interests of these children, reintegrate them into family and society, and give them a future in the "real world," it can also be interpreted problematically. While orphanage workers critique and bemoan the crisis of immorality in the city, resources and rehabilitative facilities remain sequestered in urban areas and admired as the height of national progress. Even if the countryside can provide healing love and care to children with impairments, their access to education, rehabilitation, and medicine is largely compromised due to their rural location (see Chapter five for Dengrong's return to the orphanage). Hence, despite orphanage workers' insistence that

the morality of the countryside trumps the squalor of the city, the countryside remains a problematic obstacle to China's modernity.

Similar to Wang's observations, then, impaired children who are placed in the countryside perhaps take on this connotation as objects of the past and obstacles themselves to China's "high quality" future. Within the walls of the orphanage, Wang found that "in the context of modernizing China where societal membership is contingent on children's potential to become creative, individualistic, entrepreneurial and productive laborers as adults, physically and mentally disabled youth are seen to lack a viable future. Thus, *ayi* [here orphanage careworkers] tend to define their needs solely in the present tense" (2010a: 154). I go one step further in suggesting that given the substantial inequalities between the city and the countryside in China today, the move to place impaired children in Daling may confine them to something of a pre-modern past. Even as foster projects in rural areas seek to provide children opportunities for social growth and inclusion, they also run the risk of relegating impaired children to metaphors of backwardness and lack of culture, associated with a countryside that remains an obstacle to China's goals of modernity. Thus, despite the substantial personhood conveyed in these kin relationships, foster families remain relatively marginal to state and social life in modern China.

Chapter Five: Becoming Persons: Redefining Family in Contemporary China

Introduction

In Chapter four I demonstrated not only some of the friction between local kinship culture and foster care, but the ways in which orphanage and INGO monitors' anxieties regarding an urban moral crisis and an imagined rural utopia render foster families marginal to state support and social life. In particular, I described some of the clashes between institutional and home models of care for vulnerable children, competing understandings of disease, disability, rehabilitation, and education, and some of the limits of foster care when it comes to integrating socially disabled children into Chinese families and society.

In Chapter five, I aim to show that despite their marginal character, these families nevertheless challenge norms of the Chinese family propagated by the state and society. Building on the unique qualities of personhood constituted via the kinning relationship described in Chapter three, I argue that the affection and care exchanged in fostering relationships both challenge state actors' understandings of personal and conventional families, and empower the foster parents to become advocates for themselves and their children.

First, I return to the three children whose abandonment and fosterage stories have framed the dissertation, Meili, Dengrong, and Pei Pei. I contrast their various family fates, showing foster parents' and children's affections, behavior, and advocacy over time, in order to demonstrate significant, qualitative shifts in personhood that have occurred as a result of these kinning relationships established through Chinese foster care. In addition to becoming personal advocates on behalf of their impaired children, fosterage creates communities of care, through which corporate advocacy for the distinct needs of socially disabled children in Chinese society coalesces. Hence, in this chapter, I show through ethnographic material, how especially foster parents (and to some extent, foster children), come to wield this newfound personhood in order to leverage for the interests of their children, as well as themselves, and the way in which state orphanage workers, in particular, receive this as an affront to established state and cultural ideas of family.

It is important to remember that despite the close-knit character of these bonds between foster mothers and foster children and the time required to care for children with such mental and physical impairments, foster parents often have their own grown, biological children. When I visited with tens of foster families on the playground inside an apartment complex in Yulin, Guangxi, I noticed that not only the grown children, but the men, as well, were conspicuously absent. When I inquired as to where these women's families had gone, they all replied that their grown children and their husbands had gone to various cities across the country to do migrant work. Some husbands who worked close by returned on the weekends or a few times a month, but for the most part, grown children returned once a year, on the spring holiday to celebrate with their parents.

In the absence of their families, and by some accounts, abandoned by them, these women had formed uterine families (Wolf 1970) with these foster children and one another (Chapter two), founding a network of care and community to replace the biological bonds of family (Chapter three).

As mentioned in Chapter four, it is certainly the case that when some grown children return, they reject the impaired children in their parents' care and assert their primary social position as biological children. It is also the case that when young couples give birth to a child, they often rely heavily on their parents for childcare and support, and this can change a family's ability or willingness to foster. However, in Guangxi, where foster parents tend to be quite elderly and residence is still traditionally virolocal, parents of only daughters often find a void in their lives following early retirement that biological family may never again fulfill. As established in Chapter two, the abandonment and marginalization of many Chinese elderly who are without family to care for them is comparable to the social disability experienced by abandoned, impaired children, and thus, these pairings become highly significant in terms of establishing social personhood.

Yima's (Meili's foster mother) only daughter resided with her husband's family and was desperately trying to give birth to her own child. Given the crowded nature of apartments in downtown Nanning and the already cramped household of four in which her daughter lived, *Yima* indicated that it was very unlikely that following Meili's exit she would move in with her daughter and her husband's family. For *Yima*, *Li ayi* and many others, while foster placements themselves were notably temporary, the exit of children often left substantial emotional holes in their lives and the lives of foster

siblings. In this next section, I show how such emotions reflect relationships that both took on the qualities of kinship and afforded the social personhood associated with them.

Broken Hearts, Social Persons

One morning a few months before I left Nanning, I climbed the seven stories to Li *ayi*'s apartment to visit Pei Pei (a foster child who suffered from a faulty cleft palate repair and whose mother was in prison, described in Chapters one and two). On these occasions, I often ate with the family, roused the girls from sleepy stupors in order to take a walk to the nearby park, accompanied the family to the market, and chatted with Li *ayi*, Kaili, her older biological daughter, and her two foster children, Pei Pei and Yuping. However, when I arrived, the youngest foster daughter, Yuping's mischievous presence was notably absent, and Pei Pei, Kaili, and Li *ayi* all wore long and fatigued faces they struggled to hide between polite smiles.

Conversation regarding Pei Pei quickly turned to the broken hearts born by each of them at the departure of Yuping to a family several provinces away in China. "Oh, I should have spoiled her more while she was here, I should have appreciated her more," Li *ayi* chided herself. "I shouldn't have complained so much about her naughtiness, I shouldn't have called her stupid," she said, laughing, but her laugh broke as tears squirted from her eyes and down her face. Li *ayi*, her foster daughter, Pei Pei, and her biological daughter, Kaili, huddled together on the wooden couch in the living room, literally clinging to one another with an affection that I'd never seen displayed in the household.

"We've all been crying," Li *ayi* said, wiping tears away from her own eyes and gesturing toward and holding onto the other two girls. "I myself can hardly eat, can't

sleep, I haven't slept since Yuping left," she choked. And then she told me how her neighbors who had fostered many children had told her the only cure for a broken heart from one child was to foster another, and so she'd gingerly asked the orphanage for another child. But the subsequent child was almost one and a half and had never been fostered before. After coming to the family, she was completely out of sorts, crying inconsolably throughout the nights, and realizing that she couldn't handle it, Li *ayi* had called the orphanage to take the child back.

The grief of losing a daughter and a sister among the three permeated the dirty walls of the tiny apartment, and I struggled to find words of comfort. When I snapped some photos of them, Li *ayi* put out her frail arms to shelter the little family and huddle them together, and again, they tried so earnestly to flash smiles on their tear-stained faces. While Li *ayi* commented how much comfort it was to still have her own daughter and Pei Pei by her side, I had been hesitant to make even that consolation. Given Pei Pei's climbing age, the orphanage had made it clear that they were not sure it was worth keeping her in foster care (see Chapter one), and I had no information to provide to Li *ayi* regarding the final verdict. I knew if I mentioned Pei Pei's case, she would pester me for information, and I wouldn't be able to tell her definitively whether Pei Pei could stay.

When children left, foster parents often described the loss as that of a broken heart, and the grief in physical terms. I'd heard almost every foster mother repeat the same symptoms that Li *ayi* had detailed: they couldn't sleep, they couldn't eat, sometimes for weeks, months, or even longer. When I traveled with INGO and orphanage monitors to courtyards and villages where parents had fostered for many years, they were the ones who encouraged these women, aging, alone, and frail to take yet another child. "I'm far

too heartbroken from the last,” the women would complain.

“The only cure for a broken heart from one child is to take another!” the orphanage and INGO monitors would sing out with bright smiles.

The reader may recall that despite *Yima*’s initial repulsion at her foster daughter Meili’s sickly appearance and her incessant acknowledgement of her shortcomings in her presence, after learning that Meili would be adopted within a matter of months to America, *Yima*, like Li *ayi* expressed a similar desire to “spoil her [Meili] a bit before she goes” (Chapter three). Clearly, the impending loss of a foster daughter with whom she shared daily life and had formed a kin relationship caused *Yima* to reflect on the changes in she and Meili’s relationship over the nearly seven years they’d spent together and how she desired to spend her last months with her. However, I noticed a shift not only in the way *Yima* spoke about Meili, but the way *Yima* expressed her feelings about herself. Whenever I would call *Yima* to schedule a visit, she’d urge me to come over whenever. “You know we have nothing going on here, Jialin, I’m a *fanren*, (an ordinary person)” she’d scoff. *Yima* often made reference to her lack of education and sophistication (“*meiyou wenhua*”) and consistently embarrassed me with the way she marveled at my privileges and accomplishments, accolades which initially made her convinced that I’d make the ideal mother for Meili (see Chapter one). *Yima*, like many other foster mothers complained that the orphanage never thought to tell her or Meili anything, because they were at the status of domestic servants, whose opinions didn’t matter (see Li *ayi*’s remarks in Chapter two).

Finally, as the months passed, the orphanage that had once expressed frustration with *Yima* for her demands and lack of discipline of her daughter, began to encourage her

to take another child after Meili left. However, *Yima* provided multiple excuses: she didn't have any young children's clothes anymore, only clothes suitable for an older child, and that she couldn't handle an older child at her age. She said that Meili, her third foster child, would be her last.

Then one Sunday in April we attended a picnic for all the Mercy Care foster families at a local park, where the municipal orphanage supplied games and food for the children, and local sponsors attended with their families. An American board member from Mercy Care had brought a photo album Meili's soon-to-be adoptive parents had sent along to introduce her to their home and their family and she urged me to make introductions between she, *Yima*, and Meili so she could show her the album.

Yima, who had been sick with stomach problems as of late, had seemed almost transparent in her thinness and positively overwhelmed by the excitement of the moment. She clung to the American board member's hands nervously, her words tumbling over one another, as she implored me to translate her assurances that Meili would be a dutiful daughter to this blond American mother whose face stared out from the glossy photo album. "I'm only an ordinary person, but I've tried to raise her to be a moral, good girl, to the best of my abilities. She may not be beautiful, but she's kind, and she's smart, and she has beautiful hands which speak to a prosperous future," *Yima* stammered, grasping at Meili's hands awkwardly.

Her words moved the board member, who tearfully replied that Meili's adoptive mother had been waiting for seventeen years to adopt a child and would love Meili no matter what—she didn't need to be perfect or obedient. Meili sat meekly and stoically nearby. She eventually ran off to play with a neighbor, seemingly disinterested and

embarrassed by her foster mother's rush of emotions. But before we left, I caught Meili and her friend with their noses buried in the photo album, marveling at the horses and the beautiful rooms featured in the photographs. When I came by *Yima's* apartment a few days later, *Yima* confirmed that Meili had been poring over the book each day.

Just a few days later, *Yima* telephoned in the evening to ask me to meet her at her home. Along with the photo album, the adoptive parents had sent along a necklace for Meili, and *Yima* said she had something she wanted me to deliver to the adoptive family by way of the American board member who was returning later that week to the US. In the mean time, I telephoned Mercy Care's director to find that as I suspected, I wouldn't be able to deliver anything directly to the board member, because all exchanges like this had to first pass through the authority of the municipal orphanage.

That evening when I got off the bus, *Yima* was eagerly waiting for me at the stop. Taking my arm, she suggested, "Let's not climb the stairs all the way up to my apartment, let's just duck into one of these shops, and I can show you what I've brought." We settled on a tiny photo development store and perched on the iron chairs. Then I delivered the disappointing news to *Yima* that I wouldn't be able to take the letter she'd written to Meili's adoptive mother to the American board member. *Yima* tried to persuade me that the orphanage would never know, but I mentioned the orphanage's kindness to me in sponsoring my research project, and that I simply couldn't do anything to compromise that relationship.

Crestfallen, she began to flip through faded photos she'd brought along of Meili as a child, commenting this time on how small and cute she was when she first came to her. Then, reading the letter line by line to me and explaining the choices of her words,

she implored me to memorize them so I could tell the American board member what to relay to the adoptive mother. When I assured her that I could pass the letter onto the orphanage and they would get it to the adoptive mother, she smirked, remarking that the orphanage didn't care about her and they wouldn't deliver her letter. She continued to read the heartfelt words that relayed the story of Meili's abandonment and detailed her obedient qualities and her substantial talents to her new mother.

After we finished reading, *Yima* took both my hands in hers and let out a tearful sigh. "You know I'm not a perfect person, but I've always prayed for a family for Meili. Perhaps even more than my own daughter, I've loved her with all my heart. And now, I think I can rest easy," she said. "I know now that I've done one thing right with my life, to raise a daughter who will have such a bright future to go live in America."

In presenting these long vignettes here, as well as in previous chapters, I have attempted to show that far from merely experiencing deep affection and loss, these relationships between foster parents and their foster children have led to profound, intersubjective change. Working with a definition of personhood that argues for mutuality of being (see Chapter one, also Sahlins 2011,a,b), belonging through "kinning" rather than biology (Chapter three), and a Chinese cultural context that understands social personhood as conferred through family relationship, I suggest that the changes effected in fostering relationships do not occur merely at the level of affection, but alter one's own understanding of self, and in turn, others' understandings of them. This definition of Chinese social personhood offered in Chapter one ("social personhood is the fulfillment of one's obligations in social networks, through which one gains moral status" p. 23) helps explain how such socially disabled individuals as *Li ayi* and *Yima* can become

surprisingly recuperated and reincorporated into society by way of their seemingly marginal relations with foster children.

For instance, when both *Li ayi* and *Yima* comment on an intent or regret to spoil their foster children and are then unwilling to foster additional children, one understands that these experiences of fostering, fleeting though they may be, are “transpersonal” (Sahlins 2011a,b). While the state orphanage conceives of fosterage as contractual (limited time frames) and transferrable (from one child to the next), in their reticence to foster another child, both *Li ayi* and *Yima* demonstrate that fosterage finds its corollary not in contract, but in kinship: children cannot be exchanged for one another. This refusal is inconvenient and surprising to many state orphanage workers who rely on these poor families to foster difficult, unwanted children, and who often assume foster families to be primarily motivated by money (see Chapter two’s discussion of foster parents’ compensation and Peng Fei’s family in Chapter four).

As aforementioned and correspondingly, *Li ayi* and *Yima*’s refusal to take in other foster children also marks a shift in their social reintegration and recuperation. The personhood afforded through these kin relationships is transferrable beyond the boundaries of said relationship. In other words, though their foster children may have left, their resumption of the role of mother has socially reintegrated them into family life. Thus, the transformational qualities of personhood remain, and the marginal women become socially recuperated as they assert themselves against the power of the state in seemingly small, but significant ways. *Li ayi* and *Yima*’s refusal to foster again suggests that fosterage cannot be confined to the contractual realm of state bureaucracy, because

its effects in personhood rival that of biological kin relations, and in some cases, even exceed them (see this chapter's conclusion).

Local Advocacy

Although foster parents frequently commented that foster children belonged in the United States or other developed countries, and that they themselves were old, uneducated, even “backward” and unable to care for them, this did not mean that they did understand their children's special needs in a sophisticated way or that they lacked the resources and the wherewithal to become advocates for these children. In their book on foster care in Beijing, Yuping Wu, et. al describe the development of local methods of rehabilitation and care among foster families (*tu banfa*), that while far from the care given in the confines of an institution, were nevertheless ample adaptations to children's needs (2005: 97). In Chapter three, I discuss how the disciplining and playing techniques that foster parents employ with both impaired and non-impaired children effectively communicate Chinese ideas of belonging and social personhood, rather than disadvantaging or confusing impaired children. My research confirms that despite orphanage monitors' complaints regarding foster parents' lack of education and spotty compliance to therapy and disciplinary methods, there were often other ways that parents adapted to the needs of their children.

The adaptation was particularly striking in the case of Dengrong, the young girl with cerebral palsy who had been placed in Daling village in October of 2011, and who I introduce in Chapter one. The first few times orphanage and Mercy Care staff returned to monitor Dengrong's progress they were visibly and audibly dismayed with the

substandard care they felt her foster parents were providing. With a hyperactive autistic foster sibling, they noted that the quiet, obliging Dengrong was being slighted by the mother's attention and affections. On numerous occasions, Huilan, Mo *jie*, and Suling had all taken turns chastising the mother for her lack of leadership.

"You're the adult," Huilan had charged, "you have to lead, not her. So if she has a cold and a fever, you can't give her lychee fruit simply because that's what she wants to eat. Everyone knows that those kinds of foods raise the internal temperature and make a fever worse. She may not eat much porridge, but you have to tell her that she can't have any of those fruits and candies until she gets better," Huilan had quipped, while she swiped at the burning forehead of the young child, bundled up and sitting feebly in a chair.

The foster mother complained that Dengrong was lazy and refused to practice walking with her walker like she urged. "Well, make her do it," was the response from Huilan, Mo *jie*, and Suling. And when we were out of the mother's earshot, Suling made the allegations of favoritism, and complained that the mother didn't take the admonitions seriously enough.

"She needs encouragement, though," Huilan had replied. "I know what it's like with these mothers. If you shame them, they retreat into themselves. They need to feel that they can do it, care for these difficult children."

In truth, I had never seen a child so ill the second time we visited, and it had been on that occasion that Huilan refused to see Dengrong, urging the foster mother to take the little girl to the countryside immediately for an injection, and telling her we'd come back the following day. The following day Huilan dropped off a host of donated prescription

medicines and inhalers from the West, instructing the woman how to administer them. Dengrong's foster mother did not only seem to misunderstand the seriousness of her condition, but she was burdened by the fear and embarrassment that Dengrong was one of the sickest kids in the village. Because everyone knew the story of how a child had died in Daling six years prior and all the children had been removed as a consequence by the municipal orphanage, foster mothers were nervous caring for children with extreme medical conditions. Finally, the cultural belief that children who die before their parents are unfilial and may return as wandering ghosts was not altogether dismissed in the countryside, especially where death and disease were more constant companions than in the modern cities.

On the third visit, we found Dengrong standing at the doorway, greeting us, smiling, the fever and cold sweats absent, and the cough much less significant as she gingerly pattered about the room with her tiny walker. Huilan smiled widely and complimented the foster mother on the care she'd been giving Dengrong. Had she been using the medicines or the inhalers? What had she been feeding her?

Gradually the foster mother admitted that she hadn't used the Western medicines much—she didn't know how, and she hadn't seen that they'd had any effect. But on one occasion when she'd been in the county seat she stopped by the office of a local healer, who suggested that she boil a tea with some local grasses and roots, and she admitted, rather timidly, that she felt this local remedy might be responsible for Dengrong's recovery. Huilan seemed unfazed and happily accepted the local solution. She insisted on reimbursing the foster mother for her medical expenses, and when the mother replied that the old man didn't give receipts like many local healers, and it was a pittance, Huilan

pressed her that the scrawling of his signature with an amount on paper would suffice. She reminded the woman that medical expenses were to be covered by the orphanage, and this, like injections, certainly qualified.

This example shows how in the absence of INGO or orphanage monitors, foster mothers often seek out local solutions to their children's impairments and medical complications. Far from demonstrating noncompliance as both the orphanage and the INGO had felt they observed in the first two months of Dengrong's care, within just three months, the foster mother had sought the advice of a local expert when she felt Western medicines weren't inducing the change she sought to see in the care and health of her daughter. Her hesitancy to express her methods and remedies to the INGO and orphanage officials is not only reminiscent of the rural and urban hierarchies I describe in Chapter four, but also suggests there may have been local or reasonable explanations to the difficulty of Dengrong's transition and her poor health in the first two months that remained uncommunicated because of difference and inequality.

A month later, when Director Wang and Huilan called a village meeting in Yang *jie's* living room to update the community on the status of the foster care project, Huilan singled out Dengrong's mother as one of the parents who was doing exemplary work. "We all know how sick Dengrong was when she came to Daling," Huilan grinned, "and this foster mother has gone above and beyond, healing such a sick child," she stated proudly. Dengrong's mother shyly blinked away tears.

Dengrong's mother's advocacy expresses both the deep understanding and changes in subjectivity that the process of fostering produces, alongside the practical concerns of trying to provide care for impaired and sick children in more primitive

settings. Not unlike *Yima*, who constantly stressed her status as an ordinary woman without sophistication, foster parents, like Dengrong's mother in Daling, purported to know little of impaired children's special needs and often humbly and dutifully accepted parenting advice from women like Huilan and Mo *jie* who were twenty to thirty years their juniors. While they appeared and even acted compliant, it is important to note that women like Dengrong's foster mother also subtly spoke up in defense of their behaviors and adaptations, which ultimately benefited the children and testified to a radical shift in relationship and personhood between the two.

To their credit, the Nanning orphanage was, and continues to be, willing to place children with impairments outside the orphanage walls and even negotiate care and medicine at a local level. Nonetheless, setbacks due to state infrastructure, technology, and distance continue to establish practical limits to these rural foster care models. Director Wang's praise of the foster mothers in Daling was heartfelt, but she also acknowledged the limits of Huilan's one-woman supervision.

However, we might read Huilan's insistence that the orphanage cover the medical expenses for Dengrong's local healing as a way for the state to assert control and boundaries over fostering relationships. If Dengrong's mother begins to cover these expenses out of pocket, the foster family begins to tread dangerously close to the boundary of a legitimate, biological family, who would not be subsidized for these expenses. These efforts by orphanage and INGO workers to codify the terms of these relationships identify the excess of emotion, feeling, and personhood that are present in them, and a possible overlap between temporary foster families and the biological or adoptive families that are sought after by the state.

For Pei Pei, her foster mother's relentless questioning and urging that the orphanage allow her to stay in foster care eventually paid off. The reader may recall that in Chapter one I described Pei Pei's precarious position as a child of a mentally ill, incarcerated woman. Because she has family, she's not legally eligible for adoption, nor is she legally eligible for state benefits, so she was fortunate to ever be placed in foster care. As she began to age, the orphanage flirted with the idea of taking her back into the institution and sending her to the local school because they felt it would be cheaper and easier to manage.

However, on nearly every occasion that orphanage or INGO personnel visited her home, Li *ayi* pestered them about Pei Pei's uncertain future. She pointed out the admirable progress she'd made in school and the considerable academic talents she possessed, arguing that it would be a shame for a child with such potential and such a strong bond to her foster family to return to the institution. Of all the homes I visited, Li *ayi*'s appeared to be one of the poorest, and Li *ayi* often berated her lack of education and her uncivilized status. Though she had complained that the orphanage often treated her and the other foster mothers like domestic servants and rarely listened to their demands (Chapter two), I heard the good news after I left Guangxi that Pei Pei had been granted permission to stay in her foster home with her foster mother and sister until adulthood.

In contrast to the limits of fosterage relations and the marginal character of foster families expressed in Chapter four, Li *ayi*'s triumph shows that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles of bureaucracy and institutions, poor, uneducated foster mothers are motivated by the experience of caring for children and the love they have for them to seek what they feel is best for the children. Despite Li *ayi*'s diminished

social stature, she won a great battle against the state due to her persistence. In allowing Pei Pei to stay in Li *ayi*'s foster household until adulthood, instead of confirming her legal obligation to her biological mother, the state radically recognized that foster families can provide tangible benefits and personhood that exceed those of biological families. In a country in which the intergenerational contract between biological parents and children is literally written into the legal code, Li *ayi*'s triumph, however idiosyncratic or local, suggests the personhood conferred through fostering relations serves to challenge longstanding cultural and biological models of family previously affirmed by the state.

Relatedly, Li *ayi*'s acceptance and love for children like Pei Pei caused those around her, including her own sister-in-law, Hu *nushi*, to question the biological boundaries of family life in contemporary China. In Chapter two, when Hu *nushi* expresses pity for Li *ayi* who must take in such troubled children, and perceives Li *ayi*'s biological daughter to be neglected as a result of the foster children in Li *ayi*'s care, Hu *nushi* seems rather incapable of seeing the benefit these children might provide to Li *ayi*. However, as she continues to speak, the ambiguity of her feelings become clear. While Hu *nushi* is at once sorrowful for the great work and sacrifices her sister-in-law makes on these children's behalf, she also bemoans her own daughter's lack of siblings and her inability to spend time with her because of her demanding job. In this way, she envies her sister-in-law's family that is made through fostering, especially given her failure as a parent to connect with her own daughter and discipline her increasingly rebellious and disrespectful behaviors.

In Chapter two I further analyze how the concerns of Li *ayi* and her sister-in-law Hu *nushi*, although they appear similar, are actually quite different. Despite Pei Pei's altered appearance and considerable speech defect (all due to a faulty cleft palate surgery), Li *ayi* primarily expressed concern about her children's grades rather than their ability to socialize within the family or connect with their peers. In contrast, Hu *nushi*'s concerns almost exclusively resolve around her own daughter's emotional development and character. In fact, Hu *nushi* seems puzzled: how is it that Li *ayi*'s makeshift family expresses the type of love and affection she craves with her own daughter? How is it that Li *ayi*, despite her limited education and her poor economic circumstances, seems free, while she herself, feels trapped? Hu *nushi* is overwhelmed to find herself envying the closeness of Li *ayi*'s humble foster family, which causes her to question the structure and value of her own relationships with her biological kin.

Communities of Care

I mentioned in Chapter three that the effects of these transformative relationships between foster parents and foster children and their alterations in personhood not only affect interpersonal relationships, but the communities they inhabit. In Chapter two where I discuss the motivations women present for fostering, it is significant that fostering communities tend to be clustered within urban complexes or villages, because future foster parents are motivated and empowered to foster through observing the experience of their neighbors.

However, the wider community often takes notice and ownership for these children as well. One of the important effects of foster care is that it brings together

mentally and physically impaired children with non-impaired children, because it places children outside the walls of the institution and into local communities. While neighbors often express shock and dismay at the conditions of these children, much as foster parents first did upon bringing them home (Chapter three), orphanage and INGO monitors as well as parents themselves take great pains to make sure the children are integrated and accepted into the larger community. Much as the experience of kinning is what creates family-like bonds between foster parents and foster children, the experience of living alongside impaired children works to change and challenge attitudes regarding disability in contemporary China.

In Chapter one, I drew upon Erving Goffman (1963), as well as Jinhua Guo and Arthur Kleinman's studies of stigma (2011) to characterize the social disability and nonpersonhood abandoned individuals experience as a consequence of lacking family in China's kin-oriented society. I have suggested that through kinning, socially disabled elderly women and vulnerable children become family to one another, conferring the requisite relations that constitute social personhood in Chinese society. Goffman names two types of normal (non-stigmatized) individuals: 1) professionals, such as nurses, and 2) those related through the social structure, such as spouses, parents, and families, who become wise persons, or "whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who find themselves afforded a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan" (1963: 28). Goffman goes on to suggest that these wise persons, who experience courtesy stigma, provide a model of normalization in that it does not seem right for society to treat them poorly (30). In contrast, Guo and Kleinman observe that in China, courtesy stigma does

not necessarily produce normalization, but can yield the opposite effect: they cite cases in which entire families are ostracized merely through association with family members who experience mental illness or have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (2011).

What is fascinating in the case of foster families is that because of their parallel social disability, elderly women and vulnerable children are uniquely able to establish “courtesy membership” in one another’s “clan.” As the reader may recall from Chapter two, this uncanny alliance is simultaneously acknowledged and criticized by middle-aged orphanage and INGO personnel. Middle-aged caregivers understand that elderly women are willing to care for abandoned children because of their commensurate socially disabled status, but they worry that this status as nonpersons makes them unsuitable parents for these vulnerable children. Furthermore, these relations cause middle-aged careworkers to question their own social vulnerabilities and reveal their insecurities. Despite a register of courtesy stigma for the foster mothers, their reciprocal and sacrificial relations with their foster children have the surprising effect of challenging the boundaries of the families and communities around them.

Especially in Daling village, where nearly everyone knew one another, and children often had more freedom to roam the streets and visit neighbors, community members began to comment earnestly regarding the abilities, rather than the disabilities of the children. One older man who lived across from some of the older boys with mental impairments frequently invited the boys in for meals, and complimented the boys on their sweet nature and good manners. These cross-generational bonds with community members, as well as foster parents, were highly significant for children whose previous lives in institutions provided limited opportunities for social interaction.

I recall how Director Wang once spoke with a prospective foster family in Daling, alleging, “You’ll have to teach these children everything. Like dogs, they’ve probably never seen one, you’ll have to teach them to be afraid of them, that dogs bite, because children who grow up in the orphanage don’t naturally know these things.” While children clearly learned many social behaviors from their foster parents outside the walls of the institution, parents and community members also learned that the limits of disability were not quite as rigid as they’d previously perceived. Children who were once abandoned now had families just like the biological children in the community. Especially in Daling, during harvest time the community regularly came together to support and help one another. Children shucked corn, popped the tops off of hot peppers, swept their homes, and did occasional light farming. Because the abilities of impaired children were comparable to other small children their age, they were frequently accepted, welcomed, and cherished as active and valuable members of the larger community.

Finally, the children experienced themselves as persons with family who were intimately integrated into the life of the community. Children with impairments played alongside village children with ease and confidence. One afternoon, Huilan asked Hengwei’s elder foster brother (who had Down Syndrome) whether he would come back to Nanning when he grew up. Shaking his head violently, he expressed in garbled, halting speech, his desire to stay in Daling and “*qu waipo*” or take a wife there. Likewise, Hongmei’s and Lili’s completely altered natures (Chapter four) are evidence of children for whom family and community relations caused dramatic shifts in personhood. For Hongmei, lying and secrecy gave way to pride and confidence in her family and

home, as she demonstrated her chores and introduced her grandmother in small phrases she'd acquired from the Zhuang language. For Lili and other autistic children, the profound shifts in ability and demeanor, the receptiveness to community members' advances and parents' affection, were remarkable evidence of the importance of family relationships and their connection to a community's affirmation of social personhood (for a conflicting experience, see Jiaqi's rejection in Chapter four).

Corporate Advocacy

Alongside the personhood that foster parents experienced as valuable contributors to these children's lives and society, in the larger community of elderly parents who were fostering, they found support for these new identities. Foster parents rarely mentioned any petitions or requests to orphanage and INGO workers in one-on-one visitation. Yet during collective meetings that the orphanage conducted with multiple foster mothers from the community, foster parents almost always asserted their request for higher wages. Not only did foster parents come to believe that the service they provided to the children was valuable and as individuals they deserved more compensation, they also identified as a corporate group of individuals who had formed families amongst strangers. Thus, adequate compensation did not signify the temporary or illegitimate nature of these relations, but rather the investment of the orphanage in their longevity and their promise.

Given that the state orphanage foster care compensation was set by the provincial level government, the orphanage officials did not raise the pay rate and claimed that they had few avenues to effect change on the foster mothers' behalf. However, the conversation that took place in these meetings shifted from one in which the orphanage

held all the power and delivered orders to one in which advocacy and negotiation became the mode of conduct for the foster parents. The orphanage found themselves in a more subordinate position, not wanting to lose the foster mothers' service and apologizing for their inability to honor their requests. As the reader may recall, in Chapter two, the mothers often commented that they couldn't adequately express themselves in Mandarin, and thus, failed to relay comments or frustrations to the orphanage or INGO monitors. While this inability or reluctance to speak up appears straightforward, there were also times at which refusals to speak Mandarin were interpreted as subtle acts of defiance toward the demands of the modern state.

In this way, the corporate advocacy of the foster mothers on their behalf and on behalf of the children not only represents a significant shift in their personhood, as well as a social reintegration into family life, but also a recognition that these families are legitimate and deserve the government's support. In their study of foster families in Beijing, Wu, et. al note that foster parents complained that they lacked political support, given that foster children were often illegally rejected from schools, institutions, and medical care due to their impairments (2005: 132-33). Whereas foster parents often acknowledged that these children would be better off in richer homes or in foreign countries, their willingness to lobby for more money to continue and sustain these relations suggests they also believed their work and the experience of family for both parent and child was important and valuable. This personhood is problematic in the example where Huilan implores Dengrong's foster mother to provide a receipt for medical expenses in order to assert the domain of the state over the temporary nature of foster families, In this interaction Huilan and other state orphanage workers find

themselves caught between not being able to provide more funding and wanting to support the foster mothers' service. Thus, Huilan recognized this relationship as contractual yet negotiable, struggling to maintain the boundaries of foster kinship.

Emotional Indictment: Family and State

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the way in which fostering relations and changes in personhood confronted societal and state paradigms of family was in the eventual adoption of *Yima*'s foster daughter Meili to America, which occurred as I was leaving Guangxi. As I recall at the outset of this chapter, both *Yima* and Meili's relationship had shifted to resemble the markers of Chinese kinship, and especially *Yima* experienced a newfound sense of confidence and satisfaction in the care and life she had afforded for Meili.

When the time came for Meili to go to America, *Yima* accompanied her to the orphanage to say goodbye, and though her words expressed her gratefulness and happiness to the new American mother, her gaunt frame, her red eyes, and her sobs expressed her loss palpably. At one point, she clung to Meili, wailing loudly, and the orphanage officials frowned disapprovingly, and quickly proceeded to pry her from her foster daughter's arms. "Stop crying," the orphanage monitors whispered feverishly and petulantly, but it was no use, *Yima* had already made the scene they'd been wanting to avoid.

I want to suggest particularly that this last scene, and others leading up to it, as well, illustrate the contrast between the kinning the orphanage monitors and INGO workers have sought to effect, and the kinning that has actually taken place for foster

mothers like *Yima* as a result of daily interaction between parent and child. Seeing *Yima*'s display of emotions in front of the new adoptive mother, I propose that the orphanage officials are horrified, not only because they want the transition to proceed smoothly and without undue disruption or emotion, but because they do not feel the deep attachment *Yima* feels to this discarded child. Although the officials have facilitated and monitored the foster placement, as well as the adoption, they have been demanding a type of philosophical or behavioral kinning, rather than experiencing the deeply intersubjective process of kinning. Their subjectivity has not been altered by this process in the way *Yima*'s has, and thus her emotion at releasing Meili to her adoptive mother, infringes upon them as an emotional indictment regarding their inability to understand the depth of relation and care effected through the foster care relationship, through becoming kin. Suddenly, it is they, the initial arbiters of kinning, who are ostracized from its very effects, and they are dumbfounded, uneasy, and afraid.

Meanwhile for *Yima*, all notions of compliance in philosophy or behavior have been disregarded as this intersubjective process of kinning, coming to see herself as Meili's mother and thus being moved to a place of social importance in her community, has altered her personhood. We see that *Yima*'s shift in recognition of Meili's personhood, from that of a discarded, sickly, yellow child that no one wanted, to a "good girl," moreover a daughter, and *Yima*'s own transformation, from that of an ordinary person to a person who has effected change in the life of another, are intersubjective shifts that she, not the orphanage officials have experienced. Hence, their indignation at her outburst of emotion is founded. *Yima*'s kinning produces noncompliance, as well as

uncertainty. If poor, elderly women can come to accept these children as valuable persons, what is it that the orphanage officials are missing?

Though not explicitly mentioned here, Meili's initial refusal to be adopted internationally, followed by a subsequent change of heart a few years into being fostered by *Yima* (see Chapter one), corroborates a parallel transformation in personhood for the "kinned" foster child. While Meili's change of heart is viewed by the orphanage as a bureaucratic headache, I move it suggests that she comes to understand herself as not only part of a foster family (reintegration), but as a social person, with important and valid needs for stability and security (recuperation). As Meili once reflected on security as the ultimate quest of every Chinese person (Chapter one), she comes to see her security not as compromised by the failures of her biological family, but as rooted in the social personhood afforded by the affection and care of her foster mother.

Yima, Meili, *Li ayi*, *Pei Pei*, *Dengrong*, and others' transformation through kinning throw the boundaries of Chinese kinship, previously paroled by biology and the state, into disarray, with the powerful suggestion that despite their temporary nature, foster families are legitimate kin, and foster relations connote not only economic and social value to those who participate in them, but significant changes in personhood. As the orphanage finds themselves in a subordinate position to the foster parents, begging them to continue fostering, and the foster parents find that their import to society and the state has increased, they begin to leverage their newfound personhood in order to make choices that support their own well-being rather than that of others or those who are in power.

Finally, as middle-aged caregivers question their own parenting philosophies and behaviors in light of the powerful conversion of these temporary relationships, they also begin to probe the boundaries of Chinese kinship, perhaps reforming the idea that these children and their parents are irreparably socially disabled due to their abandonment. For Huilan, Liu *laoshi*, and Hu *nushi*, the boundaries between their normal, biological families and these foster families have been tested, and many times the bonds between foster parents and their foster children have paradoxically called into question the limits of modern Chinese family life and biological kinship. While Liu *laoshi* was often critical of the foster parents' disciplinary techniques (Chapter two), she and her husband expressed longing to adopt a young girl of their own from the orphanage so that their infant son could have a companion. They, not unlike many other orphanage directors or INGO employees were impressed by the genuine love and affection within the foster families they oversaw, and in contrast to traditional attitudes (Chapter one), began to consider adopting children themselves.

For Hu *nushi*, Li *ayi*'s close-knit family troubled her own assumptions about how social disability and poverty need affect family life. As she worked long hours away from her daughter so that she could have a better life, she, like the migrant workers who live away from their families, began to experience the effects of a her own absence on her child and the limits of what sacrifice and money can buy. The rifts in her relationship with her daughter caused her to pause at the unlikely harmony in Li *ayi*'s little family, a family that would hardly be desirable by societal standards, but from which genuine bonds of kinship had emerged.

On the long bus rides to and fro Daling, Huilan's tears recalling the loss of her father and her frustrations regarding the care her in-laws provide in her absence to her only daughter, are hardly insubstantial. Once in Daling, she reveled bitter-sweetly in the warmth of these foster family relationships, struggling to maintain the divide between her personal life and her work. Late into the evening, when we were tucked under the damp down comforters in the hotel, Huilan would whisper about her inability to reconcile her admiration and frustration with these foster parents and with herself. One evening she confessed that given this inner turmoil, she never quite felt successful in her job. "But when I was a nurse," she quipped, "and I could find a vein drawing blood, that was such a simple, sincere sense of accomplishment. Sometimes I long for that, you know?"

Huilan often told with animation and emotion, the story of a family in Daling, who had fostered a toddler with cerebral palsy nearly six years ago when another charity tried to implement a foster care project in the countryside. When a child died and the government demanded that all the children return to the orphanage in Nanning, the family, particularly the foster father and his young son, were heartbroken. For six years, Huilan recounted, the teenage son lobbied the local government and then the municipal government in Nanning to return the child into their care. When the girl, now eight years old, returned to her former foster family in Daling with the other children in October of 2011, the foster father and his son sobbed with joy, proclaiming, "finally, our daughter has come home."

Huilan told me this story several times in response to queries I made about the long-term sustainability of these foster placements in Daling and the future of these children with impairments in Chinese society. She argued that such affection among a

father and his teenage son illustrated the ability of fostering relations to transcend generational divides, reforming attitudes among people in her generation about the value and personhood of these children. While she acknowledged that some older children rejected the children from the orphanage, many came to love them as their elderly parents did, advocating for them as this teenage son, and demonstrating that fostering relations were legitimate family relationships which afforded valuable personhood to both socially disabled children and even, middle-aged young people and parents.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have presented foster parents and children's affections, behavior, and advocacy over time to demonstrate significant, qualitative shifts in personhood that have occurred as a result of these kinning relationships established through Chinese foster care. In addition to becoming personal advocates on behalf of their impaired children, fosterage creates communities of care, through which corporate advocacy for the distinct needs of socially disabled children in Chinese society coalesces. These transformations in personhood ultimately trouble local, societal, and state assumptions about the role of family in Chinese culture, as middle-age orphanage and INGO workers find their own personhood and family relationships wanting.

Conclusion

Just a few months after I left Guangxi, Huilan emailed to inform me that Director Wang had left her position as Foster Care Director at the municipal orphanage, and Huilan had accepted the promotion. Struggling to reconcile the increased responsibility of overseeing the entire department in addition to the Daling project, Huilan confided in me that her own insecurities as a parent made her often feel hypocritical, ineffective, or listless. Noting that age was not a prerequisite to caring, she praised some of the elderly foster parents she had known over the years, but like many others, wondered who might take their place. In a world in which these children were being abandoned by people in her generation and their allies (elderly women) were growing older and more feeble (Chapter two), who would emerge to adopt them, foster them, or value them as persons? As she had once whispered to me, “I love these children, but even I couldn’t imagine caring for them myself.”

In that same email, Huilan confided that Dengrong had been sent back to the orphanage, because her health remained too fragile. However, I also learned from Huilan that this result was not one of negligence of care, but one of genuine health complications. At over three and half hours by bus outside the capital city of Nanning and with her guardianship and medical insurance still housed in the orphanage, it became too impractical for the fragile Dengrong to reside out in the village, where there were few

modern facilities or remedies. Huilan told me that Dengrong's foster parents traveled several times from Daling to Nanning to visit her in the orphanage, where she continued to recover.

Over Skype, one evening, Meili, who'd been adopted to America just three months after I left China, was eager to try out new words in English. Several months later, she insisted on only speaking in English with me, blurting out short phrases in a sing-songy lilt. *Yima* was busy trying to learn how to type on a computer in order to communicate with her, she reported. Her adoptive mother had discovered that Meili was quite nearsighted, and she now wore glasses that framed her round face. Her adoptive mother emailed me often to thank me for helping with Meili's transition—it had been virtually seamless. It was hard for her and her husband to remember a time without Meili, yet back in Nanning, *Yima*, who refused to foster another child, grew thinner and more frail.

The varied trajectories of these three foster children, as well as the foster mothers and some of the orphanage and INGO workers who played such a key role in their kinning processes speaks to some of the ways in which despite its seemingly marginal character, fosterage intertwines and expands families across contemporary Chinese society. In this dissertation I have tried to show that what is surprising about these fosterage relationships is that beyond constituting personhood among those previously reckoned non-persons due to their social abandonment, they also challenge normative cultural ideals of family held by state orphanage and INGO careworkers. Hence, such seemingly marginal, non-biological bonds actually rival, and in some cases, exceed those

of the biological family, revealing the extent to which personhood in China remains elementally social, but is also widening its purview.

In Chapter one I explained how abandoned children with physical and mental impairments become *socially disabled* due to their lack of familial attachments in a society that primarily values the bonds of kinship as the foundation for personhood. I argued that because of their *social disability*, these children are considered irredeemable and unadoptable in the eyes of most in Chinese society, often including the orphanage and INGO workers who work on their behalf. The rest of the dissertation follows the interaction of these state and societal caregivers, foster parents, and the three children mentioned in this conclusion: Dengrong, who is abandoned because of her severe cerebral palsy; Pei Pei, who is the daughter of a mentally ill, incarcerated woman; and Meili, who is abandoned due to divorce.

Chapter two aligned the social disability of physically and mentally impaired children with that of their poor, elderly foster parents who have been abandoned by their own children, as well as state institutions. I showed how poor, elderly women are motivated to foster children with impairments because the state provides a stipend for caregiving, but also because children facilitate new connections between caregivers and communities. However, state orphanage and INGO workers identify the foster parents' advanced age, financial motivations, lack of education, and attitudes perceived to be "backwards" as problems they have to manage. Over the course of fieldwork, I concluded that these middle-generation workers (who are parents themselves) often displaced ambivalence and frustrations they harbored from their own childhood (or toward their own parents who were providing care for their children) and vulnerabilities

about their own inability to care for their children given their careers and financial constraints onto the foster parents they managed.

In Chapter three, I documented how foster children go from being “unwanted,” “ugly children” to beloved sons and daughters in the eyes of their foster parents. I provided ethnographic examples of the process of *kinning* that takes place between elderly foster mothers and their foster children, and which includes discipline, caregiving, displays of affection, and advocating for children. I demonstrated how through this process, biologically unrelated foster parents and foster children construct socially meaningful relationships of family that convey *personhood* to individuals who were previously excluded from such social value in kin-oriented Chinese society.

Chapter four highlighted some of the ways in which despite this constitution of personhood, foster families remain marginal to state and societal life in contemporary China. In this chapter, I focused on a pilot foster care project that involved placing twenty-two children with relatively severe impairments previously housed in the Nanning municipal orphanage into private foster homes in rural Daling village, located approximately three and a half hours drive from Nanning. I argued that the education of impaired children becomes the site at which prejudiced attitudes toward rural people are acted out by government and INGO personnel, and where elite forms of institutional education and rehabilitation are ultimately deemed incompatible with the “backward” attitudes of rural people, among them foster parents and impaired children.

Chapter five demonstrated that despite their marginal and temporary character, fosterage relationships are transformative. This is because the bonds between elderly caregivers and impaired children, as well as their newfound personhood, challenge

normative understandings of family held by state orphanage and INGO caregivers. Following the three children in the dissertation to their alternative fates of return to the orphanage, long-term fosterage, and international adoption, I showed how orphanage and INGO careworkers experience emotional indictment as they come to recognize the personhood constituted between foster parents and children and find the affection in these relationships wanting in their own families. Additionally, I documented how foster parents, who become advocates of children with impairments, gain a nuanced understanding of the limits of physical and mental impairments on social life. Furthermore, the communities in which these children live are transformed through the process of receiving and living with these children who were previously kept inside or institutionalized.

While by and large children with impairments are adopted outside of China today, during my eighteen months in the field, I met more and more Chinese families who were willing to consider children with Hepatitis B and Down syndrome for adoption. An increasing awareness beyond just the foster mothers, but to others in society, suggested that ideas about disability and disease might be shifting. Because it is legal for parents with one child to adopt a second with a disability, or from an orphanage, more and more families with the financial capabilities and the social connections, are considering such an option.

Still, one might query how significant these local changes are in light of China's regional diversity, massive demographics, and popularly referenced, strong central state. For *Yima*, let alone Meili, the ramifications of the kinning relationship had appeared widespread and profound. *Yima* had expressed a sense of satisfaction and joy regarding

this relationship, over and above the one that she had with her own biological daughter. She had confronted the orphanage workers who had snubbed her along the way. She had intervened in Meili's life in a life-altering way. Yet, these changes seemed to have their legal and societal limits. *Yima's* insistence that Meili would be her last foster child had been both demonstrative of her newly acquired personhood and power vis-à-vis the state, but had also depleted her social role in the eyes of others, given that without a foster child, she was no longer a mother, fulfilling an apparent social obligation to a family and society. Such persistent social disability speaks to some of the legal and societal limits of reintegration and recuperation for China's elderly, for whom recognition of personhood remains problematically predicated on biocentric notions of family and social function.

However, in the case of Pei Pei, her lack of legal personhood is stunning in contrast to her social personhood. Legally bound to her biological mother who is imprisoned, Pei Pei's foster mother is not her legal guardian, and yet, it is this foster family who fights for and receives the state's permission to care for Pei Pei. It is arguably the personhood mutually conveyed through the kinning relationship between Li *ayi* and Pei Pei that not only flies in the face of the state's legal borders around family and child rights (or lack thereof), but also challenges her sister-in-law's normative notions of family (see Chapters two and three). Pei Pei's case demonstrates that in spite of legal limits to personhood in contemporary China, alternative family forms, such as fosterage, can confer social personhood that is equally transformative.

Perhaps this is practical evidence of a increasing culture and recognition of children's rights that Orna Naftali detects in China (2014). In her work among middle class teachers and parents in Shanghai, Naftali cogently identifies both efforts to

encourage children's rights and traditional approaches to discipline and childrearing (honoring hierarchical relations and filial piety) that appear in conflict with this internationally-minded regime (2014: 131). She also acknowledges that some children, like those of migrants, and I would argue, children with impairments and abandoned children, remain problematically outside of that Chinese state's notion of child rights (135). Because such children are viewed as property of the patriarchal family under adoption law, which also makes no stipulations for guardianship, these children remain outside the category of modern citizens to whom certain rights are afforded (Shang 2013).

What is instructive however, for instance in the case of Pei Pei, is that these children's very inclusion in fosterage, alongside increasing trends among Chinese families who are adopting children with Hepatitis or Down syndrome that I saw toward the end of my fieldwork, speaks to the reorientation of family and personhood transcending from the margins of Chinese society. Despite popular claims in the Chinese media and in scholarship that the Chinese family is in decline and immorality has run rampant in modernity (Yan 2010, 2011a,b), these foster families suggest that Chinese concepts of family and person are being transformed through relationships that both defy and mimic the biocentric notions of family that have long been upheld by Chinese culture. Perhaps paradoxically, these shifting notions of family and person are not grounded in the state's modern policies or a Western individualism wrought by modernization, but rather in the kinning relationship between parent and child, through which enduring cultural values, such as social roles, obligation and care, are being taught and tweaked. It is significant that understandings of Chinese personhood continue to be

constituted within the context of family life, despite changes produced by the processes of globalization, migration, and family planning policies. While such processes certainly challenge social hierarchies, it is important to remember that these processes are always contextualized within the realm of culture and the cultural responses of creative peoples.

Nowhere are these changes perhaps more apparent than in the tenuous relationships between the senior and middle generations in modern day China, especially the ambivalence they produce within the middle generation regarding childhood and childrearing. It has not been possible within the scope of this dissertation to fully intimate the impact of Western psychological discourses on this realm of social life (Naftali 2014), but the ethnography, particularly in Chapters two and four, references conflicts between psychology and education and local customs, beliefs, and hierarchies. Still, I believe these chapters do not merely confirm the dissonance of these modern discourses, but also qualify the extent to which such discourses are often reaffirmed and reified in order to justify generational ambivalence, personal vulnerability, and social inequality. For instance, while middle generation orphanage and INGO workers quibble with foster parents' lack of education and psychological understanding, they also subtly draw attention to their own vulnerability with respect to market and social pressures when it comes to parenting (Chapter two). Whereas the same state and societal employees appear to valorize rural modes of care and morality, they perhaps unintentionally relegate abandoned, impaired children to a past, rather than a present or a future that deserves the attention of a modern, progressive state.

Despite the underside of these generational frictions, my intent has also been to rehabilitate these seemingly “uncivilized,” “immoral” subjects (Yan 2003, 2010,

2011a,b) by ethnographically conveying the social pressures they experience. For instance, even as Huilan was complicit in the emotional removal of Jiaqi in Chapter four, her motives were sound. Her desire to expand the Daling program to serve more children, alongside her desire to keep her familial and work life separate at the outset of this chapter, demonstrate the complicated and contested nature of personhood and morality in modern China. Even for Huilan and other orphanage workers, these children and their foster parents, socially disabled by their abandonment, teeter on the boundaries of persons and nonpersons in their own consciousness. As with the emotional indictment the orphanage workers experience following *Yima*'s uncharacteristic outburst in Chapter five, my ethnography draws attention to the uncomfortable ways in which personhood is not a private pursuit in modern China, as the socially able recognize their own vulnerability in the socially disabled.

Not surprisingly, foster parents and foster children find and ally themselves with one another due to their common social disability. However, it is the power of these bonds of fosterage to disrupt the neat social networks of the middle class and middle-aged state orphanage and INGO workers in this dissertation that mark the wide circles of social change afoot from an out of the way place such as Guangxi. In this way, I have shown that these seemingly marginal families are not so marginal after all in that their bonds of kinship and their transformations in personhood infiltrate the normative modes of the state in their everyday interactions with state orphanage and INGO workers. When it comes to kinship in China, "nature has not had the last word" (Levi-Strauss 1971[1949]: 31), just as the state has not been the final arbiter of personhood and citizenship. From the seemingly trivial rearing of socially disabled children by poor,

elderly parents comes a notion of modern personhood that troubles the boundaries so archetypal of modernity in China. From the everyday acts of rearing the next generation come the families that foster change.

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