

FOCUS

Saved from the 'bitter sea'

A Chinese prison officer helps inmates' children

By LI JIA AND CALUM MacLEOD
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XIAN, China
When "Black Bean" was 4 years old, his mother and her lover stabbed his father to death. The lover was executed for murder and the mother was sentenced to 15 years in prison as an accessory to the crime. Yet the little boy's nightmare had only just begun. Reviled by the whole village, including many relatives, he was abused by adults and children alike.

"I cried while I was filming him," remembers Li Yaming, a documentary maker who trekked to Black Bean's remote village in Shaanxi Province, northwest China. "At 5, he was under a meter tall, with severe burns, scars and wounds all over his tiny body. His right leg was crippled, either from being beaten or from a fall he had while minding goats. Some of the villagers said Black Bean would die if he stayed there."

His mother cried when she saw how her son had changed since she was jailed. Again, Li and his camera were on hand to capture the moment when the scarred little boy first limped into his mother's prison in the provincial capital of Xian. Yet the tears were mixed with relief -- and overwhelming gratitude to maverick prison officer Zhang Shuqing.

Rescuing Black Bean, in April 1996, was just one more small victory in Zhang's struggle to help some of China's most destitute families. For the last five years, the feisty grandmother, a 52-year-old divorcee, has battled social prejudice and government indifference to establish what she calls the Children's Village in Xian. This center for the offspring of convicted criminals serving time in prison is the first of its kind in China and one of the country's few nongovernmental organizations worthy of the name.

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The gibes soon turned personal. Not only are the very concepts of charity and NGOs new to most Chinese, let alone charity that involves such controversial recipients, but Zhang is a divorcee who

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When Black Bean was four years old, his mother and her lover stabbed his father to death. The lover was executed for murder and his mother was sentenced to fifteen years as an accomplice. Yet the little boy's nightmare had only just begun. Reviled by the whole village, including many relatives, he was abused by adults and children alike.

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His mother cried very audibly when she saw how her son had changed since her incarceration. Again, Li and his camera were on hand to capture the moment the scarred child first limped into his mother's prison in the provincial capital Xian. Yet amid the tears there was relief, and gratitude to maverick prison officer Zhang Shuqing.

Rescuing Black Bean was another small victory in Zhang's struggle to help some of China's most destitute families. For the last five years, the feisty grandmother, a 52-year-old divorcee, has battled social prejudice and government indifference to establish a 'Children's Village' in Xian. This care center for the offspring of serving convicts is the first of its kind in China, and one of the country's few non-governmental organizations worth the name.

Li Yaming has recorded every major step of Zhang's trail-blazing crusade. "Anyone less determined than Zhang would have given up long ago," says Li. "We went down to the villages to bring back children and we were greeted with suspicion and hostility. Some called us bad names, even spat on us, while some thought we would try and sell the children."

The journey has taken Zhang into the darkest reaches of modern Chinese society. Far from the bright lights of Shanghai, and the political pomp of Beijing, centuries-old customs and attitudes prevail in the villages where most Chinese still live. Black Bean's mother Han Jing'en had herself barely turned eleven when she was sold into marriage with a peasant farmer from a neighboring village. The match was brokered to enable her older brother to marry the farmer's sister.

Thrust rudely into the roles of wife and mother, Han sought solace from her abusive husband in the arms of his younger brother. When the older man refused a divorce, he was killed in a flash of long repressed anger. As soon as Han learned from other prisoners of Zhang's plans for a Children's Village, she applied for Black Bean, the nickname of son Chen Xin, and his six year-old sister Chen Jun.

The children had been split up since their mother's imprisonment, after Han's brother betrayed her sacrifice, refusing refuge to his nephew and niece. The local government promised a monthly subsidy of 110 yuan to any family who would take the children, no small amount in an impoverished community.

Chen Jun was taken by the village head's family, while Black Bean changed hands four times before ending up with a fellow outcast, a midget who lived alone. Besides the welcome subsidy, the boy's new guardian found a useful slave, whom he beat into cooking for him and tending his goatherd in the mountains. While their children threw stones at Black Bean, their parents threw insults at the 'little criminal'.

Scars still cover his scalp, and he remains shorter than his playmates, but today Black Bean is sprouting anew. On a winter's day in the Xian suburbs, he cavorts in an oversize coat donated by a local company. Here at Xincheng Children's Village, Zhang's second center, almost everything is a cast-off, from the shaky dining tables to the old school benches and bookshelves.

Black Bean is too shy to answer questions, but explodes in laughter as he foot-juggles a homemade shuttlecock. Other children crowd round their common saviour, grabbing her hands. "Granny Zhang, how are you!" She basks in their attention, asking one girl if she is warm enough, and joking with a boy whether he still wets his bed.

Her roles range from fund-raiser and manager to lobbyist and social worker. "Many of these children are traumatized," she explains. Chen Jun was so quiet with no smile when she first arrived here. "One year, I took her and other kids home for the Spring Festival. We were washing up together, when she suddenly told me in tears how her dad was stabbed in the chest and how the blood spurted everywhere. She had been having nightmares every night. I comforted her, saying her mother and all of us loved her. It was good for her to let it out and gradually she became more lively."

Zhang Shuqing boasts no formal qualifications for her multiple roles and responsibilities. Her career and interests have been shaped by the five decade history of Communist China. Born to a poor family in Baoji city, west Shaanxi, she was sent down to the countryside, to 'learn from the peasants' during the Cultural Revolution.

In backward and mountainous areas, Zhang achieved her real education as a nurse, and later a 'bare-foot doctor'. Her writing hobby finally won her return to the city in 1984. The job at 'Public Health News' in Xian brought official permission to leave the countryside, and a long-anticipated reunion with her husband. However, married life proved impossible to renew. Zhang and her husband divorced.

She took custody of their two daughters, and put her energy behind another career move, becoming a prison officer to run a newspaper for the Shaanxi Prison Bureau. "I loved my job and my uniform." Zhang remembers with excitement. They opened doors into desperate lives. "In 1987, I interviewed a couple who were serving prison sentences. The women knelt down and begged me to go to see their five young children, all under their grandma's care."

She kept her promise and trekked into the loess hills, where millions of Chinese still live in caves. "When I got to their cave, I was shocked by what I saw! The old woman was sick and the four kids were curled up on the mud-brick bed. The eldest daughter had died from illness." Zhang offered what help she could and went home with a heavy heart. The need for humanity became the abiding theme in the prison life stories and scripts she wrote for TV dramas.

In 1995, Zhang launched her first independent effort, the 'Xian Returning To Society Research Association', which offers legal and other advice to released prisoners. Rejections from government offices meant Zhang was obliged to register the association as an NGO. At the opening ceremony, her care center proposal for the children of the criminals aroused strong opposition. One city leader said "Why don't you care for children from decent families, such as laid-off workers or even martyrs?"

Funding was her main obstacle. But China's vicious recent past proved the catalyst for Guo Jianhu, a wealthy entrepreneur, to donate housing in an area 65 kilometers from Xian. Guo's own children had suffered discrimination when he was wrongfully imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. After much pleading, nearby schools agreed to take the children free of charge.

On May 26, 1996, the Xian Children's Village formally opened with 26 of the most needy children, selected from 90 applications made by prisoners in Shaanxi. "It was a victory for human rights!" believes Li Yaming. "It's incredible, a big step toward a more civilized society. Traditionally, people believe criminals and even their children deserve to be discriminated against and despised. To them, that's justice being done."

When funds from his TV station dried up, Li used his own money to film more stories from the 'Children Village'. His documentary 'The Story of Black Bean' became a hit in China, but Li was still criticized by his superiors last month for showing the program to United Press International. Its images of China are regarded as too 'negative' to reveal to foreigners.

As the start of the Old Silk Road, Xian was once the most prosperous and cosmopolitan city in the world, home to the remarkable terracotta army. Those glory days have long faded, leaving the region a conservative stronghold where poverty fuels a rising crime rate. Although prison statistics are guarded as 'national secrets, estimates suggest there are over 30,000 prisoners in Shaanxi, and a million nation wide.

While China's crime situation still compares favorably with many other developing countries, the number of murder cases has jumped 40% over the past decade. In one women's prison in Shaanxi, Li Yaming noted nearly all the 200 inmates had murdered their husbands. "Divorce is still socially unacceptable and too difficult to realize," offers Zhang in explanation. "Some see murdering their unloved spouse as the only way out, without realizing the legal consequences."

Or the bleak consequences for their children. After their mother was jailed for killing their father over a love affair, sisters Guo Xiaoyan and Xiaoqin were treated little better than slaves by their two uncles. "There was panic in their eyes - anything unusual could lead to a beating," remembers Zhang of the moment she reached the dark cave where the girls lived. "Granny Zhang looked kind and she said she could take us to see our mother," says 13 year-old Guo. "So, we went with her. We're glad we did." The two have blossomed at the centre, studying hard and learning dance routines they proudly perform for visitors.

The hard-won but successful establishment of the Children's Village has bred rumors questioning Zhang's motives. Some people say she uses the village to further her own political ambitions - Zhang is not even a Communist party member. Others criticize her for courting media publicity, and suspect she exploits the children for money.

The jibes soon turned personal. Not only are the concepts of charity and NGOs new to most Chinese, let alone involving such controversial recipients of aid, but their advocate Zhang is a divorcee who enjoys smoking and drinking, flying in the face of traditional criteria for 'decent women'. "At first, I was upset by such attacks," she admits. "And then, I thought, 'say anything you like!' I don't care as long as my accounts are clean and I don't abuse the children."

Whatever the pressures of her position, Zhang keeps a ready smile, morale boosted by media coverage of the villages, financial help and support from strangers, and the reaction of grateful parents. At the end of 1997, a survey showed that 98% of prisoners with offspring at Zhang's centers won praise or reduced sentences for their improved behaviour.

Selling noodles at her market stand near Xincheng Children's Village, 30 year-old Jiang Yanzhen remembers her own jail term with a shudder, particularly the time her eldest son was kidnapped. After being raped by a local drug dealer, the former school teacher had no choice but to marry him. One night, Jiang put up a fight when he began beating her and their two sons again. She was jailed for manslaughter.

“Every day, I worried something terrible might happen to my younger son Taotao,” says Jiang, who turned her anger against other inmates. As soon as she heard about Zhang’s Village, she applied. “Our crimes brought great misfortune to our two children,” she wrote later in a letter of thanks. “I was so depressed, but when I nearly wanted to give up my life, you gave me the courage to live again. Now, the only thing in my mind is to reform myself completely.”

Jiang’s good behavior won a two-year reduction from her six-year sentence. Such success encouraged Zhang to build a second children’s village, with public donations, and free land from the district government. But construction halted when several promised donations failed to materialize. By New Year’s Eve 1998, Zhang was down to only 600 yuan. “I stayed up all night, drinking white spirits by myself, thinking hard,” Zhang recounts the crises. “I drifted to sleep with the idea I would attempt a bank loan with my flat as deposit. Then, the very next day, I was informed that a Hong Kong businessman had just donated 150,000 HK dollars!”

Zhang’s force of personality won over many of the people she has met. Journalist Huang Ruizhen came to interview her for local radio, became a part-time volunteer, and then a full-time member of staff, despite a large pay cut. Sculptor and entrepreneur Zou Renti made regular donations after his first visit.

As her charges grow up, Zhang badly needs the support of people like Zou to meet the challenges of further education and employment. When Wen Long graduated in 1998 with a primary-level education, he was already 17, too embarrassed to continue sitting with students six years his junior. After countless rejections, Zhang turned to Zou and his studio producing silica gel ‘waxworks’. Zou remembers the interview. “‘Do you know what sculpture is?’ I asked. ‘No,’ he replied, ‘but I played with mud before.’ ‘That’ll do!’”

Mindful of his status as the first graduate to land a job, Wen has worked tirelessly to return the favor. The studio atmosphere is a world away from the traumatic childhood he tries to forget. “So many unpleasant things happened. It pains me to look back at the past,” Wen says. His father was executed after summer floods revealed the body of his mother, buried months earlier in a dry riverbed. Relatives in the same village abandoned Wen and his sister. They had to steal to survive. “I really don’t dare to think what would happen if I’d stayed there.”

“It’s easy to imagine what would happen,” says Zhang. “He might commit more serious crimes than stealing. That’s why I tell villagers and officials not to treat the children of criminals too harshly. They are innocent. But if we don’t give a damn, they may become the second generation of criminals.”

As requests for help flooded in from across China, Zhang made a daring move to Beijing last year. Her four children’s villages in Xian have cared for over 150 children, aged between four and seventeen, and mostly from Shaanxi and neighboring provinces. “If we are successful in setting up a model, people in other parts of China may try to do the same,” hopes Zhang. In central China’s Hebei province, a businessman named Su Xuxiang has housed seventeen prison children for the past two years.

But her battle in Beijing proved no easier. After six months of failure to win official approval, Zhang was ready to concede defeat when the China Charity Federation, a nation wide non-profit organization, took her project under its wing, though it remains financially independent. “It is still very difficult for China’s NGOs to develop as the government is too used to looking after everything,” she explains. “Yet things are changing. Even I changed from a hot-blooded Red Guard to a mature social worker!” she cries with a hearty laugh.

She has good reason for optimism. The Beijing Children’s Village has found a free home in the Shunyi county suburbs from a sympathetic Beijing entrepreneur. By Chinese New Year in late January, Zhang hopes to enroll forty children. Yet expansion will sorely test her small organization.

Even in the capital, Zhang is still consulted over day-to-day affairs in Xian. One former prisoner who worked for her after his release alleges the children’s villages are also home to small-scale corruption among staff, such as embezzlement of the meager funds for children’s meals. “Because of the low pay, the quality of some staff is also low,” he told UPI, on condition of anonymity. “They don’t treat the children here as equals, even physically punishing them.”

In December, Zhang was back in Xian to discuss potential co-operation with Oxfam and Medicine Sans Frontieres about further assistance to the families of serving prisoners. As she was leaving her fourth village, a girl handed Zhang a letter from her sister, now studying computer science at a polytechnic. ‘Your warm hands saved many poor kids like us who were struggling in the bitter sea.’

Are such letters the most rewarding part of her work? “No! That’s when I receive donations! Each donation, no matter how small the amount, makes me so happy because every tiny bit makes a difference to the children!” With no steady government or corporate money on offer, Zhang faces a constant struggle to keep the villages going. The struggle dominates her life. “Once, a friend kindly introduced a well-off gentleman to me. After a brief exchange of courtesies, I began to talk about our village. I never heard from him again. He told my friend, “Who would dare marry such a workaholic?!””

In her relentless hunt to save more Black Beans, Zhang Shuqing compares herself to China’s mischievous folk hero, the Monkey King. “His mission was the journey to the west to get the Buddhist manuscripts. My mission in life is to look after these poor children of criminals. Nothing will change my devotion!”

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