



Mama Love

by **Dominica Drazal**

Have you ever wondered what life is like in a Chinese orphanage? Do the children laugh, play, love and learn in the same way that our children do? Do they reap from the unprecedented economic growth in this country? Who helps them?

Whereas a multitude of foreigners have come and gone in China, few have left a footprint on the landscape of this nation as powerful as Julie Martens, the co-founder of MiFan Mama, a charity dedicated to helping orphaned Chinese children with the basic necessities of life.

British by birth, this mother of five and grandmother of six arrived in China 13 years ago after having worked as a Human Resources expert in South Africa for 20 years. MiFan Mama, her charity, was born from a brief charity trip in 2009 to an orphanage in Anhui Province run by a man named Lao Wang. As she was leaving, a child tugged on her sleeve and requested, "Please, next time can you bring us some rice. We do

not have any." Since that pivotal moment, Martens has organized a monthly trip, driving 14 hours to Anhui, to deliver rice and supplies.

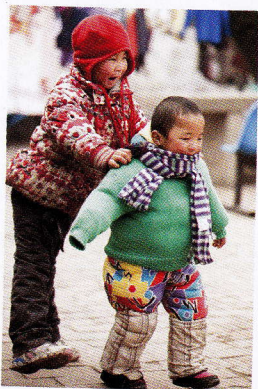
Who are these kids? Having converted his former factory into an orphanage, Lao Wang has taken in and aided over 700 poverty stricken people, ranging from the old and poor, handicapped adults and children, homeless teenagers, and over 500 disabled children and babies. While most of the children he takes in are orphans, some have been placed there by parents too poor to care for them. Of the 250 children, only about 30 attend primary school and 30 either study at middle school, high school or university. Those attending school are fiercely ambitious. Many teenage girls want to emulate the personalities they see on television and become "movie stars." There are also 200 disabled children, many of whom are severely mentally or physically handicapped. Limited resources impede the number of organized activities available for the children, but they receive regular physical therapy. In addition to weekend singing and dancing extravaganzas led by their aiyis, the children can generally be found playing amongst themselves.

Martens says her biggest challenges in running the charity are receiving donations and finding committed volunteers. "I encourage people wanting to help to buy two of everything - from food to hygiene and school supplies - on their next trip to the supermarket and then donate the second item at one of our drop off points throughout Shanghai," she says. She also invites volunteers to join her on her monthly trip to Anhui and to get further involved in management.

One of her greatest concerns is that few Chinese are involved in the organization. "I hope that more outreach will succeed in piquing their interest and making the organizations have long-term and sustainable success," she explains. Plans are also afoot to extend the scope of the organization and, to that end MiFan Mama will soon launch a foster home for blind children in Shanghai, teaching parents and caregivers about preemptive care.

"The work is very emotional and I certainly get exhausted at times, but then some small thing will happen which makes it all so rewarding," she says. "For instance, each time I arrive at the orphanage a girl I fostered runs towards me shouting, 'Mummy, I love you!'"

"They deserve our help," Martens says with conviction, "and I cannot turn my back on them." ❧



How You Can Help
 Donate - Rice, books, shampoo.
 Buy the book - Photographer Anna Willett recently published a book about the orphanage with 100% of the monies raised from sales going to support orphan education in China.

Contact Information:
 - About MiFan Mama and how to help: www.mifanmama.com
 - About Anna Willett www.annawillett.com; annawillett@yahoo.com.au