

Vietnam's Youngest Export: Adoption, On and Off the Books

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HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam -- Ba Tam sells sticky buns outside a maternity hospital in this Southern Vietnamese city. But today, the elderly woman is trying to interest a foreign visitor in another business she dabbles in: the baby trade.

Holding up a two-day-old boy swaddled in sheets of newspaper while his mother recovers from his birth on a rusting bed, Ms. Tam makes her pitch: "He can be yours."

Homeless and jobless, the boy's mother decided only yesterday to give up the still-nameless child, after learning her husband had left her for another woman. Surrounded by her grandmother, her seven-year-old son and several visitors who loiter in the maternity ward, she talks about ensuring a better life for her child, but says she doesn't want to sell him. Ms. Tam cuts her off.

"A healthy boy like this is a good deal," she snaps. "Just pay the hospital bill and give us a tip," she tells the foreign visitor.

Ms. Tam is one cog in Vietnam's machinery of adoption profiteers -- middlemen and fixers of all variety who can deliver a newborn to foreign parents in a matter of weeks. For couples eager to avoid the regulatory thicket in countries like China and Korea, it's an alluring proposition.

But adoptive parents, desperate for a child and unfamiliar with the ways of developing countries like Vietnam, may have little awareness of the payoffs and pressure tactics that unfold behind the scenes. Bribes are doled out liberally -- to baby brokers who scour maternity wards, to birth mothers, to provincial officials who speed up the necessary paperwork.

Sometimes, the corruption leads to tragic endings. Destitute mothers have left their children in local child-care institutions temporarily, only to find that the babies have been adopted overseas when they return to collect them. Some infants have died of neglect after being abandoned by adoptive parents midway through this process, according to recent state-run media reports surrounding an upcoming adoption trial.

Of course, not all international adoptions in Vietnam are murky. In the U.S., for instance, the immigration department runs rigorous checks on the adopted child's origins. A number of the adoption agencies that operate in Vietnam are reputable, and hundreds of abandoned and orphaned children have found loving homes overseas. It's easy to see how an adoption can be salvation for a child. During a recent visit to the Trung Tam orphanage in the southern city of Can Tho, the air is thick with the smell of urine, as mentally handicapped kids rock themselves in cribs alongside several infants who cry for

attention from the single nurse on duty. Many of the children are underweight and covered with scabies.

Yet because Vietnam lacks a central body to police its adoptions, there's great potential for abuse, even in legitimate adoptions. In the upcoming trial, 11 people -- including a doctor and several nurses -- are accused of lending their pregnant patients \$40 to \$60 each for the rights to sell the women's babies. Between 1995 and 1997, some 200 infants were sold in that fashion, according to the Communist Party-run Lao Dong newspaper.

Adoptive parents come to Vietnam from a variety of countries, with the U.S., France, Sweden and Canada among the most frequent players. Adoptions in Vietnam have mushroomed in recent years. U.S. couples adopted twice as many Vietnamese babies last year as they did in 1995. The French figure was three times higher in 1998 than in 1994. More so than some other nationalities, the French tend not to go through established agencies, instead taking the private-adoption route, which has fewer checks and balances.

Several French adoptive parents contacted in Vietnam and France were reluctant to give their names. One couple, from Marseilles, noted how easy the whole process seemed: "I applied five weeks ago, and already my son is here," exclaimed the adoptive father.

It was his second trip to Hanoi, on a flight route that Air France crew refer to as "the stork." In the crowded waiting room of AEA International, a health and emergency-care clinic, the Frenchman signed adoption papers, surrounded by brokers, interpreters and relatives of the newborn. The birth mother breastfed the weeks-old infant, Minh, while his adoptive mother captured the moment on video. Asked whether he was surprised at the speed of the adoption, he said: "I don't know anything about that."

But the French government has doubts. Earlier this month, it temporarily banned adoptions from Vietnam, citing concerns over increased trafficking in newborn babies. The government says it's negotiating for safeguards before it agrees to a resumption.

While the circumstances of each adoption vary, many private adoptions have common points. A typical one might begin like this: After checking into a hotel, prospective parents ask the doorman to arrange a meeting with a baby broker. The broker meets the couple in a nearby coffee shop, takes their paperwork -- a dossier of income statements, marriage and birth certificates proving eligibility to adopt -- and discusses the age, sex and physical attributes of the child desired. Over the next few weeks, they wait by the phone while the middleman handles the intricate legwork of this one-stop shopping adoption package.

The broker might start at the gates of Huong Vuong Hospital, one of two large maternity clinics near Cholon, Ho Chi Minh City's Chinatown. That's where Ms. Tam's latest project, Nguyen Thi Thu, is bedridden. The day before she ventured outside to buy some cake from Ms. Tam's foodcart, complaining, in between mouthfuls, that she couldn't afford to keep her baby. Ms. Tam, a tiny woman whose toothless mouth is stained orange from betel nuts, quickly appointed herself as the birth mother's agent. She spread word to

the assembled motorcycle taxi drivers, who in turn told their circle of brokers that a baby boy was on the market for an unspecified fee.

The next day, Ms. Tam and one of the taxi drivers, Anh Thanh, try to close the deal on their own, offering to arrange a meeting between a prospective foreign parent and Mrs. Thu.

Inside the crowded 40-bed ward, Mrs. Thu, flanked by her grandmother and older son, looks on as strangers cradle her baby. Inside the newborn's leg, her surname is written in purple iodine. As Mrs. Thu airs her anxiety over not being able to provide for the new child, Mrs. Tam urges the foreign visitor to decide quickly. Mrs. Thu checks out tomorrow, and if Ms. Tam doesn't get word by the end of the day she'll find another buyer.

But Ms. Tam is at the mercy of other adoption entrepreneurs, each representing different parties and offering to fix different problems. Mr. Thanh, the motorcycle taxi driver acts as an intermediary between Ms. Tam and the broker representing prospective parents -- when not trying to carve out more of the transaction for himself.

While fees of a few hundred dollars may seem paltry by developed-nation standards, it's a princely sum in a country with average per capita annual income of less than \$300. Interviews with parents, brokers and agencies suggest that the going price for a Vietnamese child through private adoption is between \$2,500 and \$3,500. That covers everything from the expenses associated with paperwork and feeding the baby, to the "commissions" and bribes that expedite the process, to the fee for the birth mother -- who often winds up making less than the lead broker in the deal.

Even after the adoptive parents and their broker have reached an agreement, someone has to make it official. In Hanoi, that someone might be Nguyen Hung, a former Viet Cong soldier also known as "Mr. Adoption." Mr. Hung, who markets himself aggressively through travel agents in France, boasts the country's "fastest service" for processing the release of Vietnamese children to foreign families. "I have lots of connections all over north Vietnam," he declares from the dank restaurant at his uncle's mini-hotel in the heart of the capital's old quarter. For a one-time fee of \$3,300, he says he can push through most adoptions in less than two months; by-the-book adoptions can take six months to a year.

Mr. Hung takes a few short cuts. For instance, police can spend two months alone investigating the circumstances of a child's abandonment. But Mr. Hung pays a couple of hundred dollars to officials to exploit a "loophole" that reduces that to 15 days. He typically hands out a total of \$1,000 in "gifts" to 14 officials in the departments of justice, social affairs, the police and local people's committee. Mr. Hung, a well-groomed middle-aged man, draws an elaborate diagram of the departments, fees and steps involved in each adoption, before snatching it back and tearing it up.

Where he finds the children, "is my business," he says, although Mr. Hung later he adds that contacts at local Red Cross-run orphanages have ensured him a steady pool of healthy infants. However, demand has been so high lately -- Mr. Hung has been handling 10 cases a month this year compared to six a month last year, mostly from French couples -- that he has recently begun getting babies from teenage mothers in remote hill tribe villages.

Rural Vietnam is among the poorest segments of the country's population. Infants are fed a diet of rice gruel and often don't survive their first year. The temptation to give up a third or fourth child is strong. Such poverty, combined with the social stigma of being an unwed parent, makes it easier to coax mothers to turn over their infants. But just to make sure, Mr. Hung says he can rely on local government officials to "persuade the mother to give up the baby -- in their own way." They usually tell the mother that rich foreigners can give the child a better life, he explains.

Indeed, Mr. Hung sees himself as a good Samaritan as much as a businessman. "I do this for economic reasons, but I like also to help the poor mother and child," he says. Mr. Hung clears at least \$5,000 a month in profit.

The government doesn't keep official statistics, but anecdotal evidence suggests that most international adoptions are taking place in the country's south, which, unburdened by proximity to the national seat, has been quicker to respond to the overseas demand for children. In An Giang province in the Mekong Delta, the doctors, justice officials and local welfare workers facing trial are accused of trafficking 199 babies for international adoption. Some of the directors of a welfare center under the control of the An Giang branch of the Vietnam Red Cross allegedly funneled babies from surrounding district hospitals and orphanages and then peddled the children to foreign adoptive parents. Three children later died in the adoptive parents' care. A senior official at the An Giang branch, speaking on condition of anonymity in a phone interview, denied any wrongdoing.

In a separate case in Tra Vinh province, also in the south, a broker in March was sentenced to seven years in prison for selling four babies.

Of course, "none of that goes on here," says Nguyen Giang Dao, a senior justice official in Can Tho, the biggest city in the Mekong Delta. In the first three months of this year his office has processed 20 adoptions, compared to 37 during all of last year. Leafing through a thick manual of procedures and guidelines, Mr. Dao says all of the adoptions are legitimate, from beginning to end.

His busy storefront office on the banks of the Mekong River provides the setting for the final step in the adoption. During a 10-minute handover ceremony attended by the adoptive couple and, often the birth parents and a roomful of relatives, the natural parents sign a certificate stating, one last time, that they have willingly relinquished the child. Unless the adoption goes through an orphanage the natural mother is required by law to be present at the handover in some jurisdictions, explains Mr. Dao. That makes for a tearful and often awkward conclusion, the bureaucrat says.

To placate the mother, who sometimes has one last chance to foil the adoption, adoptive parents and brokers have been known to pay one final bribe. Such payoffs, Mr. Dao insists, aren't allowed inside the Can Tho office. But he cannot vouch for the before-and-after: "I don't know what happens outside," he says.

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Adoption the Official Way

For those who adopt the official way in Vietnam, the process usually begins in the adoptive parents' home country. In the U.S., for example, adoptive parents must undergo rigorous checks on their eligibility to adopt. Their assorted files, officially approved and stamped by their embassy in Hanoi, are then passed to the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry, which vets the paperwork before sending it to the justice department in the birth province of the child to be adopted.

From there, the files pass through myriad officials in the local people's committee, the police and justice departments and other agencies, each of whom has to check off on the adoption. The parents' entire file must then be translated into Vietnamese by a public notary, a weeks-long task in itself.

Once all of these steps are complete, the adoption takes at least two months.

For the child, the process begins even earlier. Children up for adoption are legally required to be advertised on state-owned television for three months running, so that relatives have a chance to claim them. An abandoned child's background, meanwhile, must be investigated thoroughly to ensure that its natural parents genuinely intended to give him up.

According to Holt International Children's Services, which processes a handful of adoptions from Vietnam to U.S. adoptive parents, this can take more than a year. (Some agencies, like Holt, conduct their own inquiries in addition to the government's.) Investigations can be laborious, as many natural mothers travel across town, or to different provinces and districts, to give birth. (Women cover their tracks carefully to avoid the shame associated with being an unwed mother.)

Not all international adoption agencies choose to take these extra steps, however. The International Mission of Hope, a U.S.-based non-government aid organization that helps place Vietnamese children with families through established adoption agencies, assumes the government is doing its job.

"The government has it well covered," says Beth Clark, a director of the mission. "Police are making sure the child is relinquished, the Ministry for Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs has the best intentions for the child, and every department has its checks," she says.

The mission, which has been operating in Vietnam for just over a decade, relies on state orphanages around the country to recommend children for adoption. Once the child is in a state institution, the mission assumes its readiness for adoption has been verified. So from the time the parent's dossier is approved by the provincial officials, the adoption takes three to four months, says Ms. Clark.

-- Samantha Marshall