

(<http://www.stahili.org/>)

# In Focus

## The Harms of 'Orphanage Voluntourism':

About our work and current issues in children's rights worldwide

## Volunteering in a Thai Orphanage

*Volunteering in an orphanage is often seen as an opportunity for young people to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable children while they see the world traveling. The reality is often very different. Children are not tourist attractions and Stahili strongly opposes "orphanage voluntourism". In this latest post in our series by former voluntourists, **Xuewei Li** reflects on her experience in an orphanage in Thailand.*

In the summer of 2016, I volunteered in an orphanage in Thailand with three other volunteers from China for two weeks. We arranged the trip through one of China's growing number of Volunteer Sending Organisations (VSOs) (<http://www.stahili.org/china-rise-south-south-voluntourism/>).

The moment we arrived at the orphanage, we were immediately overwhelmed by the excitement of the children. There was no need for any introduction as the children were clearly used to volunteers arriving.

Most of the children were around 2 to 5 years old, had at least one parent alive, and none of them had lost both parents. What was marketed as an orphanage was in fact more like a kindergarten or day-care centre for children from less privileged families. The children went back to their families around 4pm and spent weekends and vacations at home. Nevertheless, the VSOs referred to the institutions as "orphanages" – a marketing strategy to trigger more empathy from volunteers and encourage them to join the programme. Most of the volunteers I met were shocked to find out that the children were not actually orphans.

After my two-week stay, I realised that most of the children were not shy of visitors, whether they knew them from before or not. Immediately upon my arrival, they asked us to help with various tasks. This concerned me as the door of the orphanage was open the whole day: children could run away easily, while outsiders could easily get access to the children, who had little vigilance for strangers. It was soon clear to me that letting strangers help with intimate activities like showering directly exposes vulnerable children to risk. It was also unclear as to why children needed to be showered in a school.

Only after several hours of playing with the children and feeding them were we asked by the staff to register our IDs. As nobody mentioned this beforehand, none of us actually had our IDs with us. Two weeks passed without any of us providing complete ID information. No background check was carried out by the VSO or the “orphanage” itself.

Unlike other volunteering experiences I have read about online, we were not treated so well at the orphanage. We were frequently shouted at or complained about by some of the staff, even though most of us tried our best to contribute. I suspect that this was because we did not come with donations. Meanwhile, people making large donations and other important visitors were welcomed with big smiles and often entertained by the children with prepared performances. As I later discovered, the government was paying only staff salaries and the “orphanage” needed constant additional financial support from donors to sustain its operations.

With a high reliance on money from outside, the doors of the orphanage were open to a constant stream of visitors. Volunteers were allowed to be close to the children – as long as they contributed financially.

This volunteering experience brought me concern for children’s safety, an unpleasant feeling of being judged by the orphanage staff for my contribution based on money value alone, and an interest in volunteering to help to end the institutionalisation of children in orphanages.

*If you have experience of volunteering in an orphanage and would like to share your experience with us, please contact us at [info@stahili.org](mailto:info@stahili.org).*