



Wish You Happy Forever: What China's Orphans Taught Me About Moving Mountains

Jenny Bowen

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Wish You Happy Forever chronicles Half the Sky founder Jenny Bowen's personal and professional journey to transform Chinese orphanages—and the lives of the neglected girls who live in them—from a state of quiet despair to one of vibrant promise.

After reading an article about the thousands of baby girls languishing in Chinese orphanages, Bowen and her husband adopted a little girl from China and brought her home to Los Angeles, not out of a need to build a family but rather a commitment to save one child. A year later, as she watched her new daughter play in the grass with her friends, thriving in an environment where she knew she was loved, Bowen was overcome with a desire to help the children that she could not bring home. That very day she created Half the Sky Foundation, an organization conceived to bring love into the life of every orphan in China and one that has actually managed to fulfill its promise.

In *Wish You Happy Forever*, a fish out of water tale like no other, Bowen relates her struggle to bring the concept of "child nurture and responsive care" to bemused Chinese bureaucrats and how she's actually succeeding. Five years after Half the Sky's first orphanage program opened, government officials began to mention child welfare and nurturing care in public speeches. And, in 2011, at China's Great Hall of the People, Half the Sky and its government partners celebrated the launch of The Rainbow Program, a groundbreaking initiative to change the face of orphan care by training every child welfare worker in the country. Thanks to Bowen's relentless perseverance through heartbreak and a dose of humor, Half the Sky's goal to bring love the lives of forgotten children comes ever closer.

Wish You Happy Forever: What China's Orphans Taught Me About Moving Mountains Details

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Jessica says

I typically don't pick up books of this genre because they tend to make me feel inadequate (Mountains Beyond Mountains, e.g.) at best or at worst, the stories aren't accurate/are insulting to the poor (Three Cups of Tea, e.g.), or a whole host of other reasons.

But since this book is a partnership between Skoll Foundation, who doesn't tend to pick bad people to fund, and HarperOne and my dear friend Amy, I dove in.

In general, I'm glad I did. Jenny is an engaging storyteller whose voice is warm and honest. She is wholly admirable, but also human. (Most social entrepreneurs tend to understate their genius and gloss over the brilliant business model design work they do, as she does, so I was ready for that). Having spent some time in China, I appreciated how she presented her Chinese colleagues, with all of the nuance and contradictions that any person deserves. I am amazed she found so many collaborators and so few enemies; I still can't quite figure it out based on what I know of NGOs in China. It's probably one of the hardest places in the world to launch a social change initiative, and she seems to do it relatively easily, all things told.

This book is for a mainstream audience, so the things I wanted to hear more about were understandably not the focus: how she transitioned from friends/family fundraising to securing major grants despite having never raised money before; how she staffed up so quickly and what the org design was; and what she learned about how her experience was different from Chinese-led NGOs. But I'm a nerd about this stuff...but I did get the sense that some major org developments were glossed over. I did kind of love that she included the Board drama--it was honest and real. And I did sort of think she was nuts/naive/crazy at certain points! But again, that's the story of most social entrepreneurs.

I did feel like it got long towards the end. I know she wanted to tell the stories of the blizzard and earthquake events, and they were great stories, but I felt I had gotten the point of the book at that stage.

A nice, educational, and inspiring nonfiction detour.

Julie says

This is the story of Jenny Bowen, who after a successful career making movies and with two adult children, goes with her husband to China to adopt a wee girl. Seeing their new daughter Maya thrive after their love and affection, and time spent with other children, Jenny wonders about all the other children in orphanages, who are often neglected and largely ignored. So with no credentials or childcare experience, she bravely goes to China and helps to set up Half the Sky Foundation, helping to improve the lives of thousands of orphans.

It is amazing what she achieves, especially in a society that is wary of foreigners and interference, that she is able to set up playrooms, provide toys and set up training for caregivers. We all have seen programmes on the way some orphans have been treated around the world especially in the 80s and 90s, strapped to chairs or cots, some not moving, and having little social interaction or any type of love or affection shown to them. What a difference some love and kindness make. You have to applaud the author for stepping up and being

the change. Bravo!!!

These are people we should be celebrating and talking about their stories, instead of newspapers and magazines filled with celebrities.

Michael Kerr says

A great read. In the process of adopting a Chinese orphan, Californian filmmaker, Jenny Bowen, discovers the terrible conditions these children were growing up in. Tiny kids tied to potty chairs all day, with no stimulation, no physical contact with caregivers, scarring punishments for infractions.... Bowen decided she had to do something about these kids and set out to make a difference. And make a difference she has. She and her husband launched a non-profit called Half the Sky, dedicated to transforming the circumstances of abandoned Chinese babies. This unlikely memoir charts the transformation sparked by their initiative.

But imagine a Chinese national coming to Canada and setting up programs in our group homes or orphanages. At best, we'd ignore such audacity; at worst we'd arrest and deport. So how did an American transform Chinese institutional child care? The fragile dance Bowen and her cohorts conduct in order to fly under the radar and affect change makes for compelling reading. Well worth your time.

Lori says

A very nice read. this is a real uplifting book about how one person can have a mission and make a difference. Jenny Bowen decided she wanted to adopt a little girl from China. her biological kids were grown and she wanted to provide a home for the thousands of orphan girls in China. Went she and her husband traveled to China to meet her almost two year old daughter, she was shocked at the conditions of the orphanage her daughter was at. it was more like a warehouse for babies. the babies were listless and unemotional. after research she saw these girls were given the minimal needs met. they are not cuddled interacted with and showed the results of such. Starting in about 1997 she made it her mission to change the conditions of the orphanages throughout China.

soon Jenny named her project "Half the Sky" she spent years going to the orphanages to improve the conditions. emphasizing interacting with the babies. Cuddling them, playing with. interacting with them. it was a slow process but over the years success. this is a heartwarming book. I liked how one person get find a purpose and work hard to improve on poor conditions and watch the results that occur.

Marsha says

This is an good book about an amazing American woman, Jenny Bowen, who started a revolutionary change in China that has saved tens of thousands of orphans and brought joy to so many Chinese. At the beginning of the book, I was so angry and disgusted with how the orphans in China--almost exclusively girls--were treated. They were tied to potty chairs or cribs and too scared or worn down to cry or complain. They didn't know how to speak, play, or interact, and the older they got, the more behind they fell. When they were adopted, many of them had extremely difficult adjustments because they didn't know how to attach, and they were stunted academically and socially. Jenny, however, learned that the orphans were not mistreated

because Chinese people don't love children, but because they lacked the resources necessary to take care of these abandoned little ones. One person would be assigned 20 or more babies to take care of, which is an overwhelming task to anyone, let alone someone who probably never took care of an infant before (no little brothers or sisters) and had no training. As Jenny set up her programs in the orphanages and provided the training and resources needed, the Chinese workers immediately opened their hearts and loved these children. Jenny has a special set of talents that enabled her to worm her way into the closed Chinese system. I loved this book!

Michelle says

Wow. Just. Wow. This is one amazing story. This woman has so much energy I'm tired now. When Jenny Bowen and her husband adopted a little girl from an orphanage in China, she learned how very little love and nurturing orphans received there. So she decided to change that. She did not know Chinese, had only been there for her adoption, was a filmmaker and hardly rich, was not a teacher or child development specialist, and had no friends in the Chinese government. At all. For some reason, none of this daunted her at all. So she went to China. Made friends. Raised money. Got her programs into orphanages. And in time, had her model of nurturing and care ADOPTED BY THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT as its standard. Along the way she provided loving homes for handicapped children, AIDS orphans, provided disaster relief, and changed lives wherever she went. Well, she and her husband and her amazing staff, volunteers and friends. This woman CHANGED A WHOLE COUNTRY. Stunning.

Sarah says

Inspiring story of how one person's idea and actions can change the world for better. I loved what this quote at the end: "Surely there's a place deep inside all of us that recognizes the need in each other. The very most basic human need, the one that distinguishes us from all other creatures- the need to love and be loved. If we are denied, we cannot thrive."

Sam B says

Heartbreaking at times, yet full of hope, this book is sure to touch your heart!

This is Jenny Bowen's memoir. She is the founder of Half the Sky, a foundation that helps Chinese orphans. After adopting her first daughter in China, she was touched by the orphanages' conditions. How the kids and baby were left alone, without human contact and not knowing what it was like to be loved. So she decided to do something about it.

Her journey wasn't an easy one and she came across a number of roadblocks along the way, but in the end she was able to help thousands of children.

I highly recommend this book, though it can be a hard read at times. Knowing what these children went through on a daily basis is heart wrenching, but knowing at so many are now loved and happy makes me hopeful for the future of China's orphans.

Clif Hostetler says

To read this book without shedding tears of happiness blended with sadness requires a heart of stone. This book is filled with incredible stories of Cinderella-like transitions from neglect to love for China's orphans (95% of them are girls). The memoir's narration contains just enough suspense created by obstacles, threats and roadblocks from Chinese bureaucracy to keep the reader on edge. But the narration is filled with so many happy endings that it's not too much of a spoiler to say that this is a good-news-happy-ending kind of story.

This memoir is written by Jenny Bowen the founder of "Half The Sky Foundation" (<http://halfthesky.org/en>), an international NGO that is working to help China re-imagine its approach to child welfare. The idea for the organization originated after she and her husband Richard read a 1996 Human Rights Watch report entitled "Death by Default: The Policy of Fatal Neglect in China's State-Run Orphanages." This led to their adoption of a Chinese orphan and subsequent exposure to the reality of widespread neglect among Chinese orphanages.

The Bowens' knowledge of conditions in China motivated them to contact other adoptive parents, and they found widespread interest in doing something to help the plight of Chinese orphans left unadopted in China. This then led to the founding of "Half the Sky Foundation" with the mission of providing model programs and caregiver training designed to offer loving, family-like care to children of all ages and abilities.

The Foundation's work started small in 1998 and has grown through the years in size, recognition and acceptance by the Chinese government, and as of 2013 Half the Sky's work has impacted nearly 100,000 young lives. Half the Sky works with the Chinese government and private sector partners to provide training and model programs to ensure that every child knows her life matters to someone.

Some of the emotion I felt from this book may be due to the emotion evident in the sound of the author's voice as she narrated the book in the audio edition that I listened to. In this case narration by the author was a definite plus. The listener knows that the emotion is heartfelt, not just a good acting job.

This is a memoir, not a carefully footnoted history. Thus complicating issues of unintended consequences and episodes of failure are briefly mentioned but not fully explored. I presume those sorts of issues are covered elsewhere.

Nancy says

I'm sure this is a biased review-- I was already a fan of Jenny Bowen and Half the Sky, and I remember fondly the kind member of their staff who sat behind us on our flight home with our new daughter. But reading what all went on to make Half the Sky the successful program that it is is eye-opening, fascinating, inspiring, and touching. I'm even more amazed and more dedicated to continuing our support for them, on behalf of our daughter and all the world's children.

Marilyn says

Everyone should read this book. It is painful, joyful, inspiring and uplifting. The descriptions of orphanage conditions in China are poignant. God bless this woman and her amazing compulsion to make a difference in this big old sometimes nasty world. She started with simple small means that grew and snowballed into a vast network of people holding and loving orphans. Bless their hearts. Bring your hankie.

Lesa Parnham says

People who read my review will say "yeah but she is biased" and I would absolutely agree. I have been in a lot of these situations and spent years wrapped in China's red tape while trying to adopt my daughter. It took us two years and tons of paperwork and money to bring our daughter Jia-Li (Ye Ru Hui) ,a handicapped child who needed surgery that we could provide, home with us. Jia was from the orphanage in Wuhan, Hubei province in the middle of China. We saw the China that Jenny Bowen saw, not the glitzy financially stable strong financial power that Beijing would like you to see. We were not allowed to go to the orphanage, even though we were one family not a huge group. We met our daughter in a government office, just as Jenny Bowen did.

Jenny's story and her dedication to the orphans of China and Half the Sky are truly humbling. This is a clear cut example of the lives of the orphans of China and how the world doesn't see what is true but what China wants you to see. Jenny didn't go to China to judge, rather to fix. She also has a wonderful way of getting people not to just give money but to go and help and see what is going on.

The book is not about adopting a child, far from it. It is about helping the children who stay in China and give them hope and a chance for a better future. She does this with the help of a group of warm hearted and intellectual group of Chinese nationals who continually push the program with the government.

Please read this book, even if you don't think this subject matter is your cup of tea. By the end you will have melted and been amazed at what Jenny Bowen and Half the Sky have done for the orphans of China.

Greg Edwards says

At once heartbreaking and powerfully inspirational, Jenny Bowen's memoir gives a voice to China's child welfare epidemic. She is simply a mother on a mission, who bites off way more than she can chew, but with a combination of moxie, luck, and perseverance, she and her team accomplish more than anyone ever thought they could. I was incredibly touched by her accounts of the conditions she encountered in China's orphanages, and these dear children who deserved loving families but were all-but-forgotten. It's a true testament to how one person's vision can be utterly infectious and drive real change against insurmountable odds.

Nancy says

I used to work in Child Welfare, and so this topic was of great interest to me. I have friends, who have had

foreign adoptions, including daughter's from China. My chiropractor and his wife adopted a daughter.

I learned many things about China and it's people from this book. I didn't know about the destructive snow storm, that hit China a few months before the Olympics, and on top of that a few months later, there was an earth quake, that killed thousands of people. The Half Sky orphanage organization did much to help their own organization's children, and staff, but also helped others.

Jenny Bowen was the lady, who started the Half Sky Orphanages, after adopting one Chinese daughter, and later adopted another daughter. She and her husband did a great deal to help these two girls. Sometimes the whole family lived in China, and sometimes they lived in the USA. Jenny reached a point, where she was living in China for one month, and then the USA for one month. I kept wondering how these many long absences might have hurt her adoptive daughters. The girls helped when they lived in China, and maybe there was a knowledge, that their parents were helping many girls like themselves.

This was a very interesting book, about giving China's throw away baby girls, a more cheerful, and positive place to live, and grow. When children are in institutions, and not loved and hugged, they don't grow, either physically or mentally. I have seen this in an American Institution. This was multiplied many times in the Chinese orphanages. This was a good read.

Lauren Stoolfire says

Jenny Bowen's story is truly amazing and inspiring. As the adoptive mother of Maya, and later Anya, two orphaned Chinese girls, she sees just what a thriving and transformative environment she and her husband are able to offer them. Jenny decided that she needed to help the children she was unable to bring home, kids that needed the same loving care as Maya and Anya in order to grow. That's how Half the Sky was formed in 1998, an organization that's determined to bring a caring adult into the life of each and every orphaned and abandoned child. *Wish You Happy Forever* chronicles the perseverance and success of Half the Sky against all odds to better the lives of the children in its care.

This isn't standard reading material for me, but I was told about it by a coworker who had just finished it and I knew right then I must read it. Thankfully she was able to let me borrow her copy! If you want to see the positive changes one person can affect in the lives of so many others, you won't regret picking up this book.
