

'We just can't afford to raise our children' [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A former high school teacher in China who moved to Canada more than four years ago, Sunny Wu is among the hundreds of immigrant mothers from the Mainland who, for financial reasons, send their newborn babies home each year to be raised by their grandparents.

"We just can't afford to raise our children here with the little money that we make, and we are actually giving our kids a better life by sending them home," said the 32-year-old Wu, who is studying accounting at a Cambridge, Ont., community college because her professional credentials as a teacher are not recognized in Canada.

"I feel guilty and sorry for it, but we think this is a best choice for her," added Wu, who is raising her 7-year-old daughter, Zena, in Canada. She plans to bring Iris back in August when she's ready for junior kindergarten.

It is not known how many immigrant women in Canada have their children raised in their country of origin, but Florence Wong, a certified family educator at Toronto's St. Stephen's Community House, a community-based social service agency, puts the number in the hundreds, if not thousands.

In 2000, her agency was contacted by a growing number of local elementary school teachers, who noticed a surge of Canadian-born Chinese students who couldn't speak any English.

Social workers at St. Stephen's found that more than half of the Mandarin-speaking mothers-to-be were planning to send their kids home.

The parents, most of them university-educated, are forced to send their children home because they cannot find jobs in Canada that make use of their previous training and education, Wong explained.

"They have to go back to school again to learn English or to upgrade their skills. They have to do shift-work in the evenings and on weekends, making minimum wages. They just can't afford to put up the \$600, \$800 a month for day care," she said.

Like most newcomers, Wu and her husband, Steve Xing, came to Canada with their life savings, about \$12,000 (Cdn.). However, what they call their "emergency money" disqualified them for subsidized child-care in Canada.

"In China, it only costs \$100 (Cdn.) a month for day-care services," said Wu, also noting that they run from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. there. "Here in Canada, we don't have a stable income. At least we can provide my children with a better life in China, where they are well looked after by my parents."

When Nancy Sun, a former office manager, moved to Canada from Guangdong four years ago, she was planning to bring her then 4-year-old daughter, Janet Lu, to join her and her husband once they found a job and settled down.

But months became years as the couple struggled, taking courses and accepting survival jobs to make ends meet.

"I didn't even tell my daughter that I was leaving her behind. She thought I was on a business trip and just kept asking for me," the 36-year-old Sun recalled. "We talked on the phone at the beginning; later she just didn't want to talk to me again."

The usually bubbly, active and friendly Janet became a quiet and secluded child, looking sad and acting clingy with her grandmother all the time.

Sun, a client of St. Stephen's Wong, returned to China in 2002 to pick up her daughter after the two had been separated for three years.

"Janet was like a complete stranger to me. I just didn't know how to take care of her, what she liked, what she didn't like," Sun recalled.

"I was nervous. She would not go anywhere with me without her grandmother. It really hurt. It was very difficult for both of us."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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