

China Experiences a Booming Underground Market in Child Surrogacy

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Shadowy World for Chinese Surrogates

Chinese law forbids surrogacy, so entrepreneurs fly often poor women to Bangkok for the procedure, then bring them back where they live hidden lives during the pregnancy and birth.

Video Credit By Jonah M. Kessel on Publish Date August 2, 2014.

WUHAN, China — In a small conference room overlooking this city’s smog-shrouded skyline, Huang Jinlai outlines his offer to China’s childless elite: for \$240,000, a baby with your DNA, gender of your choice, born by a coddled but captive rural woman.

The arrangement is offered by Mr. Huang’s Baby Plan Medical Technology Company, with branches in four Chinese cities and up to 300 successful births each year.

As in most countries, surrogacy is illegal in China. But a combination of rising infertility, a recent relaxation of the one-child-per-family policy and a cultural imperative to have children has given rise to a booming black market in surrogacy that experts say produces well over 10,000 births a year.

The trade links couples desperate for children with poor women desperate for cash in a murky world of online brokers, dubious private clinics and expensive trips to foreign countries.

“China’s underground market shows that there is a need for surrogacy in society,” said Wang Bin, an associate professor at Nankai University’s law school. “And where there is a need, there is a market.”

Photo



A 30-year-old rural woman who asked to go by her surname, Kong, is six months pregnant and will earn \$24,000 as a Baby Plan surrogate. Credit Sim Chi Yin for The New York Times

The rise of surrogacy is often linked to the increase in wealthier, better-educated Chinese couples waiting until their late 30s to start a family, a trend that makes it harder to conceive. Some academics say China's severe air, water and soil pollution contribute to increasing infertility, though that claim has not been scientifically demonstrated.

Regardless, failure to reproduce is less of an option than it is in the West. Tradition holds that couples must have a child. A folk proverb warns that "among the three unfilial deeds, having no offspring is the worst." Some women think they must have a child or their husbands will divorce them. Some couples seeking surrogacy have sadder stories, sometimes hoping to replace only children who have died.

China's unregulated market, with a network of roughly 1,000 baby brokers nationwide, often results in trouble.

One woman who asked to be identified only by her family name, Zuo, said a friend put her in touch with a woman from the countryside who had already given birth and needed more income. Another friend recommended a private clinic in Beijing that would conduct the embryo implantation and follow-up treatments; a surrogate mother requires months of hormone shots to prepare her body for the implanted embryo and prevent its rejection.

The surrogate became pregnant but said she wanted to keep the child and disappeared. “We paid 30,000 yuan,” about \$5,000, “as a down payment,” Ms. Zuo said. “And we got nothing and have no way to find the woman.”

Here in Wuhan, Baby Plan offers a more expensive, but at times grimly controlled, program. Chinese couples fly to Thailand, where surrogacy is legal, to donate their sperm and egg. A Chinese surrogate is flown there, too, and receives the implant. The three return to China and the surrogate is installed in a private apartment with a full-time assistant. To make sure she does not get ideas about fleeing with the customer’s fetus, she is cut off from her family and receives daily visits from a psychological counselor, Mr. Huang said.

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If all goes well, the baby is born at a private clinic, which Mr. Huang says has an agreement with Baby Plan to accept the couple’s identity papers, legally registering the child as their own. Often, the couple never meet the surrogate. If the fertilization works on the first try, Baby Plan makes a profit of \$24,000, Mr. Huang estimates, the same amount the surrogate mother makes.

“The baby is guaranteed, as well as a DNA check,” Mr. Huang said. “Otherwise you don’t pay.”

One Baby Plan client is a 49-year-old professional from Shanghai who asked to be known only by her family name, Zhang. Ms. Zhang’s 18-year-old daughter committed suicide in 2012. Because of China’s single-child policy, she was the only offspring of Ms. Zhang and her husband. After a year and extensive counseling, the couple decided that they could heal only if they had another child. A medical test, however, showed that Ms. Zhang’s eggs were probably too old to be fertilized. Ms. Zhang said she suggested to her husband that they use another woman’s egg.

“At least with his sperm it will look a bit like her,” Ms. Zhang said of her dead daughter, her hands shaking. “It will be a bit like having my child back — half the blood will be hers, so my heart will be soothed.”

Ms. Zhang’s surrogate is four months pregnant and she recently visited the woman. “It’s not easy for them either,” she said.

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Chinese Parents Discuss Surrogacy

Despite its illegality, surrogacy is still practiced and remains controversial in China. We asked parents in a Wuhan park what they thought of the practice and its impact.

Video Credit By Jonah M. Kessel on Publish Date August 2, 2014.

Mr. Huang said his surrogate mothers were all Chinese women recruited from the countryside by friends and family members. He said his upper-class clientele would not accept a foreign woman they regard as inferior as a surrogate, even though the cost is lower. “Chinese don’t want their children carried by people who are more backward than they are,” he said.

Still, foreign women are widely used as surrogates.

One Vietnamese woman, a 30-year-old who asked to go by her family name, Nguyen, said she was recruited in Ho Chi Minh City. She left home, telling her mother and her two daughters that she was going to China to work for a year. She stands to make nearly \$19,000, versus the \$24,000 that Baby Plan offers Chinese surrogates. “I just want the implant to take place as quickly as possible so I can go home sooner,” she said.

For the surrogates, the earnings are relatively substantial, but they bear most of the risks and have few legal protections. Besides the physical risks of hormone treatment and the pregnancy, many suffer psychological problems.

One 24-year-old in Wuhan who asked to be known by her family name, Yang, said she was on her second pregnancy for Baby Plan. After she went home with \$24,000 in 2012, she said, her alcoholic boyfriend stole the money and gambled it away. That pregnancy had come with a cost.

Ms. Yang said she became a surrogate to earn money for her sick father. But during her pregnancy, her father died. Baby Plan did not allow her to return home for his funeral because she would have missed hormone treatments. “That was a mistake on our part,” Mr. Huang acknowledged. “But if we had let her go home, the client family would have lost their child.”

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Now Ms. Yang is back to give birth a second time for a Baby Plan couple, this time because she needs money for her sick mother.

Mr. Huang said the company preferred women who had been mothers already. They will be less worried about possible side effects, including whether manipulating their reproductive cycle might affect their ability to have children later. They are also more mentally stable, he said.

But to be safe, Mr. Huang said, the company hires women to visit every day to make sure the surrogate does not form emotional attachments to the baby they are carrying, a common development. “Our liaison staff tells them every day that the baby in your stomach isn’t your baby,” Mr. Huang said. “A nice way of putting it is emotional comfort; less nice is brainwashing.”

Even for more mature women, the toll can be substantial. A 30-year-old rural woman who asked to go by her surname, Kong, is another Baby Plan surrogate. Now six months pregnant, she says her living conditions are good and she has clear goals for her \$24,000; she plans to start a housecleaning business in a small city upstream on the Yangtze.

She was even given special dispensation to talk to her son, a 4-year-old who is staying with her mother.

“At first he called me on the phone and said ‘Mom, when are you coming home?’ ” she said. “He was angry, then he cried,” she continued, her voice becoming ever softer. “Now he won’t talk to me on the phone.”