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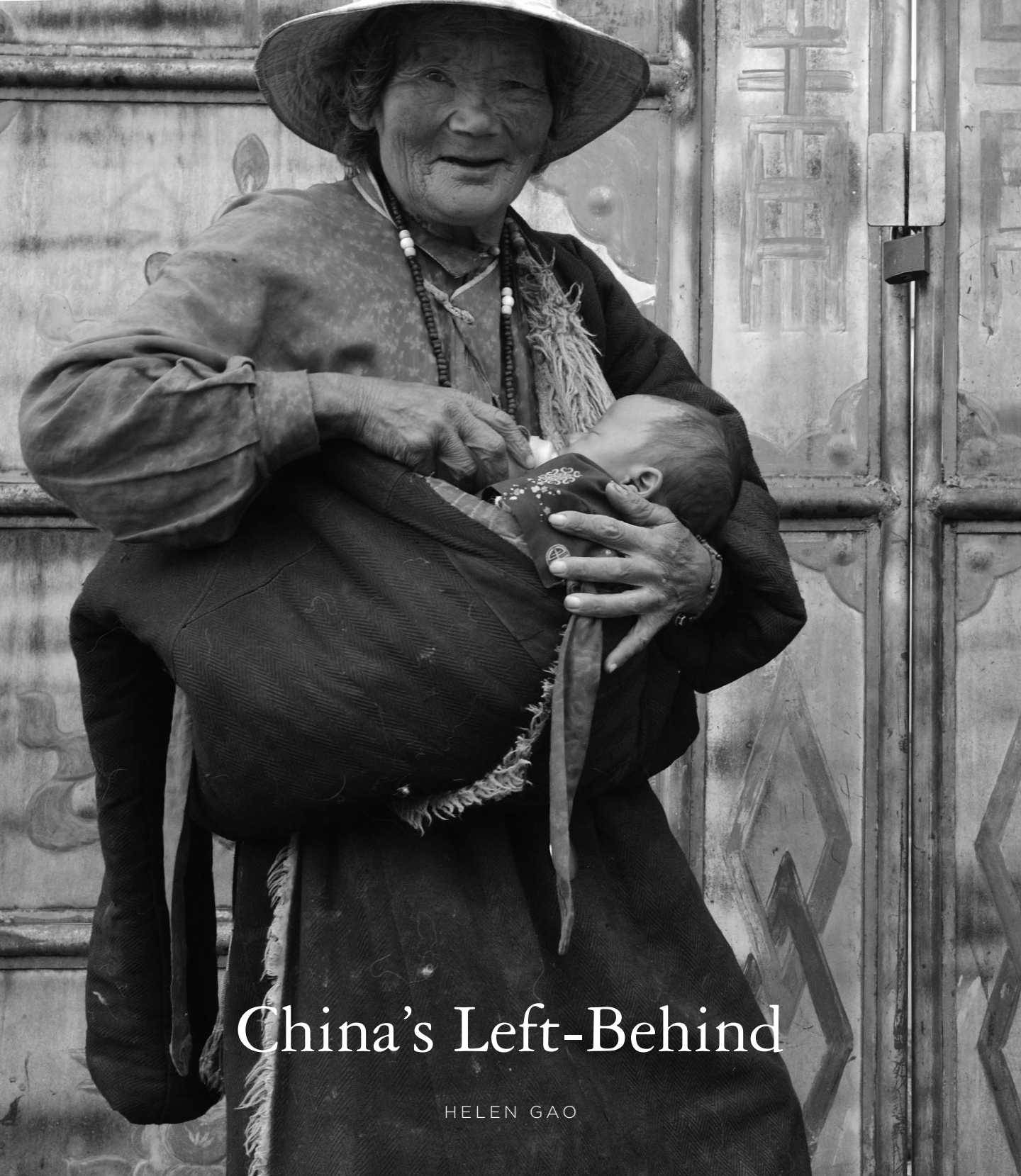
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China's Left-Behind

HELEN GAO



GUANG'AN, China—Jiang Xin leaves school at 2:30 p.m. every day. On his way home, the 8-year-old usually lingers by the rice fields with his friends for an hour or so, squatting on the edge of a dirt road, where trucks loaded with coal roar by. They play with pebbles, exchange school gossip, or punch the buttons of Jiang's video game player, which he wrapped in tape to prevent from falling apart. Their cattle stand together in a nearby field, grazing on grass stalks.

Around 3:30, the children fetch their cattle and head home. Jiang lives in a two-story shack on a small hill with his brother and grandparents. Soon after he leads the cattle into the pen and latches the gate, his grandparents return from a long day working in the fields, sometimes carrying large bundles of wood to add to their stock that already fills the upper floor of their house. Around 4 p.m., his 11-year-old brother, Jiang Heng, who goes to school in the town, trudges up the hill. The brothers are usually glued to the television until dinnertime, ignoring their grandparents' call for them to finish their homework. "With the farm work and all, sometimes I really can't manage them," says Xiao Chuntao, the brothers' 58-year-old grandmother, as she peels peanuts while watching over her grandsons, who are engrossed in the Japanese TV series "Ultraman."

Like many others in Guang'an, which means the village of "Brightness and Peace," the Jiang family consists of empty-nest elders and left-behind children. Perched atop a mountain near the southwest boundary of the central province of Hunan, the village has a population of around 1,400. Since the early 1990s, more than half of the villagers

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have decamped to the cities to make a better living. When the young and able-bodied leave, their children usually remain in the care of their paternal grandparents, in many cases only months after they are born.

SO MANY LEFT BEHIND

The most recent survey from the All-China Women's Federation found some 61 million "left-behind children" across China, who are growing up without one or both parents—a population larger than California and New York combined. Close to 33 percent are raised by their grandparents, another 10.7 percent by other villagers or relatives, and at least 2.06 million, according to the survey, are forced to fend for themselves. It is one of the darker side effects of China's manufacturing and construction-fueled economic boom, which has created a vast number of low-skill jobs in coastal provinces, luring hundreds of millions of laborers away from their impoverished hometowns.

These young migrants, who are parents of pre-school or school-aged children, face a difficult decision after relocating. If they decide to bring their children with them into the cities, urban living costs could prove debilitating given the parents' paltry salary. A range of social and institutional hurdles prevent the children from becoming fully integrated urban citizens. At the same time, if the parents choose to leave their children in their rural hometowns, the family will have to bear years of painful separation, which often takes a physical as well as psychological toll on the young generation.

Despite their backbreaking work in cities, migrants earn considerably less than urban natives. A 2011 survey by the Ministry of Human Resources shows that the average monthly salary for migrant workers was slightly over 2,000 RMB (\$323), compared to the national average of 3,200 RMB

(\$510). These amounts already represent a significant increase from just half a decade earlier, but have been largely offset by several rounds of nationwide post-financial-crisis inflation. In cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen, where the average cost of living approaches New York City's, migrants try to scrap by while saving every extra yuan to send home. Raising their children in such an environment, which entails extra costs for food, clothing, schooling, and other expenses, is beyond the means of many parents.

Another major hurdle that discourages migrant parents from bringing their children into cities is China's *hukou*, or household registration, system. Sometimes likened to China's "internal passport," the system ties social benefits such as health care and free education to each person's hometown. Migrant

children can only receive government subsidies on their education if they go to school near where they were born, and they have to pay prohibitively high tuition if they hope to enroll in urban schools. Furthermore, in many crowded Chinese metropolises, where a large number of local students vie for limited educational resources, some public schools simply refuse to take migrant children. Others make the enrollment standards so stringent—by demanding, for example, official documents and certificates rarely granted to migrants—that it's virtually impossible for migrants to meet them. In Beijing alone, more than 140,000 migrant children are shut out of the public education system, according to government statistics that likely vastly

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underestimate the number. Some of these students find their way to private schools set up for migrants, which usually charge hefty tuition due to their lack of government subsidies, and offer only subpar education.

Facing economic hardship and the hurdles posed by the *bukou* system, many migrant parents find migrating with their children an unrealistic option. They are left only with the difficult alternative of leaving their children behind as they depart for distant cities. These boys and girls, the so-called “left-behind children,” are thus separated from their parents in many cases from birth, and must stumble through their childhood and early teenage years without proper physical care or emotional guidance.

The issue of left-behind children surged to the forefront of public attention at the end of last year when five boys, cousins aged nine to 13, were found dead in a rolling trash bin in the southwestern province of Guizhou. The likely cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning. The children had climbed into the bin to take shelter from the cold and lit a fire inside. With their parents seeking work in the coastal regions, the youths received little adult oversight during their lives and were left to wander the streets.

While the tragedy in Guizhou was an extreme case, it sparked a national discussion among Chinese citizens on the plight of migrant children, the major obstacles they face, and the long-term effects created for both these children and the society. The challenges and damaging effects of growing up as left-behind children are mostly manifested in their daily lives, as demonstrated by the experience of children in Guang’an village.

In the long run, the fate of these children is increasingly uncertain. The implications of their incomplete upbringing,

compounded by larger social woes such as uneven educational opportunities and widening income disparities, allow little upward social mobility, even through hard work. A slowing and transforming economy means they will less likely be able to reap the benefit of the nation’s manufacturing boom by performing low-skill jobs as their parents did. Whether China can create a caring, supportive environment for these children and help them develop into productive participants of society could test China’s ability to carry out its grand national scheme of urbanization and keep its economy thriving in the years ahead.

LEFT BEHIND AS A FACT OF LIFE

In Guang’an it is so common for children to grow up without their parents around that both the children and their grandparents take it as a fact of life. “Kids in the countryside are not the same as those city children,” says Fan Renshu, principal of the village elementary school. “City children are too reliant on their parents. Rural kids are more independent. They are used to not having parents around.”

It certainly seems to be the case with the Jiang brothers. Their parents, like most migrant workers in the village, toil in factories in nearby Guangdong province. Both work for a foreign handbag manufacturer in Shenzhen, whose brand neither of Jiang’s grandparents can name. Due to the high transportation cost—around 2,000 RMB (\$318) round trip for the both of them, only slightly less than their combined monthly salaries—and their tight work schedule, the parents usually return home only once a year during the Chinese New Year, bearing bags of toys and new clothes for their sons.

Last year, however, the couple made an exception. They rushed home in October,

when news arrived that the grandparents were attacked by wild bees while cutting wood in the mountains. Xiao, the grandmother, with multiple stings on her head, was in critical condition. The medical bills took a huge bite out of the family's meager savings. Fortunately, both grandparents recovered quickly. The parents didn't stay long before they had to get back to work, but as result of the trip, they did not come home for the Chinese New Year in February. "They've come back twice last year already," Jiang Heng, the elder grandson, explains matter-of-factly. "That's too many times. It has exceeded their quota."

During the rest of the year, Jiang's parents call home about once a month. On the phone, the brothers answer their questions in monosyllables, and spend the rest of the time reciting to them passages from their school textbooks. Asked if they remember their parents' faces, both brothers only flash a shy smile. "My grandchildren have spent the longest time with us, so they are the closest to us," says Jiang Zhonghan, the grandfather, with a proud smile.

DAMAGING THE LEFT BEHIND

Most adults in Guang'an, such as Fan, do not fully realize the potential damage the experience of growing up as left-behind children can impose on the village's next generation. After all, under Chinese family tradition, it is not uncommon for grandparents to assist parents in childrearing. Most grandparents here, like the Jiangs, look after their grandchildren with great attentiveness and love. Circumstances, however, often require them to become the primary caregivers to children, stretching the boundaries of their capacity. In many cases, such unconventional family arrangements can damage the children's physical and psychological well-being.

Despite their frailness, the grandparents in Guang'an typically take care of their grandchildren while supporting the family financially by carrying out heavy farm work. Backbreaking jobs on the village's rice paddies or cornfields often claim the majority of grandparents' attention during planting and harvesting seasons. As much as they hope to carry out their childrearing duties conscientiously, they find the task difficult to accomplish, and in such cases, accidents proliferate.

Jiang Mi, a quiet, skinny 8-year-old girl in Guang'an, suffers from a partial hearing loss in her left ear. It was caused by an infection a few years ago, when her grandmother washed her hair and didn't notice the water that

entered her ears. Fan, the elementary school principal, recalls an accident from a neighboring village in 2009. A boy and girl fell down a well and drowned when their grandparents failed to keep a proper eye on them. In another tragedy, a boy left at home with his grandfather in a nearby county died after eating rat poison by mistake. His grandfather, overwhelmed by guilt, committed suicide soon afterward.

Given the frequency of such incidents nationwide, only a small number are ever reported by the state media. When they are, like the five deaths in Guizhou, they are chilling reminders of the precarious condition in which some left-behind children live, due to lack of adult care. Even less visible to the Chinese public than the physical damage of left-behind

THE STARK INCOME DISPARITY BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN CHINA MAKES THE PARENTS' CHOICE BETWEEN LEAVING HOME OR STAYING NO CHOICE AT ALL.

children may be the damage on their psychological stability and character.

“Grandparents usually pay more attention to the grandchildren’s physical health, making sure they have enough to eat and wear, and less to their character and morality,” says Jiang Nengjie, 27, a Guang’an resident making a documentary about left-behind children. (Most of the village members share the same family name, Jiang, but are not closely related.) “When the children reach puberty, many will suddenly turn rebellious, and then it is too late for their grandparents to try to rein them in.”

Juvenile delinquency among left-behind children has become an issue of major concern. Chinese legal statistics reveal that in 2010 left-behind children comprise 70 percent of juvenile offenders. Without effective adult supervision, many turn to alcohol and drugs, while others squander their days in gambling parlors and Internet cafes. In the book *Wounded Villages*, Nie Mao, a professor of humanities at Central South University and an expert on left-behind children, documents several cases of such children who fell between the cracks in Chinese society. One 15-year-old boy from Hunan province broke into an apartment and murdered the owner for 300 RMB (\$48) to pay for his hours in an Internet café, while his father toiled at low-paying jobs in Guangdong.

“The problems in the lives of left-behind children are widespread and deep-rooted. They have the potential to lead to severe consequences through an insidious process,” writes Nie. “They don’t manifest themselves in every child, but when they do, it shows the seriousness of the situation.”

LIFE BETWEEN CITY AND VILLAGE

Jiang Nengjie, the documentary filmmaker, has been tracking three families in Guang’an since 2009 to record their ways

of coping with the absence of the middle generation in their households. During her Chinese New Year visit in 2011, Jiang Heng’s mother, Ye Haiping, confessed to Nengjie her concerns about her in-laws’ ability to supervise her sons’ education. “I’m not at home, so nobody will discipline the boys except their grandparents,” she sighed. “But the grandparents don’t understand [my sons’ schoolwork], and they get fooled every time when the boys lie to them saying they’ve finished their homework.”

Xiao, the grandmother, bemoans the thin filial bond her grandsons feel toward their parents. “Nowadays, children don’t feel attached to their parents, because, well, [the parents] didn’t raise them. . . . There is a song called ‘Mother is the Best Person on Earth.’ I think it should in fact be ‘Grandmother is the Best Person on Earth,’” she says without a smile.

Though dissatisfied with the present arrangement, neither the parents nor the grandparents see an alternative. The stark income disparity between rural and urban China makes the parents’ choice between leaving home or staying no choice at all. With their jobs in the handbag factory in Shenzhen, the parents have a combined net income of 30,000 RMB (\$4,780) per year—meager given the jobs’ strict schedule and physical demands. But it still dwarfs the 8,000 RMB (\$1,275) the grandparents collect annually through farming. The parents send back 500 RMB (\$80) per month to support the family.

Nationwide, the income gap between rural and urban China has widened to a staggering level. Incomes in urban China are more than five times the level in rural regions. This income ratio has increased 26 percent from 1997 and 68 percent since 1985. Such a disparity is driving new waves of younger migrants like Jiang’s parents

into the cities every year, accelerating the urban economic engine while leaving the rural areas trailing further behind.

Some parents from Guang'an have brought their children along on their migrant journey. But Jiang Zhonghan and Xiao Chuntao agree it was not an option the parents had considered. Registered under the system as rural residents in Hunan province, if Jiang Xin and Jiang Heng were to move with their parents to Shenzhen, in Guangdong province, they would be barred from attending local public elementary schools and shunted to private schools set up for migrants. The tuition for these schools, which could reach 2,000 RMB (\$320) per semester, would deal a heavy blow to the parents' modest living in the second most expensive city in mainland China, where their combined salary is only 2,500 RMB (\$400) per month. One summer, Jiang Heng recalls, he and his brother visited their parents in Shenzhen during school vacation. It was the longest period of time in their memory that they had spent with their parents, but the reunion was not a peaceful one. Without time to watch over their sons and worrying about their potential misbehavior, the parents had no choice but to lock them in their tiny apartment while they toiled on the assembly lines. The brothers remember spending most of the summer crying to themselves behind a locked door.

"From then on, whenever they cry, I warn them: 'If you cry for another minute, I'll send you to your dad.' Then they immediately stop," says Xiao.

EDUCATION OR MIGRATION

Jiang Xin and Jiang Heng now attend local schools and are in second and fifth grade respectively. Jiang Xin's school, Guangming Elementary School, located inside the village, runs from pre-school through

second grade. The number of students is dwindling—from a peak of over 300 in late 1980s to the current 53—a result of birth planning laws, a change in families' traditional mindset that preferred large numbers of offspring, and young couples' mass migration to cities. The school was nearly shuttered a few years ago in a wave of rural elementary school closings and mergers ordered by the central government. The former village head, 73-year-old Jiang Zhongshu, fought to keep it open. It is currently staffed by three teachers. Fan, the principal, is scheduled to retire next year, and with the job's puny salary and secluded location, the school is struggling to find a replacement.

Jiang Heng goes to Zhongxin Elementary School that's located in a larger town, an hour and a half by foot from his own village. It is the nearest school to the Jiang family that offers education beyond second grade, and where all graduates of the village elementary school are expected to proceed with their education. Heng's grades were poor when he first transferred to the school, but he gradually caught up. Now he ranks 15 in his class of 78—a decent performance, but needing further improvement if he hopes to win a coveted spot in a county high school. Few children in Guang'an attend high school. Even fewer go to college. The vast majority head to factories in coastal provinces like Guangdong and Zhejiang after graduating from junior high school at the age of 16.

"The conditions here cannot compare to the cities," Jiang Nengjie, the filmmaker,

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says on a walk along the dirt road tracing around the rice paddies in the village. He is one of the few college graduates in the village. “If you go to school in a place like this, what is the chance of you landing in a decent college?”

China’s exam-oriented educational system, with a student’s college placement dependent solely on performance in the nation college entrance exam, is traditionally considered a social leveler that gives every student an equal chance to succeed. In recent years, most colleges have expanded enrollment, churning out a ballooning number of graduates, but the top schools have largely maintained their size. With an increasing

number of students gaining access to formal education, the competition to get into the top schools, always cut-throat, has reached the boiling point.

Middle-class urban parents attempt to boost their children’s academic

performance by hiring private tutors, filling their weekends with cram classes. Most children in rural areas receive virtually no guidance from parents, who work far away and have little surplus income to invest in their education. Many of their teachers at school do not have college degrees themselves. The gap in the availability of educational resources between rural and urban China essentially bars left-behind children with rural backgrounds from elite educational institutions. Peking University, one of the nation’s top schools, admitted around 30 percent of its students from rural areas from 1978 to 1998, but that number has fallen to 10 percent in recent years. At Tsinghua University,

commonly touted as China’s MIT, rural students represented only 17 percent its student body in 2010, while 62 percent of the students taking the national college entrance exam that year were of rural origin.

Even for those rural students who worked their way into universities, it’s questionable if their accomplishment will lead to a step upward in their lives. China’s university graduates quadrupled in the past decade, reaching eight million a year. As a result, a college diploma is quickly losing its luster among employers. That is especially the case for graduates from the less prestigious community colleges and polytechnic institutes, where students tend to be from poor or rural backgrounds. According to China’s education ministry, last year 80 percent of students at such institutes were the first in their families to receive higher education.

Many of these schools charge up to twice as much tuition as elite universities, due to the limited subsidies they receive from the government. Instead of teaching general knowledge courses, they offer vocational training in narrow and specialized fields—automobile repair, hairdressing, computer programming—and are often operated jointly with large factories. A large number of students find themselves funneled to these factories upon graduation, undertaking simple manual work they could have performed without any professional training. Such prospects have convinced an increasing number of rural students to forgo higher education. “Many people believe that rather than going to high school and university, which doesn’t guarantee anything, it makes much more sense to become a migrant worker instead and start making money early,” says Nengjie.

For now, the Jiang family is betting their hopes for the two brothers on

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education. “We want them to study well and go to high school. We don’t even ask them to share the work in the house and on the farm,” says Xiao.

“When dad and mom come home for Chinese New Year, I’d ask them if they are tired from working,” Heng cuts in with the air of a grown-up. “They’d say, ‘Not tired if you achieve good grades.’” He seems less certain about his future. “I’ll have to see when I grow up,” he continues. Though for now, he adds, his dream is to own a “learning machine,” a study tool popular among his friends that teaches English through listening practices and vocabulary games. At 11, Heng will face the decision about his future in four years. Most older teenagers in the village have already flocked eastward to the boomtowns on the coast. Some join the same factories where their parents have worked for decades to put them through school, with the hope that they would have a brighter future. After years of separation, the families are reunited at long last—on the assembly lines.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND?

The issue of left-behind children is both a matter of individual misfortune and a national concern. The Chinese economy is at a critical crossroads, where the manufacturing and construction-based structure is yielding diminishing returns, while the government has reiterated its hope to turn domestic consumption into the nation’s next growth engine. In a decade or less, the 58 million left-behind children will have finished their time in the education system and will flock to the cities. Some will enter factories and construction sites. But others, due to a dwindling number of such jobs or their own higher expectations, will look elsewhere. Some among them, feeling forgotten by their family and forsaken by

society, may live on the instant gratifications offered by drugs, sex, and the Internet, or turn to illicit activities, a worrying trend the society is already witnessing today. How to incorporate children of migrant workers into the modern city life, equip them with skills marketable in China’s future economic model, and turn them from potential social liabilities to valuable human capital will be among the key challenges on the government’s agenda in the years ahead.

By 2030, the Chinese government has announced that one billion of its citizens will live in cities. That means urbanizing 310 million rural residents in the next 17 years, on top of the nation’s existing urban population of 690 million. Left-behind children will occupy a significant chunk of that population. Right now, the biggest barrier that disables them and their parents from settling in cities are the social benefits—most importantly, free schooling—denied to them as a result of the *hukou* system. That is where change will have to start and where reforms, though gradual, are already taking place.

In recent years, major cities across China started to relax their rules that restrict migrant children from attending local schools. In provincial cities such as Wuhan, Nanjing, and Yueyang, over 90 percent of migrant children have been assigned to public schools in the vicinity, according to government reports. In cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where the large number of migrant students makes the task of absorbing them more daunting, local governments have been slowly expanding the number of public schools that accept migrant children, while experimenting with a variety of methods to manage their inflow. Beijing, for example, allows migrant children to attend state schools if their parents can produce five separate documents proving their local employment and residence status.

Both Beijing and Shanghai are formulating plans that will enable migrant children who attended middle schools to take the test for local vocational schools. Guangdong, China's manufacturing heartland, aims to allow students without local *hukou* to take the college entrance examination locally by 2016 if they have attended local high schools and if their parents are legally registered temporary residents with over three years of social insurance payment to the provincial government. (Under current rules, students who hope to take the annual college entrance exam will have to do so in the province where their *hukou* belongs.)

The main worry of Chinese urban planning experts about delinking social benefits like subsidized education from *hukou* status is the intense pressure the new city population would create on urban infrastructure. In Beijing, for instance, local first grade students entering elementary schools will jump from the current 110,000 to around 180,000 in 2014, the government predicts. Accommodating more migrant students on top of this bulge of local students will be challenging, and it's a problem that also exists in other metropolises like Shanghai or Shenzhen. Given such constraints, a more sustainable solution that would improve the education of left-behind children in the long run perhaps lies closer to home.

For years, the economic gap between coastal areas and inland provinces has been the primary driver for the mass migration of labor. Increasingly, however, migrant flows are starting to shift. The development of inland cities such as Chengdu, Xi'an, Zhengzhou, and Wuhan now allows millions of migrants to find jobs without leaving their provinces. Since 2011 in the populous province of Henan, more workers have found jobs within the province than outside. Typically located in large provincial cities, the relative

proximity of their workplaces to their hometowns means more migrants will be able to bring their children with them, and the cities' less strained infrastructure will be more able to absorb them. All these inland cities have expanded local schools, and as a result are able to adopt more relaxed rules than Beijing, clearing the way for migrant children to enroll in the local education system.

China's ambitious plans to upgrade its economic machine and increase urbanization will fail if it's not prepared for its future citizens to abandon farms and mountain communities like Guang'an. As tens of millions of farmers become newly minted urban residents each year—a process that will continue for decades to come—the fundamental solution to the issue of left-behind children is to reform the *hukou* system, extend the central government's commitment to health care and public education, and create more urban employment opportunities. Such measures are sorely needed for migrant workers to put down their roots in cities.

A gradual delinking of *hukou* status and social benefits is a good place to start, but the process will need to be carried further. According to Chinese government estimates, the cost of converting each migrant into an urban citizen, apart from long-term pension costs, stands at around 67,000 RMB (\$10,860). Providing urban living for tens of millions of migrant children and their parents will lead to a colossal bill, more than most local governments can pay out of their own coffers. If China is serious about its urbanization project, the central government will have to demonstrate its willingness to bear this financial strain in the years ahead. The children of migrant laborers will never be equal to their urban peers until they can go to the same schools, take the same exams, live in the same cities, and dream of the same future. ●