Based in southwestern China, ICWA Fellow Chi-Chi Zhang is working in an urbanizing landscape impacted by incredible social change, mass migration, and a growing yet potentially problematic economy. She will be writing about China’s next generation and its role in the country’s political, economic and social development. As a producer for CNN in Beijing, Chi-Chi covered ethnic dilution in Inner Mongolia, traveled to the North Korean border for Kim Jong-il’s death and documented Tibetan unrest in Sichuan Province. She previously worked as a correspondent for the Associated Press in Beijing.

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ICWA Letters

The Left-Behind Children

By Chi-Chi Zhang

Dear Mom,

How are you? You must know why I am writing this letter, right? You left not long after we moved back home. Dad is very mean! You were forced to move away because of him. Mom, can you please come home? Last time, I got lost looking for you. Mom, just please come home! I wish you the best.

Your daughter,
Zhang Jiahui
Datong 2nd Elementary

DATONG, China – Ten-year-old Jiahui sobbed uncontrollably as she talked about her mother, with pursed lips exposing deep dimples on both sides of her cheeks. Her Mother, Hu Li, moved to Chongqing less than a year ago to find work, leaving behind Jiahui, 10, and her brother Jiahao, 8, in their hometown of Datong, a bustling coal-mining town about four hours south of Chongqing. Jiahui’s story is an all-too-common one in rural China, where able adults have left behind their children to find jobs in prosperous coastal cities and urban hubs. In millions of Chinese villages and towns like Datong, a scene of children and elderly residents fill the sidewalks. Datong lies in a hilly region with some of the richest coal reserves in China. The mines provide thousands of well-paying jobs to rural residents, but the perilous nature of mining has forced many able parents to leave in search of safer and less physically demanding employment. The departure of millions of migrants has torn apart families, affected the psychological development of 58 million left-behind children and turned the villages they call home, into “shell villages,” which is a moniker given to rural communities that lack a capable labor force and productive public assets.

Migrants will tell you their decision to abandon their kids for an economic gain is one of necessity and not choice. They want to give their children a high school and college education, one that their parents could never afford as farmers. As researchers begin to shed light on the psychological impact on children with departed parents, local governments are stepping in to offer subsidies for left-behind families, as


An elderly woman buys vegetables at the Datong market with her granddaughter. Photo by Zachary Wang

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well employment opportunities in rural areas. For the generations who were raised as left-behind children and are now raising left-behind children of their own, the assistance has not come soon enough. China predicts another 300 million rural residents, mostly young parents in their 30s and 40s, are expected to move into cities and towns over the next three decades, creating a greater demand for migrant assistance in urban areas and support for their families in rural communities.

The term “left-behind children” also known as “liushou er tong” was coined in the 1980s as China opened up to foreign investment through economic reforms and the demand for migrant labor grew. As workers flock to cities, China’s floating population (migrants who move to find work, but do not permanently settle in one city) burgeoned to 220 million in 2010. Over the past decade, the term “left-behind children” entered the mainstream vernacular as state media outlets began reporting on the “plight” of left-behind children. Coverage of government initiatives to help needy families were reported as propaganda pieces showing concern for rural populations. In mid-2012, Premier Wen Jiaobao visited a school in rural Hunan that enrolled left-behind students, calling on officials across the country to improve rural education and food safety. However, some educators say that categorizing children as “left-behind” can sometimes single them out to be bullied and further perpetuate the stigma that they are different. “A lot of solutions are being offered to help these ‘left behind’ kids, but by categorizing them, it also adds to their insecurities and further promotes stereotypes that they are needy, incapable, and troublemakers, which can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a society, we must help empower all children, especially those who are less fortunate, without categorizing or isolating them,” said Huang Yirong, a volunteer teacher during a special arts and recreation course for left-behind kids that at Datong 2nd Elementary held right before the Spring Festival.

Although some government initiatives are beginning to make a dent, a lack of funding and teachers in rural areas remain a challenge. In towns like Datong, many schools offer a tuition-free education for left-behind children, but they lack resources such as technology and qualified educators—many of whom don’t want to teach in rural areas for little pay. Datong 2nd Elementary was lucky enough to receive funding to buy flat screen televisions and build a new multi-million-dollar school to be completed this

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...year—a perk from the local coal mine that otherwise covers the town in soot and smog.

In comparison to rural areas, cities that migrants often move to offer little or no health care and educational resources for migrant children. With a “rural hukou” or home registration, migrants do not enjoy the same benefits as residents with an “urban hukou,” such as access to free or subsidized schools and health care. In cities like Beijing and Shanghai non-governmental organizations have launched migrant schools to help bring families closer together, but local governments have shut down many of the schools deeming them illegal and unsafe. Migrants argue the closures are just another sign that the cities do not want them to settle permanently for fear of overpopulation and burden on the city’s resources. Public schools in cities offer a select number of spaces for migrant kids to attend, but tuition can cost up to US$5,000 annually—more than half a year’s salary for many workers. With few options to choose from, migrants are often forced to leave their kids in the care of grandparents, relatives, or just on their own, only to come home every few years, or if they’re lucky—once a year during the Spring Festival holiday.

Ever since the 26-year-old Hu could remember, her grandmother raised her while her mother worked in a zipper factory in the coastal city of Wenzhou about four hours south of Shanghai, as her father drank away all their money. Hu’s grandma, who had an elementary school education, rarely oversaw her studies. Hu hated school and talked back to her teachers—often earning beatings and detentions. Once every few years, her parents would return home, but they were like strangers to her. Hu’s parents often quarreled over finances, especially during her father’s drunken rants, when he occasionally hit her mother. Although Hu never blamed her parents for leaving, she vowed to be there for her kids. At the age of 15, Hu’s mom, Dan Lamei, took Hu out of school to work in the zipper factory. A year later, Hu began dating a repairman at the factory and was pregnant with her first child, Jiahui, in 2003 and two years later with Jiahao.

Over the course of nine years, Hu’s husband started drinking more and gambling with colleagues from the factory. He began with a few dollars, but gambling soon became an obsession. Not long after Jiahui was born, he took half a year’s salary, about US$2,000, to the poker tables and lost it all in one day. When he returned home late that night, Hu could smell the stench of baijiu (white liquor distilled from sorghum) on his breath. She knew the money was gone. Hu’s husband began to skip work to gamble and often returned home drunk, sometimes beating Hu and the children. She cried for him to keep the kids out their fights, but he ignored her. In 2012, Hu decided to move the family back to Datong, hoping for fewer distractions, where her mother had secured a mining job for her husband. But it didn’t take long for Hu’s husband to start gambling and drinking again and with more than US$6,000 in debt; he disappeared in August of last year. With no choice but to fend for herself, Hu left her children with Dan and her stepfather while she took a bus to Chongqing to look for work. With her cherub face,
bright smile and chatty disposition, Hu quickly landed a retail sales job in Chongqing’s scenic mountain resort area of Gele Mountain earning $425 a month. The salary was nearly double what she could earn in the same job in Datong. Hu works alone ten hours a day at “Young and Pretty,” an apparel store that carries neon sweatshirts and faux leather jackets lined with leopard print rabbit fur and bedazzled with crystal-like jewels. She saves her four days off a month in she hopes of visiting her children soon.

This year, Hu couldn’t return for the Spring Festival due to work. It has been six months since Jiahui and her 8-year-old brother have seen their Mom and Dad. Jiahui knows her Mom is working in Chongqing, but doesn’t know where her Dad is nor does she care. Like other left-behind children I met in Datong, Jiahui was acutely aware of how she was different from other kids. She knew why she was in a special art class and why other kids made fun of her. Jiahui felt she wasn’t as likeable or intelligent as other children because her mom left her, like she wasn’t good enough. Material-wise, Jiahui had more toys and clothes than she needed. Each morning, her grandmother braided her hair into two thick ebony braids. Jiahui’s canary-yellow Ugg-like booties were crocheted by her grandmother by using colorful threads of wool and stitching them into thick pieces of foam as soles. But her grandmother’s care had not replaced the emptiness of Hu’s departure. Jiahui often looked at her mom’s photos to reminisce of when the family lived together and she and her brother would play ring-around-the-rosy with their mom at the park.

Research has shown that left-behind kids are more likely to have low-self esteem, misbehave, drop out of or do poorly in school than kids who live with their parents. When Hu recently called her daughter to inquire about her poor grades, Jiahui responded, “Well, you’re not here to help me.” One day after school, I found Jiahui and Jiahao dodging dump trunks in a dusty parking lot as they happily played tag. The 48-year-old Dan was too busy with her husband manning a clothing store they both work at to mind their grandchildren. Not long after Hu moved to Chongqing, Jiahui walked for hours into the late evening looking for her mother before another villager picked her up and called her worried grandmother. More than 30 percent of left-behind children are involved in non-fatal accidents—twice that of average children. Neglect and a lack of parental guidance are common in left-behind children’s lives, which sometimes leads to tragedy. In November, five boys between the ages of nine and 13 died after suffocating on fumes from firewood they burned to stay warm in a rub-

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bish bin in the southwestern province of Guizhou. The kids were reported missing for weeks before their bodies were found, but their extended absence was not a surprise to their families, where all of the parents were migrant workers. The boys were known to misbehave, skip school and sometimes run away from home, not returning for days. Simple physical deficiencies such as a lack of adequate nutrition also afflict left-behind children, as their caretakers are often too busy tending fields or peddling goods to worry about their diet. Principal Wang of an elementary school near Datong said before their school built a cafeteria last year, some students who didn’t eat breakfast would even faint during class or on the playground. Since then, the school has begun serving eggs and milk for breakfast. In a recent survey of left-behind children in the southern province of Guangxi, only 30 percent of children said they ate fruits and vegetables daily and nearly 90 percent said they ate better when they lived with their parents. The study did not examine children who lived with their parents in rural areas, where a lack of nutritional diet is common. The survey found that in surrogate families where relatives raised the children, the host parents were less likely to cook with expensive ingredients such as meat and were more likely to feed the kids potatoes and cabbages, which are more filling and less expensive than other vegetables. In Hu’s case, she said her parents have every incentive to invest in their grandchildren—who are raised on an allowance Hu sends home each month.

While Jiahui was candid and open about her feelings toward her mother’s departure, many of the young boys among the dozens of left-behind children I met were shy and reticent about expressing their feelings. One of the shyest boys in the class, Mu Weiyan, didn’t like to raise his hands or engage in discussions—when others laughed, his face was stoic. When he spoke, the handsome 10-year-old Mu gave one-word answers barely audible above a whisper. After school one day, Mu took me down a muddy grass-lined path that cut through flooded rice paddy fields that led to his house. About halfway into our walk, we crossed a dusty road as dump trucks filled with coal whizzed within feet of us kicking up a choking pane of dirt. Up until a year ago, Mu and his 7-year-old brother lived with their aunt in a nearby town. Mu said they were forced to move out because their aunt felt they were too much of a burden. Leaving his friends behind to live with his grandmother in a new town was not easy for Mu and it reflected in his glum disposition and poor grades. He said other kids made fun of him for not having parents and without parental encouragement; he felt he wasn’t as capable as other students. After a 40-minute walk, Mu’s 52-year-old grandmother greeted us outside their two-story brick and cement home. When I asked his grandmother about why Mu moved to live with her and said they moved to attend a better school. Then her sun-aged face crinkled as she smiled and said, “What has my grandson done now for his teacher to visit? He should study harder in school; he plays too much!” As his grandmother rattled on and off for the next hour about Mu’s inability to do his homework and penchant for choosing playtime...
over studying—like most normal kids, one of his volunteer teachers, Wang Yaoxian, explained to me it was common for relatives not to sympathize with the children. He said that adults, especially those with little education, have a hard time grasping the psychological effects of not having parents around on the kids. Unless they were left-behind children themselves, parents and caretakers will almost never ask how the children feel or why they feel that way. The lack of communication can lead to internalized emotions and as a result, children act out by running away, misbehaving in class, being bullies in school or, like Mu, being very insular about their feelings and sometimes even depressed. Since many of the children have never been encouraged to express their emotions much of how they feel is bottled up.

Although Hu is keenly aware of the parallels between her own childhood and that of her children, she doesn’t feel conflicted about her choices. She’s adamant that giving the financial means to be educated will far outweigh whatever psychological trauma they may experience. To maintain a close relationship, Hu exchanges phone calls with her kids two or three times a week. Unlike her own mother, Hu wants her kids to know that she will always be there for them. She even plans to have them spend their two-month summer vacation this year with her on Gele Mountain, where they can play on their own in the local plaza or on the sidewalks within a relatively safe community. With more inland opportunities, parents like Hu are able to find lucrative jobs closer to home rather than traveling thousands of miles to coastal regions like Wenzhou. Hu feels that her sacrifice is worth being away from her children, but as they become adults—how they define such values weighed against their mother’s absence could greatly differ from Hu. In the meantime, summer is just around the corner for Jiaohao and Jiahui.
Hannah Armstrong (2012-2014) W.AFRICA
Topic: State-building and security in the Sahel Region

Hannah is a recent graduate of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies with an M.A. Distinction in International Studies and Diplomacy. She previously worked as a freelance foreign correspondent, reporting on politics, economic development, and security from Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, and Haiti. Her work has appeared in the Financial Times, Foreign Policy, the Christian Science Monitor, and Monocle Magazine, among others. Fluent in French and proficient in Moroccan Colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic, she served as a Fulbright Scholar in Morocco, where she researched tensions between Islamist feminism and liberal feminism in civil society. She holds a B.A. in Political Philosophy from New College of Florida.

Amelia Frank-Vitale (2012-2014) MEXICO
Topic: Unauthorized migrants en route

Amelia is looking at the intersections among the war on drugs, organized crime groups, party politics, and the varieties of violence faced by Central American migrants who are passing through Mexico in hopes of reaching the United States. Amelia graduated from Yale in 2005 with a degree in Anthropology. A former union organizer, she completed a master’s degree in Ethics, Peace, and Global Affairs at American University in 2011.

Malia Politzer (2013 - 2015) INDIA
Topic: Internal and international migration trends, remittances, citizenship issues and identity in India.

Formerly a writer for Mint, an Indian business and economics news daily paper, Malia wrote on a variety of social issues including disability issues, internal migration, gender, social entrepreneurship and development trends. As a fellow at the Village Voice, she wrote primarily about immigration. She has won multiple awards for her reporting and published articles in the Wall Street Journal Asia, Far Eastern Economic Review, Foreign Policy Magazine, Reason Magazine, and Migration Policy Institute’s monthly magazine The Source. She has also reported from China, the US-Mexico border and South Korea, and speaks fluent Spanish, conversational Mandarin, and working on learning Hindi. Malia holds an M.S. in multimedia and investigative journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she was a Stabile Fellow, and a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hampshire College.

Shannon Sims (2012-2014) BRAZIL
Topic: Stakerholder involvement in the governance of South Atlantic Coastal Forest, the Mata Atlantica

Shannon is a 2011 graduate of The University of Texas School of Law. Shannon holds a B.A. in International Relations with Politics concentration from Pomona College in 2005 and attended Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey with University of the Aegean, Mytiline, Greece, in 2004. Following the BP Oil Spill in April 2010, she was nominated for an environmental law internship with the United States Coast Guard District 8 Legal Division in New Orleans, where she helped draft unique legal regulations defining the role of the Coast Guard during a drilling moratorium. In 2009, through the Rapoport Fellowship from the Rapoport Center for International Human Rights and Justice at the University of Texas School of Law, Shannon completed a legal clerkship with the Attorney General’s Office of the Ministry of the Environment of Brazil (IBAMA). She researched concessions management in environmentally protected areas along the coast, and documented small Brazilian fishing communities.

Chi-Chi Zhang (2012-2014) CHINA
Topic: China’s next generation and its role in the country’s political, economic and social development.

Based in southwestern China, Chi-Chi will be working in an urbanizing landscape impacted by incredible social change, mass migration, and a growing yet potentially problematic economy. As a producer for CNN in Beijing, Chi-Chi covered ethnic dilution in Inner Mongolia, traveled to the North Korean border for Kim Jong-il’s death and documented Tibetan unrest in Sichuan Province. She previously worked as a correspondent for the Associated Press in Beijing, covering events such as the lead-up to the 2008 Summer Olympics, the Xinjiang riots and China’s 60th anniversary. A Utah native who moved back to China in 2005, she has also lived in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Follow her on Twitter @chi2zhang.

Neri Zilber (2011-2013) ISRAEL
Topic: Israel’s complicated and diverse society and even more complicated political system.

Neri is a writer on international politics—mainly Middle Eastern—and was based in New York City. He was previously a researcher and analyst specializing on the Middle East at the US Library of Congress, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and the World Jewish Congress. Raised and educated in Israel, Singapore, Spain, and the United States, he holds a bachelor’s degree from the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University and a master’s degree from the Department of War Studies, King’s College London.