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## Home-Cured Tobacco —A Tale of Three Generations in a Chinese Village—

Big Nest Village (GUIZHOU), China

August 1998

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter:

Chen Zhixian, a shy, modestly attractive 21-year-old woman from Big Nest Village, hasn't been the same since returning from Zunyi City four years ago. Her first time away from home as a would-be migrant laborer, Chen Zhixian found out she was different than most in the city: she was illiterate. In fact, when asked by potential employers to sign a simple contract, she couldn't even write her name — the minimum requirement. Chen Zhixian returned home in defeat, completely humiliated. The sad truth: Chen Zhixian has never attended a day of school in her life.

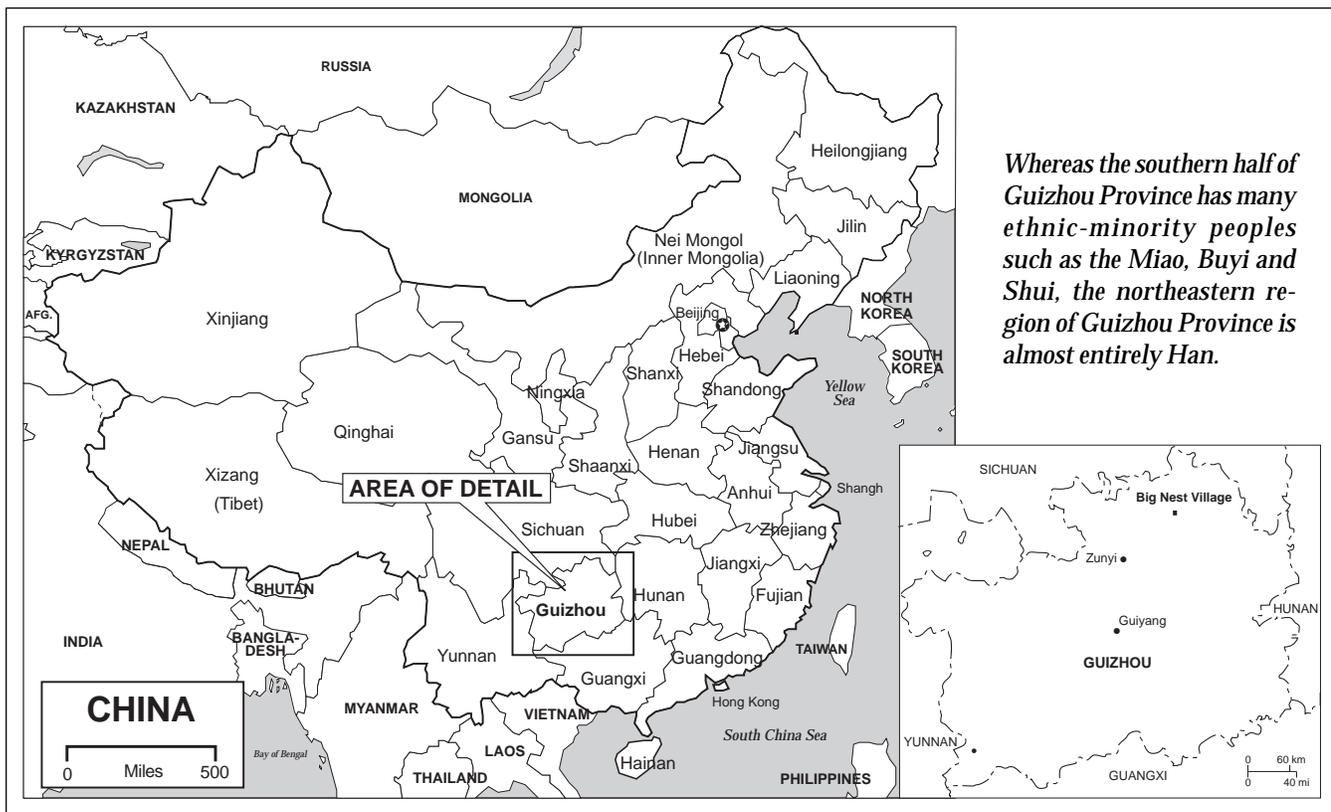
Within months of his sister's crushing experience, her brother Chen Dongfang, two years older and the eldest of seven children, returned from a distant vocational school to begin teaching at Big Nest Elementary School.<sup>1</sup> Chen Dongfang says that his parents, poor farmers and illiterate themselves, could afford to send only one of their children to school. As the oldest son he received the privilege. After completing his primary education, Chen Dongfang went on to star as the number-one student at the township middle school and then studied elementary education at the vocational school.

Upon returning to Big Nest and a paying job, Chen Dongfang's first thought was his sister. He walked with Chen Zhixian down the hill to the elementary school and inquired if she could enroll. She'd have to start from the beginning — from first grade. School officials laughed. A 17-year-old sitting at a wooden desk in a room full of seven-year-olds? No way. The request was rejected; Chen Zhixian's trauma deepened.

Since then, she has suffered from depression, expressed by lethargy and lingering sickness. The evening I arrived at the Chen village home I caught only a glimpse of Chen Zhixian. I found out later she had been sick and was taken that evening to a relative's home for "treatment." The distant cousin, I was told, would use "spirits" (*shen*) to attempt to cure her.

The following morning Chen Dongfang apologized to me in private: The

<sup>1</sup> Many of the villages I have visited in Guizhou Province have an elementary school. To attend middle school or high school, however, one has to travel to the nearest town center or county-town. This means that middle-school or high-school students usually live at school.



chicken that the family was going to slaughter for us as a welcome dinner was given to the witch-doctor relative as payment.

Chen Dongfang has one overriding concern in his life: that his younger siblings do not experience their older sister's misery.<sup>2</sup> Besides Chen Zhixian, who stays at home, four siblings attend school and the youngest will begin first grade in September. Since he was 19 years old when he began teaching, Chen Dongfang has paid each of their tuitions.<sup>3</sup> The second sister, Chen Zhifen, now 15 years old, is in fourth grade. She's the hardest working of the siblings, says Chen Dongfang. First brother Chen Zhihua, 13 years old, is in sixth grade. He's an introvert and has terrible grades. He'd much rather hole up in a room taking things apart and putting them back together. The second brother, Chen Liping, 12 years old, is in fifth grade. He's a peaceful boy, but his heart is not in his studies. The third brother, Chen Xiaobo, 11 years old, is also in fifth grade. He's smart and loves to talk. The youngest, Chen Chunfen, a playful 7-year-old sister, begins first grade this September. She's Chen Dongfang's favorite sibling. Chen Chunfen is courageous, he says. She'll do well.

Apart from their studies, the Chen children are part

of a tightly knit household economy. Each child has daily chores: taking the water buffalo to graze along mountain paths (*fang niu*), cutting wild grass for pig fodder (*ge cao*), washing clothes by hand, sweeping the dirt-floor home and food preparation such as grinding chili peppers, washing vegetables and peeling potatoes.

With big brother hovering over his siblings, they will all — with the exception of Chen Zhixian — learn to read and write. But that doesn't mean they enjoy it. Each of the children told me at some point during my visit that they do not like school.

"Why not?" I asked.

"My teacher doesn't care about me," was the common reply.

Little appreciated by villagers, elementary-school teachers in this region's rural areas lack incentive to put their hearts into their work — unless they are exceptional, like Chen Dongfang.

During the four years he taught at Big Nest Elementary, Chen Dongfang spent evenings visiting village fami-

<sup>2</sup> Chen Dongfang is currently studying at an education college in Guizhou far from home. He continues to draw his 200-yuan-per-month salary even as a student living away from Big Nest Village. He taught at Big Nest Elementary for four years before beginning his current two-year program.

<sup>3</sup> Tuition for one semester of elementary school in Big Nest Village is 80 yuan (about U.S.\$10) — less than what two people would spend on lunch at McDonalds in the United States. Middle-school tuition is about U.S.\$15 per semester. For families in Big Nest, whose annual incomes average less than U.S.\$80, sending children to elementary school is a costly decision — especially because some adults, never having attended school themselves, are not convinced of its value.

lies to stress the importance of education. He also pled with family heads to enroll their children in school. As a result of his efforts, which were completely of his own initiative, the number of students at Big Nest Elementary increased from 100 to 500.<sup>4</sup>

I asked Chen Dongfang about his own dreams and plans for the future. "I have only one goal," he replied without hesitation, "to continue to raise the money each of my five younger brothers and sisters needs to complete middle school."<sup>5</sup> The 23-year-old spoke with the seriousness of a parent.

This type of commitment would present a dilemma for most young people. Not for Chen Dongfang. Though his heart's desire is to remain in Big Nest to teach, and he is at the age at which most young men in his village marry, he has shelved all personal desires until he secures his brothers' and sisters' education. Because of expected tuition increases, Chen Dongfang is even considering going to China's coast after he completes his teachers program next summer to look for a construction job. If he could find employment, he would make possibly four times what he makes as a teacher. But it's a risk, he admits. Travel to the coast would mean forfeiting his guaranteed monthly teacher's salary. And plus, it's no sure bet he could find a job, especially with the economy as it is.

Chen Dongfang has the sharp, distinct facial features characteristic of someone from the mountains of Zunyi District. Add a Red Army cap to his head and some revo-

lutionary fire in his eyes and he'd look like something from a poster of the 1950s. But this young man is a child of a different age. Education and travel outside his village have opened horizons not previously known in Big Nest, witness an uncle's sincere question as we sat around one rainy afternoon chatting with family and village friends: "Is China at the center of the world?" It was a fascinating question from someone who has never left his village. In response, Chen Dongfang patiently explained to his father's brother that the earth is round.

Big Nest exists somewhere between centuries-old living conditions (wooden plows, cooking over open fire, smoke-cured ham and paraffin lamps) and urban values of the late 1990s as the village is pollinated by young people who travel back and forth from China's urban centers as migrant labor. The result is village life in which young and old, though living together, seem at times as if they belong to worlds that are shaped very differently.

During my four-day homestay with Chen Dongfang I began to sense the intriguing mix of continuity and change that exists in rural-interior China. Most of my insights came as Chen clansmen and I sat on wooden benches in a small, barren room (used also as the eating area), chatting as we dodged drips from a leaking roof, swatted pesky flies and shooed away scrawny chickens that kept sneaking into the room, convinced they would find grains of spilled rice.

Atmosphere was created by pipe smoking, an impor-

*Though his position as the oldest son has had its privileges, Chen Dongfang takes family obligations seriously. During the four years he taught at Big Nest Elementary, he gradually purchased enough cinder blocks to replace their home's wooden walls (pictured on the left side of the structure). Chen Dongfang, his parents and siblings live in the left side; first uncle and his family live on the right.*



<sup>4</sup> The number of students has dropped back down to 350. Last January, when Chen Dongfang last returned home after a six-month absence, he found that because of a government-corruption-induced tobacco-price debacle, families suddenly did not have enough money to send their children to school. Just after the Chinese New Year in February, there were only 100 students enrolled. The number has crept back to 350.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Dongfang estimates that he will need to provide tuition expenses totaling between U.S.\$100-150 per year (no less than 60% of his annual salary) over the next four years until three of his siblings complete middle school and his burden lightens.



*Chen Daru, pipe in hand, listens as grandson Chen Dongfang clarifies a point.*

tant activity in this tobacco country. Each man had a plastic bag stuffed somewhere in his clothes that contained chocolate-brown tobacco leaves. Each also had his own pipe made with a polished-brass mouthpiece, a thin, five-inch-long piece of bamboo and a small brass bowl just large enough to hold the end of a rolled piece of tobacco leaf. These pipes are their prized possessions. As conversation circled the room, a man, empty pipe in mouth, would pull out a crumpled plastic bag from his pocket, remove a broad leaf of tobacco, carefully tear a strip about one-inch wide and six-inches long, roll it into a tight cylinder and then stuff one of its ends into the pipe's bowl. The men shared lighters or matches and when one of them had problems getting his pipe lit they would all laugh, joking that his lungs were not strong enough or that his tobacco (each grows his own) was inferior.

As we sat around, each man puffing away and enjoying conversation, Chen Dongfang's grandfather, Chen Daru, told some of his life story. Though he's almost deaf, his 80-year-old mind is lucid. He spoke as if the events of his life 60 years ago had happened just yesterday. No one I met in Big Nest is more thankful than Chen Daru that the past is history.

#### **GRANDFATHER**

When Chen Daru was his grandson's age, destitute poverty, opium smuggling, warlords, salt monopolies and clan warfare strangled northern Guizhou Province.<sup>6</sup> Besides the continual struggle to live off his land, Chen Daru enjoyed considerable standing in the

Chen clan, some 1,000 families spread over five villages.

Chen Daru's social position was strengthened because his best friend, also from Big Nest — a dynamic, eloquent young leader — was recruited by the local warlord as his lead assistant. With his own army and political administration, the warlord controlled a piece of northeastern Guizhou Province equivalent in size to a present-day county. Like many warlords at the time, he entered into an uneasy alliance with the Nationalist government.

Within the warlord's stronghold, however, clan warfare was common. On the eve of the Communist takeover, sporadic hostility between the Chen clan and the neighboring Ye clan increased at an alarming rate. Chen Daru claims that the Ye clan was the aggressor and the Chen clan fought strictly out of self-defense.

The timing of the skirmishes could not have been worse. At the high-point of the Chen-Ye feud, the People's Liberation Army marched into northern Guizhou to "liberate" the area; that is, to mop up after their victory against the Nationalists and to consolidate power.

The new regime investigated the existing power structure and eliminated potential opposition. Chen Daru's best friend was summarily executed; Chen Daru was categorized as a counter-revolutionary, a label he would not shed for 30 years, until Deng Xiaoping rose to power in 1978.<sup>7</sup>

"I never did anything wrong," 80-year-old Chen says

<sup>6</sup> To illustrate how difficult life was in the 1920s and 1930s, Chen Daru told us how a cousin of his hiked two weeks (each direction) to Chongqing in Sichuan Province just to purchase two buckets of salt and then transported them all the way home on a shoulder pole. Farmers in salt-deprived Guizhou had no other choice because of exploitative salt monopolies.

<sup>7</sup> Far-reaching rehabilitation and other policy changes were ratified at party sessions in late December 1978 at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The meeting marked Deng Xiaoping's rise to power as the country's paramount leader.

*Symbol of change. The white building, used as clan headquarters prior to 1949, then as an all-you-can eat mess hall in the 1950s, now functions as the administrative office for the sub-township government.*



quietly between puffs. “We were just trying to defend ourselves. I am *not* a counter-revolutionary.”

#### **FATHER**

Regardless of what Chen Daru says about his innocence, among those who paid the heaviest price for his “crimes” were his children.

“Growing up was very difficult,” says Chen Daru’s oldest son, Chen Meixian. A man of few words, he enjoys the circle of conversation, but says little.

After learning more about his youth as the son of a “counter-revolutionary,” I understand why he does not speak much. Born in the early 1950s, Chen Meixian grew to maturity through years of class struggle, communes, mess-hall eating, famine and tragic Cultural Revolution.

Because of his father’s special status, other children were not allowed to play with him. He was not permitted to move freely around the village and he was denied the opportunity to attend school.

Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution a marriage was arranged for Chen Meixian to a young woman from a village three miles away. They gave birth to their first child, Chen Dongfang, in 1975.

Life turned better in 1978 when his father was rehabilitated, but for someone — by that time in his mid-twenties — who had never known anything other than labels and class struggle, change was not automatic. Children are like wet cement. His personality had been formed; he had learned to mind his own business.

Though China’s “one-child policy” was instituted in 1979, Chen Meixian and his wife gave birth to seven children by 1991. Villagers say that birth-control enforcement has not been strict in Big Nest until just the past few years.<sup>8</sup> Prior to that, clan mentality drove considerations of family size: the number of people relative to rival clans measured Chen strength. Village leaders, who are also clan heads, until lately encouraged families to have more children. The leaders, in turn, would falsify reports to township officials on the number of people in their village.

Today, Chen Meixian and his two younger brothers live in adjoining homes. His sister lives in a distant village with her family. According to custom, his father lives with the youngest son. And though their living space is separated, and they cook and farm according to their nuclear-family units, they share much of their lives in common as an extended family.

Chen Meixian is a gentle man. Though he appreciates the fact that his oldest son feels so strongly about education, his preoccupation in life is farming, and seeing that his crops (tobacco, corn, rice and potatoes) succeed. After all, he and his wife have a family to feed.

#### **SON**

Chen Dongfang is keenly aware of the profound changes that have occurred within his family in just three generations.

He is the first in his family to know how to read. The opportunity to study has clearly provided Chen Dongfang with new prospects and improved thoughts of how to care for his family. How else, he wonders, can

<sup>8</sup> Now, after a family is discovered to have two children in Big Nest, the woman has no choice but to be sterilized. Township-government officials enforce these efforts.

his family and Big Nest Village ever break their isolation and cycle of poverty?<sup>9</sup>

Chen Dongfang is also part of an increasingly mobile generation. Even those in Big Nest who have received little or no education now flow to China's urban and coastal areas, a reality made possible only since the 1980s when policies to restrict migration (through a combination of household registration requirements and rationing) were relaxed.<sup>10</sup> In fact, an entire age group — those in their late teens through early 30s — is conspicuously absent from Big Nest.

One afternoon conversation included two brothers of about Chen Dongfang's age who work at construction in Kunming, the capital of inland Yunnan Province. They had returned for a brief visit with their wives and children. Though they come home only once or twice a year and have not lived at home since they were teenagers, they bring new ideas — and cash — every time they return. The result, as their experience is replicated millions of times throughout Guizhou Province and China's interior, is a pattern of increased interchange between China's urban and rural areas.

These brothers' absence and the absence of hundreds

of others like them from Big Nest make Chen Dongfang's presence all the more meaningful. Though away at an education college most of the last year, he remains an inspiration for the village children.

Besides the young, Chen Dongfang also has the attention of Big Nest's older generation. To watch those his father's age sit like children as they listen to him tell stories of life in far-away cities and new-found information is quite a role-reversal from what I imagine decades ago, when the young would sit wrapped in their fathers' stories about the production brigade or the latest clan skirmish.

But perhaps most interesting is the way Chen Dongfang and his family relate to each other. The respect he receives from both siblings and parents make it seem as if his siblings have two sets of parents: their mother and father who put food on the table, and Chen Dongfang who keeps pencils and notebooks in their hands. This dual, parent-like family structure demonstrates the ways in which education and mobility among young people in Guizhou's villages are influencing family relations.

Dramatic change has occurred in Big Nest since Chen Dongfang's grandfather was a young man, when this community, hidden deep in Guizhou's rugged



*Family picture. Chen Meixian (second from the right, front row) with his wife and five of his seven children. Oldest son Chen Dongfang is wearing the glasses. Chen Zhixian, the oldest daughter, has gone to the witch-doctor relatives, and a younger son is living with Grandmother for the summer.*

<sup>9</sup> A World Bank report entitled *China 2020* states: "Higher literacy rates in rural areas, especially among women, spur the movement of workers from agricultural to nonagricultural activities." Improved literacy is fundamental to improving Big Nest Village's economic situation.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough overview of the rural-urban gap in China's modern development, see Martin King Whyte, "City Versus Countryside in China's Development," *Problems of Post-Communism* (January 1996).

*Three generations of change. Chen Daru (grandfather), Chen Meixian (father) and Chen Dongfang sit together at a meal. Seven-year-old Chen Chunfen, Chen Dongfang's youngest sister, snuck into the picture.*



mountains, was mired in 50-percent infant mortality, 30-year life expectancy and near-total illiteracy. Even so, Chen Dongfang is painfully aware — and he is reminded every day by his sister's suffering — that too much remains the same.

Maybe that's why it bothers me so much to imagine Chen Dongfang crouched on a floor of scaffolding at some construction site in Guangdong Province. Migrant laborers have a contribution to make, certainly; but Big Nest Village needs Chen Dongfang.

*Dan*

**Postscript:**

One month after my visit to Big Nest Village, I met with Chen Dongfang at my home in southern Guizhou. Not having seen him since that time, I was eager to hear news of Chen's family. He shared the heart-breaking information that his youngest sister, Chen Chunfen (pictured above), who was looking forward so much to beginning first grade, found out that she cannot go to school this year. Reason: This year's tobacco crop was damaged by flooding. There's not enough money, even with big brother Chen Dongfang's help.

"But can I go to school next year, Mother?" asks the disappointed seven-year old. "We'll just have to see," mother replies, hiding her fear.

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## INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Shelly Renae Browning.** A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. **[SOUTH ASIA]**

**Chenoa Egawa.** An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Paige Evans.** A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Whitney Mason.** A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." **[sub-SAHARA]**

**Jean Benoît Nadeau.** A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

**Susan Sterner.** A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Tyrone Turner.** A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. **[THE AMERICAS]**

**Daniel B. Wright.** A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andrae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. **[EAST ASIA]**

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