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ICWA LETTERS

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“Hey, Coolie!” —Local Migrant Labor—

GUIZHOU, China

January, 1999

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Dear Peter:

Life is hard in Guizhou's countryside. That's the message my friend's three uncles communicate during a recent visit to their remote village home. No road, sheer mountains, shallow soil, no running water, backbreaking labor, stripped forests, too many mouths to feed and little money make life a constant challenge. Even so, their ability to live as well as they do — wood-beam houses built into abrupt mountainsides, terraced rice paddies, recently installed electricity and now even TV sets and rice cookers for some — amazes me every time I make the trek to Splendid Village.

Lack of food and clothes in this middle-class-poor community no longer poses a serious threat. The villagers say their biggest need is cash: the means to pay their children's school tuition, prepare daughters' dowries, purchase fertilizer and other needed items like cooking utensils.

As a result, 90 percent of the men and many of the women in their 20s and 30s have departed Splendid Village for the cities — the country's cash centers — as migrant laborers. Despite the strong attraction, however, urban areas stir apprehension in the hearts and minds of these rural folk.

One of First Uncle's daughters was deceived while looking for a job in coastal Guangzhou Province; she ended up getting sold as someone's bride. She later escaped and found her way home, exhausted but free.¹

Second Uncle's sister-in-law, who stopped by while we were eating breakfast, lost her husband in a mining blast in neighboring Guangxi Province last year — yet another migrant-labor casualty.

Second Uncle says he would be working in a city somewhere, regardless of the risk, were it not for his wife's frail health. Because of chronic arthritis in her hips and knees, she is incapable of managing the affairs of their home on her own. Some days she cannot even get out of bed. So Second Uncle remains

¹ From 1991 to 1996, 88,000 women who had been kidnapped for marriage were released by the police and 143,000 kidnappers were caught and prosecuted. But if that is how many were freed, imagine how many women are yet to be discovered. *The Sunday Telegraph*, 22 November 1998.



Mountain homes and rice paddies illustrate the challenge of village life in Guizhou Province. Every family unit in this village tries to have at least one member working as migrant labor in an urban area on the coast or in nearby Duyun.

with his family. That neither of them is able to pursue cash outside the village has led to a painful family decision: Which one of the three children will drop out of school after Spring Festival next month?

Third Uncle works in nearby Duyun, the prefecture capital, pulling a pushcart from dawn to dusk. He hap-

pened to drop by while some of us were visiting at his brother's home.

Third Uncle speaks to me without raising his eyes. He says he has no other choice but to do this kind of beast-to-burden work. He seems ashamed. Yet after expenses he averages 500 yuan *a month*, almost as much as the average annual per-capita income for the township!² Good money, yes, but he earns every fen of it through exhausting labor and the disdain of urbanites. I know — I've seen him around town.

Life is difficult in the mountains; but for farmers-turned-migrant laborers in the city, it is bitter, degrading and dangerous.

Many observers view China's labor migration as primarily a flow from the country's backward hinterland to the more prosperous eastern seaboard. Indeed, it looks this way from

afar. But disparity in China cuts most deeply between city and countryside, not coast and interior. Labor on the move responds accordingly.

Most of the farmers I have spoken with in Guizhou Province say that more of their fellow villagers seek work in southwest China's urban areas than venture toward



Every district or prefecture (the administrative level below province) has a capital city. These urban areas — including those throughout central and western China — are all magnets for migrant labor. Each of the district/prefecture capitals of Guizhou Province and the provincial capital, Guiyang [as shown in the map], has a migrant-labor population equal to approximately 25 percent of the local urban populations.

² 500 yuan is about U.S.\$312. The current exchange rate is just over eight yuan per one U.S. dollar.



Pushcarts parked in an orderly row as their owners huddle by a nearby fire. The carts are built almost the same as the old rickshaws — only these are used for transporting objects instead of people. The single-axle carriage has an eight-by-three-foot flatbed, two wooden poles that extend from the front of the frame and serve as handles. A tail-like piece of wood that protrudes from the rear, usually with a scrap of tire attached, works as a brake. When traveling down a hill, for example, the porter can lift the front handles, which drags the tail and causes the cart to slow. The carts are hand-made; lumber and parts cost about 200 yuan. On average, the carts have to be replaced every two years due to wear and tear.

the better-known coastal destinations of Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Shanghai. Two-thirds of those who leave Splendid Village, for example, remain in Guizhou's cities.

China is not a country simply tilted east with all its labor sliding toward the coast. Rather, urban centers across the land — small, medium and large — are like raised magnetic points, attracting China's estimated 200 million redundant farmers from fields and mountains as if they were fine metal filings.

Little-heard-of Duyun, the city's 200,000 people squeezed along a river valley in the middle of southern Guizhou's mountains, is one of those points. Just ask some of the 2,000 pushcart pullers who run its streets each day.

Kao Huo [Warming by the Fire]

From a distance the parked pushcarts look like idle surfboards lined up on Malibu Beach. It had snowed twice in five days, so I wasn't surprised to see a group of porters huddled around a fire of old boards, warming themselves as they passed the frigid mid-January day.

Since returning from the visit with the three uncles just days before, I had become absorbed with the realization that the majority of "migrant" laborers in China probably never even travel beyond their provinces' borders. Compared with the stereotypical "Overland Chinese" — those laborers who work on the eastern seaboard and

remit significant amounts of cash back to their homes in the hinterland³ — what distinguishes this lesser known but equally significant group of migrants? Why stay closer to home? Does one give anything up by not going to the more prosperous coastal cities? How do urban residents in the interior view this segment of the floating population? What are their pleasures, their hardships?

The next thing I know, I'm in the circle with these guys, chatting about their lives in the city. Surprised, but with typical rural hospitality, they respond warmly to my interest in them. The fire feels good.

It turns out they are part of a larger group of 30 that have come from the same home village about three hours from Duyun. Some are old-timers; one of the young ones has been in the city just three days. Most have been pulling pushcarts for three to five years. They average about 30 years in age.

Their huddle occupies a street corner toward the edge of the city. The intersection serves as the terminus for vans and transport trucks that arrive from outlying counties and Guiyang, the provincial capital. The city government has designated their gathering point as an "official" pushcart location — the sign says so. According to the guys, it simply means that if their pushcarts are not parked in a row they may get fined.⁴

Besides their strategic location, the group has

³ A Guizhou official told me that in 1997 migrant laborers from Guizhou remitted 5 billion yuan (U.S. \$600 million) to family members back home. That figure equals Guizhou's entire annual-local government revenue! It is also equivalent to 10 percent of the province's gross domestic product. Similarly, Sichuan Province's six million farmers that worked outside the province remitted 14 billion yuan to their families. For more commentary on migrant labor's flow to the coast see my report, "One in Fifty Million — Traveling with China's Migrant Labor" (DBW-5).

⁴ In addition, porters are required to pay an annual tax of 100 yuan, the equivalent of about four days' wages. The porters are not aware, however, of any government services they receive in return.

developed a clientele of sorts with a variety of nearby stores and factories and an auto-repair garage.

The porters haul anything and everything: construction materials, furniture, coal, bags of cement, lumber, sheets of glass, scrap metal, sacks of grain, even slaughtered hogs just off the bus from the countryside. If it can be loaded onto an eight-by-three-foot flat space, these guys can deliver it.

The porters average four or five yuan per load. The best haul they can remember is a job that paid 30 yuan; it was a heavy delivery that had to go a long way.

After expenses, which are minimal [30 yuan for rent and 100 yuan for food], each porter clears between 300 and 500 yuan a month. Compared to the cash available at home, this is a significant amount.

As we speak, an occasional request comes: “*Banche!*” [pushcart] But they may as well have been calling, “Hey, coolie!” One of the men hops up from around the fire and is off to the job. The circle tightens and expands as men come and go.

“Why did you all leave home in the first place?”

“We’re too poor. There’s no money back there.”



If it can fit on an eight-by-three-foot flat space they'll haul it. A porter finishes up tying down a set of furniture.

“Who takes care of your fields and family while you are gone?”

“We have family members who look after things and do the work. If an emergency comes up, we are not far away.”

“How often do you return home?”

“Spring Festival, planting, harvest, ... about four or five times a year.”

“Why didn’t you go to the coast to work? Isn’t the money better there?”

“The money’s better, yes, but the risk is greater. It’s much more dangerous there than here, and here is already bad enough. Plus, like we said, we’re closer to our village and it’s much easier to return home.”

“What do you enjoy most about working here in the city?” I ask this to see their reaction to something they probably don’t think about very often: pleasure.

No response. I don’t fill the silence. Finally, one of them says, “Full stomachs.”

“And the hardest thing?”



Another porter begins to maneuver his pushcart, weighed down with a 300-pound hog that has been split right down the middle.

The answer comes more quickly: “City people look down at us. We occupy the bottom of society.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re from the countryside. The work we do is dirty.”

Among the circle, three do most of the speaking; the others just seem to take it all in. One man in particular, an older man of about 50 with a weathered, unshaven face, emerges as the group’s spokesman. He’s the veteran and has lived in Duyun some 30 years (when he was young his family moved from the countryside under special circumstances). He points to a shoddy two-story brick structure across the road. “That’s my home. My wife, children and I live there.”

But originally, he’s from the same village as the others.

At some point in the morning conversation, a cute little girl runs up to him from across the street.

“This is my daughter. Actually, she’s adopted.”

“What’s her name?” I ask as we squeeze her inside the circle so she can enjoy the warmth.

“*Tang Lujuan*. ‘Lu Juan’ means ‘flower by the road.’ We found her as a baby, abandoned along the street in front of our house.”

Jackpot! He and I have the same last name: Tang.

“We’re *jiamen* [relatives]!” Lao Tang declares to all. Family runs deep in China, even with adopted foreigners like me.

“We built the Tang Dynasty,” he earnestly says to me, now holding my hand, “but our family name is in decline. There are very few of us left in Duyun. We’ve got to stick together.”

Very pleased, but unable to reciprocate his fervor, I switch the conversation back to the reason I first approached the group: “I’m quite interested in your work, both because it enables you to earn cash for your families back home and because of your contribution to the welfare of this city. How else would the city people transport their things — like furniture, new refrigerators

and television sets — around town?”

As I complete my sentence, a young rural woman with a scarf tied around her head strides by, balancing a shoulder pole with a stack of charcoaled sticks fastened to each end.⁵ Without telling the guys what I am doing, I stand up and shout “*mutan!*” [charcoal] and walk over to the woman. I instruct her to drop her load over by the guys.

When they figure out what is happening, the men give a shout of “hurrah!” We then settle back in around our upgraded fire. After chatting a bit longer I head home for lunch.

Each day over the better part of one week, I frequented the porters’ huddle. I’d sit for awhile, chat, warm up and then head on. I also walked the streets of Duyun, observing pushcarts and pondering this interesting segment of the local migrant labor population.

One day, I return determined to do more than talk. I



“Do you have a camera?” this rookie porter asked. “Yes, I’d like to have our picture taken together.” “But we’re too dirty,” he added. “It would lower your status (jiangdi nide shenfen) if you had your picture taken with us.” I came back the next day with my camera and my son Jon, above. Turns out this young man has a child Jon’s age back home in the mountains.

want to experience a bit of their work firsthand. The fire’s already warm by the time I arrive.

“What is the most effective way to find work as a pushcart puller?”

“You can roam or you can park yourself outside a

⁵ Making charcoal in the countryside and selling it in the city is another cash-generating activity for rural residents living on the outskirts of the city. This woman had walked three hours from her village home to sell the stacks of homemade charcoal for 35 yuan. The result, however, has been devastating deforestation.

store and hope that someone makes a purchase while you are standing there, but by far the best way to make money is to have a good relationship with a store owner or person at a factory who will direct work to you.”

“What’s the worse thing that has happened to you all out here?”

“We’ve had guys killed. Cars drive too fast and don’t pay attention.”

On this day there are just about six of us gathered around the fire. It’s still quite cold. Someone walks up and asks for a porter to haul something down the street.

“How much?” asks Lao Tang.

“Two yuan.”

The men laugh off the offer and turn back to the fire.

Fifteen minutes later another call comes — “*Banche!*” A man, with whom they seem quite familiar, dismounts his bicycle and says something about hauling scrap metal.

“How many of us do you need?”

“Three.”

“How much per cart?”

“Twenty yuan for three carts.”

“Fifteen per cart.”

They settle on ten yuan a cart. Three men hop up; Old Tang is one of them. I follow.

We head toward an auto-repair garage that specializes in trucks. Several tons of rusted metal from wrecked trucks need to be hauled away to a man’s scrap shop.

They load each pushcart piece by piece, occasionally checking to make sure the stack of strewn metal is balanced by lifting the cart’s handles.

After about an hour, all three loads — about a half-ton each — are maxed out and ready to go. We pull out of the factory compound and onto the main road. Even the slightest gradation requires all four of us to help: one

in front pulling, three straining from behind.

Fortunately, most of the route is level. We arrive at our destination 45 minutes later.

Subcultures, whether Washington, D.C.’s homeless population or Beijing’s princelings,⁶ have their distinct mores, vocabularies and common experiences. In this way, I was struck by the sense of community experienced



One of the loads of scrap metal. Even the slightest gradation required extra strength from behind. Going over a bridge, we backed up traffic until all three pushcarts crawled across.

by the porters who had left the countryside (and their families) to pursue cash in the city. The relationships were especially strong among those from the same hometown or village.

At the same time, I was equally impressed by the extent to which urban dwellers look down on porters — for that matter, on all laborers who come from the countryside.

Every grain of rice....

“Dirty” is the first word used by a young urban woman when I ask her about migrant laborers in Duyun. “Of course, though, I don’t feel that way,” she adds when she sees the look on my face.

“When we were children,” she explains, “our parents often told us that if we didn’t study hard we would end up like them, working on the streets.”

At the same time, urban kindergarten children, including my daughter Margaret, memorize a Tang

⁶ Princelings, or *gaogan zidi*, are children of high-ranking cadres. They sometimes function as a privileged clique.

Dynasty poem called *Min Nong* [Compassion for Peasants]:

*Weeding rice paddies,
while the bright sun shines down from above;
Sweat off their brow drips to the ground below,
mixing with soil and seedlings;
Who knows the toil
that went into each grain of rice that sits on your plate.*

Memorized appreciation? Perhaps. But the longest 18-inch distance in the universe is between the head and the heart. Rural laborers construct their buildings, pedicabs cycle them around town, porters transport their burdens and women laborers polish their shoes, wash their plates and care for their children. But prejudice runs deep. In the eyes of most urban residents, rural folk are just, well, filthy.

Though the primary ways in which the urban-rural divide was institutionalized in the 1950s — household registration and migration restriction — have been eased or eliminated, they produced a two-caste mindset that remains until today. The result has produced perhaps China's greatest wall: little understanding or appreciation between its agricultural and non-agricultural populations.⁷

Most rural people I have spoken with seem to have internalized this bigotry. A pervasive inferiority complex expresses itself in frequent self-diminishment, like the rookie porter who said I would lower my status if we had our photograph taken together.

Even so, as long as cash remains difficult to come by in many rural regions of the country and as long as the wage difference remains so unbalanced, millions of rural laborers will continue to migrate to the cities looking for work. How their urban bosses view them is among the least of their concerns.

Thinking Ahead

In the longer term, practically inexhaustible flows of redundant labor from the countryside to China's cities — coast or interior — must be viewed as a temporary solution to the shortage of cash in the countryside. Both the numbers [those 200 million farmers in excess of the

need to work the fields] and the realities of the rural-urban divide are just too dramatic. Cash centers must be developed that are more numerous and diverse than simply the urban areas that dot the country.

One obvious need is to promote non-agricultural income-generating alternatives in the countryside. Township and village enterprises (TVEs), for example, brought means of production and capital to the countryside. In this way, TVEs have become an important means of absorbing idle farmers; they have absorbed 27 percent of redundant rural labor.⁸ But that's primarily in eastern, more prosperous China where rural areas tend to have better infrastructure, access to markets and traditions of non-agricultural production. As of 1995, TVEs in western China were producing only four percent of the total national value.⁹

There is lots of room to grow for TVEs in western China. The need is certainly evident. Still, it takes money to make money. Financial institutions, even of the most basic sort, that extend credit to rural residents must be normalized and made more accessible. For even the better-off poor regions of rural Guizhou, however — like Splendid Village — the likelihood of extending credit in any meaningful way seems light-years away.

Infrastructure improvements also need to continue to spread. This is happening, but slowly. It is a long, gradual process, especially in desperately poor mountainous regions like Guizhou Province.

As policymakers work to improve conditions in the countryside, the continued development of urban areas must not be overlooked either. Cities and towns will continue to attract rural laborers. As these points across the country become increasingly connected into road, railway and telecommunication grids, they have the potential of stimulating complementary growth in the countryside. In this way, urban-rural relations need not be seen as a contradiction; rather, a superior perspective views the relationship as mutually dependent. Generations-deep prejudice, however, is difficult to reverse.

In the meantime, as China faces a declining trend in rural incomes¹⁰ and levels of corruption that thwart efforts to institutionalize rural residents' ability to gain access to cash at more local levels (especially in towns and

⁷For a thorough discussion of the urban-rural divide as a two-caste system see Martin King Whyte, "City Versus Countryside in China's Development," *Problems of Post-Communism* (January 1996).

⁸He Qinglian, *Xiandaihua de xianjin: Zhongguo wenti baogao* (The pitfalls of modernization: China's problems series) (Beijing: Today's China Press, 1998), 251.

⁹Compared to 63 percent in the east and 33 percent in central China. See Wei Houkai, "Zhongguo xiangzhenqiye fazhan yu quyue" (The development of china's township and village enterprises and regional disparities), *Zhongguo nongcun jingji* (China rural economics) (May 1997): 56-60.

¹⁰China's Ministry of Agriculture reported a decreasing trend in net farm incomes: 5.6 percent in 1996, 4.6 percent per in 1997 and an estimated 3.0 percent in 1998. *South China Morning Post*, 24 December 1998.

townships), the welfare and stability of the countryside will in large part depend on the ability of migrant laborers to earn cash in the country's urban areas.

The bright side of an otherwise unsettling reality (i.e., overwhelming numbers of migrant labor) suggests that rural laborers prefer to pursue work in areas near home rather than simply rush to the coast. Coastal urban residents and policymakers attempting to address rural stability and the countryside's need for cash-generating activities can take heart that the disparity pie in China first slices vertically along the urban-rural gap, not the horizontal coast-interior divide.

Still, when it comes down to it, the ability of migrant laborers to meet their families' needs for cash absent any meaningful way to earn sufficient income in the countryside, and in the continuing cases of huge wage disparities, will keep them coming in numbers that could potentially overwhelm all of China's urban areas combined. It almost causes one to hark back to Mao Zedong's theory on peasant revolution: "From the countryside sur-

round the city" [*cong nongcun baowei chengshi*].

Throughout the time I spent observing and getting to know pushcart pullers around Duyun, they would often describe their work as *ku li* [literally translated: 'bitter labor']. But it was not until one noonday when I was home speaking in Chinese with my wife, Guowei, that it suddenly struck me: *ku li* sounds like the English word "coolie." I asked the guys about it. My "distant relative" Lao Tang gave confirmation: "We porters have a long legacy; we are one and the same with the Shanghai dockworkers of old." Indeed, the men huddled around the fire are China's modern-day coolies.

Bitter labor in exchange for needed cash — that pretty much sums up the experience of migrant laborers in urban areas across China.



Modern-day coolies. The men preferred to stand rather than have their picture taken around the fire.

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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]

Chenoga Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoga 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, Chenoga'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]

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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]

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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 Andraee, 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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