In a nation on the rise, a **booming economy** is tearing millions of workers away from their families. What can be done to help a generation of **kids growing up without their parents**? **BY BROOKE ROSS**

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**DEEP IN RURAL CHINA, YUWEN TANG, 12, shares a one-room apartment with his grandmother, younger brother, and two cousins. There isn’t much privacy; the family bathes in a metal tub on the floor and shares a toilet with neighbors. Yuwen is constantly surrounded by people—except for the two he misses most: his mom and dad.**

Yuwen’s parents live in the city of Chengdu, several hours away from his home in southwest China’s Sichuan province. They work in a textile factory, churning out the kinds of products that have helped transform China’s economy into the second-largest in the world. Yuwen sees them only two or three times a year.

“I know it is hard for Mom and Dad to earn money,” he recently told the BBC. “But I miss them so much. It’s very painful.”

Yuwen, along with his brother and cousins, are part of what’s known as China’s “left-behind” generation: children who live in rural areas while one or both of their parents live and work in China’s cities. (Urban areas are often the only place to find jobs in the Asian nation.) According to rough estimates, about 61 million left-behind children live in China—one-fifth of all kids in the country.

Although children face serious risks growing up without their parents, including abuse and depression, many Chinese feel they have no choice but to leave their kids behind. Why? Doing so allows their children to stay in school. While rural migrants are free to work in China’s booming cities, they and their families are not allowed to access government services there. That includes public school and health care.

“Left-behind children are one of China’s best-kept secrets,” says Kam Wing Chan, a geography professor at the University of Washington and an expert on
Most parents of left-behind children work in city factories producing everything from stuffed animals (right) to McDonald's Happy Meal toys (bottom right). Some migrants live in cramped dormitories that don't allow kids (below).

Chinese migration. “It's a very big issue that needs to be better known.”

Recently, advocates for left-behind children have begun working to bring attention to the nationwide crisis. They have prompted calls for China to end the policies that keep migrant families apart. How the government responds could have a huge impact—not just on the millions of left-behind kids, but also on the economy that this young generation is expected to sustain someday.

The Massive Migration
About half of China’s left-behind children live with one parent while the other is away. Another 44 percent are like Yuwen: left in the care of others, usually grandparents, so both parents can work. And 3 percent—2 million kids—live by themselves with no relatives to rely on at all. (See “Left-Behind Children by the Numbers,” opposite.)

The phenomenon of left-behind children is a consequence of the largest human migration in history. In recent decades, about 270 million Chinese migrants have left their rural villages to take jobs in China’s bustling cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai. (See “Mapping China,” p. 17.)

China was once poor and isolated, and its people suffered for decades under a repressive government. But in recent years, the Communist country of 1.4 billion people—the largest population in the world—has transformed itself into an economic giant.

In 1978, the nation’s leaders began to adopt reforms that loosened government control of the economy. Thanks to these changes, other nations rushed to do business with China. Technology firms and clothing manufacturers have taken advantage of the nation’s skilled, low-paid workforce, and today China is known as the world’s workshop.

The country makes everything from jeans to iPhones. Many migrants have jumped at the chance to work 12-hour days in China’s factories manufacturing such products. The pay is low, but it’s still more than they’d earn in their villages, which are often crippled by poverty. Most parents, including Yuwen’s, send money home to their kids as often as they can.

“I’m so worried because I’m not with him,” Yuwen’s mother tearfully told reporters in Chengdu. “If there were no legal barriers, we would bring him with us.”

Strict System
Unlike the U.S.—where a family in rural Wyoming, for example, is free to move anywhere it wants—China operates under a rigid household registration policy. It’s called the hukou
(hoo-koh) system. Established in 1958 under Communist ruler Mao Zedong (1893-1976), the hukou system classifies all citizens as rural or urban. It allows residents to work anywhere they choose—but they can receive government services only in the places where they were born.

The hukou system was put into effect to keep rural families from flooding into cities. This system slows the growth of urban slums—a huge concern for Chinese officials. It also allows the governments of Beijing, Shanghai, and other large cities to avoid paying for services for migrants and their children.

The program prevented migration to the cities for many years. But as China’s economy grew, millions of people began moving to the cities anyway in search of jobs. Willing to give up their own health care—but not their children’s health care or schooling—desperate parents began leaving their kids in the best living situation they could. It can be a gut-wrenching decision, with the children left to bear the ultimate burden.

A Generation at Risk

Without adequate parental supervision, left-behind children are at increased risk for abuse, violence, and injury, according to United Nations data. In 2015, four young siblings living by themselves in rural southwest China died of pesticide poisoning.

Left-behind children also suffer emotionally. About 25 percent say they have no hope for their future, according to Lijun Chen, a researcher at the University of Chicago in Illinois. He is the co-author of a recent study that analyzes rural Chinese children’s mental health, economic backgrounds, and education levels.

Ironically, while most migrant parents cite education as the primary reason they leave their kids behind, their children often do poorly...
in school. Some teachers report that left-behind students have difficulty focusing. Many have a hard time even getting to class, because schools in China’s countryside are often far from villagers’ homes. Such factors likely contribute to the big difference in high school graduation rates between rural students (only about 3 percent) and city students (63 percent).

“If little is done to improve left-behind children’s circumstances soon, there will be enormous long-term costs,” warns Chen. “Many of them will not become productive.”

Economic Fallout
Much more is at stake than just the children’s welfare, experts say. The left-behind crisis could also spell disaster for China’s economy.

Thanks to its history of population control, China already has low numbers of children overall. In 1980, the country adopted a law limiting urban families to one child each. Although that policy was modified last year, today only about 17 percent of Chinese are under the age of 15. At the same time, the number of people over age 60 is increasing.

This has experts worried. In future decades there may not be enough young, educated workers in China’s cities to replace those who are retiring—and to produce the goods that drive the nation’s economy.

HELPING CHINA’S KIDS
Growing up in the city of Yangzhou, China, Xinyi “Cindy” Hua (right, center) was well aware of the left-behind crisis in her country and always wanted to help. While studying abroad at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, she got her chance.

After winning a community-service grant last summer, Hua, 22, established a mentoring program in China between local college students and left-behind children. Every week, along with about two dozen students from Nanjing University, she visited the children at their rural elementary school to read to them and play board games. The older students also ran safety workshops for the kids.

Hua recently graduated and returned to China. She’s now working on expanding her program. By next year, she hopes to have recruited volunteers from 10 Chinese universities to mentor up to 1,500 kids.

Hua says the best part of working with left-behind children is helping to improve their confidence. Many of the kids tell their mentors they want to be college students just like them.

“We are changing the way they think about themselves,” Hua explains. “And that’s exactly the difference we are trying to make.”

Bringing the Left-Behind Forward
Fortunately, China is starting to take notice of its youngest, most vulnerable people. Officials recently announced that they are planning to conduct the country’s first census of left-behind children to determine their exact number and location.

And earlier this year, China’s government issued guidelines for the care of left-behind children. They call on rural governments and schools to work together to look after young citizens, while urging parents to ensure that their kids are in good hands if they leave for the cities.

Local communities are also stepping up. Social workers in various provinces are working with thousands of left-behind children, making sure they have the care they need. An expanding network of Chinese college students has also begun visiting rural schools to mentor left-behind children and help them with their homework. (See “Helping China’s Kids,” left.)

Such measures may be a step in the right direction, but many people are calling on the government to do more, starting with comprehensive reforms to the hukou system. Officials have discussed making changes to the policy for years but have yet to act.

“The hukou system is unfair and unsustainable,” Professor Chan says. “Ultimately, China needs to reform or abolish the system if it’s to become a modern country.”

Illinois-based researcher Lijun Chen agrees. In his report, he calls for ending the policies that keep children from joining their parents in cities.

“Every child,” he says, “should be given an environment in which they can prosper.”