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Home alone

Wen Chihua

Absence of parental affection and study pressure are the most difficult challenges confronting children of migrant workers in China, who work far away from home.

To Zhong Jiezhen, 11, in baggy red sweatpants and worn-out rubber sandals, home means cooking, household chores, and looking after her younger sister and grandmother.

"It feels so hopeless, lonely and scary when you have to attend to everything all by yourself, constantly worrying — What if something happens to Papa and Mama? What if they can't send home money anymore?" says Jiezhen, wiping tears with her stained white shirt in her village home in Chengxiang, Quannan County, in China's Jiangxi Province.

Her mother Huang Zhinian has tears in her eyes as well. She and her husband made a special effort to come home for the annual mid-autumn festival. "We have no alternative. We left home to make money to put the children through high school. And we cannot take them with us. Living costs in the city are too high."

Zhinian, who appears seven or eight years older than her age of 38, migrated from her hometown with her husband in 2002. They are transient construction workers in Fogang city in Guangdong Province. A stone's throw from Hong Kong, they live 300 km from their children. At best, they earn 10,000 Yuan (\$1 = 8.08 Yuan) a year. Zhinian's mother-in-law Tu Qingmei, 70, is unable to take care of her grandchildren. "More importantly," says Qingmei, "I'm illiterate, and unable to supervise and instruct their study." This leaves Jiezhen virtually on her own.

The mountainous region of Quannan has over 4,500 six to 16-year-olds whose parents are migrant workers. These children account for 22.47 per cent of the county's school students. Most lack adequate care, says Lu Fangqing, deputy director of the local education bureau. "Ineffective guardianship has left these children with no sense of certainty or security. It also creates study difficulties and psychological problems."

Rural development is top priority for the Chinese government. But the problem for this poor, remote county is that each family has only 0.04 hectares of arable land, one-tenth the national average. Poverty drives villagers to the cities. "The average annual income per head is 2,534 Yuan in this county, of which 50 per cent comes from those working in cities," says Luo Zongqi, county government chief.

On a national scale, 120 million rural migrant workers are doing the menial jobs that city dwellers are unwilling to do, while 20 million children deal with growing pains and unpredictable miseries alone.

Absence of parental affection and study pressure are the most difficult and overlooked challenges confronting these children,

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according to a survey conducted by the Beijing-based China Children Press and Publication Group, in collaboration with UNICEF China.

The Group surveyed 5,000 children from Quannan and Xinxian counties in Henan Province, from where a big portion of the country's migrant labour force originates. Of these, 65 per cent said they understood why their parents had to work so far from home. But the children said they were fearful that they might not be able to live up to their parents' expectations and often felt guilty about their poor grades. While 50 per cent said they worried their parents might fall ill, get injured in an accident or get duped by urban criminals, 77.4 per cent wanted their parents to quit their jobs and come home for good.

The psychological pressure is often overwhelming, leading to study-weariness and negative, destructive tendencies. Chu Rui, director of the Group's Activity Department, which conducted the survey, warns that these troubled children will grow into troubled adults in 10 years, so the government needs to pay attention to them now.

With financial support from UNICEF, Chu says the Group donated 120,000 Yuan worth of books to schools in Quannan County. They are trying to create a 'Hand-in-Hand Library' at each school for rural children and offer them some spiritual comfort. To prevent these children from feeling left out, the Quannan government has also launched a project in rural schools to deploy counsellors and telephone hotlines for parents to contact their children.

In addition, a special school to teach custodians how to take care of the minors under their care will be opened. "It's especially important to educate rural guardians," says Huang Zhengren, principal of Pitou Town Central Primary School.

He cites the case of Hu Jingjing, a student, who lived with his grandmother and became hostile and destructive after his parents divorced. His grandmother consulted a fortune-teller, who predicted that Hu was doomed to be executed in the future. After hearing his 'fortune', Hu started to steal his classmates' pocket money and urinate in the classroom, the principal recalls. Every time a teacher tried to help, Hu would heckle the teacher, saying, "Why bother? I'll end up on death row anyway."

Huang says, "We contacted his father, telling him how desperate Hu was for his love. Eventually, he took the child with him to Guangdong. Hu is catching up now at a new school."

He added that many rural custodians of children are illiterate and "tend to be superstitious" when trying to discipline the kids. "That's why a special school is necessary for them."

Other efforts include a family-style dormitory within schools, and a care centre where 13 teachers act as substitute mothers for 50 children. "We are not only responsible for their daily life, but also for their study and their emotional needs," says Chen Qinying, an experienced pre-school teacher and now director of the centre.

Chen Juwu, an outstanding high school student, used to struggle in his studies. "Thanks to the centre, rural kids here have made remarkable progress in their study," says Chen. "I don't know where I would be today without their help."

"Hopefully, the attention can replace some of the family love that is missing in their lives," says county government chief Luo Zongqi. "Maybe they can grow up with less pain." However, the best choice is still to resume the normal and reliable relationship between parent and child, he adds.

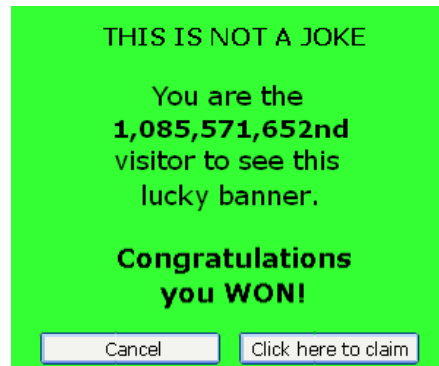
As for Jiezheng, her mother plans to work in Guangdong one more year to save up enough money for the child's high school education. "Then," says Zhinian, "I'm coming home for good."

For the first time in hours, Jiezhen smiles.

Women's Feature Service

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