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## **A Lost Generation: The Trafficking of China's Left-Behind Children**

### **\*\*An Endless Search\*\***

On a late December afternoon in 2012, the residents of Mi Village in South Eastern China's Guangdong Province curled up for their daily nap after lunch. Dressed in his Superman tracksuit and white sneakers, Liu Si Rui — a four-year-old boy with a round face and cherub cheeks — plopped down in front of the TV while his grandfather dozed off beside him. Soon after, Si Rui ran outside to play by himself while the rest of the house slumbered.

When his grandfather woke up an hour later to find Si Rui missing, he scoured the dirt roads and knocked on neighbors' doors to no avail. The family reported the disappearance to the county police, but as is often the case, they were informed that the incident couldn't be filed until 24 hours after Si Rui had gone missing. Because it was New Year's Eve, their request continued to be ignored until January 4 — five days after the disappearance.

In Mi Village, Si Rui was just one of the many left-behind children: offspring of migrant workers who are primarily raised by grandparents while the parents work in distant cities. Unable to find employment in the village, his parents moved over 200 miles away shortly before Si Rui was born to seek work in Shenzhen — a huge manufacturing city that boasts 10 million people. Liu Jun Ming, Si Rui's father, worked as a driver and his mother as a factory worker; all while Liu's 60-year-old parents cared for his two young children.

Although there had never been any incidents in the village before, he suspects that his son was kidnapped. Liu says that he doubts Si Rui would have disappeared if he were watching him, but because the grandparents were older and more trusting, they were unable to properly care for his son. "For the older generation, they feel like such a mysterious tragedy couldn't happen in such a harmonious society," Liu adds.

He and his wife made the difficult decision to leave their children behind because of Shenzhen's high cost of living and limitations imposed by the *hukou* — a housing registration system that dictates social benefits— including subsidized housing, free health care and education that are connected to the town or city where the *hukou* is registered. Similarly to India's caste system, China's housing registration is assigned at birth and determines socioeconomic opportunities. Migrants are also unable to access social benefits when moving elsewhere. "We couldn't bring the children with us because it's really hard to get an urban *hukou*," Liu says.

Although family registration systems have origins in ancient China, the modern-day *hukou* was promulgated in the 1950s to restrict movement and control the size of populations in cities. According to China's industrialization plan, farmers were needed in rural areas to produce a surplus of agricultural goods that could be used to fuel the cities. Originally, the *hukou* was separated into rural or urban status, which limited mobility from the farms to cities. In July 2014, President Xi Jinping's administration announced a minor [reform](#) that abolished the distinction between an urban and rural *hukou*, allowing rural dwellers to access housing and social benefits when they move to small cities. But the reform does not apply to Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, or Shenzhen—the largest cities in the country, where a [third of the population](#) currently doesn't have a local *hukou*.

Because they didn't have a Shenzhen residence status, Liu's children couldn't enroll in a reputable public school for free. Their only option in the city was to attend schools specifically for migrant worker children that are often unlicensed and required tuition Liu couldn't afford. "If there's no such limitation imposed by *hukou*, I would have definitely brought my kids to the city; but we have other concerns as well, because I have a huge economic burden in the city and we are not from a rich family," he says. The Liu's are not alone in their plight. *China's Education Improving Institute*, a research organization, recently surveyed 2,000 migrant workers in Beijing and found that the main reason they chose to leave their children behind is because of the tuition fee and educational limitations imposed by the *hukou* system. Without Beijing residence status, their children were unable to access free, high quality education or to take the *gaokao* — a college entrance exam.

Si Rui's disappearance is also a common tale in modern-day China. [The U.S. State Department estimates](#) that around 20,000 children are abducted every year. And the ones who are most likely to be targeted are the left-behinds. According to a [report](#) published in 2008 by *All China Women's Federation*, migrant and left-behind children are at the highest risk of being trafficked. But abduction is not the only problem for left-behind children. Reports have highlighted a range of issues facing the children, including [sexual assault](#) and [mental health problems](#). Over the past decade, the country has ramped up efforts to thwart the human trafficking industry by creating hotlines to report trafficking and increasing prosecutions for offenders. In 2007, the government even created Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Women and Children, a [panel](#) to protect women and children from being trafficked — but the phenomenon of child abductions continues to plague the country. In 2014, the U.S. Department of State placed China on its [Tier 2 Watch List](#)—the second to lowest rating in its survey for trafficking — because of an increase in kidnapping and a failure to make minimal efforts to combat it.

Analysts cite various reasons for the high rate of child trafficking in China, including the [one-child policy](#), which has led to an influx in the prostitution of girls and the abduction of boys for adoption. But the *hukou* system also plays a pervasive role in the trafficking industry, which thrives on unprotected children and lack of oversight from officials. When migrant workers move to large urban areas, they are prevented from accessing services without a local *hukou*, so they have little choice but to be separated from their children who then become prime targets for trafficking. According to a [report](#) released in

2011 by the NGO All-China Women's Federation, 61 million children in China haven't seen their parents in three months.

Unlike most migrant workers, Liu would see his children every month, but now he is relentlessly searching for his son to no avail. Over the past three years, he has traveled around the country distributing flyers that feature a picture of a smiling Si Rui and explains his mysterious disappearance. The caption reads: "The parents are devastated."

### **\*\*The Urban and Rural Divide\*\***

China is forging ahead in efforts to [move 100 million people](#) into urban areas by 2020—an ambitious plan that encourages farmers to migrate from the rural areas to work in large, booming cities. In an attempt to shift from exporting to a consumption-driven economy, the government is relying on urbanization—the mechanism that drives China's growth and is fueled by abundant and cheap labor. Over the past three decades, the portion of China's total [population that lives](#) in cities has increased from 20 to 54%. Throughout Beijing, the poignant smell of burning coal and car exhaust wafts through the air as a reminder of the steady development.

Although the government has encouraged some rural dwellers to vacate their land for development purposes, many voluntarily migrate to the city to seek their fortune and take their chances at realizing the Chinese Dream. This has led to a large migrant population for which there is not enough resources. To welcome the change in economy, the government's urbanization plan that was proposed in July 2014, promises to offer an urban *hukou* to [45% of the rural dwellers](#) who will be moving to the cities. But there are currently 250 million migrant workers in the cities without a local *hukou* who are treated like second-class citizens without access to full-benefits. Although economists agree that the reform is a step in the right direction, for many migrant workers and human rights activists, the changes aren't coming fast enough.

According to Li Heping — a litigation lawyer based in Beijing who focuses on human right's issues—if the *hukou* system doesn't undergo a sweeping reform, its limits on mobility will continue to undermine the rapid urbanization of China. "The government heavily relies on the *hukou* system to control its people and social benefits. It is a tool to handcuff its people," Li says. He compares the *hukou* to a vestige of China's patriarchal system and India's castes. Although everyone is affected by the housing registration, he says that lower-class migrant workers are especially targeted by the system's discriminatory practices. To enroll their children in the city's public schools, migrant workers without a local *hukou* need to provide a series of documents, including sponsorship, health documents and work permits, that are nearly impossible to get.

Li considers the *hukou* China's attempt to manage its most pressing concerns: family and migration. "If the government allowed people to move around," he says, "it would be difficult for officials to control people who were born in different areas." Li considers the housing registration system a fundamental issue that dovetails with many of the other

problems besieging the country. It creates an impassable gap between the rural and urban areas, he says. And that's the "main cause of the phenomenon of left-behind children."

For Xie Guoliang, a cook who moved to Beijing from Henan Province over 20 years ago, the *hukou* has prevented him and his family from bridging the divide between the past and their current lives. Although his 15-year-old son, Xie Junwen, was born and raised in Beijing, he is attending a boarding school in Hebei Province because he doesn't have a local residence permit. Xie's son was able to enroll in primary and middle school without a problem, but once Junwen entered high school, the local government was no longer obligated to offer access to education. Beijing education officials released a new policy in April 2014 requiring children without a local *hukou* to provide a range of credentials, including residency permits and tax forms that the parents can't obtain.

Because Xie's parents passed away and there's no one left in his hometown to care for his son, he decided to send Junwen to Langfang, a city about 30 miles away from Beijing. The family visits Junwen every two weeks, but Xie still worries that the separation will be harmful to his impressionable son, who he says is having trouble "adapting to a new environment." His normally introverted son has been breaking the rules by listening to music in school because he feels lonely. But his son's behavior isn't the only concern; a recent [BBC report](#) revealed that the 30 million children sent to boarding schools in rural China are at high risk of being abused by caretakers.

Although a soft-spoken 40-year old, Xie speaks about his children's education in an impassioned and urgent tone that belies his relaxed demeanor. "I want my kids to go to school because I didn't receive a higher education and I cannot have a higher income," he says. "If my children don't have access to higher education, that would be a negative cycle and then they will inherit my social status."

Despite the government's pledge of *hukou* reform, Xie believes that local education officials have created stricter policies in recent years to deter migrant workers from settling their families in Beijing. "It all came gradually. Initially, this policy [*hukou*] was trying to encourage people to work here, until Beijing's population exploded," Xie says. "But now, the government uses its policy as a means to limit the population." He's worried that his five-year-old son in kindergarten will also have a problem entering primary school next year.

The city's use of the *hukou* to deny access to education is already causing enrollment to dwindle. According to [Caixin Online](#), Beijing's Education Bureau says that as of May 2014, the number of primary school students without a local residence permit had decreased by 7 percent in a year. Over the past four years, the Beijing government has also shut down hundreds of schools for migrant worker children that they say posed safety hazards, leaving thousands of children to either attempt to enroll in other Beijing schools or become left-behind children.

Ren Xinghui — a former public policy analyst for the Beijing-based think tank, Transition Institute — has been studying the quality of education for left-behind children

for several years. He found that both migrant worker and left-behind children are the most likely to be targeted for kidnapping because they haven't easily adapted to a new environment, lack parental supervision, and haven't been granted equal education.

Xinghui doesn't believe that there's a short-term solution to curb the epidemic of trafficking among left-behind children. Instead, he says that the government should provide public facilities for children or repeal the *hukou* policy in the long-term. "For example, these migrant children are not listed in public service protection, and their children are playing outside. If the government could provide them with community centers or extra community service, they will have more protection."

He adds that the *hukou* system is the main impetus behind the separation of children from their migrant worker parents and that its greatest limitation is access to education.

The restrictions imposed by the housing registration system also encourage some migrant parents to move abroad. Like a lot of young parents in Guangdong Province's Lan Cang County, Hu Zhi Qin and her husband decided to move to Malaysia because it wasn't possible to get a *hukou* for a medium or large city. "We just wanted to make some money to support our family and we could make more money working overseas compared to a first tier city," Hu adds. Her three-year-old son Long Jia Jun and five-year-old daughter were cared for by their doting parents. The children lived a typical small city life where they often played with their friends outside. On the evening of April 4, 2010, Jia Jun was playing in the dirt with his sister and the other neighborhood kids, just 20 meters away from the front of the house where his grandmother was making dinner. As it approached 5 p.m., Jia Jun ran back towards the house alone, his brown leather shoes hitting the dirt, as he went to check up on his grandmother.

The family never saw Jia Jun again. In a frenzy, the grandparents called the police that night, but were told that they couldn't file the incident until 24 hours later. The police used the same excuse in the following days, until they finally filed a missing person report a week later. "The left-behind children are more likely to be targeted because there's no supervision and there were no kids who went missing before, so no one took it seriously," Hu says, choking back tears. She thinks that if she had been watching her children, that Jia Jun wouldn't have been kidnapped. Hu and her husband have since moved back to Lan Cang, and they have no intentions of leaving to find work again. "We just want to have a regular job in our village and to take care of our kid," she adds.

### **\*\* Parents Band Together \*\***

Since the 1980s, the child trafficking industry has skyrocketed. Although official statistics are hard to pin down, the [Chinese government says](#) that around 10,000 children are abducted every year, while Xunzi Zhijia — a non-profit organization that supports the parents of kidnapped children — estimates that it's closer to 200,000. That number is around [20 times that of the U.S.](#), where only about 100 children are abducted by strangers annually.

The market demand for children in China is high and according to Wu Xing Hu, a parent of a missing child, major players in the industry include local government officials and other people of authority, ranging from police officers to doctors.

Wu — whose standard uniform is a pair of dark green cargo pants and a shirt with a photo of his missing child — was a truck driver near his hometown in Weinan City, Shaanxi Province until 2008 when his 12-month-old son, Jia Cheng, was abducted from his bed in the middle of the night. Ever since, he has traversed the country in search of his son. Along with posters of his abducted child, Wu also carries a thick binder that's bulging with flyers for other missing kids and documents that he's managed to get from traffickers — including the prices for children. The list mostly contains boys, who sell for as much as 17,000 RMB (\$2,733), while the girls are only worth 3,000 RMB (\$483). In the lucrative world of trafficking, these prices are conservative; according to a [BBC report](#), a male baby can be sold in adoption for as much as 100,000 RMB (\$16,000), which is double the worth of a female. Wu received the list from a friend who bribed local officials in Guangdong Province. He adds that the authorities are aware of the prices because they are instrumental to the industry. Parents must apply for a *hukou* when their child is born; but for a small price, Wu says that the local officials willingly turn a blind eye to trafficked babies who enter the village by granting them an identification card. Traffickers look for attractive children who appear to be bright. “They focus on one or two and observe them everyday,” Wu says. “When they're not protected by their parents, they will take them.”

There are a number of possible outcomes for abducted children, depending on their age. According to the parent-run organization, Xunzi Zhijia, adoption is the most common result for a child up to five years old. The youth are kidnapped before they have a clear memory of their previous life. Those from five to eight years old are often sold into labor, prostitution or marriage. Local media has reported that some gangs force children into [begging](#) or even harvest their [organs](#).

Abducted children are sold to couples who are unable to conceive, or want to ensure that their only child is a boy so that he can carry on the family name. Created in 1978 to curb China's rapidly growing population, the one-child policy originally limited families to only one offspring and imposed heavy fines on those who had more. Although the policy has eased in recent years — couples who are only children can now have a second child without penalty — it has still contributed to social problems such as the high demand for baby boys and a subsequent gender imbalance.

The children of migrant workers are not the only youth who are being trafficked. Wu himself was sleeping beside his son when he was stolen from his arms; but he notes that left-behind children are at the highest risk of being abducted because they play in the village unsupervised.

Wu adds that in recent years, children in the countryside are more vulnerable to being trafficked. In the small villages, he says, doctors can be the chief agents in the industry. Some doctors have sold healthy infants to traffickers after tricking the parents into

believing that their children were sick. Last January, an [obstetrician was given a suspended death sentence](#) for lying to parents and convincing them to relinquish their newborn babies who she claimed were dying of incurable diseases. She was found guilty of selling seven babies for more than 100,000 RMB (\$16,500 USD) each to middlemen who were connected to traffickers. “The child is the hope for the country and the family, but the parents have no ability to protect them,” Wu laments.

But Wu is not alone. There are many other similarly zealous parents who have made it their life mission to find their missing children. Although the families come from different parts of the country and socio-economic backgrounds, a common theme is that the police are unable to help them. Instead, parents have banded together to create online campaigns and volunteer-run organizations in hopes of tracking down their children’s whereabouts. Over the past several years, some microblogs have invited netizens to upload photos of child beggars, to help crack down on the black market and reunite family members. The parents of a kidnapped child also created the popular site, [Baobeihujia.com](#) (Baby Come Home), an advertising service that allows families to post descriptions and photos of their missing children.

Riding the trend of parent-run organizations, Xunzi Zhijia was created in 2012 by Professor Yu Jianrong — a famous scholar and human rights activist — as a place for the families of abducted children to meet and swap tips. Located in the outskirts of Beijing’s desolate Song Zhuang Village, Xunzi Zhijia is tucked inside a traditional brick courtyard surrounded by frozen wheat fields. Newspaper clippings and photos of hundreds of children are haphazardly plastered on the walls like a grade school collage. Xiao Chaohua, the main organizer, is the only parent who remains at Xunzi Zhijia when he’s not searching for his son. With a slight hop in his step, Xiao walks through the dismal courtyard to an office with an unmade twin bed, which also doubles as his bedroom.

Although it’s January, the office’s only source of heat is a small, coal fire stove in the center of the room that Xiao stokes from time to time. As he huddles over the stove, Xiao points to a portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong that is flanked by the photos of missing children. “Not even Mao could protect them,” Xiao mumbles.

He chokes back tears as he shares the details of his five-year-old son Xiaosong’s abduction in 2007. At the time, Xiao was a clothing storeowner in Huizhou, an industrial city near Guangzhou, in Guangdong Province. On Valentine’s Day, he gave his two children money to buy snacks on their own at a nearby grocery store. When his daughter returned alone after chatting with a friend, Xiao and his family scoured the city in search of Xiaosong. He later posted flyers in Guangzhou, contacted the local media and put ads on TV and in the newspaper. Xiao closed down his shop and bought a van to search for his son full-time. He ran out of money five years later, but his determination to find his son brought him to Beijing to start Xunzi Zhijia with the help of Yu. Three times a year, members pile into a white minivan that has photos of their kidnapped children pasted on the doors and windows, and travel to different provinces where they distribute missing-person flyers and warn other parents about child trafficking.

Most of the 700 parents who belong to Xunzi Zhijia are low-income workers from Henan and Guangdong provinces, where Xiao notes that the majority of the kids are abducted. He says he's unsure how many parents in the organization are migrant workers, but thinks the rural children who are brought to the cities or left-behind are the most at-risk for being captured because the parents, he says, "don't have time to constantly watch over the kids."

Xiao stresses that the organization is the parents' only hope of finding their children. "The police are of no help at all. I have filed multiple complaints, but it's of no use," he says. Xiao once notified the police of a suspect in his son's disappearance, but the authorities released the man one day later and didn't keep a record of the incident. He believes that police are not more eager to solve child abduction cases because there is no financial incentive. "They are really aggressive when investigating gambling and prostitution because it gets them money. But finding a kid means spending money," he adds. As was the case in the disappearance of Si Rui and Jia Jun, many local officials also refuse to investigate an abduction until the person is missing for 24 hours, which Xiao says is the optimal time to rescue a child.

Despite the bleakness of his situation, Xiao's unrelenting optimism and resilience are like a single light in a dark, cold room. He has spent everyday for nearly a decade continuing to look for Xiaosong, although the chances of finding him are slim. Over the past four years, the organization has tried to track down 2,700 missing kids. So far, only three children have been located.

### **\*\*When the Village Meets the City\*\***

Wary of leaving their children unprotected, millions of migrant parents choose to bring their kids with them when they move to urban areas. Some enroll their kids in schools for the children of migrant workers and hope that the ambitions of the city will eventually grant them a slice of the Chinese Dream. Others no longer have relatives in the village, so they're forced to bring their children with them to the urban areas. But once in the city, lower-class migrant parents find that the *hukou* system affects every facet of their lives. According to [China's National Bureau of Statistics](#) from 2013, 35.81 million children migrated with their parents to the cities.

On the outskirts of Beijing, Yamenkou Village in Shijing Shan District serves as a ghetto for about 50,000 migrants who work in low-paying jobs such as construction and cleaning. The village's dirt alleys are lined with concrete shanty homes covered with wooden slabs and plastic tarps. Produce carts and garbage litter the labyrinthine streets, while the smog from nearby smoke stacks envelopes the area in a gray haze.

Tian Xin Fong is a 44-year-old cleaner at construction sites who arrived in Beijing four years ago from Henan Province. The walls inside of her 12 square meter home are decorated with photos of her family and torn-out pages from furniture catalogues. Tian, her husband and two children do everything in the single room; in the cold winter months, they even adjoin their beds for warmth. Although she pays 320 RMB/month (\$50) on rent

that takes up much of her income because she's unable to find steady work, Tian admits that she lives in poor conditions. The roof is made of thin wooden boards that are first coated in animal fat and then covered with a felt carpet to keep out the rain. But this slum-like accommodation is all that she's able to afford since she doesn't qualify for subsidized housing and can't buy property in Beijing since she doesn't have a local *hukou*.

"I have a lot of problems and I don't even know where to start," she utters in a timid voice as she bows her head. Because her family is from a rural village, Tian says, "from every aspect, we've been negatively affected by the *hukou* system." Her options for jobs are limited to menial positions, she's unable to receive proper medical attention for her diabetes and she relies on the generous donations of strangers to put her youngest child through elementary school. Returning home also isn't an option — although she considers it everyday — because the diaspora to urban areas has left her village almost vacant and she wouldn't be able to financially support her children on the farm. "It's a tough life for my family," she concedes.

Tian is just one of the 8 million migrant workers in Beijing who struggle to make better lives for their families amid a range of obstacles. Teng Biao, a prominent Chinese human rights lawyer and visiting fellow at Harvard Law School, stresses that the *hukou* is the most pervasive policy that inhibits the upward mobility of migrants. "The *hukou* system is contradictory to the equal rights articles in the Chinese Constitution," Teng says. "The migrant workers conditions will be better if there is no *hukou* system."

Although Teng admits that the policy is used as a means to "discriminate against a majority of Chinese people and maintain function," he has little faith that it will change at any point in the near future. Teng believes that the *hukou* system could only be abolished following a major governmental transformation. "We should first start with the political reform and the process of democratization," he says.

**Abstract:**

Since the 1980s, the child trafficking industry in China has skyrocketed. Although official statistics are hard to pin down, it is estimated that up to 200, 000 kids are abducted per year. And the ones who are most likely to be targeted are the children of migrant workers. When rural dwellers move to the cities, the high cost of living and limitations imposed by the *hukou* policy — a housing registration system that dictates social benefits — often forces them to leave their children behind with their grandparents. This story looks at how China's pervasive housing registration system contributes to the trafficking industry by leaving children unprotected.

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