

1 *Going Out*

When you met a girl from another factory, you quickly took her measure. *What year are you?* you asked each other, as if speaking not of human beings but of the makes of cars. *How much a month? Including room and board? How much for overtime?* Then you might ask what province she was from. You never asked her name.

To have a true friend inside the factory was not easy. Girls slept twelve to a room, and in the tight confines of the dorm it was better to keep your secrets. Some girls joined the factory with borrowed ID cards and never told anyone their real names. Some spoke only to those from their home provinces, but that had risks: Gossip traveled quickly from factory to village, and when you went home every auntie and granny would know how much you made and how much you saved and whether you went out with boys.

When you did make a friend, you did everything for her. If a friend quit her job and had nowhere to stay, you shared your bunk despite the risk of a ten-yuan fine, about \$1.25, if you got caught. If

she worked far away, you would get up early on a rare day off and ride hours on the bus, and at the other end your friend would take leave from work—this time, the fine one hundred yuan—to spend the day with you. You might stay at a factory you didn't like, or quit one you did, because a friend asked you to. Friends wrote letters every week, although the girls who had been out longer considered that childish. They sent messages by mobile phone instead.

Friends fell out often because life was changing so fast. The easiest thing in the world was to lose touch with someone.

The best day of the month was payday. But in a way it was the worst day, too. After you had worked hard for so long, it was infuriating to see how much money had been docked for silly things: being a few minutes late one morning, or taking a half day off for feeling sick, or having to pay extra when the winter uniforms switched to summer ones. On payday, everyone crowded the post office to wire money to their families. Girls who had just come out from home were crazy about sending money back, but the ones who had been out longer laughed at them. Some girls set up savings accounts for themselves, especially if they already had boyfriends. Everyone knew which girls were the best savers and how many thousands they had saved. Everyone knew the worst savers, too, with their lip gloss and silver mobile phones and heart-shaped lockets and their many pairs of high-heeled shoes.

The girls talked constantly of leaving. Workers were required to stay six months, and even then permission to quit was not always granted. The factory held the first two months of every worker's pay; leaving without approval meant losing that money and starting all over somewhere else. That was a fact of factory life you couldn't know from the outside: Getting into a factory was easy. The hard part was getting out.

The only way to find a better job was to quit the one you had. Interviews took time away from work, and a new hire was expected to start right away. Leaving a job was also the best guarantee of get-

ting a new one: The pressing need for a place to eat and sleep was incentive to find work fast. Girls often quit a factory in groups, finding courage in numbers and pledging to join a new factory together, although that usually turned out to be impossible. The easiest thing in the world was to lose touch with someone.

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For a long time Lu Qingmin was alone. Her older sister worked at a factory in Shenzhen, a booming industrial city an hour away by bus. Her friends from home were scattered at factories up and down China's coast, but Min, as her friends called her, was not in touch with them. It was a matter of pride: Because she didn't like the place she was working, she didn't tell anyone where she was. She simply dropped out of sight.

Her factory's name was Carrin Electronics. The Hong Kong-owned company made alarm clocks, calculators, and electronic calendars that displayed the time of day in cities around the world. The factory had looked respectable when Min came for an interview in March 2003: tile buildings, a cement yard, a metal accordion gate that folded shut. It wasn't until she was hired that she was allowed inside. Workers slept twelve to a room in bunks crowded near the toilets; the rooms were dirty and they smelled bad. The food in the canteen was bad, too: A meal consisted of rice, one meat or vegetable dish, and soup, and the soup was watery.

A day on the assembly line stretched from eight in the morning until midnight—thirteen hours on the job plus two breaks for meals—and workers labored every day for weeks on end. Sometimes on a Saturday afternoon they had no overtime, which was their only break. The workers made four hundred yuan a month—the equivalent of fifty dollars—and close to double that with overtime, but the pay was often late. The factory employed a thousand people, mostly

women, either teenagers just out from home or married women already past thirty. You could judge the quality of the workplace by who was missing: young women in their twenties, the elite of the factory world. When Min imagined sitting on the assembly line every day for the next ten years, she was filled with dread. She was sixteen years old.

From the moment she entered the factory she wanted to leave, but she pledged to stick it out six months. It would be good to toughen herself up, and her options were limited for now. The legal working age was eighteen, though sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds could work certain jobs for shorter hours. Generally only an employer that freely broke the labor law—"the very blackest factories," Min called them—would hire someone as young as she was.

Her first week on the job, Min turned seventeen. She took a half day off and walked the streets alone, buying some sweets and eating them by herself. She had no idea what people did for fun. Before she had come to the city, she had only a vague notion of what a factory was; dimly, she imagined it as a lively social gathering. "I thought it would be fun to work on the assembly line," she said later. "I thought it would be a lot of people working together, busy, talking, and having fun. I thought it would be very free. But it was not that way at all."

Talking on the job was forbidden and carried a five-yuan fine. Bathroom breaks were limited to ten minutes and required a sign-up list. Min worked in quality control, checking the electronic gadgets as they moved past on the assembly line to make sure buttons worked and plastic pieces joined and batteries hooked up as they should. She was not a model worker. She chattered constantly and sang with the other women on the line. Sitting still made her feel trapped, like a bird in a cage, so she frequently ran to the bathroom just to look out the window at the green mountains that reminded her of home. Dongguan was a factory city set in the lush

subtropics, and sometimes it seemed that Min was the only one who noticed. Because of her, the factory passed a rule that limited workers to one bathroom break every four hours; the penalty for violators was five yuan.

After six months Min went to her boss, a man in his twenties, and said she wanted to leave. He refused.

“Your performance on the assembly line is not good,” said Min’s boss. “Are you blind?”

“Even if I were blind,” Min countered, “I would not work under such an ungrateful person as you.”

She walked off the line the next day in protest, an act that brought a hundred-yuan fine. The following day, she went to her boss and asked again to leave. His response surprised her: Stay through the lunar new year holiday, which was six months away, and she could quit with the two months’ back pay that the factory owed her. Min’s boss was gambling that she would stay. Workers flood factory towns like Dongguan after the new year, and competition for jobs then is the toughest.

After the fight, Min’s boss became nicer to her. He urged her several times to consider staying; there was even talk of a promotion to factory-floor clerk, though it would not bring an increase in pay. Min resisted. “Your factory is not worth wasting my whole youth here,” she told her boss. She signed up for a computer class at a nearby commercial school. When there wasn’t an overtime shift, she skipped dinner and took a few hours of lessons in how to type on a keyboard or fill out forms by computer. Most of the factory girls believed they were so poorly educated that taking a class wouldn’t help, but Min was different. “Learning is better than not learning,” she reasoned.

She phoned home and said she was thinking of quitting her job. Her parents, who farmed a small plot of land and had three younger children still in school, advised against it. “You always want to jump

from this place to that place,” her father said. Girls should not be so flighty. Stay in one place and save some money, he told her.

Min suspected this was not the best advice. “Don’t worry about me,” she told her father. “I can take care of myself.”

She had two true friends in the factory now, Liang Rong and Huang Jiao’e, who were both a year older than Min. They washed Min’s clothes for her on the nights she went to class. Laundry was a constant chore because the workers had only a few changes of clothes. In the humid dark nights after the workday ended, long lines of girls filed back and forth from the dormitory bathrooms carrying buckets of water.

Once you had friends, life in the factory could be fun. On rare evenings off, the three girls would skip dinner and go roller-skating, then return to watch a late movie at the factory. As autumn turned into winter, the cold in the unheated dorms kept the girls awake at night. Min dragged her friends into the yard to play badminton until they were warm enough to fall asleep.

The 2004 lunar new year fell in late January. Workers got only four days off, not enough time to go home and come out again. Min holed up in her dorm and phoned home four times in two days. After the holiday she went to her boss again, and this time he let her leave. Liang Rong and Huang Jiao’e cried when Min told them her news. In a city of strangers, they were the only ones who knew about her departure. They begged her to stay; they believed that conditions at other factories were no better, and that to leave or to stay would be the same in the end. Min did not think so.

She promised she would return for a visit after she got paid at her new job. Min left that same day with a few clothes in a backpack and the two months’ wages that the factory owed her. She did not take her towels and bedding with her; those things had cost money, but she couldn’t bear the sight of them anymore.

In ten months on the assembly line, Min had sent home three thousand yuan—about \$360—and made two true friends.

She should have been scared. But all she knew was that she was free.

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In the village where Lu Qingmin was born, almost everyone shared her family name. Ninety households lived there, planting rice, rape, and cotton on small plots of land. Min's family farmed half an acre and ate most of what they grew.

Her future appeared set when she was still a child, and it centered on a tenet of rural life: A family must have a son. Min's mother had four girls before finally giving birth to a boy; in those early years of the government policy limiting families to one child, enforcement was lax in much of the countryside. But five children would bring heavy financial burdens as the economy opened up in the 1980s and the cost of living rose. As the second-oldest child, Min would bear many of those burdens.

She disliked school and did poorly. As long as she could remember, she was in trouble. She climbed the neighbors' trees to steal their plums; if she was caught she got a beating. Once when her mother ordered her to do chores, Min refused. "There are so many people at home. Why do I have to do it?" Her mother chased her for a quarter mile and hit her with a stick.

She was good at having fun. She learned how to swim and to drive a truck; she loved roller-skating and hid her injuries from her mother. "I have fallen every way there is to fall," Min said. "But you can't think about that." She was her father's favorite. One summer, he rented a truck and she traveled the countryside with him, selling watermelons from their farm. They drove during the day and slept in the truck at night; it became one of Min's fondest memories. Most migrants associated the place they came from with poverty and backwardness, and some were even reluctant to say the name of

their village. But long after Min came to the city, she still talked about her hometown as if it were something beautiful.

In the late 1990s, both of Min's parents went out to work to earn money for their children's schooling. Her father worked in a shoe factory on the coast, but poor health drove him back. Later her mother went out for a year. Min boarded at a middle school in a nearby town but returned home every weekend to cook and wash clothes for her father and the younger children.

Almost all the young people in her village had gone out. When Min was still in middle school, her older sister, Guimin, went to work in a factory in Dongguan. Soon after, Min failed the national high school entrance exam and her parents considered having her go out, too. Guimin phoned home and urged them to keep Min in school; Guimin's factory wages, she said, would help cover the tuition. Their parents agreed, and Min enrolled in a two-year vocational high school. That made her one of the most educated people in the village—more educated than Guimin, who had sacrificed her own schooling to help the family.

Guimin came home for the 2003 lunar new year holiday and took Min away with her when she left. Min had one more semester of school, but she wanted to save the tuition and get a jump on the job hunt. She was thrilled to be leaving home; she had never ridden on a train or seen a factory. "I wanted to get out early, learn some things, and see the world," she said.

In Dongguan, Guimin rented a cheap hotel room for Min and found her a job in a Japanese factory that made liquid crystal displays. Min worked there for a month and left. She had never been in a place where she didn't know anyone, and she was so lonely she couldn't bear it. She returned to the hotel and found a job at another factory but didn't take it. Her sister offered to continue paying for the hotel room, but Min felt herself becoming a burden. At a bus station, she spotted a help-wanted flyer for a quality-control job on the assembly line of an electronics factory. She dialed the

number on the ad—many were just scams to trick migrants out of their money—and the person who answered the phone gave Min directions to the factory. It was a three-hour bus ride to the southeast tip of Dongguan and Carrin Electronics, the place where Min spent her hard year alone.

The minute she entered the factory grounds, Min realized the place was worse than the Japanese factory she had just left behind. But it was too late to turn back, and she did not want to ask her sister's help again. She was getting used to being on her own—it was better that way.

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Migrant workers use a simple term for the move that defines their lives: *chuqu*, to go out. *There was nothing to do at home, so I went out.* This is how a migrant story begins.

The city does not offer them an easy living. The pay for hard labor is low—often lower than the official minimum wage, which ranges between fifty and eighty dollars a month. Work hours frequently stretch beyond the legal limit of forty-nine hours per week. Get hurt, sick, or pregnant, and you're on your own. Local governments have little incentive to protect workers; their job is to keep the factory owners happy, which will bring in more investment and tax revenue. But suffering in silence is not how migrant workers see themselves. To come out from home and work in a factory is the hardest thing they have ever done. It is also an adventure. What keeps them in the city is not fear but pride: To return home early is to admit defeat. To go out and stay out—*chuqu*—is to change your fate.

Migrants are the rural elite. They are younger, better educated, and more enterprising than the people they leave behind. The city people's name for them—*liudong renkou*, floating population—

suggests an aimless mob, but most migrants leave home with a work objective in mind, in the company of a relative or fellow villager who already knows the way. And most of today's young migrants don't come from the farm: They come from school. Farming is something they have watched their parents do.

Migration was an accidental consequence of economic reforms. In 1958, the Chinese government set up a household registration system that assigned each person rural or urban residency. City dwellers were allocated jobs, housing, and ration coupons for food and other necessities; residents of the countryside, with none of these privileges, were stuck on the farm.

In the late 1970s, reforms allowed farming households to sell part of their harvest on the market rather than supplying it all to the state. Agricultural production soared. Suddenly, food was available in local markets across the country, and rural residents could survive independently in the cities for the first time. A 1984 government directive permitted farmers to settle in small market towns; to be on the move was no longer a crime. Migration picked up speed, and by 1990, the country had sixty million migrants, many of them drawn to the booming factories and cities of the coast.

Today China has 130 million migrant workers. In factories, restaurants, construction sites, elevators, delivery services, housecleaning, child-raising, garbage-collecting, barbershops, and brothels, almost every worker is a rural migrant. In large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, migrants account for a quarter of the population; in the factory towns of south China, they power the assembly lines of the nation's export economy. Together they represent the largest migration in human history, three times the number of people who emigrated to America from Europe over a century.

Yet the government has been slow to acknowledge the reality of migration. For years, migrants in the cities had to dodge the police; those caught without residency permits were fined or sent

home. Finally in 2003, the State Council, China's cabinet, issued a comprehensive document calling migration key to the country's development. It banned job discrimination against migrants and advocated better working conditions for them and schooling for their children. On the brick walls of rural villages, pro-migration slogans appeared: GO OUT FOR MIGRANT WORK, RETURN HOME TO DEVELOP. LABOR FLOWS OUT, MONEY FLOWS BACK.

Migration is emptying villages of young people. Across the Chinese countryside, those plowing and harvesting in the fields are elderly men and women, charged with running the farm and caring for the younger children who are still in school. Money sent home by migrants is already the biggest source of wealth accumulation in rural China. Yet earning money isn't the only reason people migrate. In surveys, migrants rank "seeing the world," "developing myself," and "learning new skills" as important as increasing their incomes. In many cases, it is not crippling poverty that drives migrants out from home, but idleness. Plots of land are small and easily farmed by parents; nearby towns offer few job opportunities. *There was nothing to do at home, so I went out.*

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Long afterward Min would remember the first time she went to the talent market, puzzling over its details like a dream she could not interpret. On a Sunday morning in February 2004 after she had quit the Carrin factory, she went to the market and spent four hours there. She was nervous. She carried nothing with her. The whole of her job-hunting strategy could be summarized in two words: Aim low. She interviewed at half a dozen companies that were hiring clerks. A clerk might type, answer phones, fill out forms, file documents, greet guests, and pour tea; a clerk was the lowest person in

the office hierarchy. “You don’t want to find a company whose standards are too high,” she said later. “Then you’ll be rejected and quickly lose confidence.”

At the booth of a company called Yidong Electronic, a recruiter asked for Min’s résumé. She had not thought to prepare one. The woman told her to write her job history on an application form. Min did not even have a pen, so the woman lent her one. And the woman smiled at Min. “I don’t know. She smiled at me. Maybe that was it.” Thus Min would return over and over to this day, trying to unravel the mystery of the moment when her luck changed.

The woman told Min to go to the factory for a follow-up interview, but Min didn’t go. The place was too far away. But at the headquarters of Yidong Electronic, a manager named Li Pengjie was looking over applications, and he stopped at Min’s. He noticed that she had good handwriting.

In traditional China, calligraphy was the mark of an educated person. Good calligraphy showed refinement and literary accomplishment; calligraphy could also reveal the subtle weaknesses in a person’s character. Li Pengjie had something more mundane in mind: He needed a clerk to keep files on the factory’s machines, and the files were written out by hand. In a factory that made connectors and backlights for mobile phones, it was this antique skill that mattered most.

Li Pengjie called Min’s cousin on his mobile phone—she did not have one of her own—and asked Min to come in for an interview that would last three hours.

First she flunked the computer test. “The other girls all know computers better than you,” Li Pengjie told her.

Next he asked about her work experience.

“I haven’t done this work,” she said. “I don’t have any experience.”

Then he gave her a writing test, and she wrote well. Li Pengjie told Min that she was hired, and that he would be her new boss.

He told her to go get her things so she could move into the factory that day.

The offer was so unexpected that Min did not know what to say. But as she got up to leave his office, the words suddenly came. “So many people wanted this job,” she said to her new boss. “Why did you choose me? I don’t know anything.”

“You are very straightforward,” he said. “And you are more honest than the others.”

Min started work the next day as a clerk in the equipment division. Her department tracked the punches and grinders and roll-plating lines that made the pieces of a mobile phone. A bound book recorded the condition and history of every machine, like the medical file of a giant mute patient. Min’s job was to keep these files in order. Workers slept eight to a room; a meal was rice, three meat or vegetable dishes, and soup. A day in the office stretched ten hours, with sometimes a Saturday or Sunday off. Min would make eight hundred yuan a month—one hundred dollars, double the base pay at her old factory.

I MET MIN for the first time three weeks later. She was short and sturdily built, with curly hair and keen dark eyes that didn’t miss a thing. Like many young people from the Chinese countryside, she looked even younger than she was. She could have been fifteen, or fourteen, or even twelve—a tomboy in cargo pants and running shoes, waiting impatiently to grow up. She had a child’s face. It was round and open to the world, with the look of patient expectation that children’s faces sometimes wear.

We met at the apartment of a woman named Lin Xue, who wrote articles for a local magazine that targeted migrant readers. I had told Lin Xue I wanted to write about young migrant women for the *Wall Street Journal*; her younger sister worked in a factory and invited

Min, one of her coworkers, to come. I was meeting many migrants then, and Min's story was already familiar to me.

"I'm from a farming village in Hubei Province, the second of five children," she told me. "Our parents work on a farm. Our conditions are not good.

"I went out with my older sister, who went to work in Shenzhen. We wanted to work in the same place, but we can't work in the same place."

She paused dramatically.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because we always fight." And then she laughed.

Min was willing to talk about anything; unlike most of the Chinese people I knew, she clearly enjoyed telling her own story. And she was as curious about me as I was about her: She had come to Lin Xue's apartment that day because "I wanted to see what an American looked like," she told me later. My only worry was that she might be too settled—with a stable office job in hand, perhaps the great dramas of her life were already past. But I needn't have worried about that.

On the day we met, Min told me her life plan. She would work in the city for seven years, sending money home all the while to repay her mother and father for raising her to adulthood; that reflected the traditional Chinese view that children should be grateful to their parents for the gift of their existence. When she turned twenty-three, the debt repaid, Min would return home and find someone to marry.

She was in a good mood that day. She had "walked out of the factory," as the migrants say, crossing the class divide between those who work with their hands and those who work with their heads. "God is still fair," she said. "He let me be so tired for a year, but now he lets me have a new beginning." She had just turned eighteen and she was already an expert in new beginnings.