



# FACTORY GIRLS

From Village to City in a Changing China

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New York

2009

## 10 The Village

After Min's mobile phone was stolen in the summer of 2004, she built a new life from scratch. She called up her cousin—the only phone number she knew by heart—and he put her back in touch with her older sister, and also with me. Min returned to the talent market and got a job in the human resources department of a Hong Kong-owned handbag factory. The position paid eight hundred yuan a month, with no overtime and every Sunday off. She was eighteen years old, and this was the fourth factory she had worked at in a year.

I visited Min in her new dorm, which was neat and newly white-washed, with photos of Chinese movie stars taped to the wall. Over noodles at a nearby stall, I asked her how her friend was.

"Do you mean my boyfriend?" she asked, rejecting the common Chinese euphemism. "Since he went home, I haven't heard from him."

"Don't you send messages by phone?" I asked.

"I forgot his number."

"So you can't find him, and he can't find you?"

She nodded. "Maybe I'll see him at home during the new year."

I asked Min about her two friends from the old factory, the ones we had visited together. "One of them got a job at a factory in Changping, but I don't know which factory," she said. "The other one went home to get engaged, but I don't know where her home is." In the village, everyone knew everyone else and people were connected in multiple ways. But Min's friends in the city were linked only through her; at one stroke, she had lost ties to almost everyone she knew. "I have no more friends now," she said.

So she started over. In her new factory, she met Ah Jie. He was three years older than Min and as skinny as a hastily drawn cartoon character, with long limbs and a narrow handsome face and a bashful smile; when he spoke to strangers, he blushed to the rims of his ears. He worked as an assistant on the factory floor and he met most of Min's demands for a mate: He had a good heart, he didn't smoke, drink, or gamble, and he was over 1.7 meters tall. Almost right away, Ah Jie began pressuring Min to marry him. She told him to put away some money first; in truth, she did not want to think about marriage yet. "I want to save some money and maybe start a small business. If I marry so early, I'd have to stay home," she told me. "To stay outside and work your entire life is better than staying home."

She told her parents about her new boyfriend. "Where is he from?" they asked.

"He's from the factory," Min said, stalling.

"Where is he from?" they asked again.

He was not from Hubei Province, which was all Min's parents cared about. In traditional China, a young woman married into her husband's village, but usually it was close enough that she could go home to see her own family on occasion. Migration now made it possible for two people from towns a thousand miles apart to meet and marry. To a young woman's parents, that was a catastrophe: Unaccustomed to long-distance travel, they worried that a daughter

who married a man from far away would virtually disappear from their lives.

When Min met a boy she liked, she made it a point to learn as little as possible about his origins. "Is your family poor?" she asked Ah Jie once. "Very poor," he answered. That was all she knew, and it was fine with her. "I don't want to know their family situation, and I don't want them to know mine," she told me. "In the end we must rely on ourselves."

THAT AUTUMN, Min seemed more settled than I had ever seen her. She spent most of her free time with Ah Jie. Her older sister, Guimin, moved to Dongguan and got a job in the shipping department of Min's factory. The sisters shared a dorm room and ate lunch together every day. As winter approached, both of them made plans to go home. Ah Jie lobbied Min to bring him home to meet her family, but she decided against it; with her parents so opposed to the match, she felt it would be awkward. Guimin's negotiations with her boyfriend, who lived in Hunan Province, were more fractious. For a long time she insisted she wouldn't go home at all, then suddenly she changed her mind, planning to bring her boyfriend with her. Their parents did not approve of him either, but Guimin was three years older than Min and willing to challenge them.

On a Sunday afternoon in January, Min and I walked to a park near her factory and sat on a low wall next to a basketball court. She was wearing new clothes she had purchased for the trip—her first pair of jeans, a denim jacket, and boots with chunky heels. In the pale sunshine, we ate oranges and made plans; she had invited me home to her village for the new year. That day, Min talked of nothing but home. The vegetables in the countryside tasted better than the ones in the city, she said. If a wild mushroom crumbled in your hand it was poisonous, but a firm one was safe to eat. When a pig

was hungry, it would stand on its hind legs and squeal. People stole chickens around the new year, so you had to keep a close watch then. The best recipe for a facial was crushed pearl powder mixed with the white of a freshly laid egg. The life in the countryside was pleasant, but you could go from one end of the year to the other and almost never see money.

"Have you ever thought about going to the countryside to live?" Min asked me.

"The Chinese countryside?" I said. "No."

"I guess it's too lonely there," she said.

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In lives blurred by journeys to strange places, there was one fixed point in the migrant universe: a farming village that was home. Agriculture brings little economic benefit now; family plots, of just under one acre on average, are too small to be profitable. But across China, the family farm is still being tended, because that is what people have always done. The land is less an income source than an insurance policy—a guarantee that a person can live and will not starve.

The continuing link to a family farm has stabilized China in an age of mass migration. Its cities have not spawned the shantytown slums of so much of the developing world, because the migrant who fails in the city can always return home and find someone there. A teenager may go out for work, leaving his parents on the farm. A husband who migrates may have a wife at home tilling the fields, or sometimes the other way around. A married couple might go out together, leaving young children in the care of their aged parents. In the city, a migrant may look desperate, but almost every migrant has a farm to fall back on.

The return to the village to celebrate the lunar new year in late winter is the central event of the migrant calendar—in the six

weeks around the holiday, almost 200 million people travel on China's trains. As the new year approaches, the impending journey becomes the main preoccupation of the factory world. Job-hopping stops as workers focus on saving money to return in style. Couples enter delicate negotiations: Whose family will they visit and what is the status of their relationship? This reckoning can be painful, and migrants unhappy with their lot may decide not to go home at all. The holiday is the hinge on which the whole year turns—it is the time to quit a job, take a rest, get engaged, start again.

The passage home is often as traumatic as the initial journey out to the city. The Chinese railway is the last part of the transport network to operate much as it did in the days of central planning. Today in China, the better off travel by plane and car, and both forms of transportation have responded to the market. Airlines have improved service and cut prices; highways are constantly expanded and upgraded to serve industry and the growing ranks of car owners. But the railway remains the dominion of the poor—set up, it sometimes seems, only to deliver misery more efficiently.

During holidays, it is virtually impossible for an ordinary person to buy a ticket at a fair price. Railway offices reserve tickets for the well connected or sell them to scalpers, who charge exorbitant rates. Because ticketing is not computerized, ticket sellers don't know which seats will free up in the course of the journey; unless a passenger departs from the first station, getting an assigned seat is impossible. Tickets go on sale only a few days before a trip, feeding panicky crowds that camp out overnight in stations. On train rides lasting hours or days, toilets become blocked and faucets stop running and people squat in the aisles holding their heads in their hands. The passengers rarely complain, and they remain good-humored in the most dreadful conditions. They spend much of their energy monitoring everything they have brought with them. This is another reason that the new year trains are always crowded: No migrant can return without gifts.

At home, the travelers fall back into the slower rhythms of the farm. Hierarchy governs village life: The older men, the chief decision makers in their families, choose what is best for the community too. A family eats and farms together, and at night the children often sleep with their parents in one large bed. The older children discipline the younger ones, and the younger ones obey. Guests show up unannounced and stay for days; communal routines of eating and sleeping and, these days, television viewing absorb them easily. There are no secrets in the village.

In the city, this way of life is already dead. Small families live in high-rise apartments alongside neighbors who are not their kin. People forge relationships with those they do not know. Young migrants in the city have lived freely among strangers; they have competed for jobs; they have dated whom they pleased. No matter how fondly they recall their rural childhoods, in truth the village cannot take them back.

It is not a new story. The ache of the traveler returning home is a classic theme in Chinese literature. One of the first poems a school-child learns, from the eighth century, is about a man who goes back to his village after a lifetime away, to find that he no longer belongs.

*I left home as a youth, and as an old man returned,  
My accent unchanged but my temples turned gray.  
The children see me but don't know who I am,  
Laughing, they ask where the stranger is from.*

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For the journey Min carried a down jacket, a box of traditional medicine whose chief ingredient was donkey hide, a pink Dooney & Bourke purse made by her factory, Nestlé milk powder, a gift box of cookies, two men's dress shirts, a plastic heart-shaped box of candy,

and one thousand yuan—about \$120, a month's pay folded into a tight square. Of her own things she brought only a mobile phone, an MP3 music player, and a makeup mirror; everything else she carried was a present for someone. It was February 2005, one week before the lunar new year.

Our bus to Guangzhou filled up in minutes. A sign taped to a window warned: WELCOME PASSENGERS TO THIS LUXURIOUS BUS. BECAUSE LATELY PASSENGERS HAVE LOST VALUABLES, PLEASE DON'T SLEEP WHILE RIDING AND HEIGHTEN YOUR VIGILANCE. Most of the passengers took their chances and fell asleep immediately. Factories flew past on both sides of the highway, but Min's mind was far away. "When I was a kid, we walked half an hour to elementary school," she told me. "Some kids came from villages several mountains over. There were wild boars and wolves then. You wouldn't see the wolves but you would hear them. You don't hear them anymore."

The train station in Guangzhou was mobbed; every year at this time, four and a half million people passed through on their way home and back out again. The vast concrete plaza in front of the station had been cordoned off into zones, and police were everywhere, shouting orders through bullhorns that turned their every word into deafening garble. As people entered the main concourse, they instinctively broke into a run: Being Chinese has conditioned them to know that there will never be enough of anything. Min and I had assigned seats, thanks to a cousin of hers who was traveling partway with us, but we started to run too. In the mad crush of people, we squeezed onto the 7:32 hard-seat overnight express to Wuchang.

The life on the train was communal, and the moment we pulled out of the station the passengers behaved as if they were already home. They removed their shoes and stripped down to their undershirts; they peeled tangerines and cracked *guazi*, salted melon seeds. Mobile phones went off constantly, their ring tones merry and intrusive: "Happy Birthday," "Dixie." A man across the aisle spread a

newspaper on the floor beneath a seat and folded himself into the tiny crawl space until only his lower legs were visible. Passengers crowded the aisles and perched on the metal sinks next to the bathrooms and crammed into the spaces between the cars, squatting in rows in their dark suits like crows strung along a telephone wire.

Metal carts barreled through, forcing the human pile to rearrange itself every few minutes. The carts sold chicken legs and warm beer and hot dogs skewered on sticks. The vendors called out: *Hot milk, hot milk, good for you.* Only the well-off bought food on the train. Most people had carried their own—hard-boiled eggs and wafer cookies and mason jars filled with green tea so cloudy that algae could grow in it. At 10:45, a sweeper came through. We had been on board only three hours, but she pushed before her a mountain of peanut shells, orange peels, and empty plastic bottles. Nobody on earth generates trash faster than the traveling Chinese.

Time passed slowly for Min. This was only the second long journey of her life. She peered out the window; she checked her watch; she fiddled with her mobile phone. She gave me regular reports—*We still have nine hours to go*—until I told her to stop. She broke open her gift box of cookies and ate a few—“It’s okay,” she assured me, “there’s a lot more”—then disappeared to visit her cousin. She returned with a salted chicken wing wrapped in cellophane, and some information: A favorite tactic of thieves was to distract a passenger with a “found” wallet while simultaneously picking his pocket.

Just past midnight, a message on my mobile phone welcomed me to Hubei, Min’s home province. We slept fitfully. At three in the morning, the family across the aisle came suddenly awake, like a coiled spring releasing, and their laughter and talk filled the car as if it were the middle of the afternoon. At 6:57, we arrived at the station, said goodbye to Min’s cousin, and boarded a bus for home.

AT 10:12, the bus crossed the Yangtze River, and Min jerked awake. She said aloud the name of every town we passed on the highway: Huangshi, Meichuan, Huangmei. “We’re almost there,” she said, her voice tight with excitement.

Min’s mother, Chen Meirong, was waiting by the side of the road outside a town called Dajin. She was forty-two years old, with deep-set brown eyes and high cheekbones—a big-boned beauty rare among country people. She had a wide smile with lots of teeth, and I don’t think she stopped smiling the whole first day Min was home. The two of them did not hug when they met—that is not the Chinese custom—but Min touched her mother’s arm and stroked the edge of her ear as they talked. She had not been home in two years.

Dajin was a one-street farming town, where purveyors of animal feed and pesticide still outnumbered stores selling motorcycles and mobile phones. The roadside businesses reflected the rural ethos of never throwing anything away: In Dajin you could pay someone to repair a clock, a watch, a stove, a phone, or a television set. In the city, it was rare to see such businesses anymore; urban people had greater faith in the quality of new products. At the outdoor stalls, the most prominently displayed items were hard-shell suitcases, a reminder that the best option in town might be to get out.

Min was full of home-improvement plans. She wanted to buy a DVD player for the house. “Let’s buy a hot-water dispenser too,” she said. “It’s much more convenient that way.”

Periodically Min’s mother would look over her daughter’s head at me. “This place is terrible!” she would say, with a big smile. “And we are so poor!”

At the turnoff to their village, Min’s mother hailed the local version of a taxi: a motorcycle pulling a metal box mounted on two wheels with narrow planks for seats. Five young women already sat inside, wearing tight jeans and puffy jackets—migrants, like Min, returning for the holiday. As the taxi rattled down the dirt road,

Min looked backward at the sight of people coming home. A young woman wearing black leather pants and stiletto-heel boots walked past rice paddies; a man in a pinstripe suit dragged two ragged toddlers, one by each hand. A man riding a bike smiled and waved. "That's the father of my elementary school classmate," Min said. "He's gotten old."

We climbed out of the taxi at a cluster of two-story brick houses. Min's father walked up the path to meet us—a thin, drawn face, a tired smile—and Min saw that he had gotten old too. The house was quiet. Min's younger sister and brother were visiting relatives; another younger sister was home, watching television. She looked up briefly when Min entered and then returned her attention to the screen.

Over bowls of noodles with liver and boiled eggs—Min's mother put three eggs in her bowl in honor of her homecoming—Min caught up on the news. Her father said he wanted to buy a motorcycle.

"How much does that cost?" I asked him.

"Seven or eight thousand," Min answered for her father.

"So much!" I said.

Min's father ventured that he could get one for less than three thousand yuan.

"That's no good," Min said. "Do you want to spend all your time repairing it?"

The phone rang. It was a friend of Min's, calling from Dongguan to see if she had arrived safely. "My mother is thrilled to death to see me," Min reported. "My mother and father have aged a lot, and the house is all messy and cold. You don't feel like doing anything but sleeping."

The phone rang again. It was Ah Jie, who was staying in Dongguan for the new year. "I can't talk now," she said in a low voice. "There are a lot of people here." Because Min's mother disapproved of the match, Min had taken the path of least resistance: She had

lied and told her mother she had broken off the relationship. Now she had brought her secret home. Every time the phone rang, it threatened to expose her.

In a few days, Guimin would be arriving home with her boyfriend. *I am bringing my boyfriend home*, Guimin wrote me in a phone text message, *even though at home they don't approve of my dating someone so far away*. Another day, she wrote: *I am already grown-up and know how to handle things. They really don't have to worry about anything*. It sounded to me like she was readying for battle.

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As soon as Min got home, she started a campaign to civilize her family. On foggy mornings, she went through the house closing windows; dampness, she informed her mother, was bad for one's health. When her father lit up a cigarette after breakfast, he got a lecture: He shouldn't smoke, and he must rinse out his mouth with tea, or else his teeth would turn black. Min walked through the house pointing out improvements she wanted: a hot-water dispenser, a washing machine, a walk of poured concrete across the muddy yard. In village homes, it is common to throw trash, put out cigarettes, and spit on the floor; every so often, someone sweeps up the mess and dumps it in the yard. Min put a plastic bag in the corner of the children's bedroom and ordered her siblings to dispose of garbage there instead. I watched as she repeated the instructions to her mother.

Guimin's impending arrival troubled her. Min was afraid her parents would be impolite to her sister's boyfriend. People from the countryside were not used to strangers, she said, and they might insult him without meaning to. Guimin was the talk of the village: No other young woman had brought home a boyfriend from so far away before. "My sister is coming home with her boyfriend," Min told every neighbor she met.

"Where is he from?" was always the first question.

"Hunan," she said—and there the conversation died, because there was no good answer to that.

The Lus' house had been built in 1986, the year Min was born. Downstairs there was a main room, with a bedroom on each side; the children's room had two double beds and a television set that was always on at full volume. The main room contained a wooden dinner table and behind it a shrine, with the spirit tablets of the deceased ancestors, a photograph of Min's grandmother, and a wall hanging that spelled out in iridescent gold characters the hierarchy of the universe: HEAVEN, EARTH, NATION, PARENTS, TEACHERS. On the wall next to the shrine were taped academic prizes won by the two youngest children. LU XIU IS FIFTH IN HER CLASS. LU XUANQING IS A "THREE GOOD" STUDENT. Everything surrounding these living quarters was functional. Upstairs was a deep pit in the floor for storing grain, sides of raw pork and cured fish hanging on hooks, and a room knee-deep in clouds of cotton—this year's crop, as yet unsold. To one side of the house was the kitchen, its walls black from cooking fires, and to the other a shed for the ox and the black sow and her piglets. Chickens wandered underfoot and laid their eggs beneath the kitchen cabinet where dishes were stored.

Electricity was used sparingly to save money, and most dinners were eaten in near-darkness. There was no plumbing and no heating. In the wet chill of a Hubei winter, the whole family wore their coats and gloves indoors, and the cement walls and floors soaked up the cold like a sponge. If you sat too long, your toes went numb, and your fingers too; the best remedy was to drink a cup of hot water, holding it with your hands while the steam warmed your face. The children often watched television standing up, jumping up and down to restore feeling in their toes.

Min enjoyed status at home now. At mealtimes, the younger children ate quickly and left the table; Min lingered to chat with her parents and with me. Her mother and younger sisters cooked

and cleaned and washed clothes, while her father fed the pigs and did odd jobs around the house. Min did not help out with housework. She spent a lot of time on the phone, planning visits with friends who had returned home. Ah Jie continued to call with bits of news: He had helped Guimin buy a train ticket home. He missed Min. He dreamed she had gone off with another boy.

Min's three younger siblings still lived at home. Sar, the third sister, was sixteen years old; she had long black hair that reached to her waist and her mother's all-enveloping smile. She went to the same vocational high school Min had attended and planned to go out to work after she graduated in a few months. Xiu, the fourth sister, and Xuanqing, the youngest and the only boy, attended middle school. The children boarded at schools in town and came home on weekends; they knew little about the workings of the farm. When Min's parents slaughtered several chickens one morning and plucked out the feathers, Xiu stood in the kitchen doorway watching. "The children refuse to do this work," Min's mother said.

On another morning, Sar walked into the yard with a bowl of grain to call the chickens to breakfast. "*Turool . . . turool*," she trilled. The chickens were nowhere in sight.

I pointed to a flock in a terraced field below the house. "Are those your chickens?"

She squinted. "They look like ours. *Turool . . . turool . . .*" The chickens ignored her.

Her mother came out of the house. "What are you doing? Those are not our chickens!" Sar's mother went up the path to hunt down the fugitives. Sar giggled and went back into the house.

ON HER SECOND DAY HOME, Min took her three younger siblings and two cousins to the nearest city, Wuxue, which was an hour away by bus. Home improvement was still on her mind: She wanted

to buy a hot-water dispenser and a hair dryer. "The children never get to go anywhere," she said to me. "Let's take them to the city to have some fun." Their first stop was an Internet café where Min met up with a high school classmate named Hu Tao. He had a narrow face that came to a point at his chin and a tiny square mustache that hung on his upper lip, like a stray postage stamp. He wore a gray denim jacket and pointy black shoes and a tense scowl on his face; he looked like he was in tryouts to be a gangster. Hu Tao worked at an uncle's restaurant in the city, but he was hoping to go out to find work.

"He likes me," Min said, out of Hu Tao's hearing, "but we've never had any feeling between us. Plus I already have a boyfriend. And he doesn't look very respectable, does he?"

The markets were crowded with shoppers ahead of the new year holiday. Stalls sold strips of red paper inscribed with auspicious couplets, along with posters featuring a heroic Chairman Mao and quasi-religious slogans: *He is the people's great liberator*. Min led the children through the stores buying things for the house: socks for her father, face towels for guests, shampoo. She bargained hard and got a hot-water dispenser for eleven dollars, and a hair dryer for \$3.30. She bought disposable plastic cups, which were more sanitary than the porcelain cups the family shared and seldom washed. In the supermarket, the younger children filled her cart with sweet rice cakes and cookies.

Wuxue had things you no longer saw in the modern cities of the coast, like a grain storage warehouse and a military grain supply station—both relics of a time when people relied on the government for their grain ration. A store advertised Old Fogey-brand men's suits. Min had last been to Wuxue two years ago. This return trip left her sorely disappointed. "This city is no good," she said. "It's not as developed as the places outside."

Hu Tao disappeared for a while but reappeared after lunch to take the children to a roller-skating rink. He had acquired another gangster accessory—a cigarette tucked behind his ear, which made him

look even less respectable than before. At a fruit stand, he stopped to talk to a young woman with bold black eyes and bleached hair that had grown out in an orange fringe. She walked ahead with Hu Tao, while Min and the children trailed behind. No one bothered with introductions.

The rink was packed and dark inside, lit only by a flashing disco ball. It was three in the afternoon. Min edged along the wall, feeling her way and trying to keep track of the children. In a dim bar area at one end of the rink, Hu Tao sat down on a stool and the girl sat next to him. "I think we should leave," Min said to me. We gathered the children and headed out, walking back the way we had come. At the bottom of a small hill, Hu Tao reappeared ahead of us, alone. He had made a choice, and it didn't involve the girl with the orange hair.

He asked Min about her place of work. Her factory made handbags and employed five thousand people, she said. Assembly-line workers were paid eight hundred yuan a month.

"I'd like to go out again," he said. "Things at home are not good."

"How was it at your other factory?" she asked. He had worked briefly in Dongguan.

"Not good. When are you going back?"

"The fifth day of the new year," Min said—then she made her bid. "You help us get tickets, and you can leave with us. Our factory is still hiring workers."

After they parted ways, Min was triumphant. "He'll get us train tickets back to Dongguan," she said. Hu Tao would use his local contacts to obtain tickets, and Min would take him out to the city and get him a job at her factory. On her second day home, she had already figured out the most important thing: how to get out again.



Seven generations of Lus have lived in Liemahuitou Village. Its ninety families, almost all surnamed Lu, live in brick houses beside low-lying rice paddies, the paths between dotted with temples where villagers burn incense for their ancestors. Terraced fields rise from the valley bottom, stacked into the blue-gray hills like an open jewelry box with many drawers. About the only unusual thing about the village is the extravagance of its name—Liemahuitou, “fierce horse turning its head.” The name was derived from the shape of a nearby mountain. Generations have lived and died here without traveling twenty miles from home. A popular old saying celebrated the isolation: *To live an entire life without making a long journey is good fortune.*

In the early 1990s, though, young married couples began heading to the city to work, against the wishes of their elders. When Min’s bachelor uncle moved to Wuxue to open a store, the family objected. “We felt unmarried people should not go out to work because they would learn bad habits,” Min’s father told me. In the past decade, migration has become the norm. Village children leave during middle school or even elementary school; both boys and girls go out, although some families prefer that sons stay closer to home. Each of Min’s parents did a stint at a shoe factory in Wenzhou on the east coast, but returned without any savings. A few migrants a generation older than Min had come back to the village and set up small businesses. None of the younger generation had returned: Some had married and continued to work far from home, and a few had bought apartments in the nearby city of Wuxue.

Migration has become the chief source of village income. Together, Min and her older sister had sent home six hundred dollars the previous year, compared with the \$240 their parents made selling pigs and cotton. The money paid for the schooling of the younger children, and it gave the sisters a voice in family affairs. When Guimin first went out to work, it was her arguments that

convinced her parents to let Min continue her education past middle school. The sisters’ level of education was unusual in the village. “We treat our daughters as sons,” Min’s mother told me one morning as she sat beside her bedroom window sewing an old-fashioned velvet slipper. Both she and her husband were middle-school graduates, which is rare for country people of their generation.

“A lot of people in the village disagree with me,” she continued. “They say daughters don’t need to have much schooling, since they will marry out anyway. But I believe to have knowledge is better than to have no knowledge.”

Birth order was a major determinant of fate. Guimin, the first-born, had left home after middle school to find work. Min, next in line, went through most of two-year vocational high school, and Sar will graduate before going out to join her sisters. The two youngest, their mother hopes, will attend high school and college now that there is the money for it. “That’s my ideal,” Min’s mother said, “but it’s up to them and how hard they work.”

Some of Min’s cousins had gone out to work when they were only twelve years old. Of the twenty-seven kids in her sixth-grade class, ten went straight to work rather than entering middle school. Some parents seemed to regard their children as little more than cash machines: One neighboring family required each of its four daughters to send home ten thousand yuan a year. Another villager set up a bank account so the wages of his three daughters, working in a sweater factory, would come straight to him.

Married migrant couples faced their own dilemmas. One of Min’s uncles worked as a bricklayer in Dongguan with his wife but kept their two teenage sons in the village school, hoping they might attend college one day. But the boys ran wild with no one to discipline them. “Since my son was fourteen, he has spent all his time with girls,” Min’s uncle complained one night over dinner at the Lus’ home. “But how can I control him? I am in Dongguan, and

so is my wife." His son stood at the far end of the room listening. "When I was his age," his father continued, "boys and girls didn't even speak to each other. But young people now live in a different world."

Only one person in the village around Min's age aspired to college: Lu Zejuan, who was one of Min's childhood friends. While Min was out working in Dongguan, Lu Zejuan had suffered a nervous breakdown from the pressure of studying for the college entrance exam. Min visited her on her third day home; Lu Zejuan was sitting in front of the TV wearing a nylon jacket with 450 Fifth Avenue, New York stitched over the front pocket. She rarely left home now, to avoid hearing gossip about herself. When Min convinced her friend to go for a walk, some of the neighbors peered at Lu Zejuan and said her name uncertainly, because they had not seen her in such a long time.

Migration was so established that education looked like the riskier bet. Wu Jianhan, a classmate of Min's from another village, came to visit and stayed for several days. He wore black suit pants, a white dress shirt, and a striped tie—the same aspirational outfit every day, even when he was helping Min's father tile the roof of the outhouse. He had tested into college, but his older brother refused to pay the tuition. "He says that now even college graduates have a hard time finding jobs. He thinks I should just go to work instead," said Wu Jianhan one morning as he swept chicken droppings and spent firecracker papers from the dirt walk in front of the Lus' house. "That's his view. I have a different opinion." Wu Jianhan was working as a migrant in Beijing, but he refused to talk about what kind of work he did there.

Min and her older sister commanded respect in the village because they had risen to office jobs. No one else had gone to Dongguan, though they favored places that were equally far away: the shoe factories of Wenzhou, twenty-two hours by bus; the hair salons

of Harbin, twenty-eight hours by train. "That's our belief here," Min said. "The farther away from home you go, the more splendid it is."

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Two days before the new year, Min angered her mother. One of Min's uncles had invited the family over for a reunion meal, a key event of the holiday—but then the phone rang with a better offer. A glamorous young aunt who ran a hair salon in Wuxue had just come home and invited Min to go shopping in the city.

"Why go out when it's raining?" was all her mother said. She was clearly displeased at Min's rudeness.

Min stood her ground. "It's me that's offending my uncle, not my mother, so it should have nothing to do with her," she reasoned.

Her aunt, Huang Caixia, came by the house to pick us up. She was twenty-five years old, in a chic belted jacket, shiny satin pants, and running shoes. The first thing she did was to take out a crimson mobile phone which opened like a makeup compact and pass it around to general admiration. In the bus to the city, she and Min discussed hair-coloring tips and sang along to the pop songs on Min's MP3 player. Min's aunt knew all the words.

*The thirty-six strategies of love*

*Are like a game*

*I want the remote control for myself.*

*The thirty-six strategies of love*

*You must maintain your charm*

*In order to score and not be called out.*

Min told her aunt she wanted her father to build an indoor bathroom for the house. "He could put the washing machine in there,

and there would be a place to bathe," Min said. "They could even add some tile so it would be like a real shower."

"And an electric hot-water heater," Min's aunt added.

"And an electric hot-water heater," Min echoed, "so we could bathe in the winter without being cold."

Her aunt figured the project would cost five thousand yuan, about six hundred dollars. "When you've lived in the city for a while, your thinking changes," Min's aunt said to me. "You're constantly thinking about how to improve life in the countryside." She and her husband worked in Wuxue and rented an apartment there, but their four-year-old daughter lived in the village with her grandmother. They planned to bring the child to the city as soon as they had saved money to buy an apartment. The couple had not requested a farm plot from the village when they married; her husband's parents still farmed a third of an acre, and that was enough. "The village is home," Min's aunt said. "But I don't feel comfortable there anymore."

THAT AFTERNOON, Guimin arrived home with her boyfriend. She was half a head taller than Min, with a pretty, fine-boned face and the natural poise of a firstborn child in a large family. As the boyfriend entered the house, he ran into Guimin's father coming out. He ducked his head, said "Uncle" in greeting, and handed him a cigarette. That was all: no introductions, no conversation, just cigarettes—the calling cards and currency of the Chinese male universe.

Over dinner, Min's parents did not say much to their daughter's boyfriend. Maybe it was shyness, or a tacit protest. But it was just as Min had feared: They were not showing the proper respect to a guest from far away. The boyfriend, who did not understand the local dialect any better than I did, sat politely without speaking. When the homemade liquor was poured, Min took charge. She turned to

the man she already addressed in private as "Brother-in-Law." "Welcome to our home," she said, raising her glass.

\* \* \*

Most days in the village began with a predawn phone call that shattered the quiet: Someone else had just come home. Min's parents rose early and moved through the house, slamming doors and speaking in normal voices while everyone else slept. Being considerate of others was not the village way: People spent all their time in groups, so they were good at ignoring one another.

Almost everything was done communally. The children got up together and stood in a line at the edge of the yard, brushing their teeth and spitting into the neighbor's yard below. Every meal was eaten together—vegetables, rice, and always pork, since a family typically slaughtered a pig in the autumn and dined on it all winter long. Bath time was also a group activity: In the evening, the women of the family would heat a basin of water. One after another, they washed their private parts and feet, without changing the water in between. Then the men would refill the basin and do the same. Every so often, the family members took a sponge bath, but that was usually different from the once in many days they washed their hair. Eventually every part of the body would be clean, although rarely at the same time.

Visitors dropped by all day long, and some stayed for days. A nine-year-old cousin of Min's slept between us in bed for several nights, then two of Min's cousins from her mother's side showed up, then two cousins from her father's side. Wu Jianhan, the boy who wore the dress shirt and striped tie, stayed longest; he was interested in Min, but she ignored him. Min's mother moved into her daughters' bedroom, leaving her own room to her husband and the boys.

At night Min, her mother, and I slept head-to-foot in a double bed under one comforter, lying immobile as dolls.

The focus of village life was television. The children sat in front of the set all day; if you visited a neighbor, you were usually given a front-row seat where you could pick up the same episode you had been watching somewhere else. Everyone's favorite genre was the historical costume drama about imperial court life. These soap operas appeared to be the villagers' primary contact with history, though it was a selective telling of the past. Wizards, fairies, magic, cults, miracles, murder, and adultery: The children were mesmerized by it all. While the Communist Party preached morality, rationalism, and scientific development, most of the entertainment on TV went counter to that.

The children straddled two worlds, the village and the fantasy universe inside their electronic gadgets. They might help their mother wash clothes in the river and then turn their attention to a handheld game of Tetris. Sometimes they seemed like they had just crash-landed on earth from the planet Television. When I took out my camera to change the film, Min's nine-year-old cousin came over to watch. "What does film look like?" he asked. "Does it look the same way it does on TV?"

Everyone was related, in ways so convoluted that even the Chinese language did not have names for them. One man who visited was Min's grandfather's younger brother's son-in-law; another day, we went to see her grandfather's brother's daughter-in-law's sisters and their father. I thought the children sitting perpetually in front of the television in Min's house were neighbors, but one day we visited her great-aunt in another village and I saw the same children sitting before the television: Of course, they were relatives. A young man who lived next door and worked in a shoe factory in Wenzhou came by so often I was sure he had a crush on Min. I was about to share this with her when I made another discovery: He was her father's cousin.

The villagers reacted to me in different ways. The ones who were working in the city struck up conversations and asked me about Beijing and America; they peered at my notebooks and tried to decipher my handwriting. Those who had stayed in the village, including Min's parents, were polite but shy—while they answered my questions readily, they never had any of their own. None of the older men spoke to me. As a young woman and an outsider, I was doubly irrelevant to them.

I never saw anyone read a newspaper or watch the evening news, and there was little sign of government. In the two weeks I lived in Min's home I did not meet a single official, and the law did not seem to cut very deep. Nationwide, the policy limiting most families to one or two children had been in force for more than two decades, yet here in the village the average family had more than two, Min's father said. The Lus had five children, but one family in the village had six, and another had seven. The man who had fathered seven children had been the village chief, one of the highest local positions.

MIN SLIPPED EASILY back into this world, but she kept her secrets. She didn't talk about her boyfriend or the factory, and I noticed that she opted out whenever it didn't suit her. She made her own plans to see friends, sometimes going against her mother's wishes; she spoke sharply to older relatives she didn't like. I never saw her do anything she didn't want to do. An aunt asked Min to bring her fourteen-year-old daughter out to the factory, but Min turned her down flatly. Another morning, an elderly uncle appeared at the house after breakfast and zeroed in, like a heat-seeking missile, on the new down jacket her father was wearing. It had been a gift from Min.

"How much does that cost?" the old man inquired. "Twenty yuan?"

"Even if you had three hundred and twenty yuan," Min snapped, "you couldn't buy that. That is a down jacket."

She was disdainful toward many of the older people in the village. "They always want to know how much money I make or how much money I brought home," she told me later. "I think these are private matters."

The young migrants dominated the holiday life of the village, enjoying the authority their money gave them. They went around showing off their mobile phones and new clothes; they compared job situations. They were the most active matchmakers, for themselves and for one another, and they gave cash to needy older relatives. In the past, such tasks had belonged to their elders, but now the older generation was too poor and powerless to fulfill these duties. Parents were left with little to do but gossip about their children's earnings and marriage prospects.

"I want her work to go smoothly. That is all," Min's mother said, when I asked about her hopes for Min. "What happens in the future is her own thing." She hoped that Min and Guimin would find boy-friends from near home. But in most ways, she seemed to have accepted that her daughters had moved beyond her ability to help or understand them.

FOR ME, the hardest thing about staying in Min's village was the collective way of life. No one was ever alone. When someone sat down in front of the TV, he called everyone around to come watch; if Min prepared hot water to wash her face, I must wash then too. A couple of times when I tried to read a book—ignoring the blaring television set nearby—the children came by one after another to talk to me with concerned looks on their faces.

Staying in Min's village made me think about my own family. Long ago when my parents were children in China, they had grown

up in a similar way. In America, they had raised my brother and me very differently, encouraging our independence and freeing us from family obligation. My parents had not expected us to visit relatives; they never told us what we should study in school. And in all the years I lived abroad, my parents never once pressured me to come home. In Min's village, I realized this for the first time, and I was grateful.

One morning after a large family meal, I walked out alone on the muddy road toward town. I saw things I had not noticed before: a blackboard listing school fees and livestock vaccination rates, a store whose entire merchandise consisted of cigarettes and fire-works, children no more than four years old playing with lighters. In the next village, I saw a four-story house of white tile. On wealthier stretches of the coast were whole villages of white-tiled houses like these. Here there was only one, a beacon of things to come.

I had been gone an hour when my mobile phone rang. "Where are you?" Min demanded. "We're all waiting for you so we can eat lunch."

I hurried back, to amazed accusations. "You didn't eat lunch! Where did you go?" "What were you doing walking on the road all by yourself?"

The Chinese countryside is not relaxing. It is a place of constant socializing and negotiation, a conversation that has been going on for a long time and will continue after you are gone. Spending time in Min's village, I understood why migrants felt so alone when they first went to the city. But I also saw how they came to value the freedom they found there, until at last they were unable to live without it.

\* \* \*

On the last day of the old year, Min's family and the families of all her uncles went to pay respects at the graves of their ancestors.

They threaded between the rice paddies—muddy ponds filled with dead stalks now that the harvest was in—crossed a stream where villagers were washing their clothes, and climbed a path up the mountain past orchards of cotton and tea bushes. In a clearing surrounded by pine trees were the grave of Min's paternal grandmother, who had died two years ago, and a stone tablet marking the graves of her great-grandparents. The mountain was called Lu Graves Mountain. "All of our old people are buried here," Min said.

Her mother set down bowls of dates and peanut candy, which were offerings for the deceased in the afterlife. Min's father burned paper money—labeled "Currency for General Use in Heaven and Earth"—and poured liquor on the ground in front of the graves. The young men threaded fireworks through the tea bushes, like Christmas lights lacing the shrubbery of a suburban house. Then all the members of the family went down on their knees in the wet earth and kowtowed three times. The burial, the fireworks, the burning of paper—all ran counter to official policy. To stamp out such "feudal" traditions, the government promoted cremation and charged each family a fine of several thousand yuan for a burial. All the families in Min's village, no matter how poor, paid the fine and buried their dead.

At home, Min's father carefully wrote a blessing for the kitchen god on a square of red paper. On the front door of the house, he pasted matching strips of red paper inscribed with a couplet to celebrate the new year. Min had picked up the paper strips in town without bothering to read them, but the words were perfectly apt:

*The dragon travels the four seas to bring wealth home  
The phoenix flies ten thousand miles to bring treasures here*

That evening, the family set off fireworks and watched the annual new year's special on television. All through the night the firecrackers sounded—a piercing whistle, a silence, then a muffled explosion.

The light in the bedroom stayed on all night, as it must for the first three nights of the year. Nobody could remember the meaning of this tradition, but it was followed just the same. The village houses glowed in the night, scattered across the valley, their cold blue lights a reminder of the factory-ships of Dongguan.

ON THE FIRST DAY of the new year, the children woke up early and took turns checking themselves in the mirror. Min tied her hair into pigtails and clipped a lime-green Barbie barrette through her bangs; the three older girls applied pink Maybelline lip gloss. The first of the year, by tradition, was the day for visits around the village. The younger children ran from house to house collecting sweets, while the older ones stayed to drink hot water mixed with sugar and chat with the adults. Before entering a neighbor's house, Min would consult with Sar on how to address the elders who lived there. She had already forgotten how she was related to many of the villagers.

At the house of an aunt of Min's mother, the three older girls conferred briefly, then Guimin took out one hundred yuan and gave it to the old woman; they also gave at the house of a great-uncle who had a lame leg. Traditionally during the new year, older people would give the younger generation *hongbao*—red envelopes of cash—but the money flowed in the opposite direction now.

The migrants of the village had developed a new tradition of their own. On the first day of the year, the only time they were all home together, the young people gathered at a Buddhist temple in the mountains. I joined Min, Guimin, and Sar as they set out that morning in a light drizzle. At a branch in the road, a small crowd waited for them. These were the young bucks of the village: some married, some not, wearing black leather jackets and jeans and smoking coolly as they watched the three sisters and me come up the path. The men carried armloads of firecrackers. One young man

had pinned four cigarettes to the side of his head with the earpiece of his glasses—an embarrassment of riches.

The temple was a cream-colored building whose black slate roof curved gracefully upward at the corners. Before entering, the young men set off several deafening rounds of firecrackers. In the first room, a wooden plaque listed the names of everyone who had donated money for the temple's renovation. Min found the names of her father and all her uncles in a thicket of Lus under the heading GAVE FIFTY.

Alone among the young people, Min walked up to the altar in the temple's innermost room. She put money in a collection box and asked a middle-aged nun if she could pray for good fortune in marriage. The nun nodded. Min knelt and prayed that she would meet the person who was destined for her. The nun came up to Min and put a hand on her shoulder. "Earn some more money," she said. "Find a good mate."

It was the first time Min had ever prayed for her marriage fortune. She wasn't sure how much she believed, but that didn't seem to matter to her. "Even if you don't believe it," she said, "you must respect it." The nun gave Min a piece of red cloth—she must keep it safe and it would protect her. If Min enjoyed good fortune, she should return to the temple in one year and give thanks to Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, who is the protector of sailors at sea, childless women, and people everywhere who are in distress.

\* \* \*

After the new year passed, Min dropped her home-improvement projects. The water dispenser ran dry; everybody began reusing the porcelain cups. The plastic trash bag sat forgotten in the corner, until one day it was gone. Min's focus shifted to her impending jour-

On a snowy day, she traveled an hour by motorcycle-taxi and minibus to visit two sisters who were friends from middle school. Both girls were home from their migrant jobs on the coast; their parents farmed and cared for a mentally handicapped teenage son. When Min arrived at the house, she was surprised to find a daughter just over a year old, barely walking. She scooped up the baby in her arms and read the situation to me, like a veteran detective happening on the scene of a crime. "Their son is retarded, so they wanted to have another son. But they had a daughter instead. Of course, they love her just as much," Min said a bit defensively as she bounced the child up and down.

"Where are you working?" her friends' mother asked Min.

"Dongguan, in an office," Min said.

"Doing what?" the younger sister asked.

"Clerk," Min said.

"Very good!" the mother said.

Min turned to the older sister, Cheng Meilin, who was twenty years old, with a pretty delicate face. "What about you?"

"It's not good," Meilin said. "I'm in a restaurant."

"Waitress?" Min asked. Meilin looked away without answering. Her younger sister, Cheng Li, worked in the housewares department of a Henan supermarket. That put both sisters at the bottom of the migrant class system as far as Min was concerned: Service work was exhausting and brought the shame of having to wait on wealthy people.

Over lunch, Cheng Li told Min about her job. She worked thirteen hours a day and had only two days off a month, and that was docked from her pay.

"Come out with me to my factory," Min said suddenly. "We make handbags. The pay is seven or eight hundred a month for ordinary workers, and we get Sundays off."

Cheng Li looked at her mother, who said, "Let's see what your father says."

In the same village Min visited the house of another classmate, who was not home; Min learned from a neighbor that her friend had married a man twice her age and now stayed home caring for their infant daughter. The neighbor broadcast the details from her front door at top volume. "The husband is short. He is old and ugly. The parents did not approve of the marriage."

Min was troubled at the news. "She seemed to have such promise," she told me as we walked back through the village. "I thought she would do migrant work for a long time. I really thought she would go places."

ON THE NIGHT BEFORE Min and her older sister were to leave, the family sat watching television together. Guimin's boyfriend left to use the outhouse, and suddenly the mood in the room changed. Guimin and her mother began speaking in low harsh voices, the words coming fast—as if some unspoken argument had been building for days in silence.

Min's mother criticized Guimin for getting involved with a man who was not from their part of Hubei. "If you marry him," she said, her voice rising, "I might never see you again."

Guimin turned on her mother in a fury. "Every person has her own piece of sky," she said. "If you want me to break up with him, I'll break up with him right away. And I will never marry anyone." Her mother started to cry.

The boyfriend returned, and it was as if he brought the silence back with him. All at once the angry words disappeared, and nobody spoke at all. Guimin stared hard at the TV screen. Their mother got up and left the room. "Go help your mother," their father told Min. She stood up, her eyes big and gleaming with excitement, and went out. Guimin began to pack her belongings. Their father continued to watch television as if nothing had happened.

Min tried to reason with her mother. "Everyone must find her own way," she said. "If Guimin is not happy with him, she'll come back to us. If she is happy with him, then you will have stood in the way of this great happiness."

Guimin and her mother did not speak to each other the rest of the night. But they still slept in the same bed, head-to-foot, as they had the entire time she was home. Early the next morning, her mother helped her get ready to leave. The two of them talked normally, as if the previous night's scene had not taken place. The boyfriend behaved normally, too: No one had told him what had happened. Guimin and her boyfriend walked up the muddy path to the road, and Guimin said goodbye without meeting her mother's eyes. "Then we will come visit at the October holiday," the boyfriend said to the parents in parting. They nodded and smiled, as if he were still welcome.

\* \* \*

ON THE FIFTH DAY of the new year, Min left home. Her classmate Hu Tao, as promised, had bought us tickets on the 3:20 to Dongguan. It was the slow train, sixteen hours, without assigned seats, but he had been lucky to get them in the post-holiday crush. We said goodbye to Min's parents and climbed on the back of the motorcycle of an uncle who would take us into town. "Hold on tight" was all her mother said in parting.

Min arrived at the station an hour early with two friends who had come to see her off. The train would arrive already packed and there would be a struggle to get on; the waiting room felt tense and expectant, like the last moments before the start of a race. There was no sign of Hu Tao. Every time Min called him, she heard a message saying that his mobile phone was off.

At 2:45, the platform number was announced and the waiting



room emptied with a rush. Min went outside to look for Hu Tao. She returned alone and conferred with her friend, Liu Liya. Perhaps the two of us should get on the train first and talk our way into tickets later. Liu Liya was doubtful. "They'll kick you right off," she said.

A little after three o'clock, Hu Tao appeared, with his clenched vacant expression and the little mustache still hovering on his lip. Min and her friends pounced on him.

"Where have you been?"

"Do you know it's three o'clock?"

He didn't know. His phone was off and he didn't wear a watch.

"Why is your phone off? We called so many times and couldn't reach you."

He said it had run out of power.

"I could just slap you twice across the face!" Min said. Hu Tao looked dazed as he handed the tickets to Min.

We joined the crowd waiting to pass through a metal gate to the platform. Policemen marched up and down yelling at passengers not to push. Min and I were among the first people through the gate, but Hu Tao fell behind. "Don't worry about him anymore," Min said. As the train approached, people swarmed up to it but almost every door stayed shut. One entrance opened; the crowd surged. Arms and legs reached out from the train, trying to hold off the crush of people. The passengers were trying to keep more people from boarding, perhaps because the car was crowded or they wanted to save room for their friends. Somebody got a kick in the stomach; voices rose in anger. The standoff lasted ten minutes, and the police were nowhere to be seen. At this crucial moment, they had disappeared.

Finally we spotted an open door a few cars back, ran over, and pushed our way on. The car was packed, but within an hour both Min and I had squeezed onto the edges of seats. Hu Tao had joined us, and Min gave him her seat and sat on his lap while they listened to her MP3 player together. This seemed a rare intimacy, and finally

Min came over to me. "That boy is the one who was my boyfriend before," she said.

"What? Hu Tao?"

She had dated Hu Tao the year before, when he lived in Dongguan—he was the one she couldn't find after she lost her mobile phone. Hu Tao had called on her first day home, thinking to pick up where they had left off. These secrets had been held so deeply that I had no idea, and now I struggled to put the pieces together.

"Does he know you have a boyfriend?" I asked.

"No."

"Do you plan to tell him?"

"I want him to find work in the factory first," Min said. "Then I'll tell him and he'll be on his own. We can just be friends." She laughed at her own nerve. "He's not as good as my boyfriend now, right? My boyfriend is more reliable."

There were more secrets. Guimin was not returning to Dongguan, as her parents imagined. That morning she had boarded the train for Changsha, the city where her boyfriend lived; they would move in together and he would help her find work there. "I'm the only one who knows," Min said. "You must not tell my mother. She'll be even angrier than she is already." She walked back down the aisle. Later I saw her sitting in Hu Tao's lap as he untangled her hair with his fingers. She looked at me through the blur of hair and hands, her smile full of delight and shame.

Later that evening, I got a message on my phone from Guimin. I told her we were on the train and hoped things worked out with her parents. *Thank you, I never worry*, she wrote back. *I am only walking my own path.*

At eight the next morning, the train arrived in Dongguan. It was warm in the south; Min took off her sweater and complained about the heat, forgetting already the misery of being cold the whole time she was home. She and Hu Tao walked out from the station to catch

a bus to her factory. She would take a shower and wash her hair, things she had put off for days because there was no running water at home. Then she would take a long nap. She did not have a plan for resolving her dual-boyfriend dilemma, but in the end it would be decided for her. Later that morning, Min would introduce her boyfriend and Hu Tao, and each would be furious to learn of the other's existence. Min would try, and fail, to find Hu Tao a job in her factory. Her boyfriend would tell her, "If he isn't gone in three days, I will find people and come after him." Min would lend Hu Tao three hundred yuan. And he would disappear from her life, probably for good.

But now on the bus packed with returning migrants, Min's thoughts were elsewhere. There was nothing to do at home but watch television, she said; she reminded me how little the nearby city of Wuxue had to offer. She seemed to be running through everything she had seen at home, trying to figure out where she stood. As the factories of Dongguan came into view through the bus window, she looked at one after another without saying anything. "Home is good," she said at last, "but you can only stay a few days."

## 11 *The Historian in My Family*

In the spring of 2005 I went to my ancestral hometown. The Chinese call this *huijia*, returning home, even if you are going to a place where you have never been. My father was sixty years old before he returned to Liutai for the first time. I had already lived in China for seven years, and all that time I had resisted the pull of the village. But something about accompanying Min on her journey home made me want to see where my own family came from. It had been ninety years since my grandfather had left Liutai, and I wasn't sure how his death had settled on this place. I didn't even know what to think of *huijia*: whether returning home was a duty or a right, whether it would have any meaning after all this time.

The road to Liutai was lined with silvery birch trees, as in the setting of a Tolstoy novel, and fields of fertile black earth stretched to the horizon on either side. It was twenty days until the spring sowing. From the car window I saw farmers out with their oxen, turning the earth; others burned corn husks in the fields, the fires