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Lu Qingmin

Min's Return A Migrant Worker Sees Rural Home In a New Light

In China, Those Who Left Find City, Village Life Don't Mix; Showing Off Cellphones 'House Is All Messy and Cold'

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DAJIN, China -- For the trip home, Lu Qingmin carried a down jacket, traditional medicine whose chief ingredient was donkey hide, a pink Dooney & Burke purse made by her factory, Nestlé milk powder and a heart-shaped box of candy. She also brought 1,000 yuan -- about \$120, a month's pay that was worth half as much as her parents' annual cotton crop. These were gifts for her family. For herself, she brought a mobile phone, an MP3 player, and a makeup mirror she consulted from

time to time.

The bus crossed the Yangtze River on a February morning, one week before the Chinese New Year. It takes 22 hours -- three buses and an overnight train -- to get from the city of Dongguan to the Hubei countryside 700 miles away. Lu Qingmin, known as Min to her friends, was coming home for the first time since leaving her rural village two years ago to find factory work in the city.

The bus turned off the highway and Min, 18 years old, spotted her mother. Chen Meirong, 42, was a handsome woman with deep-set brown eyes and prominent cheekbones, who smiled but said little. As they walked down the town's one street and hailed a motorcycle taxi home, Min did the talking. She wanted to buy a DVD player for the house. "Let's buy a hot-water dispenser," she said next. "That way it's more convenient."

At home over bowls of noodles with liver, Min's mother put three eggs in her bowl in honor of her homecoming. Min's father said he wanted to buy a motorcycle. Min said that would cost 8,000 yuan, close to \$1,000. Her father, 48, said he could buy one for a third of that price. "That's no good," said Min. "Do you want to spend all your time repairing it?"

After lunch, the phone rang. It was a friend of Min's, calling from the city. "My mother is happy 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."

China has 114 million migrant workers, the largest migration in human history. As the country moves to a market economy, young people who grew up in the countryside are leaving to work in the factories, restaurants, hair salons and construction sites of cities. Urban China offers them hard work and tough conditions but also adventure and opportunity. In a world without parents to guide them, young migrants rely on each other to find jobs and help navigate their new lives.

Amid journeys to strange places and the looming unknown of the future, there is one fixed point: A farming village that is home. In the 40 days around the Lunar New Year holiday, 140 million people travel on China's trains -- more than three times the number of Europeans who emigrated to the U.S. over

a century.

Homecomings may be happy, but they also highlight the rapid changes in Chinese society that can lead to clashes and discord. In the countryside, a family eats and farms together and sleeps in one big bed. Older people, especially men, traditionally make decisions. The eldest children discipline younger ones, and younger ones obey. Guests visit unannounced and stay for days, easily absorbed into communal routines. There are no secrets in village life, and interactions between any two villagers are predetermined according to the kinship ties between them.

In cities, this way of life is already dead. In the countryside, migration is putting an end to it. Young people return home with modern ideas and money -- and secrets from a city life their parents don't understand. They have lived among strangers, competed for jobs and promotions, and dated whom they pleased. The village can't easily take them back.

Min spent her first days back at home on a modernization campaign. At meals, she lectured her father not to smoke and told him to rinse his mouth out with tea to keep his teeth from turning black. She plotted improvements to the house: indoor plumbing, a washing machine, a walk of poured concrete. (Min's migration to the city was the subject of a front-page article in *The Wall Street Journal* in November.)



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Lu Qingmin's parents, sister and brother in front of their home in a rural village in China's Hubei region.

to home, as she had.

Min had told her mother she had broken off the relationship, but that was a lie. Every time the phone rang, it threatened to expose her secret.

On her second day home, Min took her three younger siblings and two cousins to Wuxue, a city about an hour away by bus. The purpose was home improvement. She bought socks for her father, face towels, two bottles of shampoo. She bargained for a hot-water dispenser and got it for under \$11. She picked up a hairdryer for \$3.30. She bought disposable plastic cups, more sanitary than the porcelain cups the family shared and seldom washed.

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 room and ordered her parents and three younger siblings to dispose of garbage there instead.

The Lus' brick home had been the first two-story house in the village when Min's parents, both farmers, built it in 1986. The main room has a dinner table and ancestral shrine against the wall, with a bedroom on each side. Upstairs are storage areas for rice, kindling, pork and cured fish, and a room knee-deep in cotton balls -- this year's crop, as yet unsold. The house has cement floors and no plumbing or heating. In the winter, everyone wears coats and gloves inside and younger children's fingers often swell up from the cold.

Her first afternoon home, the phone rang. It was Min's boyfriend, calling from the city. "I can't talk now. There are a lot of people here," she said. She had been dating 21-year-old Ah Jie for three months. He was from a province 300 miles from the Lus' village. To Min, that was just a bus or train ride away. But her mother objected, fearing a marriage to someone from that far away might mean she would never see her daughter again. She wanted Min to marry close

Min had last visited Wuxue two years ago, and it had diminished in her eyes since she had seen the cities of the coast. "This city is no good," she said. "It's not as developed as places outside."

At an Internet café, they met up with Hu Tao, a high-school classmate of Min's who still lived at home. As they threaded through the streets, he asked Min about her factory. It makes handbags and employs 5,000 workers, Min told him. Workers make 700 or 800 yuan a month, between \$84 and \$96.

He asked when she was going back. In two weeks, she said -- if she could get tickets out. Around the holiday, train tickets become a precious commodity. She made her bid. "You help us get tickets and leave with us," she said. "Our factory is still hiring workers."

They parted. Min felt triumphant. "He'll get us the train tickets back to Dongguan," she said. He would use his local contacts to obtain the sought-after tickets and she would help him get a job. It was her second day home, and she had already figured out the most important thing: How to get out again.

Seven generations of Lus have lived in Liemahuitou Village. Its 90 families, almost all surnamed Lu, grow rice, rape and cotton in the valleys and on blue-green terraced hills. Farm plots are less than an acre per family on average, and villagers mostly eat what they grow. In a small temple, the villagers burn incense to honor their ancestors, buried on a hill of pine trees above. "To live an entire life without making a long journey is good fortune" was a popular old saying.

In the early 1990s, young married couples began leaving the village, drawn by jobs in fast-developing coastal cities. Within a few years, migration became the norm. Village children left during junior high or even elementary school. Many of Min's cousins had gone out to work when they were only 12 years old. Of the 27 kids in her elementary class, Min said, 10 migrated rather than continue with school.



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Money sent home by migrants is the chief source of income in the village now. Min and her older sister, who had gone out to work before her, sent home a total of \$600 last year, compared with \$240 their parents expect to clear after selling the cotton crop. Young migrants home for the holiday dominate the life of the village. They go from house to house showing off mobile phones, comparing jobs and discussing boyfriends and girlfriends. Parents gossip about their children's salaries and marriage prospects. The young give cash to needy older relatives and do matchmaking for each other, tasks once the preserve of their elders.

Min's village, Liemahuitou, in winter.

Min's family has five children -- four girls and a boy. This is uncommon but not unheard of in rural China, where the one-child rule of the cities is more loosely enforced. Min and her sisters are unusual in that all have gone to junior high or high school. "We treat our daughters as sons," said Min's mother, as she sat by her bedroom window one morning, sewing a velvet slipper. Both she and her husband are junior-high graduates, rare for country people of their generation.

"A lot of people in the village disagree with me," she said. "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."

Min and her older sister commanded respect in the village because they had worked their way up to office jobs in the city. Others from the village, also seeking better opportunities, had traveled to places equally far away: Wenzhou, 22 hours by bus; Harbin, 30 hours by train. "That's our belief here," said

Min. "The further away you go from home, the more splendid it is."

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. Then the phone rang with a better offer: A glamorous young aunt who ran a hair salon in the city of Wuxue invited Min to go shopping. Min was thrilled. Her mother wasn't. "Why go out when it's raining?" was all she said to Min. She considered it rude to turn down the uncle's invitation.

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

Her 25-year-old aunt, Huang Caixia, came by the house, dressed in a chic belted jacket and satin pants. The first thing she did was take out a crimson-colored mobile phone and pass it around to general admiration. On a bus to the city, Min told her aunt she was thinking of dyeing her hair and asked what color was best. She was also hoping to convince her father to build an indoor bathroom.

"He could put a 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." The aunt suggested a hot-water heater and figured the whole project would cost \$600.

"When you have lived in the city for a while, your thinking changes," the aunt said. "You are constantly thinking about how to improve life in the countryside."

Min's aunt and her husband work in the city and rent an apartment there. Their 4-year-old daughter lives in the village with her grandmother, but they plan to bring the child to the city as soon as they have saved some money. Though the husband's parents still farm a third of an acre, the younger couple didn't request a farm plot from the village when they married.

"The village is home," Min's aunt said. "But I don't feel comfortable there anymore." On the last day of the old year, Min's family walked up a mountain path to pay respects at the grave of Min's grandmother, who died two years earlier. A stone marked the graves of her great-grandparents. Her grandparents were buried about 15 feet away. The mountain is called Lu Forest Mountain.



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Min's family inside their home, which lacks heat and plumbing. Her brother, Lu Xuanqing, does his homework.

The older generation presided at the ritual. Family members kowtowed at the graves while young men threaded fireworks in the bushes, like Christmas lights. Min's father burned paper money, set down bowls of dates and candy, and poured homemade liquor on the wet ground in front of the graves, all offerings for the deceased in the afterlife. Because the government is promoting cremation, families must pay a fine of several thousand yuan for every burial. Everyone in the village, no matter how poor, pays the fine when a relative passes away.

On the first day of the new year, the custom among young people of the village is to meet at a Buddhist temple in the mountains. Min put money in a temple collection box and asked a middle-aged nun if she could pray for her good fortune in marriage. Min knelt and prayed that she would meet the person destined for her. The nun gave Min a red cloth that signified blessing and put her hand on Min's shoulder. "Earn some more money and find a good mate," she said.

It was the first time Min had ever asked anything of Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. She wasn't sure how much she believed but that didn't seem to matter. "Even if you don't believe it," she said, "you must respect it."

After the new year, Min dropped her home-improvement projects. The plastic trash bag sat in the corner unnoticed, until one day it was gone.

In another village, Min visited the house of a former classmate. The young woman wasn't home. Min learned that she had married a man twice her age and she was now caring for an infant daughter. A neighbor broadcast the details at top volume from her front door: "The husband is short. He is old and ugly. The parents did not approve of the marriage."

For young migrant women, early marriage can spell an end to possibility. "She seemed to have such promise," Min said as she walked through the village. "I really thought she would go places."

On the fifth day of the new year, Min left home. Her classmate Hu Tao had come through with the tickets: The slow train to Dongguan, 16 hours, no seats, but he had been lucky to get them in the post-New Year crush. At the local train station, the two joined a crowd waiting to pass through a narrow gate to the station platform. There was a tense expectancy in the air: The train would be packed and there would be fights to get on. Policemen marched up and down yelling at passengers not to push.

As the train approached, people swarmed to it, but almost every door stayed shut. The crowd thronged to the one open door. Arms and legs reached out from the train into the crush of people; passengers were trying to prevent others from boarding. The police were nowhere to be seen. Min and Hu Tao spotted another open door and squeezed on.

The next morning, the train arrived in Dongguan. It was warm in the south; Min complained of the heat, forgetting already how cold she had been the whole time she was home. She and Hu Tao caught a bus to her factory. She would shower and wash her hair at the factory dorm where she lived, things she had put off for days because there was no running water at home. She would take a long nap.

On the bus packed with returning migrants, Min realized the city now felt like home to her, and home in the village faded away. "I don't think I will ever live in the village again," Min said. "Home is good, but you can only stay for a few days."

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