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The Chinese Dream

At 18, Min Finds
A Path to Success
In Migration Wave
Like Millions of Others, She
Left Country for the City,
Ill-Prepared for Life There
Good Handwriting Pays Off

By **LESLIE T. CHANG**
Staff Reporter of **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**
November 8, 2004; Page A1

DONGGUAN, China -- For one year, Lu Qingmin did almost nothing but work. She worked on an assembly line at a factory in China's Pearl River Delta, testing hand-held games, digital clocks and electronic calendars. Her workday stretched 14 hours and ran seven days a week; a rare Saturday afternoon without overtime was the only break, she says. Dinner was rice, a meat or vegetable dish and watery soup. Workers slept 12 to a room, their beds crowded near the toilets. She made \$50 to \$80 a month, depending on overtime.

After six months, Lu Qingmin -- known as Min to her friends -- wanted to leave. Her boss refused. The company withheld two months of every worker's pay, a common tactic to keep employees from leaving without permission. Min couldn't afford to walk away from that.

Then Min did something migrant workers do more often than might be expected: She fought back. She walked off the production line for a day in protest, incurring a \$12 fine, equal to a week's wages. She returned to work the next day, but fought often with her boss after that. "Your factory is not worth my wasting my youth here!" Min says she told her boss, a man in his 20s. Eventually, the boss relented, she says, and gave her back pay and her liberty.

Min took another gamble. She bought a \$1.20 ticket to this city's largest "Talent Market," an ongoing job fair where thousands come every day. Although she had no computer skills and no high school diploma, Min talked her way into a clerk's position in an electronics factory. On Feb. 6 of this year, she started her new job, crossing the divide between those who work with their heads and those who work with their hands.



GROWING PAINS

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Lu Qingmin

Three weeks later, Min was chatty and elated. "God is still fair. He let me be so tired for a year, but now he lets me have a new beginning." Min has a round face, curly hair and big eyes. She had just turned 18, and new beginnings were already something of a specialty for her.

* * *

Min is one of China's 114 million migrant workers, the largest migration in human history in terms of sheer numbers, labor experts say. Her experiences over the past year and a half show the dramatic impact of this migration on China and its rural people, who make up the bulk of these migrant workers. They are moving from the most traditional part of China to its most modern. And most of them are young, torn between the expectations of the traditional village and the promise of the big city.

Many employers pay less than the minimum wage, which ranges from around \$50 to \$70 a month in factories along the coast, and require more than the 49 hours of work a week permitted by law. Workers who are injured, get sick or become pregnant are generally on their own. Enforcement of labor laws is lax, since companies and local governments share a common goal: to attract more investment. Local officials say they lack the resources to comprehensively police the thousands of factories under their watch.

But suffering in silence isn't how some workers see themselves. To come out from home and work in a factory, say Min and many others, is the hardest thing they've ever done. It's also an enormous adventure. What keeps them working, they say, isn't fear, but pride: To go home early is to admit defeat. To stay outside the village in the wider world is the chance to change your fate.

Their very name -- liudong renkou -- or "floating population" -- implies an aimlessness that isn't borne out by facts. A survey of 700 migrant laborers done in the mid-1990s by a Chinese government think tank found 87% left home with a work objective in mind, either a confirmed job or an acquaintance in the city to help them get one. In the city, migrants rely on relatives, fellow villagers and others from their home province to act as a safety net.

Migrants are the rural elite. They are younger and better educated than those who stay behind. The gap is especially wide among women: A study in the mid-1990s by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found 78% of female migrants in the Pearl River Delta had a junior-high-school education, while among rural women nationwide it was only 43%.

Remittances sent home by migrants are already the biggest source of wealth accumulation in rural China, economists say. Yet earning money isn't the only reason people leave. In surveys, migrant workers rank "seeing the world" and "learning new skills" as important as earning cash for the family. In many cases, it isn't grinding poverty that drives them out from home, but idleness. Plots of land are small and easily farmed by parents. When migrant workers tell of why they left home, their narratives often begin the same way: "There was nothing to do at home, so I came out."

* * *

Min comes from a village in central Hubei province with a lyrical name: Liemahuitou Levee, which translates as "Fierce Horse Turning Its Head." The village has 60 households. Her family grows rice, rape and watermelon on a third of an acre. She is the second of five children, an uncommonly large family in China. Growing up, she fished and swam in the river, climbed trees to steal the neighbors' plums, and one summer rode in a truck with her father selling watermelons.



"As a child I was very naughty," she says. "But my father liked me a lot, because I was more like a boy than a girl." Min told her story in conversations and visits over the course of seven months. Relatives and co-workers provided some corroborating details.

Almost all the young people in her village left home to find work. At 16, Min left too. She quit vocational high school a semester before graduation to save her family the tuition fee and get a jump on the job hunt. Her older sister, Guimin, worked in a factory in Dongguan, about 500 miles away. In January 2003, Guimin returned home for the Chinese New Year's holiday and took Min with her when she left.

At a bus station in Dongguan, Min saw an ad for factory quality-control workers. She took a three-hour bus ride to the factory, filled out a form, and was hired on the spot. Only then did she walk in and see the

cramped dorms, the dirty floors, the smelly toilets crammed next to the beds. Because of her age, only the poorly managed or "black factories," as she called them, would hire her. The factory employed more than 1,000 workers.

Her first week at work, Min turned 17. She took a half-day off on her birthday and walked the streets alone. She hadn't made friends in the factory yet, and her friends from home didn't know where she was. It is common among migrant workers to drop out of sight after they leave home. They often wait until they have landed good jobs before reconnecting with friends. Min was too proud to tell anyone she was working in a dirty factory, which made electronic gadgets, for \$50 a month.

Min wasn't a model worker. She chatted with her neighbors on the production line, risking a 60-cent fine for talking. She ran to the bathroom every hour, she says, just to gaze out the window at the mountains. Eventually the factory passed a rule limiting workers to one bathroom break per four-hour shift. "I thought it would be fun to work on the assembly line," she said. "I thought it would be a lot of people working together, talking and playing. But everything was the opposite of what I imagined it would be."

Workers were required to stay six months. At the end of that period, Min told her supervisor she wanted to leave. He refused and tried to shame her into staying, Min says, by telling her the work on her part of the assembly line wasn't good. "Are you blind?" she recalls her supervisor saying.

Min replied, "Even if I were blind, I would not work under such an ungrateful person as you."

She took the day off work in protest. The next day, she returned and again asked to leave. Her supervisor said he would allow Min to leave after Chinese New Year. It was a calculated bet that Min would stay: New migrants flood Dongguan after the new year holiday, and finding a job then isn't easy. Min's parents disapproved of her desire to move to a new job. During weekly calls home, Min says her father would lecture her that girls should be stable and save money. Min was getting impatient with such talk: "They always treat me like a child," she says. "I don't think I've been a child for a long time."

She was still a dutiful daughter. In her first year out, she sent \$360 home, she says, more than the yearly per capita income in the part of China where her family lived. The money helped pay for school fees for her siblings and fertilizer for the farm. In her plans, her parents played a key part: She would work as a migrant until she turned 23, sending money home all the while. After that, her life and earnings would be her own. "I would like to work outside for seven years for them, then go home and start looking to set up a family of my own," she says. Her mother didn't want her to find a boyfriend away from home, and Min said she didn't want one.

Meanwhile, she put into motion other plans for the future. She paid \$12 to take a computer course. She would sometimes skip dinner and go to the class. Two good friends in the factory washed her clothes to help her save time. Many other workers lacked faith in such self-improvement plans. "A lot of workers feel they don't have much learning, so it isn't any use for them to try to learn something new," Min said. "But I think to learn is better than not to learn."

In February, after the Chinese New Year, Min again went to her boss, who finally approved her departure. She left the same day with only her clothes and the money the factory had owed her -- about \$100 -- in her pocket. Her two friends cried when she left, but Min says she didn't shed a tear. She promised she would come back for a visit after finding a new job. Her friends, Min says, didn't see the point in moving because they believed conditions would be just as bad anywhere else. "It's not that they dare not leave," she says. "It's that they feel to leave or to stay is the same thing." But Min could imagine a different life. After a week of rest at the apartment of a cousin, she bought a ticket to the Zhitong Talent Market, the city's largest job fair. She was scared: The market is intended for technicians and managers, not ordinary workers like Min. She was shorter than most of the others and pushed around by the crowds. She interviewed at half a dozen companies, careful not to aim too high and lose her nerve.

At the booth of a factory that made parts for mobile phones and other electronic products, she interviewed for a clerk's job. She didn't have a high school diploma. She didn't have significant computer skills. She didn't even have a pen to write out her resume. The woman at the booth lent her one. At the factory, a manager named Li Pengjie saw her application and noticed Min's good handwriting. Since records are kept by hand, penmanship is a valued skill. "I saw that she wrote well and asked the company to call her on her cousin's mobile phone and come in for an interview," recalls Mr. Li.

During a three-hour interview, he asked Min to detail her work experience. "I haven't done this work. I don't have any experience," Min recalls replying. Mr. Li corroborates Min's account of the interview, though he says he doesn't recall all the details. When he said he would hire her, it seemed such a miracle that she couldn't help asking, "So many people wanted this job. Why did you choose me? I don't know anything." Min says he told her it was because she was more honest than the others.

* * *

Dongguan is an unfinished city, a place imagining itself into something else. Towering bank headquarters of mirrored glass rise next to shops selling motorcycle parts, plastic pipes and dental services. Long stretches of factories, each with a narrow strip of window and a guard at the gate, sit next to vegetable fields and duck farms. Migrant workers walk along highways, pulling suitcases or carrying their bedding, with trucks and buses passing them at high speed. The streets are well paved but often lack crosswalks and pedestrian lights. The city is built for machines, not people.

Half of all female migrants in the country come to this province, most to the factories of the Pearl River Delta with Dongguan at its heart. Employers generally prefer young women for the repetitive tasks of the assembly line. Dongguan city has 1.5 million local residents and more than five million migrants. Locals estimate 70% of the population is female.

On weekends, teenagers take over the city, giving its parks and squares the feel of an open-air high school. Girls roam in packs, dressed in frilly tops and tight jeans, their hair pulled back in ponytails; boys travel in smaller groups. Far from the traditional life of the village, they are raising and reinventing themselves in one of China's most chaotic cities. Here are talent markets to talk one's way into a better job, commercial schools to make up for a lost education and photo studios at which to pose for "glamour shots" in a borrowed costume against a painted backdrop of picket fences or formal gardens.

It is a city of striving, and not everyone survives. In the industrial zones, plastered on walls alongside job listings and ads for syphilis clinics, are "Missing Person" notices. "He left home five years ago, dark-skinned, with a pockmarked face, speaks rather fast, likes to play video games," reads one. The notices are posted by family members, searching for loved ones who disappeared into the great maw of the city.

* * *

In her new job, Min kept track of the condition and maintenance of machines. Every machine had its own bound book. Her new boss, Mr. Li, taught her how to draft documents and took her around the factory. Her work day was shortened to 10 hours. She got every other Sunday off. Dinner was rice, three meat or vegetable dishes and soup, and workers slept eight to a room. As a clerk, she now made \$100 a month, plus room and board, a big step up from her previous assembly-line job.

But in a city of frantic mobility, impermanence was a fact of life. Mr. Li soon decamped for a new job in Beijing. His replacement, a classmate of the owner's, had been booted from the factory last year for keeping a mistress, Min says. Outside of work, she called him "Old Fogey Liu." On the job, she was different. "I am very well-behaved when I am in the factory," she said.

Her jump into the white-collar class had landed her in a lonely spot. She was more like the young women on the assembly line, but she was no longer of their world. Her office colleagues were older and kept their distance, she says, cutting conversations short when she approached. Min was discovering the office hierarchy is complex. "In the office, they may be very friendly to you, but then they say things behind your back," she said. "You can't have a single friend."

On a hazy day in March, Min climbed a hill to the city's television tower with her cousin. The view from the summit was of low-rise factories and high-rise workers' dorms. "Whenever there is a mountain, I want to climb it," said Min. "But when I climb to the top, I realize there's nothing to see." Disillusionment colored her thoughts that day. She wondered if her new job was worth the price she paid in loneliness. "In the old factory, I had friends but no money. Now I have more money, but no friends." Her cousin, 21-year-old Liu Shengwei, agreed with her. "It is hard to make friends in Dongguan," he said. "Everyone is thinking only of himself."

In April, Min got her first paycheck -- \$35 for 15 days' work -- and went to visit her friends in the old factory. She bought new clothes for the occasion: A black shirt with pearlized buttons and cropped pants, and wore open-toe, high-heel shoes. They were a switch from the plain cotton factory clothes and sneakers she usually wore. She had been in the mall until midnight the night

before picking them out. Her old factory was a two-hour bus ride to the southeastern tip of Dongguan, and Min started to get excited as she approached. "I feel like it's already changed a lot since I left. Since my friends are here, it feels like home."

Her two friends were waiting on an overpass. Liang Rong was taller, with a pretty face. Huang Jiao'e was short and plump. Both were a year older than Min. They looked her up and down. "You've gotten skinnier!" "You've gotten taller!" they said at once. They walked to a nearby park to talk. They admired Min's new clothes and she told them how much each item cost.

Min couldn't help bad-mouthing the factory where they still worked. "The people at the factory here are very low-quality. At my new factory if you say something coarse, people will criticize you." She played up the status of her factory's top boss, although she had never met him. "My factory now, it's much better. The boss has a lot of money." Her friends nodded, listening closely. Min continued, "From the outside it doesn't look very big, but inside there are a lot of departments. The work is divided very finely."

Min added, "You come visit me and I'll introduce boyfriends to you. There are many boys in my factory," she added in an offhand way. Her two friends, impressed at her daring, squealed "Ooh!" in unison. Min confided later she thought they wouldn't come. They rarely had a day off and they were too timid to travel to a strange place, she said. Min walked with them back to their factory. It was on a long dirt road with young men shooting pool at tables outside. Teenage boys and girls called out to her like a returning hero: "When did you get back? Where are you now?" They looked impressed when she said she was working near downtown Dongguan.

Min's recent change in fortune had an effect on her friend Huang Jiao'e. She had enrolled in computer classes. She said she wanted to study, then quit her job in the summer and land a better job, as Min had done. Later, as they walked in another park, Min spoke encouragingly with Huang Jiao'e about her class. "Do you know how to go online yet?" Min asked. She often went online to chat with friends during downtimes in the office. Her friend shook her head. "I haven't been online yet." Min promised to teach her next time. It was getting late and the girls parted with quick goodbyes. On the bus ride home, Min was in a muddle. She had seen her old life and knew it was past. Yet her new life, too, was somehow wanting. Night fell outside the bus window. "If I only go to school, come out and do migrant work for a few years," she said, "then go home, marry and have children, then I might as well not have lived my whole life."

Min quickly tired of things she had recently wanted. She turned increasingly sour on the job she had been so thrilled to have, bewildered by the complexities of the workplace and beset by loneliness. As the youngest person in her department, Min felt ordered around by colleagues. Production pressures in the factory were also picking up. Three more workers were added to her dorm room. Two new workers lost fingers on the single-punch machine, she says. With the rush of orders to fill, she adds, no one had time to train them properly.

In late April, an opportunity fell into her lap: Her former boss, Mr. Li, wanted her to come to Beijing to work for him. He assembled computer parts for sale in the provinces, and he needed someone to mind the store. She had worked with him only two weeks, yet felt that was enough for her to decide: She trusted him. She would go. But in a place with no moorings, no history, and her parents a world away, Min was prone to wild changes of mood. She brooded over the offer and decided it wouldn't be proper for her to go alone. It was better to stay in the south, close to her cousin and her sister, who was working in a factory in a nearby city. "Here I have both of them to rely on. There I would have only one person to rely on, and he is not of my blood." Yet on a walk

in the park in May she said, almost in passing, that she had asked to resign. Her boss would decide if he would approve her departure in a month.

Min was changing in other ways. She straightened her hair. It was sleek now, cut on a stylish slant, and it made her look older. It cost \$12 and took three hours. She had just gotten her first full month's pay of \$100. No month passed without some dramatic turn of fortune. In June, Min was transferred to the human-resources department, charged with recruiting and running orientation sessions. She spent four hot days standing on the sidewalk, trying to persuade migrants to come to the factory. Where she once had kept track of machines, now she was keeping track of people. She realized it was a better fit. "If I learn human resources well, I can easily find work in other places," she said.

One new recruit was Huang Jiao'e, her friend from the old factory, who arrived with a suitcase on an evening in late June. The two girls sipped sugary milk tea at a stand near the factory. Min talked about how hard it was to persuade factory hands to stay. "I tell them: 'To jump here and there is tiring. Save some money, get some experience, and then decide what you want to do.'" Huang Jiao'e challenged her. "I have never heard you speak in such an exaggerated way!" Min was defensive. "This is my responsibility. You would do the same if you were in my place."

Though the words were teasing, there was an edge to their conversation. Once they had been equals, now they weren't. Min tried to play down the imbalance. She said, "Our salary is not high either. If you have overtime you may make more than me." Her friend retorted, "But I would be tired to death!" Min said to her, "There are different ways of being tired. In my job now, my body is tired and my heart is tired."

She was moving up in the factory world. She poured tea for foreign clients -- an honor for someone lately of the factory floor. She enrolled in a weekly English class for managers. "Do you know what 'pardon' means?" she asked Huang Jiao'e, saying the single word in English. She looked disappointed when her friend said yes.

And she had a budding romance. A boy from home, a former classmate, had come out to Dongguan to work in a factory. He came to visit and they spent the day together. She stuck to the traditional woman's role: At lunch in a restaurant, she poured his tea as carefully as if it were for a foreign client. But afterward, Min called him on the phone. "Do you think we have a future together?" she wanted to know. He told her he needed three days to think about it. "Whichever way he answers is fine with me," Min said. Yet she was already building fantasies around him: He had some training as a chef. "We could go home and start a small restaurant," she said. "This migrant work, there is no future in it."

* * *

The Zhitong Talent Market, one of China's largest, occupies four floors of a pink office building. It stretches a full city block and on weekends can draw 7,000 people. By 9 a.m. Saturday, there is a stream of people, most of them young. The elite carry laptops and resumes printed out by computer. Others carry their papers in a shopping bag and huddle over counters filling out forms by hand. Their country accents might be a bar to employment elsewhere, but here they are the norm. Min hated the talent market, even though her luck had been so good there. She said it made her feel replaceable. But in late June, four months after she had first come and landed her job as a clerk, she returned. Her request to leave the factory had been approved. She still didn't have a diploma and she still wrote out her resume by hand. But everything else had changed.

This time, she aimed high. "Clerk is a very low position so I didn't look for that," she said. Instead, she targeted companies seeking human-resource workers. At the booth of a factory that makes rubber parts for electronic products, she had an interview that lasted two hours. This time, she asked how big the company was and how much employee turnover it had. When the interviewer asked why she had left her old job, Min said it was a personal matter and she would rather not answer, preferring not to go into the office politics and loneliness that had driven her away.

And this time, she wasn't more honest than all the others. Asked how much human-resources experience she had, she says she answered one year. In truth, it was 24 days. "If you say less, they think it's not enough," she said afterward. Companies generally don't check with former employers, except for top executive positions. The company hired her with a \$6 raise above the salary of the person she was replacing, Min says. She made \$100 a month plus room and board, the same as her last job, but there was a chance of a raise of as much as \$35 if she performed well in the first three months.

In her new job, Min handled employment records: the performance, demerits and salary data of the factory's 400 workers. When workers came to the factory gate, she screened them for hiring with a few no-nonsense questions. "I ask them if they have an ID, what they want to do, how long they plan to stay. If they don't answer well, I say, 'Thank you, we don't have jobs right now.' "

Her workday lasted eight hours. She got every Sunday off. Workers at her level slept four to a room, and her room had its own bathroom and phone. On the 10th of every month, the Taiwanese wife of the factory owner visited. She would distribute the monthly pay to workers and seek the Buddha's blessing, a fairly common practice for bosses from Taiwan who retained their traditional religious beliefs, but a new experience for Min, who wasn't religious. She would follow the boss's wife to the key places of the factory -- the workers' canteen, the main gate, and before each of the dangerous machines. The two would ask the Buddha to let business prosper and the workers stay safe. Min says she was careful to avoid conflicts with colleagues, and mostly kept her mouth shut. Not long after she arrived, the top boss even called her into his office, she says, and commended her for being a person of few words.

Now she handled her parents more adeptly. She never told them she had quit her job. Instead she waited until she found a new one, wired home \$120 as a pre-emptive strike, and then called her parents with all her news at once. "They don't know how things are outside. So I do something, then I tell them about it," she said.

Her older sister, Guimin, was skeptical about Min's job hopping. "Do you think it's good to do things this way?" she lectured Min on a visit shortly after Min landed her new job. Guimin had been away from home for four years and had changed jobs three times. Min changed jobs three times in less than two years. Everyone she knew was in flux, and many were on their way up, too. Her sister had been promoted to executive secretary. Her cousin was in Guangzhou now, a manager. Her two friends from the old factory had scattered. Liang Rong had gone home to marry someone of her parents' choosing. Huang Jiao'e, who had moved over with Min, landed a job as production clerk in a factory elsewhere in the city.

Min's old boss had returned from Beijing to work in a socket factory here. But she was no longer in touch with him. The boy she liked was also on the move. Three days after she asked him if they had a future together, he sent her a message on her mobile phone at 7 a.m. It said: "I'm here at the

factory gate." She didn't believe it and ran down to see. He had worked the night shift at his factory and then come on the bus, a two-hour ride. He waited outside for four hours while she worked, and then they had lunch. He didn't tell her they had a future together. They didn't discuss it. "But because he came," Min said, "I knew."

Shortly after that visit, he moved home to work with his father. He was an only son, and his father wanted him home. Min thought it was a good decision. She said they would stay in touch by phone. On a cool evening in August, Min took a motorcycle taxi to the Railway Park near her factory, a popular spot for young people and families. She took off her shoes at the artificial beach, next to a man-made pond. She watched migrants learning how to dance in a roped-off square. And she had her picture taken by a photographer in the park, the first one she'd had since she came to the city.

She said she was happier at work than she had ever been. Her younger sister was thinking of coming out to work next spring, and Min said she must stay put to help her when she came. Min's own longer-term plans -- how long to stay in Dongguan or when she might leave -- were unclear. "I didn't imagine that I would ever have this kind of job," she said. "When I came out, I thought I would just be a worker."

Yet she seemed to take it for granted that the more she moved up, the more she would want out of life. She said that now she wanted to learn how to work in sales and she might change jobs again if her raise wasn't good enough. "Desire is eternally unsatisfied," she said, and she laughed. "Don't you think so?"

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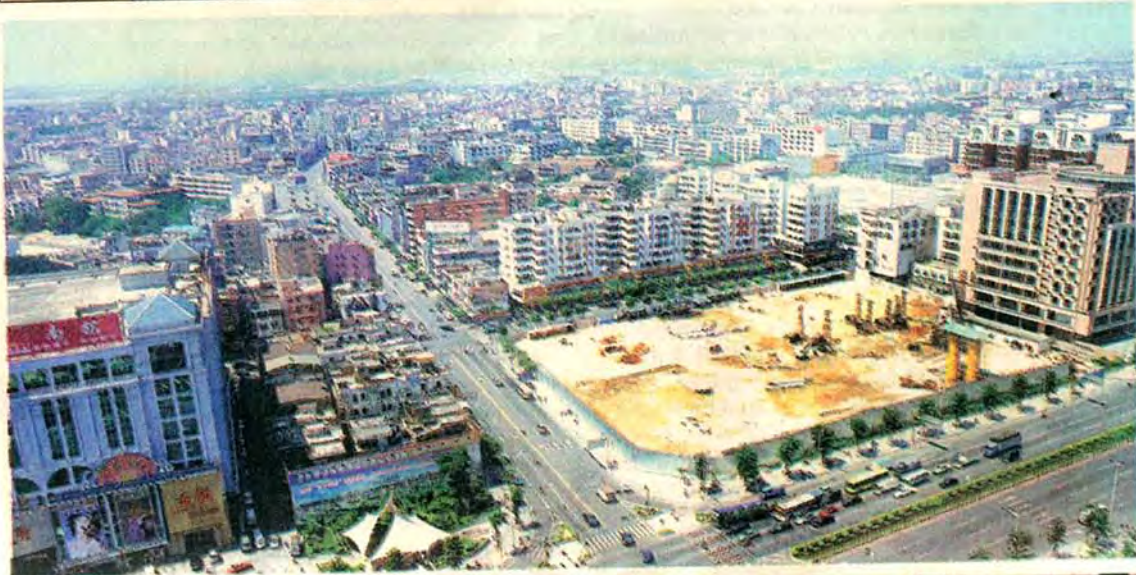
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Min's Journey

Like millions of migrant workers in China, Lu Qingmin left her rural village to find work in the city



- **February 1986:** Min is born in a farming village in Hubei province
- **February 2003:** Min comes to Dongguan, a sprawling city of factories in the Pearl River Delta that is home to more than five million migrants
- **March:** Min gets a job doing quality control on the assembly line of an electronics factory
- **February 2004:** Min quits, takes a week off and goes to the Zhitong Talent Market to find a new job. She joins a factory making parts for mobile phones and other electronic products as a clerk, a big jump in status and pay from her previous assembly-line job
- **June:** Min is promoted to the factory's human-resources department. Three weeks later, she leaves the factory, takes a week off and goes to the Zhitong Talent Market again
- **July:** Min joins the human-resources department of a factory making rubber parts for electronic products



A section of Dongguan city (top picture); **Lu Qingmin** (bottom left) stands reading a job posting at the Zhitong Talent Market and (right) in her company-provided dorm room while her sister, **Lu Guimin**, sleeps after arriving for a visit.