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The Culture of Survival: Lives of Migrant Workers through the Prism of Private Letters

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In 1993 a fire in the south China city of Shenzhen, in Guangdong province, took eighty-seven lives and left forty-six injured. All were young female migrant workers from poor provinces. The management of Zhili Toy Company,[1] a Hong Kong–managed factory, had violated regulations by bribing local authorities and safety inspectors, bolting all exits, barring all windows, and blocking passageways with stock. When the fire broke out, the workers were trapped by the inferno.[2] The accident aroused unprecedented public outrage in China.

Soon after the fire, a Chinese researcher who was visiting the factory retrieved a few hundred personal letters that the victims had received from friends and relatives and were piled up to be discarded. He kindly passed on to me the letters that contain information about factory life. These seventy-seven letters, plus two resignation requests and a few hand-copied songs and ditties popular among migrant workers, form the basis of this chapter. They give a very different perspective from that produced by previous research about China's migrant factory workers.

Chinese migrant workers have been studied extensively, with almost all of the research being focused on female workers. Some of these studies discuss the women workers' places of origin and the conflicts that arise among groups of workers from different localities.[3] Other writings explicitly focus on gender, with the assumption that female workers suffer more than males.[4] Yet other authors explore the workers' self-images of inferiority that have been instilled by manage-

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ment,[5] or they examine the workers' efforts to get jobs and their status vis-à-vis the state,[6] their exploitation in the factories of investors from other Asian countries,[7] their social characteristics and role in the labor market,[8] or their social and family networks.[9] The writer who has come closest to penetrating the inner mental state, anxieties, and suppressed fears of the worker is Pun Ngai, who worked in a factory and lived in the workers' dormitory for more than six months.[10]

All this research adds significantly to our knowledge of the migrant workforce. But important aspects of the workers' situations and feelings are kept private and are revealed only in the intimacy of their letters to relatives and close friends. These letters cast light on a hidden part of their lives.

Of the seventy-seven letters, seventy-three were written by friends and relatives to the victims of the Zhili fire; only four were written by Zhili workers and had not been posted before the fire. Most of the letters were about a page long. Only sixteen letters were written by men (fathers, brothers, and husbands), and of these, just five were by migrant workers and described working conditions. Most of the letters were written by relatives, close friends, or fellow villagers of the Zhili workers. Eight letters were from relatives in the workers' home village or town, and the contents mainly concerned family matters. Sixty-five were from friends or relatives who were no longer in their own villages. Most were factory workers (among the men, a few were construction workers) who were working in Guangdong province.[11] These letters were channels through which the Zhili workers exchanged information on factory conditions with their friends and relatives. Because all parties were going through a shared experience, their descriptions of their work situations, living conditions, health, and feelings toward the factories were candid and intimate. These sixty-five letters provide the bulk of the information for this chapter.[12]

Obviously this collection of letters is not a random sample in the normal statistical sense. But it is a random sample of a "natural" kind, written by workers scattered across Guangdong province who can be taken as representative of a larger population of migrant workers in the province.[13] In analyzing these letters, I used a rule-of-thumb method. During a first reading of the letters I jotted down the topics or issues that the workers wrote about and came up with forty-three. Care was taken to keep the topics as disaggregated as possible in order to capture details. For example, over the issue of wages and money, subcategories include "amount of wages," "wages too low and therefore no savings," "wages too low, so cannot send money home," "amount of overtime pay," and so on. In a second reading of the letters, any references to each of these forty-three issues were recorded. The results are given in table 7.1, which lists the issues mentioned in order of frequency.

Several issues were mentioned more frequently than others. There were 107 references to wages,[14] 84 to finding another job,[15] 57 to work hours and overtime,[16] 50 to physical existence,[17] and 30 to loneliness and isolation.[18] (As this

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Table 7.1 Issues Appearing in Workers' Letters (in Order of Frequency)

Item	*Number of Mentions*	*Issues*
1	38	Trying to find work at another factory
2	26	Looking for and introducing someone to a job
3	24	Amount of wages
4	24	Amount of overtime work each day
5	22	Length of work hours
6	18	Relationship with the opposite sex
7	17	Ailments
8	15	Any reference to food and meals
9	15	Wages too low and therefore no savings
10	14	Longing to see friends and relatives
11	13	Workers do not have enough work, with adverse effects on their wages
12	13	Sending money home
13	12	Borrowing and lending money
14	11	Irregular pay
15	10	Someone not able to find a job
16	10	Any discussion about residential status and the need for work permits, identity cards, or unmarried-status certificates
17	7	Desire to remain at a factory; not looking for another one
18	6	Amount of overtime pay
19	6	Any reference to paying deposits *(yajin)*
20	6	Loneliness
21	6	Crying over hard life and loneliness
22	5	Overnight work or work until the wee hours of the morning
23	5	Exhaustion from long hours of work
24	5	Indication that the worker would go home in the next couple of years to settle down
25	5	Factory's business not doing well
26	5	Wages too low to send money home
27	4	Harsh discipline
28	4	ID card or other papers taken away by management
29	4	Longing for letters
30	4	Regrets about having left home
31	3	Factory owing wages to workers
32	3	Any reference to the factory keeping a portion of pay
33	3	Taking any kind of medication
34	3	Lack of sleep
35	3	Plans for New Year holiday
36	2	Occupational health and safety problems
37	2	Inability to move to another factory because the present factory will not let them go or because the factory owes them money
38	2	Marriage
39	1	Wages cut recently
40	1	Any reference to slowdowns, labor disputes, collective protest actions, strikes, etc.
41	1	Weight loss
42	1	No desire to return home, no matter how bad life is in the factory
43	1	Life is satisfactory in the factory

chapter later discusses, a number of issues we normally would expect to appear in such letters did not surface.)[19] This chapter looks at wages, work conditions, and problems related to physical well-being and examines how factory conditions affected the workers' social situation and mental state by entrapping them in a "culture of survival."

WAGES (PAID AND UNPAID) AND WORK HOURS

Among the workers' many concerns, issues related to wages topped the list. To gain a full grasp of the anxiety felt by these workers it is necessary to compare their wages against the minimum wage standards set by the city and district governments. These benchmark standards are established locally, based on a formula provided by the central government and pegged to the cost of living in an area.[20] The minimum wage excludes subsidies and payments in kind, and it is revised annually.[21] Paying below the minimum wage set for an eight-hour workday is illegal. The minimum legal wage set for Shenzhen in 1993 was ¥280 a month, and for other industrial cities and economic zones in Guangdong province, it was twenty to thirty yuan lower (except for Zhuhai, just east of Shenzhen).[22]

How did the wages cited in the letters fare against the legal minimum wage for Shenzhen? Of the letters that specified the writer's wage, only six mentioned a payment at or above minimum wage—¥280 a month. Of these six, two had been promoted to posts beyond the production line (the only two non–production line workers in the entire collection of letters), so only four workers earned the legal minimum, meaning that nineteen out of twenty-three production line workers received less than the minimum wage. Of these nineteen, two received ¥200–280, and the remaining seventeen were paid less than ¥200, with one making as little as ¥60.[23] Not reflected in these figures was the fact that the average normal workday was twelve hours instead of the officially sanctioned eight hours.[24] In other words, of the twenty-five letters that contained specific information on wages, almost all indicated that the workers were paid at rates much lower than the legal minimum wage.

Of the four workers who received at least the minimum wage, only one stated that she was working an eight-hour day. However, she was only earning ¥280 a month, exactly the Shenzhen minimum wage. She was the only one out of the twenty-three production line workers whose work conditions did not violate the legal limits for wages and work hours.[25] What is more, among these twenty-three workers, three wrote that the factory withheld a portion of their monthly pay, five wrote that wages were paid irregularly, and three reported that there was not enough work on the production line and so the opportunity to earn wages had been sporadic. That is, eleven out of the twenty-three workers faced serious problems in obtaining their wages, which were less than the legal minimum.

Although other letters did not mention specific wage amounts, similar problems over wages surfaced. Of these letters, eleven reported that the amount of work was irregular and the income was unsteady, nine reported that the wages were so low they had no savings, five reported that the factory paid them irregularly, and two reported that the factory owed them wages (one for two months and the other for three months).

Thus, in addition to the nineteen production line workers who gave specific information on their wages and were paid below the legal minimum wage, another twenty-seven workers received wages that were very irregular, unpaid, withheld, or extremely low. Of the workers who mentioned their wages in one way or another, forty-six had serious problems with their wages, whereas only four workers indicated they were at or above the legal minimum Shenzhen wage of ¥280.

The highest wage cited was ¥760 a month, earned by a woman who worked in the only factory mentioned in all the letters to have raised wages. However, the worker's health was deteriorating due to the very long work hours: "How could I have time to write home? I'm so exhausted that I'm now down to ninety pounds. But don't worry, dear sister, I'm still okay. Nothing has gone wrong yet. I bought three boxes of health supplements. But it hasn't helped."[26]

As is now obvious, illegally low wages and very long work hours were the norm in the factories that hired these migrant workers. The pay was so sporadic that the workers commonly asked one another, "Have you been paid yet?" The usual answer was, "Not yet." The norm was being owed wages instead of being paid. Consider this example: We have [finally] gotten our wages. Got December's pay on March 15. Got 140 yuan. I've sent 100 yuan home."[27]

After three months' work, the workers had been paid a pitiful ¥140, an average of ¥40-some a month. Elsewhere in the letter the writer indicated that she had little idea of how much she was supposed to be earning a month. There was no mention of the workers querying management about why they received so little or whether more wages would be forthcoming. It seems that even if there had been some sort of an established pay rate, it barely mattered to her. She was relieved finally to have some cash in hand.

It was common for the workers not to know how much they were supposed to be paid. One male letter writer observed:

> Now the conditions in the factory are too bad, but there is no way out. To make money, to make a living, for myself and for the whole family, for father and for mother, for the whole family to be able to eat, I have to continue to work. I asked the workers who have been here a longer time and was told wages are *probably* nine to ten yuan a day. Eight hours of work during the day plus seven hours of overtime are counted as one workday. Every month thirty-six yuan is deducted for food and board, and twenty-five yuan for a security deposit that can be gotten back when we leave [emphasis added].[28]

It is clear that this male worker had begun working in the factory without being told the wage rates. He could only find out from fellow workers roughly how much he might be making. It is no wonder that when I was conducting field research in Fujian province, a typical response from migrant workers to a question on wages was a hesitant "I don't know." At first I thought they were reluctant to disclose their wages to a foreigner. I gradually became convinced that they genuinely did not know.[29]

A very similar situation exists with overtime work. Some workers understood "overtime" in the Western sense and as defined by the Chinese labor law—work days beyond eight hours. But to some workers, overtime did not begin after eight hours. Take these two letters as examples:

> Now I'm working in another factory. It's better than the Japanese umbrella factory. It's twelve hours' work a day. If my factory needs people, I'll tell you.[30]

> Here the work hours are like this: 7:30 to 11:30 A.M., 1:30 to 5:30 P.M., 6:30 to 10:30 at night [i.e., twelve hours' work]. Sometimes we also have to do overtime work. After 10:30 we get a fifty fen [cent] subsidy. There is a lot of work in this factory.[31]

In both letters, twelve hours was considered a normal workday. In the first letter overtime pay did not exist as a concept. In the second letter, only after having worked for twelve hours did the worker (and management as well) consider the work overtime. Under such circumstances, it is understandable why overtime rates were barely mentioned in the letters. Of the twenty-one letters that contained information on work hours, only five had references to overtime rates. But as the second letter quoted above indicates, the way workers were paid for their overtime was also unconventional by Western standards. What exactly did she mean by getting a fifty fen subsidy after 10:30 P.M.? There are two possibilities. It may be that no matter how long she worked after 10:30 P.M., all she received was an extra fifty fen. A more encouraging scenario would be that she received fifty fen for every hour of work after 10:30 P.M. The labor law defines the overtime rate as an added percentage of the regular hourly rate. But in all the letters cited above, because hourly rates were nonexistent, at least as understood by the workers, overtime rates were also nonexistent. Wages were merely management's arbitrary manipulation of figures. Irregular small sums of money called wages were doled out now and then to the workers. The function was not to provide a predetermined, calculable award for the workers' labor but to ensure that the workers stayed alive but did not become desperate enough to stage protests or run away.

It can also be seen from the above examples that being able to work for twelve hours a day was regarded as a blessing. The frightening alternative was suspension of production due to a lack of orders. There were thirty-four entries related to not having enough work and/or unemployment. In the following quotation a

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worker reports to her family back home on the situation of her younger sister working in another factory:

> She hasn't made that much money. She has little money to buy clothes. Since I've been here, their team has only worked for some ten days or so. They haven't gotten their January pay yet [the letter was written in March]. They don't even have money to buy breakfast or dinner.[32]

THE BARE NECESSITIES OF LIFE: MEALS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The normal practice of factories in Guangdong is to provide migrant workers with meals and subsidized lodging, which is usually a bed in a two-level or even three-level bunk. About ¥35–70 is then deducted from their wages to cover these amenities. This arrangement could superficially be characterized as Confucian paternalism; however, it is economically driven. Providing lodging and meals to workers makes controlling the workers' time much easier and puts them on call around the clock. It ensures that workers do not expend unnecessary time and energy in buying and cooking food or use up time going in and out of the factory compound. By the time the workers finish their twelve-hour workdays, there is little time left for leisure and commuting activities anyway.

The uneven nature of production requires that factories hoard labor. Most factories continue to let the workers stay and eat in the dormitories even when production is suspended. After all, it costs management relatively little to provide meals, and the beds are there anyway. Spending an additional small amount on food gives management the great advantage of having labor ready to restart the production lines the moment new orders arrive.

From management's perspective, the workers' "basic needs" are satisfied through a bed and food. But having visited some workers' dormitories in the Shenzhen area, I can only label them as unfit for human habitation. If they are lucky, eight people share a tiny room lined with bunk beds; if unlucky, up to a hundred workers share a single hall in a warehouse. In Chinese newspapers there has been no lack of anecdotal reports on unsanitary and dilapidated living conditions.[33] Yet of the sixty-odd letters from factory workers, not one complained of poor living conditions. They took the discomfort of the accommodation for granted. As long as there was a bed, the workers did not think to complain in their letters. Perhaps the living conditions back home left even more to be desired. Whatever the reason, the workers quietly tolerated the lack of privacy, the filth, and the noise.

Food is more important than lodging to physical survival. The letters included fifteen entries related to food, many urging the recipient to eat properly. Here

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are three examples. The first is a letter from a husband comforting a Zhili worker not to worry because she was unable to send any money home:

> But you should eat well. Don't be too miserly. If your health suffers it's not like being at home. Health is capital for revolution. Without health you can't make money.[34]

> Little sister, you should go to see the doctor. Don't take money too seriously. To have a body in good health is to have everything. Don't be stingy. Make sure you eat both breakfast and dinner.[35]

> In your factory do you have two meals or three meals? I hope you're not excessively frugal. If you're hungry, go buy something to eat.[36]

Chinese culture places a great emphasis on food. But the concern for adequate food and eating properly, as expressed in these letters, is a reflection of a culture of marginal existence. This explains why all information on food was on the number of meals and the quantities served rather than on quality. The supply of food varied from factory to factory, as did the charges. The amount of food seemed adequate and most people seemed satisfied at being given three meals a day. But for people coming out of a culture of marginal existence in a rural setting, the question of whether they were being fed enough continued to be a topic for discussion.

> Here we have to pay for our food: fifty fen for breakfast, one yuan each for lunch and dinner—two dishes with meat, and one entirely of vegetables.[37]

> Each day there are three meals: breakfast, dinner, and lunch. In the afternoon there are three dishes. Living is okay.[38]

> As for me, two meals a day means I get very hungry before the morning meal. But I guess once I get used to it, it will be okay.[39]

IMPAIRED AND DISPOSABLE BODIES

Having enough to eat is not, in and of itself, enough to sustain a healthy body. Very long work hours, repetitive work, and less-than-pleasant work environments, not to speak of occupational safety and health problems, take their toll. There were seventeen entries in the letters discussing ailments, one entry on weight loss, and eight others discussing exhaustion and lack of sleep. The most frequent ailments were headaches, fever, and leg pain. It cannot be established from these letters whether these were symptoms of occupational diseases. But according to one study carried out in Shenzhen city in 1994, slightly more than half of the 10,942 factories could be classed as hazardous in terms of occupational

health and safety (OHS) standards. Of these hazardous factories, 4,000 were foreign-funded enterprises (FFEs) employing approximately 250,000 workers. It was discovered that 3,108 of these FFEs had not installed any OHS preventive facilities.[40] Considering the high proportion of hazardous workplaces, the workers who complained of health problems in these letters had a high chance of having contracted chronic OHS diseases. The following descriptions of sickness could well be symptoms:

> Now I'm in great misery. I have a fever every day. It's so hot that it is killing me. The pain is unbearable. I also have anemia. Can't eat even a mouthful of rice.[41]

> When I was at Decheng factory, the smell of the umbrella material gave me headaches. I couldn't bear to work there any longer. Got two months of pay for three months of work.[42]

> I heard from third older sister that she has lost quite a bit of weight. She always has headaches. I hope you can write to her more often to comfort her spirits.[43]

> At the time I got your letter my leg was so painful. I couldn't even walk. I was not in the mood to write back. Sorry.[44]

Despite the serious nature of the symptoms, only one worker mentioned that she had taken a few days off. All the others seem to have continued working. At the most, they took some "health supplements." None mentioned bringing health problems to the attention of management or being denied permission to take a rest. It is possible that no matter how sick workers were, they feared losing their jobs if management realized they were not up to working a twelve-hour day. Moreover, many factories fine workers heavily for absences from the production line, even for illness, or deny them the end-of-month bonus for full attendance.

Two letters graphically describe toxic conditions:

> For a long time I haven't wanted to work in the paint-spraying department. I don't know what's wrong, whether it's because of the spray or that I have a cold, I have such painful headaches. The painkillers only helped for a while and the pain started again. I can't stand it. Every time father writes he tells me not to work in the spraying department. But it's not possible to switch. The other departments do not have work and do not need people. The only possibility is to change to another factory, but that's not easy. Here, they haven't paid our wages. No idea when we'll be paid.[45]

The second letter was written by a Zhili worker and was dated 8 March 1993. This worker and two friends had arrived in the Shenzhen area on 14 July and found work at three different toy factories. The toy and footwear industries are particularly hazardous because of toxic solvents in the spray paints and glues that are used.[46]

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> Aili got into Tianhe toy factory. Then she got boils on her face. On 28 July she went back home. She went in a Labor Bureau vehicle.[47]

Further down in the letter she wrote:

> Now let me tell you about my situation. When I first arrived, I worked at Yigangban factory [before coming to Zhili]. I was there for just over ten days. There was toxic gas in the factory. You must have heard of Li Yuxia's death? Yuxia died a horrible death. She got critically ill on July 18. Went to hospital. She died after having stayed there for only three days. I was scared. She's already been cremated.[48]

Aili and Li Yuxia seemed to have been victims of acute poisoning related to paint spraying. Yet instead of holding the factory responsible, the local Labor Bureau arranged to have Aili shipped quietly out of Shenzhen. Having shown symptoms of acute poisoning, she was disposed of as spoiled goods.[49] A similar fate befell survivors of the Zhili Toy Company fire, many of whom were severely burned. They were given rudimentary treatment at local hospitals for six months and practically forced back to their home villages with only small sums of compensation and with their burns and injuries far from properly healed. A report has been published on the broken lives of these survivors, living in disfigurement and shame and, in some cases, constant physical agony.[50]

PHYSICAL ENTRAPMENT

Not a single letter indicated that the writer had ever made an individual or a collective complaint to management or to the local authorities.[51] Either they tolerated their factories as best they could and hoped conditions would improve, or they tried to find another factory. For many, looking for another factory was a consuming project. It was the second most frequent topic of the letter writers. There was always the hope that the grass was greener elsewhere, that the pay and job would be a bit more stable, that the working hours would be long only because it meant business was healthy and workers were paid on time. Their aspirations were modest. Short work hours were not desirable, portending low pay or no pay. To wish for better living conditions and better meals would be a luxury. But their desperation to escape from their current wretchedness explains the large number of entries (sixty-four) in which workers asked about, and reported on, work and pay conditions. Requests to get themselves, a relative, or friend into a factory, and discussions about job opportunities and job hopping appeared in almost all the letters.

The responses were frequently negative. For one, the labor market was tight, especially for male migrants, as reflected in references in ten letters to someone being unable to get into any factory. One male worker had two jobs, one after

another, but neither paid anything: "I worked for five days and quit because it was a factory that didn't pay any wages." In the end he did not even have money to buys stamps to send a letter to his sister at the Zhili factory. He managed to get back to his home village, and only then could he send her a letter.[52] Unemployment befell women workers too:

> Dear Little Sister, actually our factory hired more than ten people to get the rush order out. But it was all casual work. They only worked for ten days, some even for only half a day. That is why I didn't dare ask you to come here. Mingxia came here because her factory is always idle. But she worked here for nine days and had to go. She is still a vagrant. She has not entered a new factory yet.[53]

Without a job, migrants could return home, but that was the last resort. The workers had invested capital in undertaking the long journey south, and some had borrowed to do so.[54] Back home, the financial situation was bad, as described in the letters—their families needed extra cash desperately. Parents revealed their concerns about unmarried daughters (and sons) who had embarked on the "dangerous" trip. To go back home without having made any money would mean plunging the family further into poverty. Finding a job that paid regular wages was imperative. But finding a place to stay while looking for work was a big problem. Often migrants had to hide in a factory's dormitory, squeezing into the bed space of a sibling or friend.[55]

The problem did not end there. Migrants who lacked jobs lived in constant fear of being deported from Guangdong. They were at the mercy of China's household registration system (the *hukou* system) that requires people to produce their ID card *(shenfen zheng)* and temporary residential permit when accosted by the authorities. Caught without these, the migrant could be sent back home:

> At our place in Shi'ai township, household registration inspection has been really tight in the last few days. Every day, load after load of people are being picked up and shipped out by truck. Therefore no one has dared to go outdoors recently.[56]

The prospect of finding a better job was not great. More often than not the situation in other factories was no better:

> I'm feeling discouraged. Since the year before last, after I left your place, every several months I've changed factories. Changed and changed again, and now I am back to an old one. I haven't been able to save a cent in the past two years. It's been a waste of my time. It's too late for regrets.[57]

> Shuniu, you talked about changing factories in your letter. Are you serious? It's better to stay put. Wherever you go it's the same. I now regret having changed factories. Sometimes when I read your letter I start to cry. Had we been in the same factory it would have been so good.[58]

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The news occasionally could be encouraging: yes, the situation here is better; the factory is recruiting; come as soon as possible. But then there would be other hurdles. The main barrier was that the present employer would not give back the workers' ID cards, their deposit, and their unpaid wages. Sometimes the worker was simply too scared to travel to another locality to take up the job. Here is an example of someone who had just been informed of the good news but missed the chance:

> I was so happy to receive your telegram. But when I thought about it I didn't dare come by myself. . . . I asked so-and-so, but he didn't know where Bao'an is either [Bao'an is the county adjacent to Shenzhen]. . . . I hope you'll forgive me for not coming. Next time when there is another opportunity, please write down the exact instructions on how to get there. Besides, I can't get back my ID card. So I can't come anyway. When Xueqin and Shuhui left here, they didn't get back their ID cards. I wonder whether they've gotten into a factory. . . . As for the situation here, again there is not enough work this month. Many people have left the factory. I have gotten my April wages [the letter was written on 18 May], 114 yuan and 54 fen. But I had to repay someone ¥65. So I haven't sent money home.[59]

The household registration system has proven a boon for factory management. Even when a factory is not running at full capacity and not paying the workers, management can prevent the workers from leaving simply by withholding their ID cards. Fourteen letters discussed ID cards and other personal documents. Zhili was one such factory. A letter written by a Zhili worker intimated that quitting was difficult: "If I could resign that would be great," she wrote, implying she was not permitted to leave.[60] Amid the pile of letters there were also two short resignation letters written by two Zhili workers. One was dated about a month before the fire, written in a tone of abject deference:

> Dear Respectful Manager and Various Other Leaders,
> How are you? I have already been working here for three years. My contract has long expired. Now my family wants me to go home. May I request you to grant permission.
> Resignee: Yili
> October 4, 1993

Presumably permission was not granted, since she was still working in Zhili when the fire broke out. On the other hand, as we saw above, some workers were so desperate to get out that they left factories without getting their ID cards back. Without them their lives could only become even more precarious.

For females, there was yet one more personal document that was required—the unmarried-status certificate *(weihun zheng)*. Without this, getting a job was difficult.

> I've been away from home for more than a month. . . . I am writing for one particular reason—for the unmarried-status certificate. Please, younger brother, help me to get this done. . . . It's been so long already. Is it because there is a problem? By hook or by crook, you must try to get it for me. The faster, the better. I haven't gotten into a factory yet. Every day I can only hang around in the room sleeping. I dare not go out because once out, it's difficult to get back in. This is becoming really intolerable.[61]

It seems that she had been smuggled into a factory dormitory by a friend. Because security guards were stationed at the factory gate it was not possible for her to go in and out easily. She was trapped.

When the withholding of ID cards became widespread in Guangdong factories, people began borrowing IDs from other workers. This flourished because factory management and local governments were willing to turn a blind eye to the illegal practice. As can be seen from the following two letters, the borrowing of ID cards was widespread:

> The fellow villager who came with me said her factory is about to recruit workers soon. She asked us to go. She said the factory is very good. The food's also good. She asked us to get our IDs ready. But my factory is keeping my ID. There's no time to get another one from home. Can I borrow yours? That factory doesn't keep IDs, so I can return it to you fast. Now we don't even have a cent. If you don't have an ID card, can you borrow one for me? You must get one for me. If you can't do it, then all I can do is die in this factory.[62]

> I am operating a single-line machine; that's why I have wanted to leave for a long time. But I'm afraid the factory won't return the ID card, and the card is yours. No matter what, I don't want to leave your ID behind. Even if I change factories, I'll try my best to get back your ID card. But I'm afraid it is very difficult. I want so much to change factories. I can't stay here for another day![63]

The workers were in a no-win situation. At best, factories paid pitiful wages for very long working hours; at worst, there were no wages and they had to idle around in factory dormitories being fed two or three meals and, worse, worrying about not being able to send home the much needed cash, a highly dreaded situation. Yet even if they could get away, the new situation might be worse—and job hopping cost money. Leaving a factory probably meant losing their deposit and unpaid wages, or the ID card. Getting another job meant paying another deposit. Thus those who succeeded in changing factories sometimes gained nothing and regretted the move. Without having made or saved any money, going home was not an option either. The odds were stacked against them. The prospect was so bleak to the writer of the first letter quoted above that she was in utter despair. As she observed, she might as well be dead.

Nonetheless, workers often decided to leave despite all odds. My interviews

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with factory managers in South China in 1996 revealed that the turnover rate was quite high, at least from the perspective of the managers, who put it down to the "disloyalty" and "ungratefulness" of the workers.[64]

MENTAL STATES AND SPIRITUAL SUSTENANCE

Suddenly thrust into a strange new environment, the first time away from home, young workers needed psychological and practical support to help them get through the initial period and over the months to come. For this reason, novices tended to leave home as a group. The best time to undertake the long journey was when a relative or a fellow villager returned home for Chinese New Year. The veteran could then "lead the way." This accounts for the annual flood of migrants into Guangdong province immediately after the Chinese New Year.

But they soon discovered that it was hard to stay together as a group. They often had to separate when they landed jobs in different factories or even in different cities. The young people had to confront factory life on their own. Letters became an important part of their lives: they were important sources of information about job opportunities and, more importantly, their only meaningful contact with the world beyond the factory and dormitory walls. Telephoning each other, even locally or in times of emergency, did not seem to be an option, since not even one letter mentioned telephoning. They could, if need be, resort to telegrams. But for the most part, in this part of China, where cellular phones had already become an indispensable plaything for businesspeople, workers had to depend on an unreliable postal service. Some of the letters expressed a palpable anxiety about letters, remittances, or documents getting lost in the mail or being intercepted by management.

The letters tell of a daily grind that quietly and steadily consumed workers' lives and spirits. They also reveal the inner feelings of these migrant workers. Among the sixty-nine letters written by workers, there were thirty separate entries expressing loneliness and feelings of isolation or misery, of sorely missing friends and relatives, of crying, and of yearning for letters.[65] They were voices crying out for human contact, comfort, and support. Most of the letters between women were filled with emotion and intimacy. More research will be needed to understand whether young peasant women are closer to their blood sisters and their peers of the same sex (also addressed as "sisters") than their urban counterparts are. Could this closeness be a romantic reaction to loneliness and isolation only after they had parted?

> Songying and Xiaojing, though we have only parted for just over ten days, it seems like several months. Perhaps it is because I am not familiar with this place. . . . While working I seem to hear you talking and laughing in my ears. The moment I wake up in the morning I think of you. I am just too lonely here.[66]

> I sent you a letter a few days ago. Have you got it? I look forward to your letter every day but it never comes. I think of you very much.[67]

Exchanging photographs took on a new emotional significance. Visual images substituted for the physical distance:

> Now the several of us are scattered all over. Oh, how difficult it is to get together again! What a shame! When I think of our innocent lives at school, how beautiful it was. I can't bear to think about it. . . . Now you and Wang Guangfang have come here [to the Shenzhen area] as well. Though we are so near, we can only see each other in our letters. Little sister, can you please send me a photo? I sent my photo to your home. Did you get it? I'll close off here. See you in a letter next time.[68]

> I received your photograph. I looked and looked at it and felt so happy because I've wanted it for so long. I can't express how happy I am. But suddenly I felt lonely. So lonely.[69]

If they were lonely, why had they not made new friends among their fellow workers? In all the letters there was not even a single reference to someone having made a new friend or having attempted to do so. Did they not want to tell old friends for fear of being accused of having been disloyal? Or was the in-group feeling among those who had grown up in a tight community so strong that it was difficult to make new friends? Was this a characteristic of females of peasant origin? Here I can only pose these questions without providing answers.[70]

Two letters were written by a husband in a village to his wife who had left home and found work at Zhili.[71] The wife had left because the family was in debt. The letters were filled with endearments; they were romantic, intimate, and sad. Their daughter had been sent to stay with a relative. The husband was eager to know what kind of work the wife was doing in the factory. He had little idea of what production line work entailed, since in both letters he queried, "Do you carry heavy things? Do you carry loads on shoulder poles?" The wife, who was illiterate and whose letters had to be written by someone else, seemed reluctant to provide him with the details. Her main message was she was terribly sorry she could not send home any money for the time being.

Social relationships and responsibilities could be a source of psychological burden. There was an overwhelming sense that they had to send money home to help their impoverished families. A study Mobo Gao conducted of his ancestral village showed that each migrant worker sent home ¥100 a month and that this was a vital help to family finances.[72] The writers of these letters who were not getting paid or not able to save money from their meager earnings suffered great anxiety.[73] Out of a total of thirteen entries in which the topic of sending money home arose, only seven indicated that money was being sent.[74]

Friends and relatives could be a burden in another way. Because family and social circles were close, gossip among relatives and friends spread quickly despite

the physical distance, causing ill feelings and bickering. The most destructive gossip was that so-and-so was not trying hard enough to help someone else find a "good" factory. No amount of explanation—that the job market was tight or the factory was not recruiting or a job there was not worthwhile—seemed to dampen suspicions that a villager or relative had let someone down. Fellow villagers back home desperate for factory jobs simply would not accept no for an answer. Here are two examples:

> Dear Shubi, Sorry, I really can't help aunty find a factory. I hope you understand my situation. Let me tell you what has been happening to me. During Chinese New Year quite a few fellow villagers came here. Up till now many of them still have not gotten into factories. . . . There is no way I can find a job for aunty. Shubi, perhaps you are feeling the same pressure because we know how it feels [in not being able to find jobs for others]. My younger cousin has also arrived. She left home on 25 January, has been here for two months, and still has not entered a factory. We are so anxious for her. Her family is even more worried. If people do not understand what the real situation is they'll say, "how come she has two cousins in Guangdong factories and they can't get a job for their cousin?" They think we're not willing to help. Well, if that's what they say, then let it be. . . . I really don't want my relatives to come here to become vagrants—no food, no shelter. Besides, public order is so chaotic here. What a miserable place this is.[75]

> Shuniu, now our factory wants to recruit eighty people. The manager told us to go home to bring some villagers out here. He said we could go by plane. But I don't want to go home. If it doesn't work out for them here, they will all blame me. I don't want to go. So I lied to the manager that I'd write home to ask.[76]

The fear of being responsible for the livelihood of a group of fellow villagers was too great to bear. They were caught in a bind. If they could not find jobs for others, they might be blamed. If there were openings, they worried that if the jobs were no good they would get blamed as well.

THE MISSING TOPICS

Several major concerns stand out clearly in these letters as being foremost in the minds of the workers, but many other topics that we might have expected to appear do not. For example, it might be expected that the letters would contain at least some information on factory ownership. In Guangdong province many of the factories are owned and managed by Asian foreign investors, the majority of whom are Hong Kong and Taiwanese Chinese, and they mainly produce for the export market. Zhili was a typical factory of this type: a Hong Kong–managed compensation-trade factory and a supplier for a Western brand-name toy company. Yet, except for one brief reference to an umbrella factory that was

Japanese,[77] none of the letters gave any clues as to the nationalities of the managers or owners. The letters usually referred to "my factory" or "our factory" as if they were managed by invisible hands.

The workers mainly categorized factories into two types: "good factories" *(hao chang)* and "bad factories" *(buhao de chang)*. But they apparently had not discerned any pattern about what made a factory good or bad, for instance, the good factories are usually managed by someone of a certain nationality and the bad factories by someone of another nationality. How do we explain this lack of generalization? My interpretation is that most factories appeared equivalently bad, either based on their own experiences or from knowledge acquired through shared information. Thus who owned or managed them was irrelevant. They hoped for a "good factory," but it was a mirage, an illusionary exit from hell to heaven.

Similarly, the letters betrayed no information on shop-floor conditions, the products they were making, or the number of workers on the job site. We know that several factories made toys only because one letter mentioned serious OHS problems with the spray-painting. The letters normally begin with a couple of lines of greeting and then plunge into a standard sentence: "Now let me tell you something about the conditions in my factory." But by "conditions" they mostly meant wages and work hours. There was almost nothing about the tasks or the workstations they were assigned to unless there was a problem. Production line supervisors were their immediate superiors, with whom they had the most contact, but there were only two complaints about them.[78] There were only two reports of incidents that involved conflicts with fellow workers from a different place of origin. Though academic studies have emphasized workers' place of origin as a major divisive factor in workplace relationships,[79] this problem did not preoccupy the writers of these letters. Nor did discrimination by locals either inside or outside the factory. Only one letter, from a male worker who had gotten into a fistfight with a local Guangdong worker, mentioned this problem.[80] Even though they were subjected to harsh and exploitative labor regimes, there were no complaints, anger, or hatred directed at factory managers. For example, there were no comments that a particular manager was horrible, had scolded them, or had docked their wages. How do we explain the absence of such issues in the letters?

I can only hypothesize. We should not conclude that these issues did not exist because they are not mentioned in the letters. After all, scholars studying such factories have verified their existence. What is obvious is that they were not important enough to be included in the short letters that the workers had time to write. The lack of comments about the production process can be explained by the fact that their tasks were so deskilled, so repetitive, so simple and meaningless, that whatever tasks or workstations they were assigned to made little difference to them. Nor did the difference in tasks have any meaningful correlation to the wages they ultimately received. Although they were theoretically

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paid at piece rates, in reality payments had little correlation with the speed and volume of work. The rates kept changing as new orders came in and new production processes were established. That they were paid irregularly, a month or several months later, rendered the kind of tasks and the piece rates even more irrelevant. Not even one of them mentioned informing management about a miscalculation in their wages.

Yet the total number of hours worked each day was important to them. The work was boring and tiring, and they eagerly looked forward to finishing. Whether it was eight, ten, twelve, or more hours of work a day at the production line made a difference in terms of rest and pay. If they only had to work for eight hours, it meant bad business—some rest but little money. If it was twelve hours for a long stretch of days, it meant good business and at least some money, but it also meant they would be extremely tired. That is why so much was written about work hours in the letters.

As to why they expressed no anger or bitterness, it could very well be that they were resigned to their treatment, since it was their choice to work in a factory in south China. They were aware they would be going back home after a few years because the household registration system prevented them from staying in Guangdong. Factory work was seen as an interim solution to family financial problems; no matter how intolerable the conditions, they would try to tolerate them because they would not last forever. They were not resigned to a life in the factories; seeking a short-term solution to their problems, they concentrated their energy on finding a better job. The sliver of hope that their friends and relatives would be able to get them into a better factory sustained them through the inhumane conditions in which they were temporarily trapped.

THE "CULTURE OF SURVIVAL"

Believers in the perfection of the free market, especially classical economists, will undoubtedly challenge my descriptions of the horrific conditions of Chinese migrant workers, just as they have challenged previous exposés of such conditions. They base their skepticism on the following logic. If the migrant workers were experiencing such bad conditions, they would not have come in the first place. The very fact that migrant workers do not return home and that new waves of such workers keep coming into the cities is proof that working in the factories is better than their situations back home. Further, even if it is granted that their experiences in the factories really are that bad, it is a free labor market. It is their free choice.

Using the information extracted from these letters, I would like to put forward this counterargument. Trapped in a "culture of survival," as the letters reveal graphically, the workers and their families were very much aware of the harshness of factory life before the workers left their home villages and towns. The letters

home, the erratic remittances, and the oral reports that accompanied the annual home visits all indicated that the streets of the south were not paved with gold. There was also the evidence of young people returning home with disfigurements (the survivors of the Zhili fire were a few of many) and strange illnesses. Still, teenagers and young adults, women and men alike, continued to surge into the coastal areas looking for work.[81] They were aware of the fate that awaited them, but there was no other way. Their families were trapped in poverty, owing not least to the heavy arbitrary taxes and fees levied on them.[82]

The two letters sent by a husband to his wife working in Zhili provides some idea of how important every yuan was to a poor peasant family.[83] By the end of the year, this family was burdened with debts and the wife had not yet been able to send back any money. This is her husband's report of their financial situation:

> Since you left, I got the cow sold on 10 January [Chinese calendar]. When I got the cash in hand, I immediately returned ¥100 to so-and-so, another ¥50 to so-and-so, and ¥10 to uncle. There were ¥40 left. I also finally sold the three pigs on 20 January for ¥130. I paid ¥80 for rent, and ¥30 to so-and-so for the meat. Then I had a woodcutter cut down some trees for firewood, and it cost ¥40.[84]

Most of the money was used to repay debts. The family was about to start off a new financial year with little cash and most probably would have to borrow again soon. Every yuan of remittances was vital to maintain the family at subsistence level. The overall impression made by the letters is that the young people would not have gone to the factories had their families not been under such financial strain.

Their apparent freedom of choice needs to be set against the poverty trap they were in at home. No one chooses to be poor. The young migrant workers from rural families were immersed in a different form of poverty than they had experienced at home. They might have resorted to the "weapons of the weak," as described by James Scott, to alleviate their conditions, but the letters betrayed no preoccupation with this.[85] Whether the workers who wrote these letters had put up any form of resistance, covert or overt, is unknown. The workers were absorbed in survival. Poverty necessitates the creation of a culture of survival to confront everyday basic needs. In the villages, the need to survive pushed families to send their offspring into the factories despite the uncertainties of getting paid, the precarious employment, and the terrible conditions. The need to survive creates a false hope and a will that somehow the young people can tough it out for a few years. If only they could send home ¥100 a month, it could make a difference. What has been discounted and undervalued by all parties—the peasants, the migrant workers, and the free marketeers—is the human cost of sustaining this survival. The fatigue, the psychological isolation and anxiety, the spartan living conditions, and the occupational diseases cannot be given a monetary value or entered into account books.

The argument about free choice also ignores the elementary fact that, once inside the factory, the workers were at the mercy of management, which withheld their ID cards and deposits. Also, the workers were unwilling to abandon the back wages owed to them. Supporters of free markets also ignore the effect of "flexible" management on migrant workers who are placed at the mercy of a globalized chain of production. The vagaries, whims, and fashions of consumers in industrialized countries, the high and low production seasons, the increasingly short turnover time between the placement of orders and shipment, the lack of operating funds, especially among small manufacturers, and the wish to avoid overproduction all favor extreme flexibility in work hours and payment. The migrant workers are the ones who bear the risks.[86] From management's perspective, all that is needed is to provide for the workers' most basic needs, or perhaps a bit above that level to keep labor turnover down. This can be sustained when the production lines are idle for as little as ¥2 in food a day. This "largesse," as we have seen, allows management to lay claims to labor at short notice.

There are times when this level of minimum subsistence cannot hold workers, especially if they wish to go to a factory that actually pays some wages or offers slightly better working conditions. If withholding deposits, wages, and ID cards does not suffice to keep workers from leaving, even more heavy-handed methods are sometimes employed. The most common is the use of security guards to bar workers from leaving the factory compound.[87] All of these measures that entrap the workers are in blatant violation of the much admired free and flexible labor market.

As revealed in these letters, workers become consumed by the most primary concerns—a subsistence income, food, and health. They concentrate on the physical need to survive and the mental strength to tough it out. In the factories, the culture of survival inhabits a milieu that is very constricted. The young people have traveled long distances to get to these factories, but once inside, their physical world shrinks. When there is work in the factory, their days are divided between the shop floor and the dormitory. When there is no work, they have no use for their free time because they have no money to go anywhere.

Leisure and entertainment are not part of their lives.[88] The highlight of an occasional day off is no more than window shopping (not buying). Having a soft drink in a café is far beyond their financial capacity.[89] For the duration of their years in a factory, their physical and mental horizons barely extend beyond the compound. It is therefore not surprising that one of the workers at a Shenzhen factory, mentioned above, had no idea where neighboring Bao'an county was and was scared to go there by herself. Letters from home and from relatives and friends working in other factories is the only means by which factory workers maintain links with the outside world. Photographs become valuable memorabilia that can provide contact with the world beyond the factory walls. Their emotional life seemingly revolves around these letters and photographs. It is possible to see parallels between the situation of these migrants and that of soldiers

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trapped endlessly in battlefront trenches, longing for letters and photographs of their loved ones. Their emotional focus on a place far away from the factory, where the question of survival looms large, is what keeps the migrants going. The letters, which potentially carry news of other opportunities, also provide hope of escape from their present state. These escape routes are essentially illusory, but the workers prefer to live with hope rather than the despair that their circumstances seem to warrant.

The chance to visit close friends and relatives in other factories can alleviate the monotony of their existence. There is much excited discussion in the letters about the possibility of such visits. But this is easier said than done, and reunions seldom materialize. The correspondents are too far away, the journey is too expensive, they do not know the way, they are too afraid to venture out on their own, or their days off do not coincide. In the end they are left with little other than their decision to endure factory life and the hope that they can escape it.

NOTES

My thanks go to Chang Kai for sharing these letters with me and for granting me permission to use them. Chang Kai is a researcher and teacher at China's Labor Movement Institute who normally writes under the pen name Yi Fu. I would also like to thank Jiang Kelin for typing out the letters; Eva Hung for helping categorize them; the staff of the Asian Monitor Resource Centre and the Hong Kong Industrial Christian Committee for supplying information on the fire and its victims; Tan Shen, Pun Ngai, Robert Senser, and the three editors of this volume for their encouragement, discussions, and various forms of assistance; Jonathan Unger for his critical editing; and Sarah Leeming for her meticulous copyediting. The funding for the project comes from an Australian Research Council Fellowship and Large Grant.

1. The Zhili Company is a compensation-trade enterprise. This type of enterprise differs from other forms of foreign-funded enterprises. While nominally owned by a local government, it is completely managed by the foreign investor. Factories tend to manufacture brand-name goods for export and do not produce for the domestic market. The Zhili toy factory manufactures for the Italian toy company Artsana/Chicco S.p.a. The Guangdong local government is basically a renter and a supplier of labor only marginally involved in the factory. It sends in a few officials to work as staff members, carrying the nominal titles of deputy managers. For a more detailed description of the organizational structure of such a compensation-trade enterprise see Robert Lambert and Anita Chan, "Global Dance: Factory Regimes, Asian Labour Standards and Corporate Restructuring," in *Globalisation and Labour Resistance*, ed. Jeremy Waddington (London: Mansell, 1999), 72–104. Also see Wu Jieh-min, "Strange Bedfellows: Dynamics of Government-Business Relations between Chinese Local Authorities and Taiwanese Investors," *Journal of Contemporary China* 6, no. 15 (1997): 319–46.

2. Yi Fu, "Feixu shang de pingdiao: Shenzhen '11.19' teda huozai shigu jishi yu fansi," *Zhongguo gongren* (Chinese workers) 5 (1994): 4–11; and no. 6 (1994): 8–11. For the English translation, see Yi Fu, "Toyland Inferno: A Journey through the Ruins," *Sociology*

and Anthropology, Summer 1998, 8–34. Through an international campaign launched by Hong Kong, American, and European NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), the Italian toy company Artsana/Chicco S.p.a. (the main buyer of products made by Zhili) eventually agreed to compensate the injured Zhili survivors and the families of the deceased. It would have been the first contracting transnational corporation to recognize its responsibility to the workers employed by its suppliers. As of the end of 1999, however, two years after that pledge, the victims still had not received anything: the company had reneged on its promise. At the time of writing, the NGOs had therefore renewed their international campaign against the Italian toy company. See "Toy Campaign: Sixth Anniversary of the Zhili Fire, Dossier no. 6, Special Issue," compiled by Asia Monitor Resource Centre and the Coalition for the Charter on the Safe Production of Toys, Hong Kong, November 1999.

3. Siu-mi Tam, "Chinese Regional Sentiment in Graffiti," *International Folklore Review* 9 (1993): 73–80; Emily Honig, "Regional Identity, Labor, and Ethnicity in Contemporary China," in *Putting Class in Its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia*, ed. Elizabeth J. Perry (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of Asian Studies, 1996), 225–43.

4. Tamara Jacka, "Working Sisters Answer Back: The Presentation and Self-Presentation of Women in China's Floating Population," *China Information*, Summer 1998, 43–75; Lee Ching Kwan, *Gender and the South China Miracle: The Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14–35.

5. Pun Ngai, "Becoming *Dagongmei* (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China," *China Journal*, July 1999, 1–18; Lee Ching Kwan, "Engendering the Worlds of Labor: Women Workers, Labor Markets, and Production Politics in the South China Economic Miracle," *American Sociological Review*, June 1995, 378–97.

6. Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

7. Anita Chan, "The Emerging Patterns of Industrial Relations in China and the Rise of Two New Labor Movements," *China Information* 9, no 4 (1995): 36–59; "Labor Standards and Human Rights: The Case of Chinese Workers under Market Socialism," *Human Rights Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1998): 886–904.

8. Thomas Scharping and Walter Schulze, "Labor and Income Developments in the Pearl River Delta: A Migration Survey of Foshan and Shenzhen," in *Floating Population and Migration in China: The Impact of Economic Reforms*, ed. Thomas Scharping (Hamburg: Mitteilungen Des Instituts Fur Asienkunde, 1997), 119–200; Scott Rozelle, Li Guo, Minggao Shen, Amelia Hughart, and John Giles, "Leaving China's Farm: Survey Results of New Paths and Remaining Hurdles to Rural Migration," *China Quarterly*, June 1999, 367–93.

9. Tan Shen, *Dagongmei de neibu huati: Dui Shenzhen yuan Zhili huanjuchang baiyufengxin de fenxi* (Internal communications among *dagongmei*: Analyses of more than one hundred letters of the former Zhili toy factory in Shenzhen), unpublished. Her paper uses a set of letters from Zhili that partly overlaps the set used in this chapter, though the emphasis of Tan Shen's analysis is quite different from the topics that are drawn out in this chapter.

10. Pun Ngai, "Opening a Minor Genre of Resistance in Reform China: Scream, Dream, and Transgression in a Workplace," *Positions*, forthcoming.

11. Other summary statistics of the letters are as follows: sixteen were from workers to

siblings working in Zhili, thirty-seven were from workers to relatives and friends working in Zhili, and three were from boyfriends or girlfriends of the Zhili workers.

12. In addition to these data, I have acquired a knowledge of the conditions of migrant workers from documentary research, yearly field visits to factories in China, a questionnaire survey of workers in fifty-four Chinese footwear factories, and personal interviews with workers, managers, trade unionists, and government officials.

13. Some of the letters have letterheads that include a city or name of a factory, identifying the senders' locations. The location of writers can be deduced from the context of the letter and place names referred to.

14. Wage issues appear in items 3, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 19, 26, 31, 32, 37, and 39 in table 7.1.

15. Issues related to job-seeking appear in items 1, 2, 15, 17, and 28.

16. Work hours and issues of overtime work appear in items 4, 5, 18, and 22.

17. References to physical existence are found in items 7, 8, 23, 27, 33, 34, 36, and 41.

18. References to loneliness and isolation appear in items 10, 20, 21, and 29.

19. Readers should be aware that the absence of references to a particular topic does not mean that it was not relevant to the letter writer. There could be many reasons why a topic was not mentioned. For example, there were twelve references to ailments such as rashes, headaches, and lethargy, and some could be symptoms of occupational health and safety diseases.

20. "Wages: After the Labor Law," *China News Analysis*, 1 October 1995, 3.

21. *Zhongguo laodong bao* (Chinese labor news), 3 December 1993.

22. For Shenzhen's regulations on minimum wage standards, see *Shenzhen tequ bao* (Shenzhen special economic zone news), 11 June 1994 and 6 November 1994. Also see the Asia Monitor Resource Centre report, *Zhujiang sanjiaozhou gongren quanli zhuangkuang* (The conditions of workers' rights in the Pearl River Delta), May 1995, 19. Because nationwide minimum wage standards are not gathered and published systematically, it is difficult to collect the hundreds and possibly thousands of locally set standards that are revised annually. Zhuhai city had the highest minimum wage in the country at ¥328 in 1993 and ¥380 in 1994. See Asia Monitor Resource Centre, *Zhujiang sanjiaozhou*, 18; *Zhuhai laodong bao* (Zhuhai labor news), 19 May 1995. In 1994, the minimum wage was ¥230 for Guangzhou city, ¥220 for Shanghai, and ¥200 for Beijing (*Change*, April 1994, 2).

23. The wages mentioned in the letters were reported in different ways. Some were given as the wage per month, some as the wage per day and some as the wage per hour. I converted these into a wage per month for a 11.8-hour workday. I arrived at this by averaging the numbers of hours worked per day provided by twenty-one of the letters. For the number of workdays per month, I used a twenty-eight-day work month. This is based on my own observations in the field, which indicated that most migrant workers in Guangdong get about two days off a month.

24. This figure is close to the eleven-hour workday obtained in a survey of fifty Chinese footwear factories that I conducted in 1996. The average workday of the letter writers is longer by about an hour, perhaps because the factories in my survey were not among the worst: we would not have been given permission by factory managers to enter factories where working conditions were unusually poor. For preliminary results from this survey, see Anita Chan, "Globalization, China's Free (Read Bonded) Labour Market, and the Chinese Trade Union," *Asia Pacific Business Review*, Spring-Summer 2000, 260–81.

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25. The working conditions described by this letter writer may not have been entirely in keeping with the law in that the worker probably had only two days off a month, which violated the labor law. This extra work drags down the hourly rate to below the legal minimum.

26. Letter 2.

27. Letter 28.

28. Letter 5.

29. This fieldwork was conducted in August 1998 in Jinjiang county in Fujian, a county well-known for its privately owned footwear enterprises, which hire only migrant workers on the production line.

30. Letter 54.

31. Letter 49.

32. Letter 27.

33. For example, see Wang Ningde, "Yiming jizhe de shiwu tian dagong riji," *Gongren ribao* (Workers' daily), 27 April 1996, 3. A translation of this article is available in *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology,* Summer 1998, 62–76.

34. Letter 41.

35. Letter 19.

36. Letter 11.

37. Letter 49.

38. Letter 48.

39. Letter 57.

40. *Guangdong laodong bao* (Guangdong labor news), 13 January 1997. This OHS survey was carried out by the Shenzhen Labor Bureau Safety Protection Inspection Section and Tongji University's Industrial Hygiene Research Department.

41. Letter 7.

42. Letter 33.

43. Letter 70.

44. Letter 65.

45. Letter 9.

46. Jia Xiaodong and Jin Xipeng, "Woguo yourongji weihai de xianzhuang he yufang" (The damaging conditions and prevention of our country's organic solvents), *Zhonghua laodong weisheng zhiyebing zazhi* (Chinese journal of industrial hygiene and occupational diseases), April 2000, 65–67; *Shenzhen tequ bao* (Shenzhen special economic zone news), 2 May 1995; Asia Monitor Resource Centre, "The Working Conditions of the Toy Industry in China: Preliminary Report," November 1998; Chen Meei-Shia and Anita Chan, "China's 'Market Economics in Command': Workers' Health in Jeopardy," *International Journal of Health Services*, forthcoming. Another toxic labor-intensive industry is electronics. See Pun Ngai, "Opening a Minor."

47. Letter 6.

48. Letter 6.

49. Kevin Bales, "Modern Trade in Disposable People," *Guardian Weekly,* 20 June 1999, 25.

50. See Asia Monitor Resource Centre, "Toy Campaign."

51. In Letter 69 there was a one-line reference to a strike having taken place earlier: "Since the strike last time, our fellow companions have all left."

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52. Letter 25.
53. Letter 23.
54. Before leaving home, they first needed to buy various personal documents—an identity card *(shenfen zheng)*, the unmarried-status certificate *(weihun zheng)* or birth control certificate *(jihua shengyu zheng)*, the permit to work elsewhere (*wugong zheng*), and a border certificate *(bianfang zheng)*—if they were planning to enter the Shenzhen economic zone. They also needed a train or bus ticket and then enough money to cover expenses before they got their first pay, including enough money to buy a return ticket in case they could not find a job. These expenses would have been several hundred yuan.
55. See letter 27 below.
56. Letter 24.
57. Letter 52.
58. Letter 1.
59. Letter 26.
60. Letter 14.
61. Letter 27.
62. Letter 7.
63. Letter 32.
64. During my interviewing in the field in 1996, these were frequent complaints about workers by members of the Taiwanese Business Association in Dongguan city in Guangdong province and in Putian city in Fujian province.
65. In table 7.1, these are included as items 10, 20, 21, and 29.
66. Letter 48.
67. Letter 7.
68. Letter 11.
69. Letter 39.
70. According to my personal communication with Pun Ngai, who has worked as an ordinary worker with female migrants, coworkers do make friends with each other.
71. Letters 41 and 42.
72. Mobo Gao, "The Rural Situation in Post-Mao China and the Conditions of Migrant Workers: The Case of Gao Village," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, October-December 1998, 70–77.
73. I can only surmise why Gao migrant workers could send more money home than the workers who wrote the Zhili letters. The Gao migrants went to other parts of China, whereas the writers of the Zhili letters were all in Guangdong. Based on my own survey and field observations, migrant workers in the Shenzhen area actually make less than those in private enterprises in other parts of Guangdong province (see, e.g., Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, "Inheritors of the Boom: Private Enterprise and the Role of Local Government in a Rural South China Township," *China Journal*, July 1999, 67). In my field research in 1998 I also discovered that migrants in Jingjiang county working for private enterprises made more than those in the Shenzhen area. When indexed against the local minimum wage, foreign-invested enterprises in Guangdong near Shenzhen paid less than four other cities elsewhere in the country (this information derives from a survey of fifty-four footwear factories in five cities that I conducted in 1996).
74. Nine entries gave the amounts of remittances home, but among these, five of the letters referred to two particular workers. The largest amount of money sent was ¥2,000

over a period of a few months. This case could be interpreted as an outlier statistically, as this was the only worker making more than ¥700 a month, well over double that made by other letter writers.

75. Letter 38.

76. Letter 53.

77. Letter 53.

78. One writer complained that her production line leader was Hunanese and therefore incompetent. A complaint of another writer was that some group leaders and technicians were biased in work allocation (letter 10).

79. See Siu-mi Tam, "Chinese Regional"; and Pun Ngai, "Becoming *Dagongmei*."

80. Such antagonisms between different ethnic and regional groups reportedly show up much more frequently in restroom graffiti. On this, see Siu-mi Tam, "Chinese Regional."

81. Even for the relatively better-off rural families, the enormous urban-rural gap in living standards meant that the opportunity was too good to be missed.

82. Gao's article contains a breakdown of these levies, which in the end left a family of four with only ¥100 per person per year. For another report on the heavy burden imposed by local governments on peasants, see Thomas Bernstein, "Farmer Discontent and Regime Responses," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 197–219.

83. Letters 41 and 42.

84. Letter 41.

85. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

86. This is generally the case throughout the developing world. Larry Elliott, "Globalisation Will Lead to Moral Disorder Unless It Is Tamed," *Guardian Weekly*, 15 July 1999, 14.

87. See, for example, Liu Xinhuan, "Zhaojie xieye gonsi kedai yuangong shou chachu" (Zhaojie Footwear Company's mistreatment of workers under investigation), *Gongren ribao* (Workers' daily), 17 April 1996. For a translated version, see *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Summer 1998, 58–61.

88. The normal Chinese word for a vacation is *fangjia*, but to the letter writers *fangjia* simply refers to any period when production line work has been suspended and they have involuntary free time.

89. Such an outing to a supermarket and café is vividly described by Pun Ngai, "Becoming *Dagongmei*."

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