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Nonfiction review: 'Factory Girls'

Julie Foster

Sunday, October 12, 2008

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Factory Girls

From Village to City in a Changing China

IMAGES



Jorge Anchondo

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By Leslie T. Chang

Spiegel & Grau; 420 pages; \$26

China is in the midst of the largest migration in human history: 130 million migrant workers, mainly women younger than 30, have abandoned traditional Chinese villages and begun a new life in the Pearl River Delta. This staggering population shift is three times the number of people who immigrated to America from Europe over a 100-year period.

In 2004, Leslie T. Chang arrived in Dongguan with the goal of telling an overlooked story. For two decades, media around the globe had been reporting on the brutal working conditions in Chinese factories. Chang wanted to find out how the workers, mainly young women, viewed their own lives. Over the next two years, Chang, a first-generation Chinese American and former Wall Street Journal correspondent, "spent a week or two of every month" chronicling the lives of two migrants, Min and Chunming.

"In the end, across time and class, this is the story of China: leaving home, enduring hardship, and making a new life," Chang writes.

In "Factory Girls," Chang reveals a world staggering in its dimensions, unprecedented in its topsy-turvy effects on China's conservative culture and frenetic in its pace even for Chang.

"Twice I bought city maps with bus schedules but both times the routes were already out of date; things were happening too quickly to be written down," she writes.

This human tidal wave began in the late 1950s. By 1990, 60 million migrants had relocated in search of work at the factory cities along China's southern coast. In the 17th century, the Pearl River Delta was one of China's "most fertile regions, supplying fish, vegetables, and rice to the country and exporting silk to Europe." Today the city of Dongguan, with an estimated population of 10 million, though no one knows the exact number, is a "city built for machines, not people."

Dongguan's factories employ tens of thousands of people. One factory alone employs 70,000 people younger than 30 who manufacture running shoes. Workers sleep in dorms housing 2,000 people. Roads in Dongguan are 10 lanes wide, and the "highway



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network, already the densest in the country, is under constant expansion in hopes of delivering goods to the world faster."

"There was nothing to do at home, so I went out." The euphemism migrants use for going to the city captures their situation. The small family farm plots of China are easily maintained by parents. The young are bored by the idleness of dreary village life. They want more money but also crave a more fulfilling life - what they call "seeing the world" or "developing myself." This path can lead to computer classes, intensive English-language schools, Internet dating or prostitution.

Like many villages in Mexico, which have been emptied of their young searching for work in North America, "money sent home by migrants is already the biggest source of wealth accumulation in rural China." This reshuffling of population has upset the balance of power in rural Chinese families. Often migrants don't return home for several years. During that time they become independent, making their own money and decisions. Once they return home for a visit, traditional roles have been reversed. Young women marry without parental consent. Money, once given by elders in red envelopes to the young during holidays, is now given to parents when children return home from the city.

Chang deftly weaves her own family's story of migrations within China, and finally to the West, into her fascinating portrait of Min and Chunming. In the unraveling of her family history her perspective is altered on her own life as well as the story she is narrating. Learning her family's story changes how she views the factory towns of the south.

"Perhaps I, too, am more Chinese than I knew. Because now I understand all of them - understand why a person would choose not to tell a story, or be unable to tell, or not admit to any feeling, because the emotion would overwhelm you otherwise."

"Factory Girls" is a keen-eyed look at contemporary Chinese life composed of equal parts of new global realities, timeless stories of human striving and intelligent storytelling at its best. {sbox}

Julie Foster reviews books for Orion and Western Literature Review. E-mail her at books@sfchronicle.com.

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