

Book Excerpt

Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China

By Leslie T. Chang

Class Discussion Questions

1. How many African Americans were relocated in the largest **forced** migration in human history? How does this compare with the numbers (on the book jacket) of migrant workers (**voluntary migrants**) in China today? (deBlij, pages 82-83)
2. From Chunming's letter home to her parents:
How do her expectations differ from those of her parents, based on what she reveals in her letter?
3. What was the turning point in each young woman's life according to the author? Why?
4. How were sex roles delineated inside a Dongguan factory? What types of jobs did women typically hold inside and outside of the factory?
5. How did their urban migration affect their marriage prospects?
6. The author implies that being less "coddled" actually works in modern Chinese women's favor. Why? Explain.
7. In the final line of this excerpt the author states "The divide between countryside and city was the only one that mattered: Once you crossed that line you could change your fate." Based on your current knowledge of China and this excerpt, explain the above statement.

Book Jacket - Description

EXCERPT: Factory Girls, by Leslie T. Chang
"From Village to City in a Changing China."
2008

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AN EYE-OPENING AND PREVIOUSLY UNTOLD STORY,
Factory Girls is the first look into the everyday lives of the migrant factory population in China.

China has 130 million migrant workers—the largest migration in human history. In *Factory Girls*, Leslie T. Chang, a former correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* in Beijing, tells the story of these workers primarily through the lives of two young women, whom she follows over the course of three years as they attempt to rise from the assembly lines of Dongguan, an industrial city in China's Pearl River Delta.

As she tracks their lives, Chang paints a never-before-seen picture of migrant life—a world where nearly everyone is under thirty, where you can lose your boyfriend and your friends with the loss of a mobile phone, where a few computer or English lessons can catapult you into a completely different social class. Chang takes us inside a sneaker factory so large that it has its own hospital, movie theater, and fire department; to posh karaoke bars that are fronts for prostitution; to makeshift English classes where students shave their heads in monklike devotion and sit day after day in front of machines watching English words flash by; and back to a farming village for the Chinese New Year, revealing the poverty and idleness of rural life that drive young girls to leave home in the first place. Throughout this riveting portrait, Chang also interweaves the story of her own family's migrations, within China and to the West, providing historical and personal frames of reference for her investigation.

(continued on back flap)

A letter home, from Chunming:

54 **FACTORY GIRLS** You will never understand what is really in your daughter's heart. Maybe you think that I have already found my ideal factory, with three hundred yuan a month. Maybe you think that I will never again jump factories. Maybe your wish is that I never jump factories again, that I work at this factory for two years and then come home to get married, to have a family like all the girls in the countryside. But I am not thinking any of these things . . .

I want to carve out a world for myself in Guangdong . . .
My plan is:

1. To study at correspondence university
2. To learn to speak Cantonese
3. With nothing to my name and without any accomplishment, to absolutely not marry

During her first three years in the city, Chunming did not return home once. She told friends that the factory break was too short, but in her diary she wrote: *Who knows why I am not going home for the new year? The main reason: I really do not want to waste time. Because I must study!* She also rejected her mother's advice and wrote love letters to a good-looking young man who worked on the factory floor. Young men in the workplace were a rarity, and the better-looking ones were spoiled by the attentions of multiple girls. This one was not interested in Chunming, and he passed her letters around for others to read.

After six months on the assembly line, Chunming learned that her factory was hiring internally for clerks, and she wrote a letter to the head of her department expressing interest. The boss had heard of her boy-chasing reputation and ordered her transferred to another department. But his order was somehow misstated, and Chunming reported to work as a clerk. She performed well and the boss changed his mind about her. The new job paid three

hundred yuan a month—triple what Chunming had made a year before.

THE STORIES OF MIGRANT WOMEN shared certain features. The arrival in the city was blurry and confused and often involved being tricked in some way. Young women often said they had gone out alone, though in fact they usually traveled with others; they just felt alone. They quickly forgot the names of factories, but certain dates were branded in their minds, like the day they left home or quit a bad factory forever. What a factory actually made was never important; what mattered was the hardship or opportunity that came with working there. The turning point in a migrant's fortunes always came when she challenged her boss. At the moment she risked everything, she emerged from the crowd and forced the world to see her as an individual.

It was easy to lose yourself in the factory, where there were hundreds of girls with identical backgrounds: born in the village, badly educated, and poor. You had to believe that you mattered even though you were one among millions.

April 1, 1994

Yes, I am a person so ordinary that I cannot be more ordinary, so plain I cannot be plainer, a girl like all the other girls. I like to eat snacks, I like to have fun, and I like to look pretty.

Don't imagine that I can be superhuman.

You are just a most ordinary, most plain girl, attracted to anything that is pretty or tasty or fun.

So from being ordinary and plain I will make my start.

* * *

Inside a Dongguan factory, the sexes were sharply divided. Women worked as clerks and in human resources and sales, and they held most of the jobs on the assembly line; the bosses felt that young women were more diligent and easier to manage. Men monopolized technical jobs like mold design and machine repair. They generally held the top positions in the factory but also the dead-end occupations at the bottom: security guards, cooks, and drivers. Outside the factory, women were waitresses, nannies, hairdressers, and prostitutes. Men worked on construction sites.

This gender segregation was reflected in help-wanted ads:

GAOBU HANDBAG FACTORY SEEKS TO EMPLOY

SALESPERSON: FEMALE ONLY, GRADE FOUR ENGLISH

RECEPTIONIST: FEMALE ONLY, CAN SPEAK

CANTONESE

SECURITY GUARDS: MALE, UNDER 30, 1.7 METERS

OR ABOVE, EX-MILITARY, KNOWS

FIREFIGHTING, CAN PLAY BASKETBALL A PLUS

The divide implied certain things. Young women enjoyed a more fluid job situation; they could join a factory assembly line and move up to be clerks or salespeople. Young men had a harder time entering a factory, and once in they were often stuck. Women, in the factory or out, came into contact with a wider range of people and quickly adopted the clothes, hairstyles, and accents of the city; men tended to stay locked in their outsider worlds. Women integrated more easily into urban life, and they had more incentive to stay.

Women make up more than one-third of China's migrants. They tend to be younger than their male counterparts and more likely to be single; they travel farther from home and they stay out longer. They are more motivated to improve themselves and more likely to value migration for its life-changing possibilities. In one survey, men cited higher income as the chief purpose of leaving home, while women aspired to "more experience in life." Unlike men, women had no home to go back to. According to Chinese tradition, a son was expected to return to his parents' house with his wife after he married; a son would forever have a home in the village where he was born. Daughters, once grown, would never return home to live—until they married, they didn't belong anywhere.

To some extent, this deep-rooted sexism worked in women's favor. Many rural parents wanted a grown son to stay close to home, perhaps delivering goods or selling vegetables in the towns near the village. Young men with such uninspiring prospects might simply *hun*—drift—doing odd jobs, smoking and drinking and gambling away their meager earnings. Young women—less treasured, less coddled—could go far from home and make their own plans. Precisely because they mattered less, they were freer to do what they wanted.

But it was a precarious advantage. If migration liberated young women from the village, it also dropped them in a no-man's-land. Most girls in the countryside were married by their early twenties, and a migrant woman who postponed marriage risked closing off that possibility for good. The gender imbalance in Dongguan, where 70 percent of the workforce was said to be female, worked against finding a high-quality mate. And social mobility complicated the search for a husband. Women who had moved up from the assembly line disdained the men back in the village, but city men looked down on them in turn. Migrants called this *gaobucheng, dibujiu*—unfit for a higher position but unwilling to take a lower one.

The migrant women I knew never complained about the unfairness of being a woman. Parents might favor sons over daughters,

bosses prefer pretty secretaries, and job ads discriminate openly, but they took all of these injustices in stride—over three years in Dongguan, I never heard a single person express anything like a feminist sentiment. Perhaps they took for granted that life was hard for everyone. The divide between countryside and city was the only one that mattered: Once you crossed that line, you could change your fate.

Stop Here

* * *

Moving up came easily to Chunming. In 1995, she jumped to a factory in a remote part of Dongguan that made water pistols and BB guns. She finally learned to speak Cantonese. Within a year, her monthly salary increased from three hundred yuan to six hundred and fifty, then eight hundred, then one thousand yuan. She discovered that the department heads above her made more money though she did the same work. *If you don't increase my salary to 1,500 yuan a month, she wrote her boss, I refuse to do this anymore.* She got what she wanted; no one in the factory had ever received a five-hundred-yuan raise before. But the promotion did not satisfy Chunming. It cast her into a new world where there was so much to learn.

Her dealings with other people immediately became more complicated. In the village, relations between people were determined by kinship ties and shared histories. In school and on the assembly line, everyone was in the same lowly position. But once a person started to rise in the factory world, the balance of power shifted, and that could be unsettling. A friend could turn into a boss; a young woman might be promoted ahead of her boyfriend.

March 26, 1996

My promotion this time has let me see the hundred varieties of human experience. Some people cheer me, some