Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*, New York, Spiegel & Grau, 2008, 436 pp., $26.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Xujun Eberlein

1.

The Chinese say, "The River is in the east for thirty years, then in the west for thirty years." The adage uses the unpredictable behavior of the Yellow River as an analogy for periodic upheavals in Chinese life and society.

Within a thirty-year time span, China has seen two grand-scale migrations, each involving many millions of young people. The first began in the late 1960s and continued through most of the 1970s: more than seventeen million urban youths took part in the so-called "sent-down" movement—most against their will. I was one of them. After my 1974 high school graduation in the city of Chongqing, I spent nearly four years toiling in the rural fields of Fuling, leaving only when the end of the Cultural Revolution provided me the opportunity to enter university in 1978.

By the end of the 1970s, nearly all the "sent-down" youths, miserable and desperate, had managed to return to the city by one means or another. Barely catching our breath, none of us could have foreseen the reverse migration that would begin in the mid-1980s, when young peasants spontaneously left their rural homes to find jobs in the urban areas. This movement, at first sporadic because of government restrictions, picked up speed as economic reforms unfolded and the constraints relaxed. I remember rural relatives—all teenage girls—from my mother's ancestral village coming to stay with us in Chongqing, one after another, before heading to Guangdong province to find work. Each winter before the Chinese New Year, the laughing, gabbing girls returned, with large and small bags of goods and gifts for their families, again staying with us for a day or two on their way home. In two decades, the number of migrant workers nationwide has reached 130 million. The "river" has again altered its course, for better or worse.

In an intimate, nonjudgmental voice, Leslie T. Chang's refreshingly rendered *Factory Girls* opens up the fascinating and gritty world of female migrant workers. While many of the young women find economic improvement, their rudderless lives raise the question of whether this new migration is a progression or regression in Chinese women's emancipation.

Before the free-market economic reforms, China's urban women largely enjoyed equal status in society and the family. This was because, for various political and economic reasons, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strongly promoted woman's equality, albeit within the larger frame of collectivism, in which individuals were cast as part of a social machine. Meanwhile, in the countryside, the traditional patriarchal system maintained its grip. In the village I was sent to in the 1970s, girls were regarded as nothing but dowry-debt. The birth of a baby girl always made her parents miserable. In one instance, a poor young mother tried to stage a "falling-off-the-cliff accident" to get rid of her infant girl; fortunately the baby survived. Only one young woman in the village had a middle-school diploma; most had not gone beyond the second grade because they were needed for work. Few showed any interest in education.

This kind of sex discrimination in rural areas has a long history; it is not the result of the one-child policy as some Westerners believe. In fact, the policy was not implemented until 1979, after I had left the village, and even then, the enforcement of the policy was often lax in the countryside, as reflected in *Factory Girls*. During a visit to the home village of a migrant worker named Min, Chang observes:

> Nationwide, the policy limiting most families to one or two children had been in force for more than two decades, yet here in the village the average family had more than two, Min's father said. The Lus had five children, but one family in the village had six, and another had seven.

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This is consistent with my experience. In general, the high number of children was due to the peasants' desire for boys. A family would typically keep producing babies until a boy arrived. Government policies might have forced the birthrate down, but they did not change the male-centric mentality in the countryside.

China's economic reform, which started and found its first success in rural areas, has helped reduce discrimination against girls. Country life has improved. There is a small but telling scene in *Factory Girls,* as the author enters Min's rural home:

> The house was quiet. Min's younger sister and brother were visiting relatives; another young sister was home, watching television. She looked up briefly when Min entered and then returned her attention to the screen.

There was no such thing as television or leisure time in the village where I lived during the 1970s.

Still, rural development is far behind that of the cities, and now the countryside "has nothing to do" for young people. Migrant workers—young women as well as young men—take the matter of further upgrading into their own hands. While still at home, Min had graduated from middle school but failed the national high school entrance exam. Her older sister, who had already "gone out" as the first migrant worker in the family, urged Min to get further education and subsequently paid her tuition for two years of vocational high school.

Min then followed her sister to Dongguan. Not education, but money changes Min's status in her family. Two years after going out, Min lands a high paying job. She is able to send back big money and expensive gifts. Her relationship with her parents changes:

> Min was able to dictate family affairs from afar. She monitored her father's purchases and rejected his business plans, and the fact that she had sent home $1,300 gave her such authority.

What the government was unable to do in the twentieth century, money may do in the twenty-first. While Chang never heard a single person express anything like a feminist sentiment, one can reasonably guess that the role of young women in the migration may eventually eliminate rural discrimination against girls and women.

2.

Min and her sister worked in Dongguang, Guangdong, one of China's largest factory cities, whose assembly lines "drew the young and unskilled and were estimated to be seventy-percent female[s]" in their early teens to late twenties, says Chang. "In EPZs [Export Processing Zones such as Dongguang] the number of women far exceeds number of men," according to the study "Women Migrant Workers under the Chinese Social Apartheid" (Au Loong-yu, Nan Shan, and Zhang Ping, Committee for Asian Women [CAW], May 2007).

The god of EPZ factories is profits; morality is not their concern. Many pay the migrant workers less than minimum wage—if they pay them at all. They often hold back pay to

prevent unsatisfied workers from switching jobs. To quit, you must get permission; otherwise you risk giving up months of hard-earned wages. Assembly-line workers also endure unreasonably high workloads and substandard working and living conditions.

Unlike other writing on migrant workers that focuses on these conditions, however, *Factory Girls* looks at the individuals from within. "I wanted to write about … how the workers themselves thought about migration," Chang notes. The result is a fascinating revelation of a little-known moral reality.

The young women who come to Dongguan from all over the country have no roots, no "real friends," no family, no urban or factory experience, and nowhere to attain behavioral guidance. They are always at risk of being cheated or abused, with no organization to turn to for support. To protect themselves, they are generally distrusting, even toward their fellow workers, especially those who do not speak the same local dialect. They grope around to cross an unknown river by primitive instinct. Two lines repeatedly appear in *Factory Girls*:

> "The easiest thing in the world was to lose touch with someone."
>
> "I can only rely on myself."

Chunming, another migrant worker who became close to Chang, arrives in Dongguan at age seventeen. She is nearly tricked into working at a brothel by a friend's cousin. To get hired at a factory while still underage, she uses an ID card that someone lost, turning herself into an impostor—a practice that turns out to be quite common. She switches jobs frequently, often by fabricating experience, and makes money by joining a pyramid scheme. When she eventually lands an office job, she takes illegal kickbacks—another common practice. Chunming is a striver ("almost everyone I knew in Dongguan was a striver," Chang writes), working hard and studying on her own. It is surprising when, in the last chapter of the book, Chunming tells Chang that she wishes to make a contribution to society:

> "A contribution to society?" I asked her, startled. "What do you mean?"
>
> "I don't mean to be a big scientist or something like that," Chunming said. "How many people can do that? I think if you have a happy life and are a good person, that is a contribution to society."

By any measure, Chuming is one of the successful migrant workers, but I wonder if she has a clear standard for becoming a "good person." Still, like Chang, I am reluctant to place too much blame on her, as morality is relative and she is a product of her working environment. Despite her constant efforts to improve herself, Chuming leads a directionless life in Dongguan.

She is not alone. Nearly all the migrant workers portrayed in the book exist in similar morally ambiguous situations. Min, for example, smuggles out expensive Coach bags from her factory, even though she had no means to sell them without being caught. A self-taught English teacher, Liu Yixia, fabricates a college degree to get hired.

It is evident from the book that the migrant women display "severe atomization and deep political apathy within the workforce," as the CAW study aptly describes it. Chang observes that no one ever mentions the Party; Min even asks, "Who is Chairman Mao now?" Compared to the old generation of Chinese women in the1930s and 1940s, who followed the CCP to fight for a new China, or the next in the 1950s through the 1970s, who took active part in the collective farming, the current social transformation sounds like a regression, as CAW's study suggests. But with collectivism severely curtailing individualism in the earlier times, what social good actually resulted from those conscious collective efforts? In contrast,

the individualism of the latest migration is new and socially tolerated: the women migrants are intent on improving their own lives, economically and socially.

Factory Girls was published in October 2008, about the time the global financial crisis began to hit China's EPZs. *China Daily* recently reported on a United Nations study that finds that young women migrant workers have been hit hardest by the economic downturn. The report quotes Max Tunon, a consultant for the International Labor Organization: "After overcoming the initial challenges of moving to the city," he says, "young female migrants do not wish to return home. …There are few employment opportunities at home and most young people are very reluctant to work on the land." The Mins and Chunmings we grow acquainted with in *Factory Girls* now face another, greater challenge. My eyes are on them.

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