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LETTER FROM CHINA

BOOMTOWN GIRL

Finding a new life in the golden city.

BY PETER HESSLER

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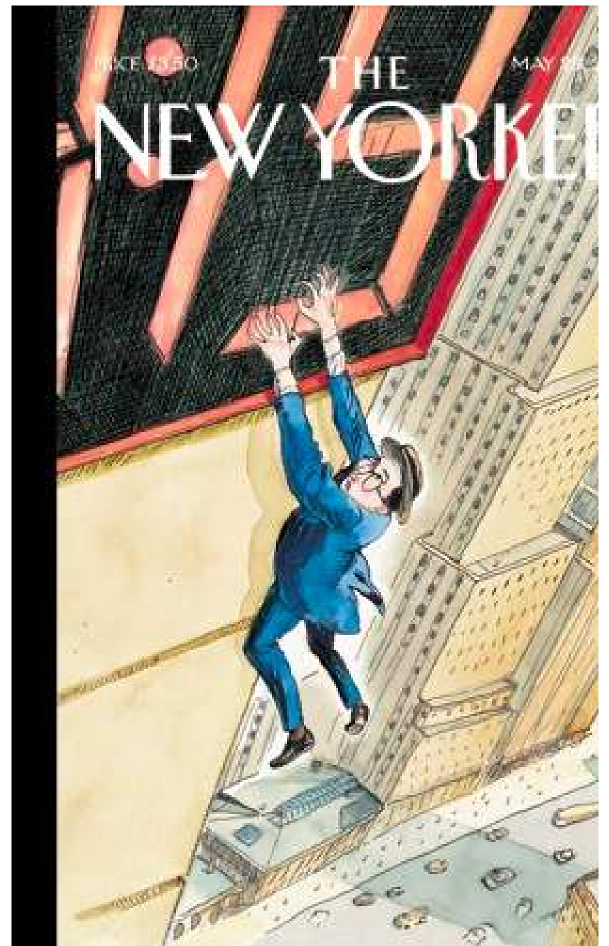
Ma Li couldn't tell me exactly why she had left her home town after graduating from the local teachers college. "There was something in the heart," she said. "My mother says that I just won't be satisfied with a happy life. She says that I'm determined to *chiku*—eat bitter." In any event, she wouldn't have been satisfied with life as a local schoolteacher. "Teaching is a good job for a woman, and it's easy to find a husband, because men like to have teachers as their wives," she said. "It could have been a very comfortable life. But, if it's too comfortable, I think it's like death."



She was slipping away even when I first met her. That was in 1996, when I taught English at the teachers college in Fuling, a small town on the Yangtze River in Sichuan Province. My students were training to become middle-school teachers, and one day I asked them to respond to a hypothetical

question: Would you rather have a long life with the normal ups and downs, or an extremely happy life that ends after another twenty years?

Nearly all my students took the first option. Most of them came from peasant homes in the Sichuan countryside, and several pointed out that their families were so poor that they couldn't afford to die in two decades. Ma Li, though, chose the short life. At nineteen, she was the youngest student in the class. She wrote:

> It seems to me that I haven't been really happy for quite a long time. Sometimes I owe my being dispirited to the surroundings, especially the oppressive atmosphere in our college. But I find the other students can enjoy themselves while I am complaining, so I think the problem is in myself.

Everything she wrote that year marked her as different. She contradicted her classmates; she skirted the Communist Party line; she had her own opinions. She wrote about her father, a math professor who had spent the Cultural Revolution in political exile, working in a coal mine; and she wrote about her older sister, who had gone to the city of Shenzhen, seven hundred miles away, to look for work. When I asked my students to compose a business letter to an American organization, Ma Li chose the Country Music Association, in Nashville. She told me that she was curious to learn what country music was like. Another time, she asked if I had any black friends, because she had never seen a black person, except on television. When my literature class performed "A Midsummer Night's Dream," she played Titania. She was a good actress, although she had a tendency to play every role with a touch of a smile, as if she were watching herself from a great distance. She had high cheekbones, full lips, and dark, fast-moving eyes in a wide-open face.

After graduation, most of my students accepted government-assigned teaching jobs in their home towns. Ma Li went south to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, with her boyfriend to look for work. He was a square-faced young man with bristly hair, hard black eyes, and a quick temper, and he wanted to go on to Shanghai. "I hadn't decided to break up with him yet," Ma Li told me later. "But I knew I didn't want to go to Shanghai." Instead, in November of 1997, she went to Shenzhen, and within a few months they had broken up for good. In Shenzhen, it took her less than a week to find a position as a secretary in a factory that produced costume jewelry for export. Her starting salary was eight hundred and seventy yuan a month, or a hundred and five American dollars. Most of her former classmates were earning about forty dollars a month as teachers in Sichuan.

It was not unusual for former students to call and tell me about various milestones of independence. Often, these had to do with money and new possessions—a salary raise, a new apartment. Once, a student called to tell me that he had acquired a cell phone. He talked about the cell phone for a few minutes, and then he mentioned, in an offhand way, that he had also become engaged. Five months after starting the factory job, Ma Li called to report that she had received a raise, to a hundred and twenty dollars a month.

She laughed when I said that she now made as much money as I did. But she sounded a little funny, and I asked if something was wrong.

”The company has an agent in Hong Kong,” she said slowly. “He often comes here to Shenzhen. He is an old man, and he likes me.”

”What do you mean by that?”

”Because I am fat.” She giggled nervously. I knew that she had gained a little weight, and in some ways it made her even prettier.

”Does he want you to be his girlfriend?”

”Perhaps.” Her voice sounded small on the phone.

”Is he married?”

”He is divorced. He has young children in Taiwan. But he usually works in Hong Kong.”

”How often does he come to Shenzhen?”

”Twice a month.”

”Is it a big problem?”

”He always finds a way to be with me,” she said. “He says he will help me find a job in Hong Kong if I want one. The salaries are much higher there, you know.”

”That sounds like a very bad idea,” I said carefully. “If you want another job, you should not ask him for help. That will only cause big problems in the future. You should try to avoid him.”

”I do,” she said. “And I tell my co-workers to always be with me if he is here.”

”Well, if it becomes a big problem, you should leave the job.”

”I know,” she said. “Anyway, it is not such a good job, and if I have to leave I will.”

The city of Shenzhen is surrounded by a sixty-seven-mile-long chain-link fence. Some of the fence’s sections are topped with barbed wire. Deep in the center of downtown is a seventy-acre expanse of green called Litchi Park. At its southern end is a billboard that features an enormous image of Deng Xiaoping against a backdrop of the Shenzhen skyline, with the injunction “Persist in Following the Communist Party’s Basic Line for One Hundred Years Without Change.” The billboard has become a symbol of Shenzhen, and locals and visitors often pose in front of it for photographs. In February of 1997, when Deng Xiaoping died, thousands of Shenzhen residents gathered to make offerings at the billboard. They left flowers, poetry, and other memorials, and some of them sang “Spring Story,” which is the official Shenzhen song:

> In the spring of 1979
> An old man drew a circle on the southern coast of China
> And city after city rose up like fairy tales
> And mountains and mountains of gold gathered like a miracle.

Other Chinese cities have history, but Shenzhen’s origins have the flavor of myth—the

miraculous birth, the benevolent god. In 1978, two years after the death of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping marked his rise to power by initiating what became known as Reform and Opening—capitalist-style innovations that ended almost three decades of Communist economics. Deng avoided trying out the more radical changes in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where mistakes would be politically disastrous. Instead, he and his advisers experimented in less developed areas, in what came to be called Special Economic Zones. Through a system of tax breaks and investment privileges, the government hoped to encourage foreign firms to set up shop in these zones. In 1980, they conferred this honor on Shenzhen, a sleepy southern border town whose economy had depended mostly on fishing and farming. Shenzhen became a "reform laboratory," and one of its nicknames was Window to the Outside World.

In 1990, the government established the Shenzhen Stock Exchange—the first big-board market in China. (The second one opened later that year, in Shanghai.) Since 1980, Shenzhen's G.D.P. has had an annual growth rate of more than thirty per cent, and its residents enjoy one of the highest standards of living in any Chinese city. A number of major American corporations have plants in Shenzhen, including I.B.M., Compaq, PepsiCo, and DuPont.

Residents of Hong Kong, which is separated from Shenzhen by only a waterway and a fence, tend to dismiss their neighbor as a cheap imitation of the former British colony. Indeed, Shenzhen's skyscrapers aren't nearly as impressive as Hong Kong's, the streets aren't as clean, and there isn't the same dramatic cityscape of steel and lights shimmering across a harbor. But few mainlanders have been to Hong Kong, and to them Shenzhen is astonishing. The city is probably the cleanest of any in mainland China. And it is green—official statistics boast that forty-four per cent of the city is open space. Parks are sprinkled throughout the downtown area, and the streets are lined with banyan trees and palms and carefully groomed strips of grass. There are few bicycles downtown; most people can afford to take buses or cabs. The traffic moves smoothly. The city center is intersected by Shennan Road, nine lanes of traffic bordered by the city's best-known buildings: the Stock Exchange, a block of glistening blue-green glass; the Land King Tower, a narrow, twin-spired building of sixty-nine stories; and its adjoining apartment complex, which, with a seven-story-high opening in its façade, is the city's most architecturally innovative structure.

Over the past twenty years, Shenzhen has become home to a social experiment that is as impressive as its economic adventure. Its population has exploded from three hundred thousand to more than four million. The average Shenzhen resident is less than twenty-nine years old—a remarkable statistic in a country whose birth policy has resulted in aging urban populations. Because many of the factories rely on unskilled, low-wage labor, most of the newcomers are women. Although there are no reliable official statistics, locals like to say that there are seven women to every man in Shenzhen, and the city is sometimes described as a "woman's paradise,"

because it offers so many job opportunites to young women. But this phrase hardly describes the underside of the boomtown. Shenzhen is notorious as a place where workers in poorly regulated factories often lose limbs in labor-related accidents. China's development over the past decade has spurred an explosive growth in the sex industry, and nowhere is this phenomenon more obvious than in downtown Shenzhen, where it's impossible to walk at night without being propositioned by young prostitutes, who are known as "street angels."

Shenzhen feels like a city under siege. Locals, knowing that they have been the beneficiary of unusual government patronage, are constantly worried that Shenzhen's special status might be revoked. (The 1997 offerings to Deng Xiaoping at the billboard in Litchi Park reflected this fear of political change.) In the mid-nineteen-eighties, when a series of smuggling scandals broke out in the Special Economic Zones, conservative Communist officials complained that the loosened restrictions on foreign investment were invitations to corruption and neo-colonialism.

Similar worries prompted the government to erect the encircling fence. It was a distinctly Chinese "solution": just as the Great Wall had been built to keep foreigners at bay, so the fence was intended to keep the capitalist reforms under control. Chinese citizens entering Shenzhen proper have to go through customs, where they must show a border pass and an I.D. that requires approval from their home province. The completion of the fence, in 1984, had unintended consequences. Labor-intensive factories inside the Special Economic Zone began moving to the other side of the fence to take advantage of cheaper rents and less rigorous law enforcement. Today, Shenzhen is divided into two worlds, which are described by residents as *guannei* and *guanwai*—"within the customs" and "outside the customs." Satellite towns have sprung up beyond the fence, most of them squalid and unplanned. In this sprawl of cheaply constructed factories and worker dormitories, wages are lower, workweeks are longer, and labor accidents and factory fires are more frequent than they are in Shenzhen proper.

It was here, outside the customs, that Ma Li got her job at the costumejewelry factory, handling inventory, keeping track of orders, and doing some English translation. The factory made pewter, brass, and low-grade silver jewelry, as well as cheap plastic beads that were painted and lacquered and packaged in zip-lock bags to be sent to Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, San Francisco, and Chicago.

Her stories drifted up to me from the south. Every two or three weeks, Ma Li telephoned or wrote, creating the city in my mind. Some of her tales ended abruptly, like the one about the businessman from Hong Kong who had pursued her. Other stories lasted longer, like the one about her older sister, who had first worked as a travelling saleswoman and then been recruited by a company that was running a pyramid scheme. She brought Ma Li to the recruitment meeting. "A lot of the salespeople had low cultural levels, but they had learned how to talk," Ma

Li recalled. “I didn’t think it was a good way to make money, but it was a good way to improve yourself and improve your confidence.” Her sister had known that it was a scam—the government was cracking down on pyramid schemes, which had run rampant across southern China—and she said that she had gone to the meeting simply out of curiosity. Afterward, she had taken a job with a lonely-hearts hot line, talking on the telephone with other people who felt lost in Shenzhen. “Some people say there is no real love in Shenzhen,” Ma Li said when I asked why people called her sister’s hot line. “People are too busy with earning money to really live.”

That, probably, was why a young man named Gao Ming took her by surprise. He had been trained as a moldmaker, but he came to the jewelry factory as a purchasing agent, because he wanted a break from manual labor. At his previous job in Shenzhen, Gao Ming had miscalculated the weight of a metal part, which slipped when he and two other workers were trying to lift it. Gao Ming let go. The other two workers didn’t, and they lost their fingers. The workers were promised compensation, and Gao Ming wasn’t blamed for the accident. Still, he decided to leave the job. Seeing the injured men around the factory made him uncomfortable.

At first, Ma Li didn’t take much notice when Gao Ming arrived at her factory, in March of 1998. He was of average height, with stiff black hair, and his shoulders were broad from working with the molds. He wasn’t particularly handsome. He kept to himself. But after a while, she found that she was noticing him. She liked the way he walked—there was a certain confidence in his gait. Two months later, small gifts started appearing in the drawer of her desk. She received two dolls and a small figurine of a sheep. She didn’t ask who had put them there.

One day in September, Gao Ming and Ma Li went out with some of their co-workers and found themselves walking alone in the local park. Ma Li can’t remember how they became separated from the others. Suddenly she was frightened—things were happening too fast. She was twenty-two years old. He was twenty-six.

”I don’t want to walk with you,” she said.

”Who do you want to walk with?” Gao Ming asked.

”I don’t want to walk with anybody!”

They went back to the factory. Months later, Gao Ming told her that it was then that he could see she hadn’t made up her mind to reject him.

The jewelry factory had fifty employees. The owner was Taiwanese, as were many of the bosses who ran plants outside the customs. He told the workers that he hated mainland China and that he was there only because of the cheap labor. The workers didn’t like the Taiwanese owner very much. Some of them made as little as twelve cents an hour, which meant that they had to work overtime to earn a decent income. Whenever they talked about the boss, they used the words that many workers in Shenzhen use to describe the Taiwanese owners: “stingy” and

“lecherous.” But the jewelry-factory boss wasn’t as bad as many of the other bosses, and conditions at the plant were better than at many of the others beyond the fence. The workers had Sundays off, and during the week they were allowed to leave the factory after work hours, although everybody had to be back in the dormitory by 11 or 12 P.M., depending on the boss’s whim.

The dormitory where Ma Li lived was on the top two floors of a six-story building. There were six workers to a dorm room. It was a “three-in-one” factory—production, warehousing, and living quarters were combined into one structure. This arrangement is illegal in China, and the workers knew it, just as they knew that some of the production material stored on the first floor was extremely flammable. What’s more, an electrician had reported to Ma Li that the building’s wiring was faulty. Afterward, she mapped out an escape route for herself. If a fire broke out at night, she would run to the dormitory’s sixth-floor balcony and jump across to the roof of the building next door. That was the extent of her plan—she had no interest in complaining to the government about the violations, and neither did the other workers. All of them were far from home, and they knew that such conditions were common in the plants outside the customs.

One Saturday night in October, Gao Ming took Ma Li’s hand as they were crossing the road. Gao Ming held on tightly.

”I’m too nervous,” Ma Li said, once they had reached the other side. “I don’t want it to be like this.”

”What’s wrong?” Gao Ming said. “Haven’t you ever done this before?”

”I have,” she said. “But I’m still scared.”

”It’s going to be like this in the future,” Gao Ming said. “You should get used to it.”

I made my first visit to Shenzhen in April, 1999. It was a hazy morning, the sky low and heavy with smog, when my bus arrived at Ma Li’s satellite city, twenty miles outside the Shenzhen fence. She was waiting for me in front of a local hamburger joint—the sole American-style fast-food restaurant in town and a sign that Western influence had made its way out here from downtown Shenzhen.

Ma Li looked much the same as when I had last seen her. She wore a simple blue dress, and her hair was tied back; she smiled and shook my hand. Much of her old shyness had disappeared; she was the guide now, steering me briskly through town to another bus stop, where we caught a ride into the Special Economic Zone. Uniformed guards at the border checked our I.D.s—my passport, her border pass—and the highway led us into the heart of the city. She was excited: she said that she went inside the fence only once a month or so, because the city was so expensive and because her factory restricted the workers to one-day weekends.

I visited Shenzhen three more times, and it was always the passage into town and then the

return, the fenced-in boundary and the routine of the checkpoint, that were the most memorable moments of the day. On that first trip, Ma Li and I spent only a few hours downtown. We walked past the Stock Exchange and glanced at the digital board on its façade. We went to the Safari Park Shenzhen, where tourists paid twenty-five yuan to throw live ducks to the crocodiles. I took Ma Li's photo in front of the Deng Xiaoping billboard. In the Chinese way, she didn't smile—a sombre pose with the Old Man waving in the background.

And then we returned, catching another bus north: past the downtown skyscrapers and the apartment blocks, watching the neighborhoods grow seedier with every mile we travelled from the center. We cut through the green hills just before the border, where nothing had yet been built. And then we arrived at the long, low line of the chain-link fence. There was a billboard at the checkpoint advertising "Mission Hills Golf Club: The First 72-Hole Golf Club in China."

Beyond the fence was a rough cluster of unfinished concrete buildings. Piles of dirt stood beside enormous foundation holes. We kept going north, the factory towns coming one after the other: dormitories surrounded by fences, smokestacks sprouting in dirty clumps. Signs above factory gateways identified the goods produced within: shoes, furniture, toys. We travelled twenty miles before arriving in Ma Li's town, where a group of Taiwanese bosses had set up half a dozen jewelry plants in a tight group. A space of a few feet separated Ma Li's factory and the neighboring one.

That night, we had dinner at an outdoor restaurant on the town's main street. It was a pleasant evening; I had always preferred nighttime in China, and, in the Shenzhen satellite towns, the monotony of the urban landscapes was hidden by the darkness. There was an energy to the place at night: the streets were filled with young people, walking in packs, laughing and flirting with one another. It was clear that they had nothing else to do—there were no families here, no traditions. They were free.

Ma Li sent part of her salary home to help pay her brother's school tuition, and the responsibility had given her a new air of maturity. At twenty-three, she was the oldest worker in her factory office, which was staffed entirely by women. During dinner, she regaled me with stories about the Taiwanese factory owners. They fascinated her—she couldn't believe the looseness of their lives, financially and morally, and she saw them as symbolic of the world beyond the mainland. She told me about one of her boss's colleagues, a Chinese-American who had recently arrived from San Francisco on business, had faxed his wife a love letter from Ma Li's office, and then had gone out and hired a prostitute. Ma Li's boss was always leering at the young women in the factory; a Taiwanese businessman in a nearby factory had become so distracted by two Sichuanese mistresses that his plant went bankrupt. In Ma Li's opinion, they were all the same. "All of them have failed somewhere else," she scoffed, explaining that her boss's old company in Taiwan had gone bankrupt years ago. When I asked if Shenzhen had

fewer political restrictions than Fuling, she said it did, but pointed out that the labor practices were just as restrictive. “Here it’s not the government but the bosses who control everything,” she said. “Maybe it amounts to the same thing.”

She told me about a notorious Taiwanese-owned purse factory in a nearby city. The plant kept the gates locked throughout the six-day workweek. Except on Sundays, the workers couldn’t leave the factory complex.

”That can’t be legal,” I said.

”Many of the factories do that,” she said, shrugging. “All of them have good connections with the government.”

She explained that one of her friends had worked at the purse factory, where the Taiwanese boss often ordered everyone to work until midnight, yelling when they got tired. One worker had complained and been fired; when he tried to claim his last paycheck, the boss had him beaten up. Ma Li decided that she had to do something about it, so she wrote the boss a letter that said, “This day next year will be your memorial day.”

”And I drew a picture of a—” She was speaking English, and she couldn’t think of the word. She pushed aside her plate and sketched an outline on the table—a simple head, a narrow body.

”A skeleton?” I asked.

”Yes,” she said. “A skeleton. But I didn’t write my name. I wrote, ‘An unhappy worker.’ “

I didn’t know how to respond—back in Fuling, my writing class hadn’t covered death threats. Finally, I said, “Did the letter work?”

”I think it helped,” she said. “Workers at the factory said that the boss was very worried about it. Afterward, he was a little better.”

”Why didn’t you complain to the police?”

”It doesn’t do any good,” she said. “All of them have connections. In Shenzhen, you have to take care of everything yourself.”

When we finished the meal, Ma Li looked at me and said, “Do you want to see something interesting?”

She led me to a small street near the middle of town. Below the road, a creek flowed sluggishly in the shadows. Dozens of people stood along the curb, smoking cigarettes. The street was unlit, and all of the people were men. I asked what was going on.

”They’re looking for prostitutes,” Ma Li said. We watched as a prostitute appeared—walking slowly, glancing around, until a man came up and spoke to her. They talked for a few seconds, and then the man slipped back into the shadows. The woman kept walking. Ma Li said, “Do you want to see what happens if I leave you here alone?”

”No,” I said. “We can leave now.”

I spent the night in Gao Ming’s one-room apartment. He had recently left Ma Li’s factory to

start a new job, which allowed him to live in private housing. His neighborhood was covered with bold-faced flyers advertising private venereal-disease clinics; we followed the notices up the stairwell to Gao Ming's apartment, on the fourth floor. The building was only half constructed—the walls unpainted, the plaster chipping away, the plumbing unfinished. The water heater hadn't been installed yet. Much of the development beyond the Shenzhen fence seemed to be like this—abandoned before it was completed. There were too many factories and apartment blocks to build, and the contractors moved on once the bare essentials were in place. It occurred to me that as soon as anything in this region was actually finished it was immediately exported.

Gao Ming's apartment was furnished with two simple wooden beds covered with rattan mats. There was nothing on the walls. Apart from a thermos and a few books, he didn't have many possessions. His current job involved making molds for the production of household appliances.

I knew that something about Gao Ming made Ma Li feel secure. Once, she had bluntly told me that he wasn't handsome, and this was true—acne had badly scarred his face. But his plainness was attractive to her. She had a theory that handsome men weren't reliable.

Over the next year, Ma Li's letters and phone calls became less cheerful. She complained of headaches; the job had become more tedious; the boss was insufferable. Her sister had moved away, after marrying a man from Fujian Province. Ma Li's co-workers came and went; she was still the oldest woman in her office. By now, she had adopted a protective role, guarding new women employees against the boss's advances. For Christmas, she sent me samples from her factory: bracelets made of pink and purple plastic beads. She told me that I could give them to my sisters in America.

I sent her a story that I had written about her and her classmates, and she responded, "I'm not confident that I'm as admirable as I seem to you. It's true that I like to be alone. But partly it's because I don't know how to join the people; I can't share their joys and sorrows and cares. Although I really wish to." Another time she wrote about her job, "My head aches sometimes. And mistakes often happen. . . . Do you know of any kind of jobs that are interesting and benefit the whole society?"

I encouraged her to find something that required English skills, but I knew that my advice wouldn't help much, because there was something elusive about her unhappiness. I had glimpsed a similar quality in some of my brightest students—most of them girls. The best freshman student in the English department had been a quiet girl who kept apart from her peers. After class, she often came to see the foreign teachers for extra practice with her English, which was excellent. During summer vacation, she returned to her home town and killed herself by jumping off a bridge. I never learned anything else about her death; nobody in the class had

been close to her. In China, more women kill themselves than men, and the suicide rate for females is nearly five times the world average—the highest of any country in the world. Many of them are women from remote provinces who migrate to places like Shenzhen.

One of Shenzhen's economic innovations has been the establishment of "talent markets," or employment centers, which have replaced the Communist-style system in which jobs were assigned by the government. Although these markets encourage independence, they also subscribe to traditional notions of how a woman should look. Ma Li complained that prospective employers often thought that she was too short. (She stands 1.53 metres tall—just over five feet—and in China talent markets generally advertise jobs that require women to be at least 1.6 metres tall, especially if they want to be employed as receptionists, secretaries, or waitresses at expensive restaurants.) Ma Li also said that she had been cursed with eyes that were too small and lips that were too big, and this reduced her chances of getting jobs that required female applicants to be blessed with *wuguan duanzheng*, meaning that "the five senses"—the ears, the eyes, the lips, the nose, and the tongue—are regular. In the first letter she wrote to me after starting work at the jewelry factory, she introduced her co-workers by carefully describing their appearance:

> Lijia is the most beautiful, able and shortest girl, who is liked by everyone. Huahui is a classical beauty, most private telephone calls from boys are for her. But I don't like her very much, for her word sometimes hurtful. Lily is the other secretary, who came two days earlier than me. She leaves us an impression of stupid and irresponsible. So she is not very popular in the office. Xinghao is the fattest girl concerning much about losing weight.

Although conventional notions of beauty can make things uncomfortable for women in the Shenzhen job market, they can enjoy freedom in the city which most women in other parts of the mainland cannot. In Shenzhen, it is not uncommon for young people to live together before marriage. Divorce is more acceptable, and many women are in no hurry to get married. During my wanderings around the city, I picked up two copies of a women's magazine entitled *Window to the Special Economic Zone*. Its articles carried such headlines as "ONE NIGHT'S LOVE," "I AM NOT A LADY," "A TRAP SET BY AN OLD MAN," and "WHY HAVE AN ABORTION?"

Whenever Ma Li talked about difficult personal issues, she mentioned a radio call-in show, "At Night You're Not Lonely," and its host, Wu Xiaomei, who is an idol to the young women of Shenzhen. In 1992, when she was twenty, Wu Xiaomei had left her home, in a remote coal-mining region of the Chinese interior, for a seventy-dollar-a-month job in a Shenzhen mineral-water plant. One night, she telephoned a call-in show. Unlike most callers, she didn't want advice—she just wanted to tell listeners about her long-held dream of becoming a radio-show host. Wu Xiaomei was a good talker, and after she was finished she gave the listeners her work address and phone number.

"The next week, I got stacks of letters and more than a hundred phone calls," Wu Xiaomei

told me when I interviewed her during one of my trips to Shenzhen. “But the mineral-water plant fired me for using their phone for personal reasons, so I had no job. I took all the letters, bundled them together, and brought them to the radio station.”

Wu Xiaomei paused and took a long drag on her Capri menthol superslim. We were sitting in a private room in a downtown Shenzhen restaurant. A pretty, petite woman with long black hair, she is the type of Chinese smoker who can eat and smoke simultaneously. She exhaled a thin menthol stream and continued: “They said I was too young—I was only twenty years old and I had no experience. But one official decided to give me a chance. I told him that I was only twenty and that I didn’t understand many things, but that many listeners were the same as me, so maybe I’d understand them.”

Nine years later, a million people tune in to Wu Xiaomei’s show every weeknight, and many of them are young factory women who work outside the fence. Even though the Shenzhen radio station is government-owned, like all media in China, Wu Xiaomei often gives blunt advice that rankles tradition-minded officials—for example, recommending that young people not be afraid of living together before marriage. She has written a book; she often appears on television; and she exudes an air of sophistication. When I asked her which writers she admired, she mentioned the stories of Raymond Carver. (“You can tell so much from a very small detail,” she said.) Like many women I met in Shenzhen within the fence, she is worldly, self-made, and confident. She had once broken off a long-term romantic relationship partly because, she said, “he didn’t like it that people knew him as Wu Xiaomei’s boyfriend.”

All the women at Ma Li’s factory listened to Wu Xiaomei’s show religiously, and the next day they discussed the callers whom they had heard the night before: the wives who were having affairs, the mistresses who wanted a way out, the women who couldn’t decide whether or not to move in with their boyfriends. Ma Li was most impressed by the individuality of Wu Xiaomei’s responses. “She doesn’t make blanket judgments,” she said. “She looks at each caller’s specific situation and then decides.”

But even with the help of Wu Xiaomei, Ma Li didn’t find it easy to adapt to Shenzhen’s freedom. She said that she thought it was acceptable for young people to live together before marriage but not to tell anybody about it. Wu Xiaomei had once told a caller the same thing, and Ma Li agreed that this decision should remain completely unspoken. “It could influence the way people see you, especially if you break up later,” she said. “It’s better if you just don’t say anything about it.” One day, when she remarked that sex was more open in Shenzhen than in other parts of China, I asked her whether this was good or bad. She thought for a moment and then said, “It’s better than it was in the past. But it shouldn’t cross a certain line.” When I pushed her to explain what that line should be, she said, “Traditional morality,” but she couldn’t define what that meant.

One day, I gave Ma Li a copy of a popular Shenzhen novel, “You Can’t Control My Life.” The book, which was published in 1998, follows the fortunes of its migrant heroine in Shenzhen from her first job, as a secretary, to a life of luxury as the mistress of a wealthy Hong Kong businessman. The author, a twenty-nine-year-old woman named Miao Yong, grew up in western China and migrated to Shenzhen after graduating from a teachers college. She found a job as a secretary, wrote fiction on the side, and became rich when “You Can’t Control My Life,” her first novel, became a best-seller. The government banned the book, because of its portrayal of drugs, gambling, and casual sex. Like many book bannings in China, this actually boosted sales—although all of the copies were bootlegs. Outside the Stock Exchange, migrant venders sold black-market copies of the novel alongside Chinese translations of “Mein Kampf.”

I met Miao Yong at a trendy Western-style café near her apartment in a Shenzhen luxury high-rise. She reminded me of Wu Xiaomei: she chain-smoked Capri menthol superslims, drove her own car, and had the same worldly air. She told me that her writing had been influenced by the novels of Henry Miller. “His books were banned, too,” she said.

Miao Yong responded to the ban with great resourcefulness: she turned her novel into a popular television series, purging the most sensitive material and changing the title to something more ambiguous—”There’s No Winter Here.” The first detail in her book jacket’s author bio is her blood type; like many hip young Chinese, she believes that blood type helps determine character. When I asked her what most distinguishes Shenzhen from other parts of China, she said, “In the past, China was very collective. It was all about group thought. But now, in places like Shenzhen, you can decide exactly what kind of person you want to be.”

Shenzhen’s strain of individualism can take extreme forms. Outside a Wal-Mart store—Shenzhen was the first Chinese city to open the franchise, in 1996—private venders were selling bogus bachelor’s degrees for something less than a hundred dollars. It was possible for any young woman to redefine herself here, but doing so could be risky. I interviewed one Sichuanese prostitute who was hoping to limit the job to an eight-month run; she was making seven hundred and forty dollars a month, and she figured that soon she’d have enough saved up to return home and start a small business before anybody knew what she’d been up to. She had been a virgin when she first arrived in Shenzhen. She was twenty years old and obsessed with the notion of getting her old life back. I talked with another young woman who was working as a “three-accompany girl,” a night-club job in which women accompany men as they drink, sing karaoke, and dance. It’s a notoriously vague profession, and more than a few three-accompany girls are willing to perform a fourth service as well. But this woman said that she hadn’t accepted money for sex, and she spoke nostalgically about her old job at a shoe factory, where she had earned a hundred dollars a month and slept in a dorm room with seven other workers.

“My heart was more open in those days,” she said. Now she was earning thirty-five dollars a night, and on her evenings off she liked to get drunk and go dancing in night clubs, entirely by herself.

After reading Miao Yong’s novel, Ma Li said that she felt no connection with the world it depicted. The heroine had no heart—all she cared about was money—and she went from one man’s bed to another. “It’s too chaotic,” Ma Li said. “You need to control this part of your life.”

I asked her where she thought these new notions of morality had come from. She shrugged. “Most people say that they came from the West, after Reform and Opening. I think that there’s probably some truth to this.”

”What do you think the book’s philosophy is?”

”It’s saying that Shenzhen is a new city without any soul,” she replied. “Everybody in the book is in turmoil— they can’t find calmness.”

A year ago, Ma Li and Gao Ming started living together. They rented a three-room apartment in a small factory town about thirty miles beyond the Shenzhen fence, near the householdappliance plant where Gao Ming worked. The apartment building was closer to being finished than most of the neighboring structures. The concrete stairways were cracked, but everything worked, and the kitchen was well equipped. It was the first decent home that Ma Li had had since coming to Shenzhen.

Another young Sichuanese couple also lived in the apartment. Each of the couples had their own bedroom, but they shared the living room, which was furnished with a bed that doubled as a couch, a low table, a color television, and a VCR. All four of them got along well. One of the bedrooms had a laminated poster of a topless foreign couple making out. Such posters are popular in China; they’re considered romantic, and they’re inoffensive because the couple is not Chinese.

Ma Li didn’t tell her parents about the apartment. Back home in Fuling she never would have moved in with a man before marriage. But one day, during a phone conversation, her mother asked if she and Gao Ming were living together. “I didn’t say anything,” Ma Li told me. “She knew from my silence that it was true.” After that, neither of them said anything more about it.

Ma Li still spent weekday nights in the jewelry-factory dormitory, but on weekends she stayed at the new apartment. Gao Ming had been promoted to a supervisory position in his factory, and he was earning three hundred and sixty dollars a month. Ma Li’s salary had risen to two hundred and forty dollars a month, but she was sick of the job. She didn’t like the way the boss occasionally asked her to work overtime, and she didn’t like being restricted to the dormitory at night.

One weekday evening, Ma Li broke curfew and spent the night with Gao Ming. The next

morning, the boss called her into his office.

”He asked me what time I came back last night,” she said. “That’s the way he was—it was never direct. He didn’t ask me whether or not I had come back—he just asked what time. I said, ‘I came back this morning.’ I didn’t make any excuse or explanation. He didn’t know what to say. I don’t think he knew whether to get angry or laugh. He looked at me, and finally he just walked away.”

A few weeks later, another young woman followed Ma Li’s lead and started breaking curfew. Not long after that, the boss took a pretty worker off the production floor and made her his personal secretary. The worker was from Hunan Province, and she was eighteen years old. Ma Li told the Hunan girl about the boss, and one day he confronted Ma Li. He asked her what people were saying about him behind his back, and then he said, “Do you tell the other workers that I’m lecherous?”

Ma Li said, “Yes.”

He tried to laugh it off, but it was clear that he no longer liked having her around. Ma Li started spending her free time searching for work. A few weeks later, she found a position as a nursery-school teacher. Like the jewelry factory, the school was outside the fence, but there were no Taiwanese bosses, no factory dormitories, and no evening shifts. The salary was roughly the same as what Ma Li had been making at the plant. She was going to teach English.

When she told her boss that she was quitting, he gave her a dressing-down.

”You’ve changed,” he said. “You used to be obedient. Everything changed after you got a boyfriend.”

”I didn’t change,” Ma Li said. “I just got to know you better.”

On the final night of my last visit to Shenzhen, Ma Li and I took a walk. Gao Ming had returned home late from a bad day at the factory, during which a worker under his supervision had been injured. The plant was working overtime on a new product—a thermos bottle—and accidents were more apt to happen at such times.

When Gao Ming said that he wanted to be alone, Ma Li suggested that she and I go outside and listen to Wu Xiaomei’s call-in program. It was a warm, clear night, and the stars were bright above the dormitory lights of the factories. We climbed a hill where we could look out over the town. It was a typical outside-the-customs factory settlement: a cluster of shops and apartment buildings wedged into a dusty cut in the hills and, fanning out along the two main roads, strips of factories and their dormitories. There were shoe and clothing factories, and a computer-accessory plant whose top story had been gutted in a recent fire. The smoke had left the plant’s white tile walls streaked with black. Ma Li said that nobody had been hurt in the fire, but down the road in another factory several workers had died a few years ago in a massive blaze. That factory had been producing Christmas decorations and lawn furniture.

Ma Li was about to start her teaching job, and she was apprehensive. She was worried about her English, which had slipped during the years at the factory, and she wondered whether she would be able to discipline the children. But she liked the school campus, and she smiled whenever she talked about the new job. She kept her hair short now, her bangs pinned back with plastic barrettes. Around her neck she wore a simple necklace that Gao Ming had given her—a jade dragon, her birth sign.

We sat together on top of the hill and listened to “At Night You’re Not Lonely.” It was after eleven o’clock, the volume control on the radio was broken, and the voice of Wu Xiaomei crackled thinly in the night air. We strained to hear.

The first caller started crying, because she regretted the way she’d treated an old boyfriend, who had left her. Wu Xiaomei told her that the experience would be good for her and that maybe the next time she’d get it right. The second caller talked about missing his high-school girlfriend, who was far away, working in another part of the country. Wu Xiaomei said that he shouldn’t believe that every feeling was love. She told the third caller that, at twenty-three, she was wrong to feel as though she had to get married immediately.

I remembered a conversation that Ma Li and I had had a couple of days earlier. We were talking about how the migrants were handling the new personal freedoms in Shenzhen, and she said that she admired the way that people here had learned to help themselves. This was a comment that she had often made in the past, but now she added that sometimes the isolation frightened her—all these people living on their own. “In original society,” she said, “people lived in groups. Eventually, these groups broke down into families, and now they’re breaking down again, into so many different people. Finally, it will be just one single person.” A few days earlier, she had remarked that the changes in Shenzhen—the independence of young people, the shift from control by the Communist Party to control by the factory bosses—had come too abruptly. “If you could have some kind of perfect socialism, that would be the best,” she said. “But it’s impossible. That was just a beautiful ideal.”

Now, sitting on the hillside with her, I asked if she wanted to leave Shenzhen. She shook her head quickly. I asked how she thought the new pressures of the city would change the people who lived here.

”The result is that people will have more ability,” she said. “And they’ll have more creativity. Afterward, there will be more different ideas. It won’t be a matter of everybody having the same opinion.”

I asked, “How do you think this will change China?”

She fell silent. Beyond us, the lights in the dormitories were going out. I had no idea how I would have answered the question myself, although I liked to think that, once people learned to take care of themselves, the system would change naturally. Still, I had seen Shenzhen’s

fragmentation—the walled city, the locked factories, the people on their own, far from home—and I wondered how all of it could ever be brought together into something coherent.

I looked at Ma Li and realized that the question wasn't important to her. Since coming to Shenzhen, she had found a job, left it, and found another job. She had fallen in love and broken curfew. She had sent a death threat to a factory owner, and she had stood up to her boss. She was twenty-four years old. She was doing fine. ♦

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