

The following chapter argues that one such local institutional factor is the labor market. The way Liton's management made use of autonomy in each factory was a response to the situation in that factory's labor market (its supply and demand condition and the way it is organized) and the specific requirements and characteristics of the two workforces as perceived by management.

## Chapter Four

# Social Organization of the Labor Market in Shenzhen

After having survived a blaze that killed sixty-eight workers in a raincoat factory in Guangdong in 1991, a woman worker from Hubei expressed her decision to come to Shenzhen again, saying "It's like going through a reincarnation, and you still choose to be a human being."<sup>1</sup> What inspired such dogged determination, which she shared with many others? How was the labor market socially organized to make possible the massive proletarianization of young Chinese peasants, and with what consequences for the patterns of factory regimes?

### The "Migrant Laborer Deluge"

In mainland China, since 1987 an annual "tidal wave of migrant laborers" has flooded railway stations in major cities around the Lunar New Year. Alarming as this metaphor appears, it captures only the tip of a massive and mobile iceberg. In major Chinese cities, the number of "floaters," that is, those engaged in "partial temporary relocation whose legal residence registration remained in their original place of habitation," amounted to 80 million by 1990.<sup>2</sup> Data from a 1987 population survey and a 1990 census by the State Statistical Bureau suggested that nationwide there were in both periods of study approximately 30 million members of the "migrant population," that is, those who had moved out of their former residence in the five-year period prior to the surveys, regardless of whether they established official residence in the new locale. In Guangdong, a total of 2.2 million migrants were recorded in the 1987 survey, while in the 1990 cen-

sus, the number increased to 3.69 million. By the end of 1993, one official estimate put the number of migrant workers in Guangdong at around 10 million. Among these floaters, long-distance interprovincial immigrants numbered 1.17 million in 1990, up from 0.26 million in 1987. Out of these reported 1.17 million, most were from the neighboring provinces of Guangxi (366,000), Hunan (208,000), Hainan (84,000), and Jiangxi (57,000). However, there were also 119,000 from the more distant province of Sichuan.<sup>3</sup> The majority of migrants ended up in the Pearl River Delta region, especially in counties and towns where outprocessing factories were concentrated. Out of the total population of 1.67 million in Shenzhen City in 1990, 980,700 (58.7 percent) were temporary residents, or "floating population." In the Baoan District of Shenzhen, where almost half of Shenzhen's outprocessing factories were located, including Liton's China factory, "floaters" outnumbered permanent residents: there were 500,900 "floaters" and 291,300 permanent residents in 1990.<sup>4</sup> Table 5 shows the ratio of local and "external" population in Shenzhen and some nearby counties in 1992.

Studies conducted by scholars in mainland China and Hong Kong on the mobile population concurred on several key features of what the official press called the "migrant laborer deluge" (*mingong chao*). One of the most interesting findings was that women, rather than men, made up the larger portion of the mobile population. For instance, Li conducted a number of surveys among factory workers in the Pearl River Delta region, and found not only that 70 percent of his sampled subjects were females, but also that "all samples show that the average distance moved for females was greater than that for males."<sup>5</sup> The 1987 survey conducted by the State Statistical Bureau found that 58.3 percent of the migrant workers from within Guangdong Province and 63.2 percent from outside the province were females. Moreover, the great majority of workers who originated in rural counties were females: 63.4 percent for intraprovincial moves and 75.4 percent for interprovincial moves. Similarly lopsided sex ratios were reported in the 1990 census.<sup>6</sup>

The migrants were mostly young people in their teens and twenties. In a study of migrants in seventy-four cities and towns in 1986, it was found that among those moving from villages to towns, 56.6 percent were in the fifteen- to thirty-year-old age group. Another study

TABLE 5. External and Local Population in the Pearl River Delta

Municipality/County	External Population (million)	Internal Population (million)	Ratio of External to Internal Population (%)
Shenzhen	1.65	0.732	225
Zhuhai	0.2	0.256	78
Dongguan	0.75	1.288	58
Guangzhou urban area	0.7	3.544	20
Foshan urban area	0.35	0.366	96
Shunde	0.2	0.899	22
Nanhai	0.3	0.898	33
Zhongshan	0.4	1.120	36
Jiangmen	0.5	3.464	14
Huizhou urban area	0.1	0.209	48
Huiyang	0.1	0.480	21
Huidong	0.08	0.571	14

SOURCE: Data from Yun-Wing Sung et al., *The Fifth Dragon: The Emergence of the Pearl River Delta* (Singapore: Addison-Wesley, 1995), p. 118.

of transient workers in Beijing in 1986 found that 73 percent of the total were younger than thirty.<sup>7</sup> In several popular destination counties for migrants in the Pearl River Delta area, one survey found an even higher proportion of young migrants: in Dongguan, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai, 86.1 percent, 73.5 percent, and 61.0 percent, respectively, were in the fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-old age group. In another study, it was reported that more than 90 percent of the mobile population in Baoan District were in the seventeen- to twenty-two-year-old age group.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the migrants' educational level, studies showed a general picture of low education. One survey found that in Guangdong, those holding less than a junior high school degree accounted for a hefty 87.3 percent of the migrants.<sup>9</sup> In the 1987 survey, 45 percent of migrants into towns had a junior high school education, while 22-24 percent had a senior high school education. Even among those moving into cities, 54 percent had only a junior high education or less.<sup>10</sup> A large proportion of migrant workers went into industrial production

and construction work. Although there were reports of Zhejiang and Jiangsu migrants reviving their traditional nonagricultural specialties and craftsmanship in tailoring, furniture-making, cotton quilt fluffing, commerce, and so on,<sup>11</sup> this was apparently not the case for migrants to Guangdong. In the Baoan District in Shenzhen, for instance, 61.46 percent of the temporary residents were engaged in industries, and another 11.51 percent in construction.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, official statistics on a population in flux must be read with caution. As one Labor Bureau official confessed during an interview with me, "We don't have statistics on the outside workers. They are too many and we [officers of the Bureau] are too few. They come and go so quickly that sometimes even their employers cannot keep track of their whereabouts. Counting these workers is almost impossible." However, the fact that independent survey research concurred on certain characteristics of the mobile workforce lends credibility to the aggregate picture drawn here.

In sum, various studies suggest that in Guangdong since the mid-1980s, there has been a massive supply of young, single, rural women eager to become unskilled workers in labor-intensive factories. These general features were reflected in the composition of Liton's workforce. In August 1992, at a time of slack orders and downsizing, Liton had about 700 workers, to be increased to more than 1,000 in the summer months of 1993 when the volume of orders picked up. Company statistics showed that 80 percent of the workforce was women, and 96.3 percent was within the age bracket of sixteen to twenty-nine years old; 52.3 percent of all workers were from outside Guangdong, including 21.8 percent from Hubei, 8.7 percent from Sichuan, 6.1 percent from Henan, and the rest from Guangxi, Hunan, Jiangxi, and as far away as Xinjiang. Even among the 47.7 percent of workers originating in Guangdong, very few had an official residence registration in Baoan. Most workers (73.8 percent) had a junior high education, while 10 percent of all workers had finished only primary school.

For every youth who had made his/her way into a factory, there were many others who were trying and waiting to come. In-depth interviews with workers revealed the circumstances that motivated this momentous population movement, the pathways from the field to the factory covering thousands of miles, and the intricate networks of support that made possible what was so keenly sought after by an entire generation of China's rural youth.

### Beyond Familial Economic Survival

Let me begin with the most widely cited motivation for rural youth to leave the land. In academic and journalistic accounts, the economic disparity between migrants' rural homesteads and their urban destinations was considered the most important "pull" factor. The *Peasants' Daily*, for instance, interviewed Chinese sociologists who explained that people left their villages to meet the increasing expense of agricultural production materials, to travel around and earn money, and to ease the economic burden on their families stricken by food-grain shortages or natural disasters.<sup>13</sup> The *People's Daily* also reported a widely held belief among peasants in northern Hubei that "as long as a family has one person working out of a village, the entire family's food and clothing problem is solved."<sup>14</sup> Academic studies agreed that migrants came to look for greater job opportunities, increased income, and an improved standard of living. One study, for instance, found an average increase in income of RMB 1,000 per year as a result of workers' migration.<sup>15</sup> Table 6 shows the provincial disparity in income among the rural population. It is clear that migrant workers come mostly from poorer agricultural provinces. Table 7 further illustrates that compared with wages in neighboring provinces, Guangdong, and especially Shenzhen, consistently paid more than others since reforms were initiated in 1978.

More than half of Liton's workers came from provinces belonging to the "not developed" and "undeveloped" categories in Table 6. During our initial conversations, workers almost universally and

TABLE 6. Regional Differences in Peasant Annual Per Capita Income

(RMB)	
Regional Type	Rank of Province/ Centrally Administered City
Developed (1,100 or more)	1. Shanghai (2,000)
	2. Beijing (1,422)
	3. Zhejiang (1,210)
	4. Tianjin (1,168)
	5. Guangdong (1,143)

TABLE 6. (continued)

(RMB)	
Regional Type	Rank of Province/ Centrally Administered City
Nearly developed (701-1,099)	6. Jiangsu (844)
	7. Liaoning (776)
	8. Fujian (764)
	9. Jilin (717)
Not developed (501-700)	10. Heilongjiang
	11. Hainan
	12. Shangdong
	13. Xinjiang
	14. Inner Mongolia
	15. Hubei
	16. Hebei
	17. Jiangxi
	18. Shanxi
	19. Hunan
	20. Ningxia
	21. Anhui
	22. Qinghai
	23. Sichuan
Undeveloped (500 or less)	24. Guangxi
	25. Yunan
	26. Henan
	27. Shaanxi
	28. Tibet
	29. Guizhou
	30. Gansu

SOURCE: Data from *United Daily* (Hong Kong), April 13, 1993 [in Chinese].

NOTE: Incomes for rankings 1-5 are as of 1991, all others are as of 1990.

TABLE 7. Average Monthly Wages  
in Guangdong and Neighboring Provinces, 1978-92

(RMB)							
Year	Jiangxi	Hunan	Guangxi	Fujian	Sichuan	Guangdong	Shenzhen
1978	46	47	45	47	49	51	—
1980	59	60	60	59	62	66	82
1985	83	88	90	88	89	116	202
1990	144	168	171	180	168	244	359
1992	191	224	228	231	205	336	494

SOURCE: Data from Yun-Wing Sung et al., *The Fifth Dragon: The Emergence of the Pearl River Delta* (Singapore: Addison-Wesley, 1995), p. 116.

"automatically" cited poverty at home as the main reason for them to come to Shenzhen. Indeed, a few women workers I talked to sent remittances back home to repay family debts. Sui-fon, a sixteen-year-old Jiangxi worker, walked an hour every monthly payday to give most of her earnings to a local working in another factory. She said the father of this local had lent RMB 1,000 to her family for rebuilding the family house and for financing her brother's study for college entrance examinations. Her elder sister, who was also a factory worker in Shenzhen, did the same thing every month.

However, as my fieldwork continued with more dormitory visits, and after more trusting relationships were established, women workers began to reveal motivations that they initially considered too "embarrassing" (*bu hao yi si*) to tell a stranger. These rural young women came for the no less important goals of escaping from parental control and various familial responsibilities. My argument here is not that economic reasons were unimportant, but that citing an increase in income says too little about for whom and for what purpose the money was intended, or why workers wanted and got factory jobs rather than those in the service or commercial sectors. The stereotype that young rural migrants came to work in order to support the peasant household economy foundered not because it was false, but because it oversimplified their complex calculations and motivations. Negotiations between workers' individual interests, both economic and social, and

the needs and expectations of their families were often involved. Becoming long-distance migrant workers allowed these women to maintain physical distance from their families while sending cash income home as a substitute or compensation for undesirable familial obligations. Studies of young women workers elsewhere in Asia also warned against an uncritical application of a "household strategy" model in explaining women's entry into factory employment. Kim reported that south Korean women workers predominantly cited personal reasons (e.g., "financing own education," "to be independent," "dowry savings," "for experience") for working in the Mason Industrial Zone.<sup>16</sup> Wolf used her data on Javanese factory daughters to launch a conceptual critique of the "household strategy" notion. My own data on Chinese workers support Wolf's observation that "seeking factory employment—a personal decision in the household economy—was not necessarily made in conjunction with parental visions of a daughter's role or as part of a household strategy."<sup>17</sup> Finally, the importance of wages must be considered in more than economic, quantitative terms. A factory wage was keenly sought after, even though the amount was less than that earned by a hairdresser, a waitress, or a saleswoman, because factory jobs, not service jobs, symbolized a disciplined and confining work life compatible with definitions of appropriate femininity for maidens. In short, reducing migrant workers' multilayered motivation to become factory hands to the economic pressure of familial survival prevents us from understanding workers' behavior at the point of production.

#### *Marginalization and Freedom*

The validity of the "familial economic strategy" notion was undermined by my data. It was not that no peasant household suffered from abject poverty, nor that women's wages stood totally outside of their families' economy. Yet the data painted a more nuanced picture: women's marginal status in the peasant household released them from any family strategy parents might have adopted. Interviews about workers' households pointed to a variety of educational and commercial pursuits by fathers and sons, whereas daughters were usually the dispensable surplus hands for farm work. Peasant daughters' marginalized economic role meant that they were free to take up newly available but risky economic opportunities in faraway cities like Shen-

zhen.<sup>18</sup> The uncertainty of finding employment in Shenzhen mitigated parents' reliance on migrant daughters' wages. Young women even reported that they relied on parents' financial support at times when they were unemployed between jobs. Moreover, the considerable variations among workers in the amount and frequency of sending remittances should warn against an economic reductionist reading of their motivation.

Prior to becoming migrant workers in the south, young rural women were disadvantaged in the allocation of familial resources. Interviews with workers revealed a pattern whereby family resources went to finance male siblings' education or small commercial ventures. These pursuits were usually carried out in home villages or nearby towns or cities. When parents agreed to daughters leaving for factory employment, the economic calculation was more to lessen the family's subsistence burden rather than to depend on the daughters' remittances for survival. The case of Wang Wah-lei (twenty-three, Guangxi)<sup>19</sup> was typical:

When I first ran away from home, my father was furious because he was afraid that I might be kidnapped and sold by criminals. Four months later, I went home to see my parents during the Lunar New Year. When they saw that it was safe for me to work outside, they agreed to my return to Shenzhen. My aunt also convinced my father that rather than keeping me idle at home, working outside would at least mean less living expenses for the entire family. At that time, my eldest brother was studying for the university entrance exam. He failed and became a state schoolteacher earning a salary of RMB 200 per month. My second brother took some money from the family to launch his own small business. He would buy household appliances from Guangzhou, transport them to our home village, and sell them for profit. I came to Shenzhen with eighty other girls from the village. My cousin told her boss that many native girls in our village wanted to come out to work in the factory and her boss asked her to organize that trip to recruit us en masse. At first I thought about working for a year to finance my own education. Now I earn more than my brother who has more education. I don't want to study anymore. Schools cost but do not benefit us much.

Cho Hung (nineteen, Jiangxi) reported a similarly biased distribution of family resources:

In the countryside, most parents discriminate against girls in favor of boys. They think that girls will eventually marry and move away, and so in the parents' old age they will depend on their sons. So they make their sons study

more. In many villages, there are only primary schools, and children going on to high school have to pay extra fees for room and board when attending high schools in towns. Because they have rural *hukou* [residence registration], they have to pay twice as much those with town *hukou*. Almost all these children are males.

While younger male siblings of women workers stayed in school longer, female siblings who were married left the household. Male siblings who were married lived with their parents and together made a livelihood from growing crops and raising fowl. In many cases, they earned additional income from crafts or service work in the villages. A common pattern was for these men to work in the field during harvest seasons, while the daily tending was left to their mothers, wives, and younger sisters. In slack seasons, these men would engage in short-term construction work, making clothes, cutting hair, making furniture or agricultural equipment, taking school photos, or treating animal illnesses for fellow villagers who paid fees for these various services. Not all peasant households engaged in craft production or service work. Those who did not were economically worse off, and northern male workers who came to try their luck in the south were usually from such families. Employers' preference for women workers for assembly production pushed most male migrants into construction work.

Because most of the lucrative and stable nonagricultural pursuits by peasants involved capital or craftsmanship that fathers passed on to their sons but rarely their daughters, the latter found themselves "having nothing to do at home." What that meant was that they did not have the means to make a cash income. A typical day for a peasant girl went like this: "In the morning, we helped in the field, doing things like weeding, applying fertilizer, and planting. After lunch, we fed the chickens and the pigs, and took the cow for a walk. We also helped cook the family meals. Then, there was nothing to do for the rest of the day. When our family needed some cash, we took some eggs, chickens, or pigs to the market and sold them. The cash we got would be used to buy salt or whatever was needed."

It was rare for their families to be totally dependent on these young women's luck in the south. On the other hand, women workers realized that as a last resort, they could go back home to make a living. For workers whose parents made money from long-distance commerce or from sideline production, workers mentioned how they had depended

on their families for financial support to survive the vagaries in their work experience. When I asked her if she sent any money home, Zhang Chi-ying (twenty-three, Guangdong) laughed and said,

My father even asked me if I want him to send me any money! He's doing long-distance commerce, selling whatever is profitable. Since I was young, I hated doing farm work. So when I saw the Labor Bureau recruitment notice in our village, I came with ninety other young women to a handbag factory. I did not understand how they calculated my wage, but I earned very little, like 10,000 hours of work for only RMB 83. I worked for a month and went home. Then my parents paid for my tuition in a tailoring school. I stayed for two months and quit again. I came to Shenzhen when the Labor Bureau posted a notice again. I did not get along with the line leader and I went home to rest for several months. I got bored at home and came out to help a friend who worked in a hair salon, until I saw Liton's recruitment advertisement. . . . I came here for my own experience. I can buy whatever pleases me.

And indeed, she did buy a camera, a watch, and a mini hi-fi deck, all displayed on her dormitory bed. Her newest acquisition was a microphone for her karaoke. Most women workers were not as consumption-oriented as Zhang. Yet their intermittent work patterns, in which workers quit work in Shenzhen and went home for a period of several months before coming out again, indicated that they could rely on their peasant families for subsistence at least. A quality control foreman summed up workers' general situation with an insightful comment:

I think Hong Kong workers' situations are worse than those in China. Like me, if I don't want to work here, I can always go home and farm the land or do something else. But what can Hong Kong workers do except work for their bosses? They don't have any land to make a living. Here, I can fire my boss and quit. . . . You don't need much money to have fun at home. In the village, we had fun shooting birds, swimming in the river, wandering on bicycles, chatting with friends. But in the city, like Shenzhen, you need money for everything. That's why no one thinks about staying here all their life. For the meantime, it's good to come out and see the world and get smart. It's good training here as you can learn to deal with different things and different people. When we go back, we can easily outsmart those who have not come.

#### *Fleeing from Home*

Becoming migrant workers allowed many young women to postpone, with the hope of eventually dissolving, marital engagement arranged

by their parents. For others, back-breaking agricultural work, as part of their familial duties as daughters, drove them to the south where factories at least meant shelter from the blazing sun. Rather than being sent by parents as part of a familial economic strategy, many women workers in Liton literally "escaped" from their families. They recalled in vivid detail how they planned the escape with village peers, often leaving goodbye notes to their parents who had objected to their long-distance trip. Liang Ying (twenty, Guangdong) recalled the day she left home:

That was the year when I turned sixteen. More than ten girls from my village planned the trip to Shenzhen. That day, we went to do farm work in the fields as usual. We even went back for lunch with our parents. After our parents left for the field again, we took our luggage and left notes saying, "Dear parents, when you see this note in the evening, I will have already left for Shenzhen to find work. Please don't worry." Among us, there were a few older ones, and they took us to a factory paying very low wages. After one week, two of us left and the rest found work in other factories. Very soon, we were all separated from each other. Liton must be my eighth or ninth factory. . . . I came to have more freedom. I did not like asking my parents for money every time I wanted to buy something. Back then, my father gave me RMB 30-50 a week, but that included everything I needed for school. . . . Our family grows rubber trees. The state requires every family member reaching the age of eighteen to participate in collecting rubber. It's really hard work. Every morning, from 4 AM to 7 AM you have to cut through the bark of 400 rubber trees in total darkness. It has to be done before daybreak, otherwise the sunshine will evaporate the rubber juice. If you were me, what would you prefer, the factory or the farm? . . . Village people are superstitious, and there are rumors about encounters with ghosts in the dark rubber field. I am most terrified by ghost stories.

Even for those whose families grew staple crops like wheat and barley, staying and working at home was far from desirable. Ho Chi-king (twenty-two, Sichuan) worked in a village enterprise as a temporary worker for a few months before joining others to come to Shenzhen: "It was a factory making paper fans. It paid very little, only RMB 40 to 50 a month. I had to pay for my own meals. I went home only once a month. Actually, when I was home, my parents gave me as much pocket money as I wanted. It was just when I grew older, I found it embarrassing to ask. At that time, 'Shenzhen' was such a beautiful name. People said it was fun here and the wages were high. It's true. Life is more rhythmic here. It's not like farming, where you have

never-ending work. You finish something and there's always something else to be done. At that time, I was very envious of those who could have regular working hours, like eight hours a day. So I came."

The case of Deng Su-ying (nineteen, Jiangxi) illustrates the relationship between being a migrant worker and freedom from familial obligations. When we were working together in Liton, Deng received several telegrams from home, telling her that her mother was sick and that she should go home immediately. Yet instead of going back, she ignored all the telegrams because she knew the real intention of her parents, who had always wanted her to go back to "fill the slot" of her brother's teaching post in a state-sector primary school so as to free him to work in Shenzhen for a couple of years. When he would return home, Deng would then give him back the post she had held for him. In mainland China, this system of *dingti* had been a popular employment practice in urban state units since 1978.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Deng Su-ying was able to rid herself of such a familial duty was due in no small part to the physical distance between home and factory. A few months later, when Liton opened a joint venture factory in nearby Dongguan County, her supervisor promoted her to become line leader in the new factory. She decided to take up the new job, and left Shenzhen for Dongguan before even writing to her parents about the promotion.

Physical distance between home and factory was also of strategic importance for women in evading marriage proposals initiated by their parents. Data from interviews suggested that it was common for rural parents to arrange an engagement when their children reached the age of seventeen. The actual marriage would take place several years later, and during the interim the couple and their families would get acquainted with each other, and gifts from the bridegroom would cement family ties. The case of Chi-ying, whom we encountered in Chapter One, demonstrated how women could make use of the time lapse between engagement and marriage to work in distant Shenzhen, eventually leading to the dissolution of the arranged marriage. More generally, working in Shenzhen had become an excuse for women to postpone marriage. Chua Wah (twenty, Guangdong) reported a tactic widely adopted by young women like herself:

All those matchmakers are extremely busy during the two weeks of New Year when all young people return home from Shenzhen. They will ask the mothers of all the households if they want to meet some nice young men to be



their potential sons-in-law. Usually these matchmakers are women who were married into our village and have connections with families in their own villages of origin. Of course, I don't want to get married so soon, and so I always tell them either "I'm too young" or "I already have a boyfriend in Shenzhen." Actually, the ideal situation is for us to get to know boyfriends ourselves while working in Shenzhen. Usually, we can meet people from the same county or nearby villages after coming here, like in gatherings with native folks. If we stayed home, we'd never have the chance to meet them.

*Personal Goals:*

*Education, Marriage, and City Life*

Beyond evading familial burdens and parental demands, some women had concrete personal goals to pursue, and waged work was a means for realizing their career or marriage plans. For instance, Qiao Hongling (nineteen, Hunan) explained to me that if she stayed home, her parents would give her enough money to survive, but not enough for "doing something big": "When I came here, I was thinking of earning money so that I could pay tuition to become a barefoot [village] doctor. My uncle is a doctor and he has promised to teach me if I can give him RMB 3,000 for a two-year tuition fee. He's very good in Chinese medicine and many people come to see him. But after I came, I saw all those beautiful clothes and different kinds of nice food, I spent almost all my wages. Starting from this year, I'll save money for my medical tuition."

Saving up for dowry was also mentioned by more than a few women who envisioned a home- and marriage-bound future. For instance, Yang Su-ying (twenty-three, Hubei) talked about the tacit agreement between herself and her family on the usage of remittances she regularly sent home. What she said should serve as a useful reminder for analysts to clarify the meanings and purposes of migrant's remittances, which cannot be taken at face value as indicative of any family strategy: "My brothers never asked me to send money home in their letters. But still, I have sent money home three times since I came here two years ago. Every time, I sent about RMB 1,500. When my third brother got married, he used up RMB 500 and my eldest brother used some of the rest for building a house. . . . When I went home for the New Year, my brothers said they would repay me when I return later. . . . It's embarrassing to ask them not to use my money. If I did, they would have blamed me. But they know it's my

money, and in the future I will need that money for my dowry. Normally, the bride needs about RMB 2,000 to buy furniture and electrical appliances for the new household."

Because migrant workers considered Shenzhen a "chaotic" city, most out-of-province workers did not find it safe to keep their hard-earned money in the dormitories, where theft was frequent. Their long work hours also made it difficult for them to go to the banks, where there were always long lines. Others expressed distrust of the Shenzhen banking system. So sending money home was a means of putting their money in secure hands, and it did not necessarily imply that remittances were for familial use. When the distinction between the amount of workers' remittances and the actual purpose of the money was blurred, interpretation of workers' relation to the familial economy would likely be flawed.

Young women decided to come to Shenzhen when they were enticed by romanticized descriptions of life in Shenzhen circulated by complacent locals returning from Shenzhen. Young peasants were attracted by tales about the modern airport, clean streets, high-rises, abundance of consumer goods, high wages, and fun with young people from all over the country. Working in Shenzhen became the rite of passage for China's peasant generation coming of age in the 1990s. The mere opportunity for peasants to move beyond their native villages was attractive enough, especially when placed in the context of nearly four decades of imposed immobility and "village involution" in all aspects of peasant life.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Chi-ying (twenty-three, Hubei), who enjoyed showing me her purchases in Shenzhen, including an electronic watch and a gold ring, told me how she had always dreamed of becoming a city girl: "When I was a kid, there was a sent-down youth<sup>22</sup> who came to live with us for a year. My father was her guardian responsible for educating her. I was very much charmed by her pretty clothes and her permed hair. It was the first time I saw a city person in my life."

A minority of workers did have to shoulder familial economic burdens and made conscious efforts to minimize personal expenditures in Shenzhen so as to maximize the amount of remittances. These were married couples from northern provinces. Because they were older, the women were not given line production work, but were janitors, and their husbands were security guards or canteen workers. When Ho San-yung (thirty-six, Sichuan) came to Liton almost three years



ago, having left her three children in the care of her parents, she was in urgent need of money:

We were fined RMB 1,500 for exceeding the state quota of one child per family. I did not understand. These policies always changed. In the old days, the government rewarded families for having more kids. Anyway, we did not have enough money to pay the fine, so the local cadres took away some of our household items. Luckily they did not take our land. My husband was also sent home from his army unit because they found out we have more than one kid. We had no choice but to try our luck in Shenzhen. . . . On average, we send home RMB 500 every four months. These are for my parents to buy clothes and books for my children. All of them are now in school. Each one needs RMB 200–300 per semester, and there are always other expenses. We are not like those young girls. They spend a lot on snacks and clothes. My husband and I spend just about RMB 10 or so each month on shampoo and cigarettes. We spend more when natives come to visit us. Otherwise, we stay in the dormitories on Sundays, and save up most of our wages.

One of Ho's Sichuanese coworkers, a twenty-eight-year-old married woman, explained how providing adequate schooling for her children imposed a heavy financial burden on her: "I miss my children very much but my wages are important for them. On average, a peasant household only earns RMB 800–900 per year to cover every single expense. In the villages, it costs more than RMB 10 to see a doctor when one gets sick. Schooling for kids is not always affordable in poorer families. In my village, there is a couple who stay home and farm. They have two very bright kids but each needs RMB 40–50 a week to attend junior high. They cannot afford that and the kids dropped out of school. It's a shame. I cannot stand that happening to my own kids."

#### *Femininity and Factory Wages*

The amount of wages was not the only consideration when women migrants searched for employment in Shenzhen. Jobs and wages carried symbolic gender meanings that mediated women's preference for factory work. Viviana Zelizer's comment on the changing meanings of women's money also applies in the case of these young Chinese women: "Money is neither culturally neutral nor morally invulnerable. It may well 'corrupt' values into numbers, but values and sentiment reciprocally corrupt money by investing it with moral, social, and re-

ligious meaning."<sup>23</sup> Waiting tables in tea houses and restaurants, or working as hairdressers in salons or as salesladies in stores paid higher wages (about RMB 300–400 per month in 1992) than working in factories. Yet these occupations were considered morally inappropriate for young women. Li Sui-ting, a woman in her mid-twenties from rural Guangdong, the only senior forewoman in Liton, told me she once suggested to her father that she wanted to be a waitress in a restaurant and her father angrily replied, "If you do that, never come home again!" She went on to explain that conservative village people associated service jobs in public areas with rendering sexual services to men, whereas people associated factory jobs with disciplined, regular, hard labor, qualities that were morally acceptable for young women living so far away from their parents. Another woman, Lui Qing-wah (twenty-one, Hubei) learned haircutting from her father, who could pass his craft only to this single child in the family. She explained to me why she could not work in salons in Shenzhen: "I worked as a barber in my home village. Theoretically, I could continue doing that here. It pays more and it is skilled work. But all my friends warn me not to get into salons. There are lots of terrible rumors about single women working in salons. In the future when we return home, no one would want to marry us. For married women, it would be different."

In short, the motivations behind women's decisions to become migrant workers involved an intertwined set of economic and moral, individual, and familial considerations. From the process of getting to know them and interviewing them, I discovered that the economic reason was a routine and socially legitimate response they gave at the beginning of our encounter. This was also the reason many used to convince their parents to agree to their migration. Gradually, as I spent more time with them and after mutual trust was established, they began to disclose more intimate, personal, and "embarrassing"—and therefore more authentic—reasons for working in Shenzhen. Evading familial obligations and parental decisions were among these less legitimate but equally, if not more, compelling causes. Understanding how they spent their wages also allowed me to cast doubt on the suggestion that the familial economic burden was the main reason behind the exodus of migrants to the south. I suggest instead that young rural women sought to increase their personal autonomy vis-à-vis parental domination and to redefine their familial gender role in