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'High Tide' of Labor Unrest in China

Striking Workers Risk Arrest to Protest Pay Cuts, Corruption

By PHILIP P. PAN
Washington Post Foreign Service

DAFENG, China—On the fourth night of the strike, management cut off the heat. The 2,000 workers occupying the Shuangfeng Textile Factory responded by huddling together and wrapping themselves in thick blankets and surplus military coats. Even as the temperature neared freezing, they refused to leave.

Not long ago, banners on the factory walls reminded workers they were "masters" of the Communist state. Now, the same workers were camped on a cold floor between rows of rusty spinning machines, nursing their grievances over boiled water and biscuits.

Mostly middle-aged women, they spoke quietly of pay cuts and worthless stock shares, of corrupt officials and missing pension funds, of being cheated in China's rough-and-tumble transition from socialism to capitalism.

They spoke, too, of the risks they were taking by fighting back.

Three times, police had tried to expel them from the factory, dragging women out by the hair, jabbing others with electric batons. Three times, the workers had managed to hold on. Now, there were rumors a military police unit had been summoned to this small city 150 miles north of Shanghai.

"We know this is dangerous," said one young woman sitting in a corner of the vast factory floor near large spools of white cotton yarn. "But it's too late to be scared now."

Then, glancing out a window, she added nervously: "The police should be here soon."

The battle in Dafeng, which began Dec. 16 and ended less than two weeks later in defeat for the workers, is part of a larger story playing out across China's fast-changing industrial landscape. Two decades after the ruling Communist Party adopted capitalist economic reforms while continuing to restrict political freedom, growing numbers of Chinese workers are risking arrest to stage strikes, sit-downs and other demonstrations.

In many ways, these protests are acts of desperation by people struggling to survive without the help of effective labor unions, courts or other institutions that provide checks and balances in a market economy.

As thousands of state factories are closed or sold, workers who once were promised lifetime job security and benefits now face mass layoffs and, sometimes, the loss of their savings to corrupt managers. Their willingness to fight back presents a thorny political problem for a party that has always staked its legitimacy on providing a better life for the working class.

It is difficult to estimate how often these protests occur, in part because local officials often try to conceal them from

their superiors.

But one recent government report acknowledged the country is in the midst of a "high tide" of labor unrest, with the number of workers participating in strikes more than doubling in the first half of the 1990s alone. Another report in an internal party publication said there were 30,000 protests of significant size in 2000, or more than 80 incidents per day.

BY BECKEE MORRISON—THE WASHINGTON POST

The authorities often respond to these protests by trying to appease the workers; at other times they react with force, sending in police and jailing the most outspoken demonstrators.

"We have no idea what's going to happen next," the young woman in the factory here said that night as the strike wore on. Like many interviewed for this report, she asked not to be identified out of fear she would be arrested. "The government doesn't want to back down, and neither do we."

A Secret Bankruptcy

The Shuangfeng Textile Factory lies on the outskirts of Dafeng, a quick drive from the city's glittering downtown into a dreary neighborhood of run-down buildings and dirt alleyways. Off the main roadway, past a row of ramshackle shops, a large crowd of workers gathers in front of the factory's creaky metal gate.

There is no picket line, just a group of men and women in heavy coats milling about restlessly in the middle of the road, stamping their feet to keep warm under a pale yellow street lamp. Their faces are lined from years of squinting while operating spinning machines and, more recently, from lack of sleep. Some of the workers are smoking; others have been drinking. Every time a car drives by, the crowd gets jittery.

Past the gate is the factory itself, a deteriorating complex built in 1931, before the Communist revolution. It is the city's oldest and largest textile mill, one of several in this cotton-growing region that produces yarn and cloth for the nation's garment factories.

In the mid-1990s, Beijing began pushing local officials to either get rid of small, money-losing state firms like the mill or make them profitable. What followed was a disorderly process in which the government often sold stock in factories to the workers, but retained control as the majority shareholder. China's Communist rulers had not yet embraced full privatization.

When workers resisted buying shares in these debt-ridden factories—shares they would not be permitted to resell—local officials exaggerated the potential for profits. If that didn't work, they threatened to fire workers who would not go along.

The reform drive reached Dafeng in 1996, when the 4,000 workers at Shuangfeng were forced to buy shares in the mill. Many workers invested large portions of their life savings, about $500 to $600 per worker on average, or more than a year's salary each.

"Some people invested willingly. Others didn't think it was a good idea. But in the end, we all handed over the money," said one worker in the spinning division. "If we didn't give them the money, we would lose our jobs."

The workers said they were promised high annual dividends and new rights as shareholders. Some said they were told they were simply lending money to the factory. But over the next five years, they received only one dividend payment and were never invited to attend shareholder meetings.

Last November, the company suddenly and secretly filed for bankruptcy. The factory boss and several other managers emerged as the firm's new owners. The workers discovered what had happened only weeks later, when a local newspaper published a short item about the transaction.

They immediately suspected they had been victims of a "fake bankruptcy," a common phenomenon in China in which corrupt managers hide a factory's assets, declare bankruptcy and then purchase the firm themselves at a reduced price, often with money they have embezzled.

The man who gained the most in the bankruptcy was Shi Yongsheng, the mill's manager and now its largest shareholder, according to workers and local officials. Shi was appointed to run the mill only three years ago after a career managing several smaller state factories in Dafeng, including a tannery and a fur plant.

Residents described him as a close friend of one of the city's deputy party secretaries. Workers said he bragged to other managers about his plan to slash salaries. Shi did not return telephone calls, and a government spokesman said Shi was too busy to speak to reporters.

But a company document obtained by workers showed that the factory owed them $14 million, including $2 million for the shares they had purchased and $3 million they had paid toward their pensions. In addition, the document said, the government had provided the factory with nearly $8 million to help it cover its debts to workers and provide those laid off with welfare payments.

A government official in Dafeng confirmed the figures were accurate. Where all that money went, though, remains a mystery.

"What happened to our money? How did we go bankrupt?" asked one longtime employee, who asked that he be identified only by his surname, Zhang. "We had a lot of questions. No one gave us any answers."

Strike Without Slogans

Instead of an explanation, the workers got a pay cut. On Dec. 13, managers began calling in employees and demanding they sign new contracts slashing their salaries by half, to between $25 and $40 a month.

The workers revolted. In one meeting, an employee tore up the contract in front of her supervisors, workers said. In another, a worker denounced factory managers, saying, "Officials live off the labor of the workers!"

With resistance rising, the company tried to make an example of two outspoken employees in the

spinning division, young mothers named Chen Feng and Liu Lanfeng. On the morning of Dec. 16, the factory hung a large poster on the front gate declaring that "the two comrades have separated from their posts and from the factory."

"I had worked in the mill for seven or eight years, and I have an 11-year-old child to support," said Chen, 29, by telephone several weeks later. "So, of course, I was depressed." Chen declined to discuss why she was fired, but she confirmed what happened next: "The workers went on strike, and they asked the company to let me go back to work."

A strike is a sensitive undertaking in China. The Communist Party has always portrayed itself as a workers' party, and it still teaches schoolchildren how Mao Zedong launched his career by organizing strikes among miners and railway workers. But the government has also absorbed the lesson of how strikes helped bring down Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

China quietly removed the "freedom to strike" from its constitution in 1982, but it has never formally banned strikes. Independent trade unions, on the other hand, are prohibited and quickly crushed.

In Dafeng, the striking workers were careful to avoid any activity that might have been seen as illegal or presenting a political challenge to the government. They refrained from chanting slogans, waving signs or hanging banners. Instead, they simply sat in the factory and refused to work. Most came and went, in keeping with their shift schedules. Others refused to leave at all; their children visited them at the factory after school.

The workers also insisted they had no leaders or organizational structure. When management asked them to choose representatives to participate in talks, they refused. "As soon as we pick representatives, the police will arrest them," said one worker.

Still, a small group of workers appeared to be working behind the scenes to guide the movement. These informal leaders hid in the crowd, whispering messages only to those they trusted. Sometimes, they met on street corners, clamming up when strangers walked by. They drafted petitions and arranged for food to be delivered to those in the factory.

One night, a few of them took a meandering route through the dark alleys that run between the workers' crumbling apartment blocks, checking every few minutes to see if they were being followed. Finally, they entered an apartment, locked the doors and drew the curtains.

"Don't call us leaders. We're just volunteers," said one of the workers. "We have to be very careful. I don't know who they are in the other shifts, and they don't know who I am."

Occasionally, one of the women in the group would raise her voice and the others would remind her to keep it down. A tense silence fell upon the room whenever the workers heard the bark of a dog down the street.

The workers said the factory's government-approved trade union, which is supposed to represent them in labor disputes, had done nothing. Newspapers and television stations, all controlled by the state, refused to report on the situation. But a few sympathetic factory and government officials offered help, leaking information about factory finances or providing tips about police activity.

If the striking workers had a long-term strategy, it was only a vague hope that provincial or central government officials would take an interest and launch an investigation. To that end, on the second day of the strike, a group of three or four workers quietly departed for Beijing to file an appeal for help.

Nightly Battleground

During daylight hours, the Shuangfeng Textile Factory was quiet. At night, it was a battleground.

On the first night, about 80 police officers, security guards and factory managers entered the mill and tried to pull the workers out. The workers scattered and hid in various parts of the factory complex. Others forced police officers to drag or carry them out. By daybreak, after expelling 100 to 200 workers, the exhausted officers gave up.

The struggle was repeated night after night. Each evening, the number of police grew. They usually charged the factory between 2 and 3 a.m., when the workers were tired and fewer remained inside. But the workers always outnumbered police. Those pulled out of the factory were never jailed; many went back in as soon as the police left in the morning.

To break the stalemate, the government tried to identify and arrest strike leaders. Video cameras were set up to record the comings and goings at the factory. Undercover officers were sent in, too, workers said.

One of the first arrested was Chen Jun, 38, a 20-year veteran of the mill's cloth division, who friends said had helped purchase food for his colleagues. They said he also made copies of a petition asking the factory to reinstate the two women who had been fired, to explain how the firm went bankrupt and to account for the money workers had paid for stock shares and pensions.

Police arrested him at his home on the third day of the strike, taking him away from his wife and 12-year-old child. "He's the kind of person who stands up for people who are treated unfairly," said one family member. "But he shouldn't have gone against the factory, because we common people can't win."

Over the next few days, police arrested several other workers, as well as two officials in the factory's finance department accused of leaking them documents, workers said. Apparently worried that the strike might spread to other factories, police also detained people who were not Shuangfeng employees but who had expressed sympathy for the strikers.

The area around Dafeng had already experienced an unusual amount of worker unrest. Late last year, workers at a large state-owned textile mill in the nearby city of Yancheng went on strike. In another nearby town, a group of laid-off workers had taken a U.S. businessman hostage, and another group had looted a supermarket in a dispute over unpaid wages.

On the fifth night of the strike here, the government mustered a force of 200 to 250 people to clear the factory, including at least one military police unit, workers said. At 2:30 a.m., it broadcast a warning over the factory's public address system: "Leave the scene immediately or accept responsibility for the consequences!"

When the 2,000 workers inside didn't move, police stormed in and began dragging people out. One police officer repeatedly kicked and punched a female worker who refused to leave. Enraged, the workers fought back and pushed police out of the factory, witnesses said.

"It was chaos, just short of a full riot," said one witness. "Some people wanted to kill that police officer, and the other police were trying to protect him. Everybody was pushing and shoving." An hour later, the police retreated.

But the workers' victory was short-lived. The next day, police arrested more people. As one familiar face after another disappeared, workers began to worry if they might be next.

Finally, they learned that the group sent to file the appeal in Beijing had never made it. Police had captured them, too.

On the night of Dec. 22, the number of workers in the factory fell to about 400, and police finally succeeded in forcing everybody out, workers said.

Company officials promptly declared a "vacation" and locked down the factory. Over the next several days, they phoned or visited almost every worker, trying to persuade them to come back to work by promising that the factory would eventually return their money. The pay cut, however, would stand.

On Dec. 27, 11 days after the strike began, people began trickling back to work. The next day, half of the workers returned and, a few days later, most of the staff was working again, employees said.

"Yes, we lost," said one worker. "People are depressed and scared now. Anyone who speaks out is arrested, so no one dares say anything. Anyway, it's useless."

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Worked Till They Drop

Few Protections for China's New Laborers

By PHILIP P. PAN
Washington Post Foreign Service

SONGGANG, China—On the night she died, Li Chunmei must have been exhausted.

Co-workers said she had been on her feet for nearly 16 hours, running back and forth inside the Bainan Toy Factory, carrying toy parts from machine to machine. When the quitting bell finally rang shortly after midnight, her young face was covered with sweat.

FAMILY PHOTO

Li Chunmei, 19, worked long hours in a toy factory in Songgang before she died.

This was the busy season, before Christmas, when orders peaked from Japan and the United States for the factory's stuffed animals. Long hours were mandatory, and at least two months had passed since Li and the other workers had enjoyed even a Sunday off.

Lying on her bed that night, staring at the bunk above her, the slight 19-year-old complained she felt worn out, her roommates recalled. She was massaging her aching legs, and coughing, and she told them she was hungry. The factory food was so bad, she said, she felt as if she had not eaten at all.

"I want to quit," one of her roommates, Huang Jiaqun, remembered her saying. "I want to go home."

Finally, the lights went out. Her roommates had already fallen asleep when Li started coughing up blood. They found her in the bathroom a few hours later, curled up on the floor, moaning softly in the dark, bleeding from her nose and mouth. Someone called an ambulance, but she died before it arrived.

The exact cause of Li's death remains unknown. But what happened to her last November in this industrial town in southeastern Guangdong province is described by family, friends and co-workers as an example of what China's more daring newspapers call *guolaosi*. The phrase means "overwork death," and usually applies to young workers who suddenly collapse and die after working exceedingly long hours, day after day.

There has been little research on what causes these deaths, or how often they occur. Local journalists say many of them are never documented but estimate that dozens die under such circumstances every year in the Pearl River Delta area alone, the booming manufacturing region north of Hong Kong.

The stories of these deaths highlight labor conditions that are the norm for a new generation of workers in China, tens of millions of migrants who have flocked from the nation's impoverished countryside to its prospering coast.

In an historic shift, these migrant workers now number more than 200 million by some estimates, more than the 80 million employees working in China's shrinking state industries.

These new workers are younger, poorer, and less familiar with the promises of labor rights and job security that once served as the ideological bedrock of the ruling Communist Party. They are more likely to work for private companies, often backed by foreign investment, with no socialist tradition of cradle-to-grave benefits.

The young migrants are also second-class citizens, with less access to the weak courts and trade unions that sometimes temper market forces as China's economy changes from socialist to capitalist. Most of all, they are outsiders, struggling to make a living far away from home.

'Go Out and Make Money'

Li Chunmei's home was the village of Xiaoeshan, a remote hamlet high in the mountains of western Sichuan province, 700 miles and a world away from the factories of Songgang, where she died. The area remains among the poorest in China, with no roads, one telephone and limited electricity and plumbing.

There are no tractors, just oxen, a few primitive tools and peasants who till the earth with their hands. Few residents can read a newspaper, and fewer still speak the national language, Mandarin. Traveling there entails a hike through fog-shrouded mountains, along narrow paths that resemble muddy balance beams.

Li Chunmei was the second of five children born to parents who squeeze out a living from this rough terrain, farming small plots of land on terraces carved into the mountainside. Day after day, they climb up and down the mountain, tending to scattered patches of wheat and rice.

"This is a poor village, and all the parents here want their children to leave for the cities as soon as pos-

sible," said Li's father, Li Zhimin, sitting inside a house he built out of packed dirt. "The sooner they go, the sooner they can help support the family."

The economics are simple, residents said. People in Xiaoeshan eat most of what they grow, and by selling the rest they earn an average annual income of about $25 each. But local officials demand about $37 per person in taxes and fees. Several peasants who refused to pay last year were arrested.

Residents say there is only one way to survive: Pull the children out of school, and later send them to find work in faraway cities.

Li took his eldest daughter, Li Mei, out of school in the third grade, before she learned to write her name properly. Li Chunmei left school in the third grade, too. The girls were put to work farming and feeding the livestock.

When Li Mei was 15, she boarded a bus to Shenzhen, the special economic zone adjacent to Hong Kong.

"Our family was having difficulties," she said. "I wanted to support myself and earn money to help my parents. I wanted to help keep my other sisters in school."

Two years later, Li Mei returned home with more than $100 in savings. Li Chunmei was 15 then, and she announced she was ready to join her sister in the city. The family needed the money, and she didn't want her father to work so hard, Li Mei recalled her sister saying.

At the end of the holiday, Li Zhimin accompanied his daughters on the long walk through the mountains to the nearest bus station. Li Chunmei was crying quietly, he recalled.

"Of course, I was worried, . . . but I told her not to cry," her father said. "I told her, 'There's no reason to cry. Go out and make money.'

"I told her, 'It's bad luck to cry.' "

The Worst Job

The ride lasted three days and three nights.

When they reached the elevated expressway between Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Li Chunmei caught her first glimpse of the factory complexes of the Pearl River Delta, her sister said. Drab, concrete dormitories line the road, decorated only by lines of laundry hanging from window to window. Late at night, passing motorists can peer through the factory windows and see rows of young women hunched over machines, working under florescent lights.

The Li sisters disembarked in Dongguan, a fast-growing city of 9 million residents, of whom more than 7 million are migrant workers. Li Mei had spent the past two years there, moving from one toy factory to another, and she had a job waiting. She said it didn't take long to arrange one for her little sister, too.

But Li Chunmei's first year in the factories ended abruptly when a motorcycle struck her and broke her leg while she was crossing the street. Her father said he traveled to Dongguan and took his daughter home to recuperate.

When she returned more than a year later, at the age of 17, Li Chunmei settled in Songgang, a satellite town northwest of Shenzhen where her sister had found work with a Korean toy manufacturer, Kaiming Industrial Ltd. Sister helped sister again, and Li Chunmei landed a job there, too.

In the two years before her death, friends and relatives said, Li worked in three different plants that produced stuffed animals, one run by Kaiming and two others that regularly received orders from the company.

Songgang is dominated by sprawling, fenced-in industrial complexes that produce all manner of clothes, toys and electronic goods for world markets. In the evenings, after quitting time, groups of young men and women stroll through the town, their factory ID tags pinned to their uniforms, time cards tucked in shirt pockets.

The town presented an exciting new world for a country girl, a place with streetlights and mahjong parlors, and off-key karaoke songs drifting through the warm air. But friends and co-workers said Li rarely ventured outside the factory gates.

Inside, life followed a rigid routine, co-workers said. Li was out of bed by 7:30 a.m. and in uniform and at her post by 8. At noon, she could take 90 minutes for lunch and a quick nap. At 5:30 she had 30 minutes for dinner. Overtime began at 6, and the quitting bell usually didn't ring until after midnight.

Workers said most of the factory's employees were assigned to assembly lines that stitched together stuffed animals. One worker attached an eye, and the next sewed on an ear. They spent the whole day sitting in front of their sewing machines, performing a single task again and again.

Li was a runner, co-workers said, always on her feet. When one worker finished a task, the runners picked up the toy and raced it to the next worker on the line. An average line had 25 workers and just two or three runners, and produced as many as 1,000 toys a day.

"She had the worst job, and the bosses were always yelling at her to go faster," said one worker on Li's assembly line, who asked to be identified by his surname, Liu. "There were no breaks, and there was no air conditioning." He added that the air was full of fibers, and with the heat from the machines, sometimes the temperature climbed above 90 degrees.

Runners required no special skills, and were paid the least, about 12 cents per hour, workers said. During the busy season, including extra pay for overtime, Li could earn about $65 a month.

But there were deductions. Workers said the company withheld about $12 a month for room and board and charged them for benefits they never received. For example, workers said they paid for the temporary residence permits they needed to live and work in Songgang legally, but never received them.

Managers also had the power to impose arbitrary fines, including penalties for spending more than five minutes in the bathroom, wasting food during meals and failing to meet production quotas, workers said.

Li often complained about the conditions, but she also seemed happy to be earning money, friends said. Once, she told them she was saving for her dowry.

"She was shy and honest, and the poorest of all of us," said Shen Xiuqun, a co-worker from Li's hometown. "She didn't have a boyfriend. She didn't like music. When all of us went out, she usually stayed in."

Another colleague, Zhang Fayong, recalled that Li once purchased a new dress, then refused to wear it. She said Li was amazed she had spent the money on it, and afraid she somehow might ruin it. After her death, her father found the dress among her belongings, folded and wrapped in plastic, he said.

He also found a stack of laminated snapshots, taken at local photo parlors for 50 cents apiece. They show Li with her friends, standing in front of false landscapes, dressed up in costumes: a military uniform, a traditional Chinese gown. She

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FAMILY PHOTO

Li Chunmei, left, poses with a friend, the only photo in which she was smiling out of many that were taken. Friends said she worked extremely long hours and without a day off. Many young Chinese workers are finding harsh conditions in toy factories producing goods for export to world markets.

looks surprisingly young, just a teenager with long black hair, holding flowers, or saluting, or sitting with an ID tag pinned to her blouse.

She was smiling in only one picture.

'We Were Trapped'

Two months before she died, Li Chunmei was transferred from the main Kaiming factory to a new plant down the street, the Bainan Toy Factory, a featureless brown building. She and about 60 other Kaiming employees began making toys in a third-floor workshop under the supervision of her manager at Kaiming, Wu Duoqin, co-workers said.

There, conditions got worse. The peak season had arrived, and Wu pressed her employees to work longer and longer hours, sometimes past 2 a.m. or 3 a.m., workers said. They worked every day for more than 60 days.

"Everyone has to work overtime. You have no choice. Even if you're sick, you have to work," said one of Li's co-workers, who asked to be identified only by her surname, Zhao.

"But we don't even get paid for all of the overtime," she added. "For example, we might work six or seven hours extra, but then they just put down three or four hours on the timecards."

Less than a week before she died, Li begged her line manager for a day off, saying she was exhausted. He refused. Then Li skipped a night shift to catch up on sleep and was docked three days' pay, co-workers recalled.

Friends said Li often spoke of quitting and returning home. But the factory had not paid her for two months, and if she quit, she was afraid she might not get the money. Several workers were in similar situations. "We were trapped," said one, a 17-year-old girl from Sichuan province. "All we could do was keep working."

Many of the conditions described by Li's co-workers violate Chinese law. The minimum wage in Songgang is about 30 cents per hour. Overtime is limited in China to no more than 36 hours per month, and it must be voluntary. Arbitrary fines and pay deductions are prohibited. But enforcement of the law is weak.

"It may be illegal, but it's normal," said Wu Chunlin, 25, a migrant from Sichuan who said he has worked in a half-dozen different factories in the region over the past five years. "It's more or less the same wherever we go."

One Chinese journalist who has investigated working conditions in the Pearl River Delta said the problem is a "merger of interests" between local government officials and factory managers. The officials are eager to stimulate investment and generate taxes and bribes, so they are often willing to overlook labor rights and safety violations, he said.

Li Qiang, a former labor organizer in China who fled to the United States two years ago, described helping a group of 400 migrant workers in Shenzhen file a complaint about factory conditions, only to be turned away by local officials.

"They said, 'Go back to the factory.' They said, 'You should know better. It's like this everywhere,' " Li Qiang recalled. "The problem is a lot of these local officials have relatives or friends who are hired as managers in the factories. There's a network of connections, and migrant workers are on the outside."

In many ways, migrant workers are among the most vulnerable in China's working class. Under a government system intended to restrict population movement, migrants enjoy fewer rights and welfare benefits than workers in the old state factories, and police can arbitrarily arrest and repatriate them to their hometowns.

It is also more difficult for them to organize protests or follow through with a complaint in the slow-moving courts. "The state workers have been together a long time. Sometimes they grew up together, so it can be easier for them to stick together," Li Qiang said. "But migrant workers are from different places, and they don't have deep roots. They're easily scattered."

The migrant workers usually are less educated than their urban counterparts, and largely unaware of their rights. Very few belong to government-controlled trade unions; in interviews, many had never even heard of the Chinese word for labor union.

In the private factories where migrants often work, managers are primarily concerned about profit. By contrast, despite new market pressures, managers of state factories in China often resemble politi-

cal leaders, responsible for the overall welfare of their workers.

Foreign outcry over sweatshop labor has led some multinational firms to monitor conditions in their factories and among their direct suppliers. But a system of subcontracting has undermined such measures.

For example, Kaiming Industrial receives orders to produce toys for a variety of brand-name companies, but their inspectors rarely visit the company and always announce visits in advance, according to a senior manager who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

He said the factory maintains good labor standards. It can afford to do so, he said, because it farms out the least profitable and most difficult orders to factories with lower standards, including Bainan, and then just takes a commission. The Bainan factory, in turn, distributes some of its workload to subcontractors such as Wu Duoqin, the supervisor who employed Li Chunmei, he said.

"So you see, she wasn't working for us," he said. "It's not our problem."

A woman who answered the phone at the Bainan factory but refused to give her name said the same thing: "Yes, we heard about that. But she wasn't working for us. It's not our responsibility."

Wu Duoqin could not be located. Officials at Kaiming and Bainan said they had lost touch with her, and a phone number she once used was disconnected.

A Father's Sorrow

Immediately after learning of his daughter's death, Li Zhimin traveled to Songgang. For 28 days, he said, he tried to get someone to take responsibility for what happened.

The police sent him to the offices of the local labor bureau, which sent him to the Bainan factory, where managers refused to see him. Then he tried the district-level labor bureau, which sent him to the local commerce department and the Shenzhen city labor bureau.

Finally, police gave him a letter that said a district medical examiner had concluded Li Chunmei "suddenly died because of an illness while she was alive." There were no other details, and the local labor bureau declared her death "non-work-related."

Li said he was unhappy with the finding, but was helpless to do anything about it. Eventually, he said, Kaiming Industrial pressured Wu Duoqin to pay for his daughter's funeral, for the expenses he incurred while in Songgang and for his bus ticket back home. His eldest daughter, Li Mei, returned with him.

Now, the family is again struggling to make ends meet. Li Mei is planning to return to the factories next year.

BY PHILIP P. PAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Li Chunmei's parents stand outside their house in a remote village in China. They encouraged their older daughters to work in factories to make money.

BY PHILIP P. PAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Li Chunmei spent her last two months producing toys in a workshop at the Bainan Toy Factory, where, during peak demand, employees worked 16-hour shifts or longer, and for 60 days without a day off. Her death was ruled an "illness."

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Poisoned Back Into Poverty

As China Embraces Capitalism, Hazards to Workers Rise

Wang Xiao was poisoned from overexposure to glue fumes at the Anjia sneaker factory.

By PHILIP P. PAN
Washington Post Foreign Service

DONGGUAN, China—Wang Xiao had been working in the sneaker factory for only a few months when she noticed a strange tingling in her feet. Over time, the sensation spread to her ankles, then her shins. Her fingertips went numb next, and her appetite disappeared. Soon, the mother of two was so weak she could barely climb the stairs to her factory dorm room.

At first, Wang, 33, thought it was just exhaustion from work, or maybe a stomach flu. After all, she recalled, she had been putting in 17 hours a day, gluing together sneakers that would be shipped from this industrial city in southern China to shops across Europe and the United States. Morning after morning, she joined 2,000 other workers on the assembly lines at the Taiwanese-owned Anjia Footwear Factory, determined not to quit until she saved enough to build a new house back in her home village.

She never suspected that toxins in the glue were slowly destroying her nervous system.

So the numbness continued to spread. It moved past her wrists and up her forearms. It crept along her legs and seized her knees. Just standing became a challenge. Finally, too sick to work, Wang quit and went home. Weeks later, she woke up paralyzed, unable even to wiggle a finger.

BY YUE SHENG—IMAGINECHINA

Female workers who became ill while working long hours at a sneaker factory are treated at a hospital in China's Guangdong province.

Now, despite a year-long search for treatment, Wang remains confined to a hospital bed, barely able to walk. Her misfortune has been compounded by medical bills that have wiped out years of savings and knocked her family, once on the verge of escaping poverty, back into debt and destitution.

Caught in China's wrenching transition from socialism to capitalism, huge numbers of industrial workers such as Wang are falling ill or suffering injuries on the job, then fending for themselves with little or no health insurance.

Unrestrained by labor unions or a strong legal system, businesses seeking to maximize profit have allowed job hazards to proliferate. China has adopted work safety rules, but enforcement is lax because local officials often can be bribed, and they are worried about chasing away factories that pay taxes important to their budgets.

Most vulnerable are about 150 million to 200 million migrant workers from China's impoverished countryside, many so desperate for work they will take any job, no questions asked. Managers often fire them if they get sick, sending them back to their villages, where they may never realize the cause of their illnesses and where access to medical care is least certain.

By the government's own count, 25 million workers in China are in regular contact with hazards such as toxic chemicals and coal dust, and 13,000 new cases of job-related illnesses are reported every year. Tens of thousands of other workers are injured or killed in industrial accidents.

At the same time, market reforms have undermined the socialist health care system that once covered 90 percent of China's population. In its place has emerged a jungle of a medical system in which many workers are receiving inferior care, at higher costs, with little or no insurance.

The wealthy have access to better health care than before, but increasingly the poor must take their chances with bad doctors and bogus medicine—and pay for it in cash. Researchers say illness has become the leading reason why Chinese families fall below the poverty line.

"I never imagined this would happen when I went out to work," Wang said, wiping away tears. "My husband worked so hard, and my two kids—one is in the first grade, the other is in second grade—we need money for both of them. . . . Now, all the money is gone."

Pursuing a Dream

The Wangs are natives of Tiegang, a dirt-poor hamlet in the mountains north of the central Chinese city of Wuhan and about 400 miles west of Shanghai. There, children play barefoot on rock-strewn paths, using discarded syringes as water guns, while grandparents toil in fields of peanuts and sesame, straining to bring in a harvest large enough to feed their families and pay their taxes.

Most houses in the village are rickety structures made of stones and logs. But in recent years, some families have saved enough to build brick homes. That was Wang's dream. She and her husband pursued it by joining the millions who have left the countryside for work in the cities.

She landed a job as a seamstress in Wuhan. He found work as a carpenter. Year after year, they saved. Then, in 1997, Wang gave birth to a boy, her second child. Local officials who enforce China's one-child policy fined the couple nearly $1,000, draining their savings, they said.

Last March, they entrusted the children to relatives and left home again. Wang's husband returned to Wuhan. She ventured farther, all the way to the Pearl River Delta, a manufacturing area just north of Hong Kong.

She said a relative helped her get a job at the Anjia Footwear Factory in Dongguan, one of hundreds of plants in the region that together produce a large share of the sneakers sold in the United States. Factory officials said Anjia alone churns out 5 million to 6 million pairs every year. They declined to identify their customers, but the North American retail chain Payless ShoeSource confirmed it was one of them.

"I started at 7:30 a.m. and took an hour break for lunch at noon. At 6, we had another hour for dinner, and after that there were the night shifts," Wang recalled. "It was such an exhausting job. I worked until 2 or 3 in the morning. If the next day was a holiday, like Labor Day, we would work until 4 a.m."

Making a sneaker was a three-step process. First, one team of workers cut out the pieces of rubber, foam and fabric. Another division sewed and glued the pieces together. Finally, a third group glued the sole to the rest of the sneaker.

Wang was a member of the second team. She and about 700 others, almost all of them young migrant women, toiled in a vast workshop, hunched over long rows of sewing and gluing machines. All day, she glued together foam sneaker pieces.

"The windows were small and there was hardly any ventilation," Wang said of the factory. "Before work, we were allowed to turn on the fans. But as soon as the machines were on, we had to turn the fans off. . . . If we used a fan, the glue would dry up and it wouldn't spread very well anymore.

"It smelled horrible," she continued. "There was an oven, and the heat swept over us. After we brushed glue on each pair of shoes, we sent them to the oven and got another pair to work on. . . . They scolded us whenever we slowed down."

James Zhou, the general manager, acknowledged ventilation problems in the plant, but he said he ordered new equipment installed as soon as he learned from local officials last month that his workers were getting sick.

He also acknowledged workers were sometimes required to work extra hours, when power blackouts put the factory behind schedule, but he denied they ever worked more than 52 hours a week. He said labor and health officials inspect the factory at least once a year, and it has always passed.

Timothy Reid, a spokesman for Payless ShoeSource, said the company sent inspectors to the plant and began canceling orders as soon as the factory informed them of the problem. He said Payless sets "strict standards" for its many suppliers and would resume the orders only after the factory finished carrying out changes Payless demanded and ensured workers were safe.

Zhou said the factory has switched to a safer glue. The original was imported from Taiwan and had been approved by the Chinese government. He said managers had no idea it contained n-hexane, a hazardous solvent also found in spray paint and cleaners.

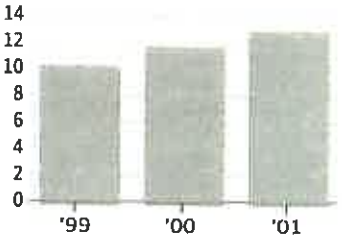
Long-term overexposure to n-hexane damages the peripheral nervous system, causing numbness, muscle weakness and eventually paralysis. Doctors first diagnosed the problem among shoemakers in Italy in the 1950s; similar cases have been reported in many countries, including the United States.

But n-hexane appeared in China only in the 1990s, after the country opened up to foreign trade and investment. Regulators have struggled to keep up with the growing number of dangerous foreign prod-

Hazards at Work

With Chinese businesses facing few controls, occupational hazards have proliferated.

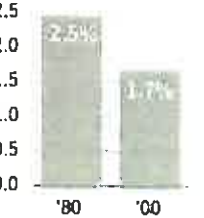
Number of new occupational diseases reported, in thousands



- **Silicosis,** a deadly lung disease caused by exposure to dust. About **558,000** Chinese workers suffer from work-related lung disease, mostly miners; but many metal workers and construction workers have been diagnosed as well.
- **Chemical poisoning**, the next most serious problem. Between 1991 and 1996, **7,743** people suffered acute poisoning in work-related accidents, and another **10,923** fell victim to chronic poisoning.
- **Industrial accidents.** About **10,000** coal miners die on the job each year. Between **6,000 and 8,000** workers die each year in other industrial accidents.

Stricken workers are less likely to receive help from the government.

Percentage of the central government budget devoted to healthcare



SOURCE: Chinese state media

THE WASHINGTON POST

ucts now used in Chinese factories.

Market reforms have also weakened the government's ability to enforce safety rules. State-owned mines and factories have cut safety and health budgets to avoid bankruptcy, according to a senior occupational health official, who asked not to be identified. And the government has trouble imposing order on the new private sector, especially small enterprises that have proliferated across the countryside.

Here in Guangdong province, for example, a recent study conducted by a provincial task force found that 96 percent of businesses contained dangerous levels of hazardous chemicals and dust in the air or were otherwise in violation of health standards, according to an unusually candid story published last month in the Yangcheng Evening News, an official provincial newspaper. Sources said government censors ordered a clampdown on coverage of the subject soon afterward.

The number of workers getting sick in Guangdong each year is rising at an annual rate of 70 percent, and at least 2,500 people have died of occupational illnesses since 1989, the report said.

The Chinese government acknowledges the problem and is trying to solve it, saying the annual cost of work-related accidents and diseases exceeds $1.2 billion. In May, it put into effect a new law setting stricter safety standards.

But based on experience, enforcing the law is likely to be difficult. One problem is a severe shortage of trained health inspectors. Even in Guangdong province, among the nation's wealthiest, the ratio of health officials to workers is 1 to 10,000, compared with 1 to 300 or 500 workers in other nations, the Yangcheng Evening News said. Only seven of 21 counties have offices assigned to preventing occupational diseases, the newspaper said.

But the most serious challenge may be to find a way to compel local officials to impose safety rules on businesses that are often run by their friends or relatives.

In many places in the Pearl River Delta, well-connected factory managers simply refuse to let health inspectors in, the Yangcheng Evening News reported. Some local leaders "tacitly consent to and support" businesses when they block health officials from examining workers; others help them pay off workers and cover up problems.

High Cost of Health Care

It was after the Dragon Boat Festival in late May that Wang's hands and feet went numb. By July, she was having trouble walking and needed to stop and rest every few steps.

Finally, a friend took her to the Dongguan Qingxi Hospital, where a doctor examined her and told her she needed to be admitted.

"I asked how much it would cost," Wang recalled. "The doctor said, 'You're worried about money when you're in this condition?' "

Wang said she had saved only $125 after nearly five months at the factory, and she was worried about what would happen when she ran out of cash. So she left, quit her job and boarded a train for home, where at least she would be near her family. She was so weak, she said, she could not even pack.

Before market reforms, nearly all workers had government health insurance. Now, those employed by troubled state industries often have only limited coverage, and those who have been laid off can lose it completely.

Migrant workers like Wang have the least protection. City governments consider them outsiders and rarely require companies to cover them. And in the countryside, the rural communes that used to pay basic medical expenses have been dismantled.

Wang said she tried getting help at two state hospitals near her village, but was quickly overwhelmed by the cost. She said a hospital in the nearby city of Xiaogan billed her almost $150 for a week of tests, equal to more than a month's pay at the sneaker factory. Then, she spent a week at Xiehe Hospital, Wuhan's largest, and was charged about $500 more.

She said doctors at Xiehe diagnosed a neurological disease, possibly caused by poisoning, and gave her shots that seemed to help. But the medicine cost $20 a day. After eight days, she asked the doctor to recommend cheaper medicine and left the hospital.

Medical bills have risen largely because Beijing has been withdrawing subsidies to hospitals, part of an effort to pass costs and responsibilities to local authorities. But the localities have not stepped in, and hospitals are trying to survive by passing more costs to patients.

"We are going through a lot of reform now. . . . Government funding has always been small, and now it is even less," complained one doctor at Xiaogan Central Hospital, who asked not to be identified. "Sometimes the government even asks us to make money."

Another important change occurred in the early 1980s, when China closed down its communes and allowed peasants to lease individual plots of land. The policy boosted rural income, but it cut off funding for the acclaimed "barefoot doctors"—peasants with minimal training who mounted public health campaigns and provided free, basic care across the countryside.

Now, rural residents turn to slightly better trained "village doctors" who usually run private clinics. Patients receive similar low-quality care, but they must pay for it. Like the hospitals, these doctors routinely overprescribe medicine and sometimes sell fake drugs to make more money.

Wang visited two such clinics near her village, one opened by a cousin who passed his doctor's exam after three years of self-study, the other by a man she heard possessed secret cures handed down by his ancestors.

Wang spent 2½ months at her cousin's clinic, a one-room storefront in Xiaogan equipped only with a bed during a recent visit. Wang Yunchu, her cousin, said he diagnosed a type of neuromuscular disease and prescribed several drugs to treat it.

"I gave her a discount on the services," he said, "but not the medicine."

Wang Xiao spent another two months at Ren Dingli's 15-bed clinic in nearby Dawu county. Ren said he diagnosed rheumatoid arthritis and treated her with acupuncture and a therapy that involved sending electricity through needles attached to her arms, legs and shoulders.

Wang said she was not much healthier when she left the clinics, but she was definitely poorer. The two doctors billed her almost $700.

"I'll never forget it," said Wang Kunming, her husband. "When we came back from Dawu, I only had three yuan [37 cents] left in my pocket."

'Rescue Mission' Launched

When they were almost out of money, the Wangs returned to Tiegang.

Day after day, Wang Xiao lay inside the shack-like house she had dreamed of replacing. Barely able to move, she relied on her husband for everything. He fed her. He scratched her when she itched. He

BY DAVID CACKOWSKI —THE WASHINGTON POST

gave her massages, hoping to restore feeling to her limbs.

He said he borrowed more money and purchased more medicine. He gave her shots, sticking the needle where a doctor had marked a spot with a pen. He experimented with medicinal herbs, boiling so many he ruined their cooking pots. Altogether, the family spent nearly $2,500, equal to more than two years' pay at the factory.

Then, after about six months, a local official showed up at their home and told them authorities in Guangdong were looking for women who had been poisoned at a sneaker factory.

For the first time, Wang realized she was not alone.

The husband of another worker had written letters to 20 officials, pleading for help because he believed his wife had been poisoned at the factory, sources said. All the letters apparently were ignored except one that went to the party-controlled All-China Women's Federation. A legal aid worker there contacted health officials and mobilized a "rescue mission" to find the workers, according to state media.

The factory immediately accepted responsibility and fully cooperated, state media said. Zhou ordered physical exams for all workers exposed to the glue and sent eight with possible poisoning symptoms to the hospital.

He said managers also compiled a list of all former workers who may have been exposed in the past decade. To date, the women's federation has located 34 former workers with symptoms and brought them to Guangdong for treatment, he said.

Zhou has promised the factory will pay their medical expenses. But he said some customers, afraid of bad publicity, have canceled sneaker orders. He said the factory might shut down if others follow suit.

Thirteen workers remain in the hospital, including Wang Xiao. Doctors say they hope she will recover fully, perhaps in a few months or a few years. But in some cases, the effects of the poisoning are permanent.

BY PHILIP P. PAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Wang Kunming and his two children sit at home in Tiegang. His wife, Wang Xiao, has been hospitalized.