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Coming Distraction: Factory Girls

October 2, 2008 in [Coming Distractions](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

As faithful readers may recall, *China Beat* contributor Leslie T. Chang has a forthcoming book, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in Changing China*, which will be released October 7. The book has received positive reviews, such as [this one](#) at *Publisher's Weekly* and [this one](#) from *China Beat's* Jeff



Wasserstrom writing in *Newsweek*. You can read the first chapter for the book as [a preview](#) at Amazon, but we wanted to share a short excerpt, from Chapter 4, with you as well. In this excerpt, Chang describes how a mobile phone is not just a desirable accessory for migrant workers, but a necessity:

From *Factory Girls: From Village to City in Changing China*
By Leslie T. Chang

Small factories had their own problems, and Min soon discovered what they were. The workplace was disorganized, and her own responsibilities were never made clear; she scrambled to keep up with all the tasks thrown her way. Her new boss, like her old one, was insecure and status-conscious. Min was learning that many Chinese men had this flaw. He didn't like it that Min did not get his approval for everything she did. He didn't like it that she was friendly with the security guards. His response was to begin interviewing candidates for her position—a colleague, rival, or replacement for Min— without telling her. She heard about it from the office receptionist.

In August 2004, two months after she arrived, Min collected her pay and left without telling anyone. A former colleague had joined a factory in Shenzhen and invited her to go work for him, and she decided to go. She spent the night in a hotel near her factory; while she slept, someone broke the lock on her door. The thief took nine hundred yuan and Min's mobile phone, the only place where she had stored the numbers of everyone she knew in the city: the excolleague who was her only link to her new job, the friends she had made since going out, and the boyfriend who had gone home.

* * *

The mobile phone was the first big purchase of most migrants. Without a phone, it was virtually impossible to keep up with friends or find a new job. Letters between factories often went missing, and calling up a worker in her dorm, where a hundred people might share a single hallway phone, was difficult. Office phones inside factories were often programmed not to allow outside calls or to cut off automatically after several minutes. Anyway, people jumped jobs so often that dorm and office numbers quickly went out of date. In a universe of perpetual motion, the mobile phone was magnetic north, the thing that fixed a person in place.

I learned all of this painfully. In my early days in Dongguan, I befriended many new arrivals who did not have mobile phones yet, and I lost track of them, one by one. When I met Min, I decided to buy

her a pager, but that industry had collapsed so suddenly and completely in the past few years that salesmen in electronics stores just laughed at me when I said I wanted one. I gave Min a mobile phone so I would not lose her too.

In the migrant world, the mobile phone was a metaphor for the relentless pace of city life. An executive at a shoe factory summed up the disjunctions of migration this way: "At home they have no phones, then suddenly they are here and it is Nokia 6850." A young woman who sold insurance said to me, "At home they hand down a mobile phone from one person to another" to describe rural life. People referred to themselves in the terminology of mobile phones: *I need to recharge. I am upgrading myself.* The parents of migrant girls instinctively distrusted the phones, and some forbade their daughters from buying one. The mobile phone, which allowed and even encouraged private contact with strangers, was everything that communal village life was not.

A girl might signal her interest in a young man by offering to pay his mobile-phone bill. Couples announced their allegiance with a shared phone, though relationships sometimes broke up when one person secretly read text messages intended for another. The migrants I knew spent a great deal of time managing their phones—changing numbers constantly to take advantage of cheaper calling plans, and switching phone cards when crossing to another city to save on roaming fees. That was the short-term mentality of Dongguan: Save a few pennies, even if it meant losing touch with some people for good.

Migrant workers are a major reason the Chinese mobile-phone market is the world's largest, yet the industry has mixed feelings about them. Migrants were behind the market's poor economics, one friend in the telecommunications industry told me; they supposedly drove down prices because they were willing to pay for only the cheapest services. Popular culture also felt their negative impact: The quality of Chinese pop music had deteriorated in recent years, I was also told, because migrants chose the least sophisticated songs for the ring tones of their phones.

Hundreds of Dongguan factories made parts for mobile phones, and every third retailer in the city seemed to be a mobile-phone store. The city also did a thriving trade in stolen phones. Certain districts were known for a high incidence of phone theft; one tactic was to speed down a sidewalk on a motorcycle and rip a phone from a pedestrian's ear, mid-sentence. The stolen phones might be fitted with new covers and then sold as new. Manufactured, sold, stolen, repackaged, and resold, the mobile phone was like an endlessly renewable resource at the heart of the Dongguan economy. It was also Min's link to the city. With the theft of her phone, the friendships of a year and a half vanished as if they had never been. She was alone again.

Leslie T. Chang will be giving readings for her forthcoming book at the following locations in the coming weeks:

Denver

Tuesday, October 7
Tatter Cover Bookstore
Reading, Q&A & Signing
7:30pm

San Francisco

Wednesday, October 8
Book Passage (Ferry Building Store)
Reading (Part of Litquake*)
6:00pm

Thursday, October 9
Books Inc. (Opera Plaza Store)
Reading, Q&A & Signing
7:00pm

New York City

Wednesday, October 15
Barnes and Noble
Reading and Signing
2289 Broadway @82nd Street, New York, NY 10025
6:00pm

Washington, DC

Friday, October 17
Politics & Prose
Reading and Signing
7:00pm

Cambridge, MA

Monday, October 20
7:00pm
Porter Square Books
Reading, Q&A & Signing
Co-sponsored by The Center For New Words