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A migrant worker in Shenzhen, which has been having trouble attracting workers because of poor living conditions. (Ryan Pyle for The New York Times)

## Chinese paradise is hell for most low-level workers

By Howard W. French

Published: December 18, 2006

SHENZHEN, China: When Zhang Feifei lost her job in this booming Chinese factory town, she was not terribly concerned. Jobs had always been plentiful in Shenzhen's red-hot economy.

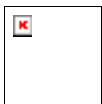
Then Zhang, a 20-year-old migrant laborer, lost her identity card and was shocked to find that no factory would hire her without a bribe she could not afford. Desperate for money, she ended up working in a grimy, two-room massage parlor in a congested alley here, where she has sex with four or five men a day.

"I was terrified at first, and I was really embarrassed not even knowing how to use a condom," said the soft-spoken young woman, casting her eyes downward as she spoke. "I didn't have any choice, though. Little by little, you have to get used to it."

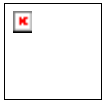
Few cities anywhere have created wealth faster than Shenzhen, which was a sleepy fishing village in the Pearl River delta, next to Hong Kong, when it was decreed a special economic zone by Deng Xiaoping in 1980. The city has since grown at an annual rate of 28 percent.

Shenzhen owed its enormous growth to a simple formula of cheap land, eager, compliant labor and lax environmental rules that attracted legions of foreign investors who built export-based manufacturing industries. In recent years, cities from one end of this country to the other have tried hard to emulate Shenzhen, often quite successfully.

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to the environment.

Today, however, the costs of Shenzhen's phenomenal success, from environmental peril to social degradation, stare out from every corner.

For some people, the city has begun to look less like a model than an ominous warning of the limitations of a growth-above-all approach.

As the limits of the Shenzhen model have grown more and more apparent, eastern cities are increasingly trying to differentiate themselves, emphasizing better working and living conditions for factory workers or paying more attention



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"Some inland cities have started to provide migrants social security, including pension and other insurance," said Wang Chunguang, an expert in labor mobility at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. "In Chengdu, in Sichuan Province, residency controls are loosening up and education for migrant children is getting more attention."

In cities farther west, where the race for development got off to a later start, Shenzhen is now seen as all but irrelevant: too wasteful, too polluted, too dependent on foreign capital and on the ceaseless turnover of migrant labor.

"This path is now a dead end," said Zhao Xiao, an economist and former adviser to the Chinese State Council. After cataloguing the city's problems, he said, "Governments can't count on the beauty of investment covering up 100 other kinds of ugliness."

Some, like Zhang, who are drawn to Shenzhen by the promise of \$100-a-month sweatshop salaries end up being trapped here, literally too poor to leave.

But others come from far away and are quickly disillusioned by how little they are able to save living in mainland China's most expensive city or quickly tire of the difficult work under often abusive factory bosses and return home.

Although the sweatshops built Shenzhen, the problems with the Shenzhen model are not limited to its factories.

While the city is dependent on migrant labor to keep its factories running, onerous residency rules discourage migrants from settling in the city and make it difficult for them to attain public services, from education to health care.

"The government has evaded its responsibilities toward migrant workers," Jin Cheng, a member of an influential local civic forum, Interhoo, said bluntly.

The resulting rootlessness has fed crime of a sort little seen elsewhere in China. Gunfights, kidnappings and gang warfare are rampant, and the signs of social dislocation are everywhere.

Crime rates are skyrocketing. Although the city does not publish data on crime, The Southern Metropolitan News, one of China's most reputable newspapers, reported that there were 18,000 robberies in 2004 in Bao'an, one of six districts in Shenzhen. By comparison, in Shanghai, a city of about 18 million, there were only 2,182 reported robberies for all of 2004, according to figures compiled by the city.

Near the gates of Foxconn, a huge electronics assembly plant that is one of the city's largest employers, a half-dozen former factory workers lounged in the shade on a recent afternoon.

Asked if it was their day off, one of them, a 20-year-old, said that he had been fired when he developed lesions on his arms from exposure to paints and asked to switch jobs. Nowadays, he said, he and his friends survive by "beating people up for a living."

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In addition to shakedown crews like this one, prostitution, usually thinly disguised in massage parlors but increasingly in the open, ranks as one of the city's biggest industries.

Migrant workers describe the city's labor market as a predatory environment filled with unscrupulous job brokers, fraudulent training courses and a multitude of other scams aimed at cheating the most disadvantaged part of the population.

Yu Di, a 19-year-old from Hubei Province with a junior high school education, speaks quietly and wears a look of deep discouragement. He works in a grimy watch-casing factory, loading and unloading heavy boxes from a truck 11 hours a day, 6 days a week. His salary, which includes no benefits, is about \$80 a month.

With his pay amounting to less than his modest outlay for food and other expenses, Yu has had to borrow money from his parents and others just to survive. He would like to look for better work, but transportation and admission fees to the job fairs held in Shenzhen are out of his reach.

Asked about his situation during an interview in his dim and filthy dorm room, he said, "just look at my environment." Then, gesturing grimly at the narrow space crammed with 12 bunk beds consisting of bare springs covered with cardboard, he added: "The only thing I regret is not working hard in school. I came to this factory because there was no other way out."

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