



REDUX

Chen Meizi and Hu Jianhui at their gallery, which specializes in art for the foreign market. Scenes of Venice and Dutch towns, which



Chen refers to as "Water City" and "Holland Street," are popular. Photograph by Mark Leong.

In the countryside southwest of the city of Lishui, where the Da River crosses a sixth-century stone weir, the local government announced, four years ago, that it was founding a Chinese version of the Barbizon. The original French Barbizon School developed during the first half of the nineteenth century, in response to the Romantic movement, among painters working at the edge of the Fontainebleau Forest. Back then, the French artists celebrated rural scenes and peasant subjects. This wasn't exactly the mood in Lishui: like most cities in eastern China's Zhejiang Province, the place was focussed on urban growth; there was a new factory district, and the export economy was then booming. But the local Communist Party cadres wanted the city to become even more outward-looking, and they liked the foreign cachet of the Barbizon. They also figured that it would be good business: art doesn't require much raw material, and it's popular overseas. They referred to their project as Lishui's *Barbisong*, and they gave it the official name of the Ancient Weir Art Village. One Party slogan described it as "A Village of Art, a Capital of Romance, a Place for Idleness."

In order to attract artists, the government offered free rent in some old riverside buildings for the first year, with additional subsidies to follow. Painters arrived immediately; soon, the village had nearly a dozen private galleries. Most people came from China's far south, where there was already a flourishing industry of art for the foreign market. Buyers wanted cheap oil paintings, many of which were destined for tourist shops, restaurants, and hotels in distant countries. For some reason, the majority of artists who settled Lishui's Barbizon specialized in cityscapes of Venice. The manager of Hongye, the largest of the new galleries, told me that it had a staff of thirty painters, and that its main customer was a European-based importer with an insatiable appetite for Venetian scenes. Every month, he wanted a thousand Chinese paintings of the Italian city.

Another small gallery, Bomia, had been opened by a woman named Chen Meizi and her boyfriend, Hu Jianhui. The first time I met Chen, she had just finished a scene of Venice, and now she was painting a Dutch street scene from

what looked like the eighteenth century. A Russian customer had sent a postcard and asked her to copy it. The painting was twenty inches by twenty-four, and Chen told me that she would sell it for about twenty-five dollars. Like most people in the Ancient Weir Art Village, she described Venice as Shui Cheng, "Water City," and referred to Dutch scenes as Helan Jie, "Holland Street." She said that over the past half year she had painted this particular Holland Street as many as thirty times. "All the pictures have that big tower in it," she said.

I told her that it was a church—the steeple rose in the distance, at the end of a road bordered by brick houses with red tile roofs.

"I thought it might be a church, but I wasn't sure," she said. "I knew it was important because whenever I make a mistake they send it back."

Through trial and error, she had learned to recognize some of the landmark buildings of Europe. She had no idea of the names of St. Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace, but she knew

these places mattered, because even the tiniest mistake resulted in rejection. She worked faster on less iconic scenes, because customers didn't notice slight errors. On the average, she could finish a painting in under two days.

Chen was in her early twenties, and she had grown up on a farm near Lishui; as a teen-ager, she learned to paint at an art school. She still had a peasant's directness—she spoke in a raspy voice and laughed at many of my questions. I asked her which of her pictures she liked the most, and she said, "I don't like any of them." She didn't have a favorite painter; there wasn't any particular artistic period that had influenced her. "That kind of art has no connection at all with what we do," she said. The Barbizon concept didn't impress her much. The government had commissioned some European-style paintings of local scenery, but Chen had no use for any of it. Like many young Chinese from the countryside, she had already had her fill of bucolic surroundings. She stayed in the Ancient Weir Art Village strictly because of the free rent, and she missed the

busy city of Guangzhou, where she had previously lived. In the meantime, she looked the part of an urban convert. She had long curly hair; she dressed in striking colors; she seemed to wear high heels whenever she was awake. On workdays, she tottered on stilettos in front of her easel, painting gondolas and churches.

Hu Jianhui, Chen's boyfriend, was a soft-spoken man with glasses and a faint crooked mustache that crossed his lip like a calligrapher's slip. Once a month, he rolled up all their finished paintings and took a train down to Guangzhou, where there was a big art market. That was how they encountered customers; none of the buyers ever came to the Ancient Weir Art Village. For the most part, foreigners wanted Holland Streets and the Water City, but occasionally they sent photographs of other scenes to be converted into art. Hu kept a sample book in which a customer could pick out a picture, give an ID number, and order a full-size oil painting on canvas. HF-3127 was the Eiffel Tower. HF-3087 was a clipper ship on stormy seas. HF-3199 was a circle of Native Americans smoking a peace pipe. Chen and Hu could rarely identify the foreign scenes that they painted, but they had acquired some ideas about national art tastes from their commissions.

"Americans prefer brighter pictures," Hu told me. "They like scenes to be lighter. Russians like bright colors, too. Koreans like them to be more subdued, and Germans like things that are grayer. The French are like that, too."

Chen flipped to HF-3075: a snow-covered house with glowing lights. "Chinese people like this kind of picture," she said. "Ugly! And they like this one." HF-3068: palm trees on a beach. "It's stupid, something a child would like. Chinese people have no taste. French people have the best taste, followed by Russians, and then the other Europeans." I asked her how Americans stacked up. "Americans are after that," she said. "We'll do a painting and the European customer won't buy it, and then we'll show it to a Chinese person, and he'll say, 'Great!'"

Lishui is a third-tier Chinese factory town, with a central population of around two hundred and fifty thousand, and, in a place like that, the outside world is both everywhere and nowhere



at all. In the new development zone, assembly lines produce goods for export, but there isn't much direct foreign investment. There aren't any Nike factories, or Intel plants, or signs that say DuPont; important brands base themselves in bigger cities. Lishui companies make pieces of things: zippers, copper wiring, electric-outlet covers. The products are so obscure that you can't tell much from the signs that hang outside factory gates: Jinchao Industry Co., Ltd.; Huadu Leather Base Cloth Co., Ltd. At the Lishui Sanxing Power Machinery Co., Ltd., the owners have posted their sign in English, but they did so from right to left, the way Chinese traditionally do with characters:

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It's rare to see a foreign face in Lishui. Over a period of three years, I visited the city repeatedly, talking to people in the export industry, but I never met a foreign buyer. Products are sent elsewhere for final assembly, some passing through two or three levels of middlemen before they go abroad; there isn't any reason for a European or an American businessman to visit. But despite the absence of foreigners the city has been shaped almost entirely by globalization, and traces of the outside world can be seen everywhere. When Lishui's first gym opened, it was called the Scent of a Woman, for the Al Pacino movie. Once, I met a demolition-crew worker who had a homemade tattoo on his left arm that said "KENT." He told me he'd done it himself as a kid, after noticing that American movie gangsters have tattoos. I asked why he'd chosen that particular word, and he said, "It's from the cigarette brand in your country." Another time, I interviewed a young factory boss who wore a diamond earring in the shape of the letter "K." His girlfriend had an "O": whenever they were together, and the letters lined up, everything was all right.

The degree of detail often impressed me. The outside world might be distant, but it wasn't necessarily blurred; people caught discrete glimpses of things from overseas. In many cases, these images seemed slightly askew—they were focussed and refracted, like light bent around a corner. Probably it had something to do with all the specialization. Lishui residents learned to see the world in



parts, and these parts had a strange clarity, even when they weren't fully understood. One factory technician who had never formally studied English showed me a list of terms he had memorized:

Padomide Br. Yellow E-8GMX
Sellanyl Yellow N-5GL
Padocid Violet NWL
Sellan Bordeaux G-P
Padocid Turquoise Blue N-3GL
Padomide Rhodamine

In the labyrinth of the foreign language, he'd skipped all the usual entrances—the simple greetings, the basic vocabulary—to go straight to the single row of words that mattered to him. His specialty was dyeing nylon; he mixed chemicals and made colors. His name was Long Chunming, and his co-workers called him Xiao Long, or Little Long. He would consult his notebook and figure out the perfect mixture of chemicals necessary to make Sellanyl Yellow or Padocid Turquoise Blue.

He had grown up on a farm in Guizhou, one of the poorest provinces in China. His parents raised tea, tobacco, and vegetables, and Little Long, like both his siblings, left home after dropping out of middle school. It's a common path in China, where an estimated hundred and thirty million rural migrants have gone to the cities in search of work. In the factory town, Little Long had become relatively successful, earning a good wage of three hundred dollars a month. But he was determined

to further improve himself, and he studied self-help books with foreign themes. In his mind, this endeavor was completely separate from his work. He had no pretensions about what he did; as far as he was concerned, the skills he had gained were strictly and narrowly technical. "I'm not mature enough," he told me once, and he collected books that supposedly improved moral character. One was "The New Harvard MBA Comprehensive Volume of How to Conduct Yourself in Society." Another book was called "Be an Upright Person, Handle Situations Correctly, Become a Boss." In the introduction, the author describes the divides of the worker's environment: "For a person to live on earth, he has to face two worlds: the boundless world of the outside, and the world that exists inside a person."

Little Long had full lips and high cheekbones, and he was slightly vain, especially with regard to his hair, which was shoulder-length. At local beauty parlors, he had it dyed a shade of red so exotic it was best described in professional terms: Sellan Bordeaux. But he was intensely serious about his books. They followed a formula that's common in the self-help literature of Chinese factory towns: short, simple chapters that feature some famous foreigner and conclude with a moral. In a volume called "A Collection of the Classics," the section on effective use of leisure time gave the example of Charles Darwin. (The

book explained that Darwin's biology studies began as a hobby.) Another chapter told the story of how a waiter once became angry at John D. Rockefeller after the oil baron left a measly one-dollar tip. ("Because of such thinking, you're only a waiter," Rockefeller shot back, according to the Chinese book, which praised his thrift.)

Little Long particularly liked "A Collection of the Classics" because it introduced foreign religions. He was interested in Christianity, and when we talked about the subject he referred me to a chapter that featured a parable about Jesus. In this tale, a humble doorkeeper works at a church with a statue of the Crucifixion. Every day, the doorkeeper prays to be allowed to serve as a substitute, to ease the pain for the Son of God. To the man's surprise, Jesus finally speaks and accepts the offer, under one condition: If the doorkeeper ascends the Cross, he can't say a word.

The agreement is made, and soon a wealthy merchant comes to pray. He accidentally drops a money purse; the doorkeeper almost says something but remembers his promise. The next supplicant is a poor man. He prays fervently, opens his eyes, and sees the purse: overjoyed, he thanks Jesus. Again, the doorkeeper keeps silent. Then comes a young traveller preparing to embark on a long sea journey. While he is praying, the merchant returns and accuses the traveller of taking his purse. An argument ensues; the traveller fears he'll miss the boat. At last, the doorkeeper speaks out—with a few words, he resolves the dispute. The traveller heads off on his journey, and the merchant finds the poor man and retrieves his money.

But Jesus angrily calls the doorkeeper down from the Cross for breaking the promise. When the man protests ("I just told the truth!"), Jesus criticizes him:

What do you understand? That rich merchant isn't short of money, and he'll use that cash to hire prostitutes, whereas the poor man needs it. But the most wretched is the young traveller. If the merchant had delayed the traveller's departure, he would have saved his life, but right now his boat is sinking in the ocean.

When I flipped through Little Long's books, and looked at his chemical-color vocabulary lists, I sometimes felt a kind of vertigo. In Lishui, that was a common sensation; I couldn't imagine how people

created a coherent world view out of such strange and scattered contacts with the outside. But I was coming from the other direction, and the gaps impressed me more than the glimpses. For Little Long, the pieces themselves seemed to be enough; they didn't necessarily have to all fit together in perfect fashion. He told me that, after reading about Darwin's use of leisure time, he decided to stop complaining about being too busy with work, and now he felt calmer. John D. Rockefeller convinced Little Long that he should change cigarette brands. In the past, he smoked Profitable Crowd, a popular cigarette among middle-class men, but after reading about the American oil baron and the waiter he switched to a cheaper brand called Hibiscus. Hibiscuses were terrible smokes; they cost about a cent each, and the label immediately identified the bearer as a cheap-skate. But Little Long was determined to rise above such petty thinking, just like Rockefeller.

Jesus' lesson was easiest of all: Don't try to change the world. It was essentially Taoist, reinforcing the classical Chinese phrase *Wu wei er wu bu wei* ("By doing nothing everything will be done"). In Little Long's book, the parable of the Crucifixion concludes with a moral:

We often think about the best way to act, but reality and our desires are at odds, so we can't fulfill our intentions. We must believe that what we already have is best for us.

One month, the Bomia gallery received a commission to create paintings from photographs of a small American town. A middleman in southern China sent the pictures, and he requested a twenty-four-inch-by-twenty-inch oil reproduction of each photo. He emphasized that the quality had to be first-rate, because the scenes were destined for the foreign market. Other than that, he gave no details. Middlemen tended to be secretive about orders, as a way of protecting their profit.

When I visited later that month, Chen Meizi and Hu Jianhui had finished most of the commission. Chen was about to start work on one of the final snapshots: a big white barn with two silos. I asked her what she thought it was.

"A development zone," she said.

I told her that it was a farm. "So big just for a farm?" she said. "What are those for?"

I said that the silos were used for grain.

"Those big things are for grain?" she said, laughing. "I thought they were for storing chemicals!"

Now she studied the scene with new eyes. "I can't believe how big it is," she said. "Where's the rest of the village?"

I explained that American farmers usually live miles outside town.

"Where are their neighbors?" she asked.

"They're probably far away, too."

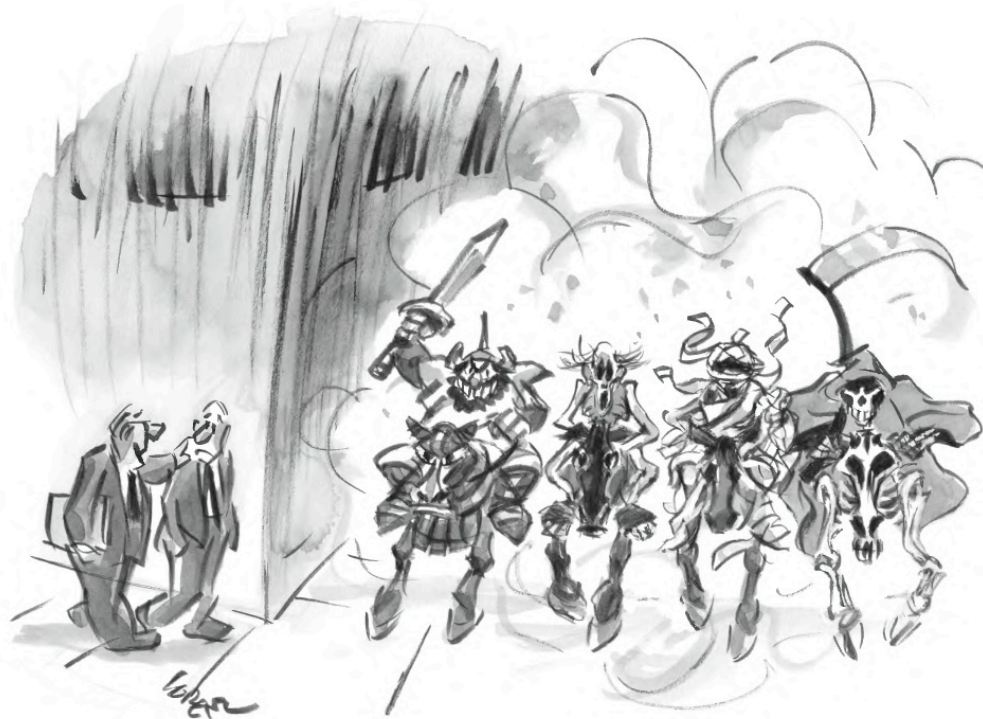
"Aren't they lonely?"

"It doesn't bother them," I said. "That's how farming is in America."

I knew that if I hadn't been asking questions Chen probably wouldn't have thought twice about the scene. As far as she was concerned, it was pointless to speculate about things that she didn't need to know; she felt no need to develop a deeper connection with the outside. In that sense, she was different from Little Long. He was a searcher—in Lishui, I often met such individuals who hoped to go beyond their niche industry and learn something else about the world. But it was even more common to encounter pragmatists like Chen Meizi. She had her skill, and she did her work; it made no difference what she painted.

From my outsider's perspective, her niche was so specific and detailed that it made me curious. I often studied her paintings, trying to figure out where they came from, and the American commission struck me as particularly odd. Apart from the farm, most portraits featured what appeared to be a main street in a small town. There were pretty shop fronts and well-kept sidewalks; the place seemed prosperous. Of all the commissioned paintings, the most beautiful one featured a distinctive red brick building. It had a peaked roof, tall old-fashioned windows, and a white railed porch. An American flag hung from a pole, and a sign on the second story said "Miers Hospital 1904."

The building had an air of importance, but there weren't any other clues or details. On the wall of the Chinese gallery, the scene was completely flat: neither Chen nor I had any idea what she had just spent two days painting. I asked to see the original photograph, and I noticed that the sign should have read



"On the other hand, it's not the end of the world."

"Miners Hospital." Other finished paintings also had misspelled signs, because Chen and Hu didn't speak English. One shop called Overland had a sign that said "Fine Sheepskin and Leather Since 1973"; the artists had turned it into "Fine Sheepskim Leather Sine 1773." A "Bar" was now a "Dah." There was a "Hope Nuseum," a shop that sold "Amiques," and a "Residentlal Bboker." In a few cases, I preferred the new versions—who wouldn't want to drink at a place called Dah? But I helped the artists make corrections, and afterward everything looked perfect. I told Chen that she'd done an excellent job on the Miners Hospital, but she waved off my praise.

Once, not long after we met, I asked her how she first became interested in oil painting. "Because I was a terrible student," she said. "I had bad grades, and I couldn't get into high school. It's easier to get accepted to an art school than to a technical school, so that's what I did."

"Did you like to draw when you were little?"

"No."

"But you had natural talent, right?"

"Absolutely none at all!" she said, laughing. "When I started, I couldn't even hold a brush!"

"Did you study well?"

"No. I was the worst in the class."

"But did you enjoy it?"

"No. I didn't like it one bit."

Her responses were typical of migrants from the countryside, where there's a strong tradition of humility as well as pragmatism. In the factory town, people usually described themselves as ignorant and inept, even when they seemed quite skilled. That was another reason that Chen took so little interest in the scenes she painted: it wasn't her place to speculate, and she scoffed at anything that might seem pretentious. As part of the Barbizon project, the cadres had distributed a promotional DVD about Lishui, emphasizing the town's supposed links to world art. But Chen refused to watch the video. ("I'm sure it's stupid!") Instead, she hung the DVD on a nail beside her easel, and she used the shiny

side as a mirror while working. She held up the disk and compared her paintings to the originals; by seeing things backward, it was easier to spot mistakes. "They taught us how to do this in art school," she said.

Together with her boyfriend, Chen earned about a thousand dollars every month, which is excellent in a small city. To me, her story was amazing: I couldn't imagine coming from a poor Chinese farm, learning to paint, and finding success with scenes that were entirely foreign. But Chen took no particular pride in her accomplishment. These endeavors were so technical and specific that, at least for the workers involved, they essentially had no larger context. People who had grown up without any link to the outside world suddenly developed an extremely specialized role in the export economy; it was like taking their first view of another country through a microscope.

The Lishui experience seemed to contradict one of the supposed benefits of globalization: the notion that eco-

conomic exchanges naturally lead to greater understanding. But Lishui also contradicted the critics who believe that globalized links are disorienting and damaging to the workers at the far end of the chain. The more time I spent in the city, the more I was impressed with how comfortable people were with their jobs. They didn't worry about who consumed their products, and very little of their self-worth seemed to be tied up in these trades. There were no illusions of control—in a place like Lishui, which combined remoteness with the immediacy of world-market demands, people accepted an element of irrationality. If a job disappeared or an opportunity dried up, workers didn't waste time wondering why, and they moved on. Their humility helped, because they never perceived themselves as being the center of the world. When Chen Meizi had chosen her specialty, she didn't expect to find a job that matched her abilities; she expected to find new abilities that matched the available jobs. The fact that her vocation was completely removed from her

personality and her past was no more disorienting than the scenes she painted—if anything, it simplified things. She couldn't tell the difference between a foreign factory and a farm, but it didn't matter. The mirror's reflection allowed her to focus on details; she never lost herself in the larger scene.

Whenever I went to Lishui, I moved from one self-contained world to another, visiting the people I knew. I'd spend a couple of hours surrounded by paintings of Venice, then by manhole covers, then by cheap cotton gloves. Once, walking through a vacant lot, I saw a pile of bright-red high heels that had been dumped in the weeds. They must have been factory rejects; no shoes, just dozens of unattached heels. In the empty lot, the heels looked stubby and sad, like the detritus of some failed party. They made me think of hangovers and spilled ashtrays and conversations gone on too long.

The associations were different when you came from the outside. There were

many products I had never spent a minute thinking about, like pleather—synthetic leather—that in Lishui suddenly acquired a disproportionate significance. More than twenty big factories made the stuff; it was shipped in bulk to other parts of China, where it was fashioned into car seats, purses, and countless other goods. In the city, pleather was so ubiquitous that it had developed a distinct local lore. Workers believed that the product involved dangerous chemicals, and they thought it was bad for the liver. They said that a woman who planned to have children should not work on the assembly line.

These ideas were absolutely standard; even teen-agers fresh from the farm seemed to pick them up the moment they arrived in the city. But it was impossible to tell where the rumors came from. There weren't any warnings posted on factories, and I never saw a Lishui newspaper article about pleather; assembly-line workers rarely read the papers anyway. They didn't know people who had become ill, and they couldn't tell me whether there had been any scientific studies of the risks. They referred to the supposedly harmful chemical as *du*, a general term that means "poison." Nevertheless, these beliefs ran so deep that they shaped that particular industry. Virtually no young women worked on pleather assembly lines, and companies had to offer relatively high wages in order to attract anybody. At those plants, you saw many older men—the kind of people who can't get jobs at most Chinese factories.

The flow of information was a mystery to me. Few people had much formal education, and assembly-line workers rarely had time to use the Internet. They didn't follow the news; they had no interest in politics. They were the least patriotic people I ever met in China—they saw no connection between the affairs of state and their own lives. They accepted the fact that nobody else cared about them; in a small city like Lishui, there weren't any N.G.O.s or prominent organizations that served workers. They depended strictly on themselves, and their range of contacts seemed narrow, but somehow it wasn't a closed world. Ideas arrived from the outside, and people acted decisively on what seemed to be the vaguest rumor or the most trivial story.



"One is a sham bag for my parents to confiscate."

GARDENING IN CARDOSO

Wildflowers become weeds
 In this small triangular
 Garfagnana garden
 Where I uproot herb robert,
 Spurge, wall-devouring
 Valerian, garlicky
 Ramsons, dead nettles.
 What about oregano
 No higher than dogs' piss,
 And pennywort protecting
 The lizard's hideaway?
 I cut back the wild fig tree,
 Its roots under the *casa*
 Squeezing our water pipes,
 Dozy snails its only fruit.
 From acacia—beeless,
 Unrelieved—a sexual
 Heaviness marries me
 And five old women—last
 In the village to chant
 The Whitsun rosary next
 Door at San Rocco's shrine.
 I leave them shepherd's purse's
 Seedpods—little hearts—
 Spoon-shaped petals on spikes.

—Michael Longley

That was key: information might be limited, but people were mobile, and they had confidence that their choices mattered. It gave them a kind of agency, although from a foreigner's perspective it contributed to the strangeness of the place. I was accustomed to the opposite—a world where people preferred to be stable, and where they felt most comfortable if they had large amounts of data at their disposal, as well as the luxury of time to make a decision.

In Lishui, people moved incredibly fast with regard to new opportunities. This quality lay at the heart of the city's relationship with the outside world: Lishui was home to a great number of pragmatists, and there were quite a few searchers as well, but everybody was an opportunist in the purest sense. The market taught them that—factory workers changed jobs frequently, and entrepreneurs could shift their product line at the drop of a hat. There was one outlying community called Shifan, where people seemed to find a different income

source every month. It was a new town; residents had been resettled there from Beishan, a village in the mountains where the government was building a new hydroelectric dam to help power the factories. In Shifan, there was no significant industry, but small-time jobs began to appear from the moment the place was founded. Generally, these tasks consisted of piecework commissioned by some factory in the city.

Once a month, I visited a family named the Wus, and virtually every time they introduced me to some new and obscure trade. For a while, they joined their neighbors in sewing colored beads onto the uppers of children's shoes; then there was a period during which they attached decorative strips to hair bands. After that, they assembled tiny light bulbs. For a six-week stretch, they made cotton gloves on a makeshift assembly line.

On one visit to Shifan, I discovered that the Wus' son, Wu Zengrong, and his friends had purchased five second-hand computers, set up a broadband

connection, and become professional players of a video game called *World of Warcraft*. It was one of the most popular online games in the world, with more than seven million subscribers. Players developed characters over time, accumulating skills, equipment, and treasure. Online markets had sprung up in which people could buy and sell virtual treasure, and some Chinese had started doing this as a full-time job; it had recently spread to Lishui. The practice is known as "gold farming."

Wu Zengrong hadn't had any prior interest in video games. He hardly ever went online; his family had never had an Internet connection before. He had been trained as a cook, and would take jobs in small restaurants that served nearby factory towns. Occasionally, he did low-level assembly-line work. But his brother-in-law, a cook in the city of Ningbo, learned about *World of Warcraft*, and he realized that the game paid better than standing over a wok. He called his buddies, and three of them quit their jobs, pooled their money, and set up shop in Shifan. Others joined them; they played around the clock in twelve-hour shifts. All of them had time off on Wednesdays. For *World of Warcraft*, that was a special day: the European servers closed for regular maintenance from 5 A.M. until 8 A.M., Paris time. Whenever I visited Shifan on a Wednesday, Wu Zengrong and his friends were smoking cigarettes and hanging out, enjoying their weekend as established by *World of Warcraft*.

They became deadly serious when they played. They had to worry about getting caught, because Blizzard Entertainment, which owns *World of Warcraft*, had decided that gold farming threatened the game's integrity. Blizzard monitored the community, shutting down any account whose play pattern showed signs of commercial activity. Wu Zengrong originally played the American version, but after getting caught a few times he jumped over to the German one. On a good day, he made the equivalent of about twenty-five dollars. If an account got shut down, he lost a nearly forty-dollar investment. He sold his points online to a middleman in Fujian Province.

One Saturday, I spent an afternoon watching Wu Zengrong play. He was a very skinny man with a nervous air; his

long, thin fingers flashed across the keyboard. Periodically, his wife, Lili, entered the room to watch. She wore a gold-colored ring on her right hand that had been made from a euro coin. That had become a fashion in southern Zhejiang, where shops specialized in melting down the coins and turning them into jewelry. It was another ingenious local industry: a way to get a ring that was both legitimately foreign and cheaply made in Zhejiang.

Wu Zengrong worked on two computers, jumping back and forth between three accounts. His characters travelled in places with names like Kalimdor, Tanaris, and Dreadmaul Rock; he fought Firegut Ogres and Sandfury Hideskinners. Periodically, a message flashed across the screen: "You loot 7 silver, 75 copper." Wu couldn't understand any of it; his ex-cook brother-in-law had taught him to play the game strictly by memorizing shapes and icons. At one point, Wu's character encountered piles of dead Sandfury Axe Throwers and Hideskinners, and he said to me, "There's another player around here. I bet he's Chinese, too. You can tell because he's killing everybody just to get the treasure."

After a while, we saw the other player, whose character was a dwarf. I typed in a message: "How are you doing?" Wu didn't want me to write in Chinese, for fear that administrators would spot him as a gold farmer.

Initially, there was no response; I tried again. At last, the dwarf spoke: "???"

I typed, "Where are you from?"

This time he wrote, "Sorry." From teaching English in China, I knew that's how all students respond to any question they can't answer. And that was it; the dwarf resumed his methodical slaughter in silence. "You see?" Wu said, laughing. "I told you he's Chinese!"

Two months later, when I visited Shifan again, three of the computers had been sold, and Wu was preparing to get rid of the others. He and his friends had decided that playing in Germany was no longer profitable enough; Blizzard kept shutting them down. Wu showed me the most recent e-mail message he had received from the company:

Greetings,
We are writing to inform you that we have, unfortunately, had to cancel your World

of Warcraft account. . . . It is with regret that we take this type of action, however, it is in the best interest of the World of Warcraft community as a whole.

The message appeared in four different languages, none of which was spoken by Wu Zengrong. It didn't matter: after spending his twenties bouncing from job to job in factory towns, and having his family relocated for a major dam project, he felt limited trauma at being expelled from the World of Warcraft community. The next time I saw him, he was applying for a passport. He had some relatives in Italy; he had heard that there was money to be made there. When I asked where he planned to go, he said, "Maybe Rome, or maybe the Water City." I stood with him in the passport-application line at the county government office, where I noticed that his papers said "Wu Zeng-xiong." He explained that a clerk had miswritten his given name on an earlier application, so now it was simpler to just use that title. He was becoming somebody else, on his way to a country he'd never seen, preparing to do something completely new. When I asked what kind of work he hoped to find and what the pay might be, he said, "How can I tell? I haven't been there yet." Next to us in line, a friend in his early twenties told me that he planned to go to Azerbaijan, where he had a relative who might help him do business. I asked the young man if Azerbaijan was an Islamic country, and he said, "I don't know. I haven't been there yet."

After I returned to the United States, I talked with a cousin who played World of Warcraft. He told me that he could usually recognize Chinese gold farmers from their virtual appearance, because they stood out as being extremely ill-equipped. If they gained valuable gear or weapons, they sold them immediately; their characters were essentially empty-handed. I liked that image—even online the Chinese travelled light. Around the same time, I did some research on pleather and learned that it's made with a solvent called dimethylformamide, or DMF. In the United States, studies have shown that people who work with DMF are at risk of liver damage. There's some evidence that female workers may have increased problems with stillbirths. In laboratory tests with rabbits, significant exposure to DMF has been proved to

cause developmental defects. In other words, virtually everything I had heard from the Lishui migrant workers, in the form of unsubstantiated rumor, turned out to be true.

It was another efficiency of the third-tier factory town. People manufactured tiny parts of things, and their knowledge was also fragmented and sparse. But they knew enough to be mobile and decisive, and their judgment was surprisingly good. An assembly-line worker sensed the risks of DMF; a painter learned to recognize the buildings that mattered; a nylon dyer could pick out Sellanyl Yellow. Even the misinformation was often useful—if Christ became more relevant as a Taoist sage, that was how He appeared. The workers knew what they needed to know.

After I moved back to the United States, I became curious about the small town that Chen Meizi and Hu Jianhui had spent so much time painting. At the Ancient Weir Art Village, I had photographed the artists in front of their work, and now I researched the misspelled signs. All of them seemed to come from Park City, Utah. I lived nearby, in southwestern Colorado, so I made the trip.

I was still in touch with many of the people I had known in Lishui. Occasionally, Chen sent an e-mail, and when I talked with her on the phone she said that she was still painting mostly the Water City. The economic downturn hadn't affected her too much; apparently, the market for Chinese-produced paintings of Venice is nearly recession-proof. Others hadn't been so lucky. During the second half of 2008, as demand for Chinese exports dropped, millions of factory workers lost their jobs. Little Long left his plant after the bosses slashed the technicians' salaries and laid off half the assembly-line staff.

But most people I talked to in Lishui seemed to take these events in stride. They didn't have mortgages or stock portfolios, and they had long ago learned to be resourceful. They were accustomed to switching jobs—many laid-off workers simply went back to their home villages, to wait for better times. In any case, they had never had any reason to believe that the international economy was rational and predictable. If people suddenly

bought less pleather, that was no more strange than the fact that they had wanted the stuff in the first place. As 2009 progressed, the Chinese economy regained its strength, and workers made their way back onto the assembly lines.

In Park City, it was easy to find the places that the artists had painted. Most of the shops were situated on Main Street, and I talked with owners, showing them photos. Nobody had any idea where the commission had come from, and people responded in different ways when they saw that their shops were being painted by artists in an obscure Chinese city six thousand miles away. At Overland ("Fine Sheepskin Leather Since 1773"), the manager appeared nervous. "You'll have to contact our corporate headquarters," she said. "I can't comment on that." Another shop owner asked me if I thought that Mormon missionaries might be involved. One woman told a story about a suspicious Arab man who had visited local art galleries not long ago, offering to sell cut-rate portraits. Some people worried about competition. "That's just what we need," one artist said sarcastically, when she learned the price of the Chinese paintings. Others felt pity when they saw Chen Meizi, who, like many rural Chinese, didn't generally smile in photographs. One woman, gazing at a somber Chen next to her portrait of the Miners Hospital, said, "It's kind of sad."

Everybody had something to say about that particular picture. The building brought up countless memories; all at once, the painting lost its flatness. The hospital had been constructed to serve the silver miners who first settled Park City, and later it became the town library. In 1979, authorities moved the building across town to make way for a ski resort, and the community pitched in to transfer the books. "We formed a human chain and passed the books down," an older woman remembered. When I showed the painting to a restaurant manager, he smiled and said that a critical scene from "Dumb and Dumber" had been filmed inside the Miners Hospital. "You know the part where they go to that benefit dinner for the owls, and they're wearing those crazy suits, and the one guy has a cane and he whacks the other guy on the leg—you know what I'm talking about?"

I admitted that I did.



"You make me want to be a better person than you."

"They filmed that scene right inside that building!"

When I visited, the Park City mayor kept his office on the first floor of the Miners Hospital. His name was Dana Williams, and he was thrilled to see the photo of Chen Meizi with her work. "That's so cool!" he said. "I can't believe somebody in China painted our building! And she did such a great job!"

Like everybody else I talked to in Park City, Mayor Williams couldn't tell me why the building had been commissioned for a portrait overseas. It was a kind of symmetry between the Chinese Barbizon and Park City: the people who painted the scenes, and the people who actually lived within the frames, were equally mystified as to the purpose of this art.

Mayor Williams poured me a cup of green tea, and we chatted. He had an easy smile and a youthful air; he played guitar in a local rock band. "It's the yang to being mayor," he explained. He was interested in China, and he sprinkled his conversation with Chinese terms. "*You mei you pijiu?*" he said. "Do you have any beer?" He remembered that phrase from

a trip to Beijing in 2007, when he'd accompanied a local school group on an exchange. A scroll of calligraphy hung beside his desk; the characters read "Unity, Culture, Virtue." He told me that he had first thought about China back in the nineteen-sixties, after hearing Angela Davis lecture on Communism at U.C.L.A. There was a copy of "The Little Red Book" in his office library. When the Park City newspaper found out, it ran a story implying that the Mayor's decisions were influenced by Mao Zedong. Mayor Williams found that hilarious; he told me that he just picked out the useful parts of the book and ignored the bad stuff. "Serve the people," he said, when I asked what he had learned from Mao. "You have an obligation to serve the people. One of the reasons I'm here is from reading 'The Little Red Book' as a teen-ager. And being in government is about being in balance. I guess that has to do with the Tao." ♦

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Multimedia: the painters of Lishui.