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Factory job pays teen \$500 a year

She works 11 months, seven days a week, 11 or 12 hours a day

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CHANGSHU, China - Bai Lin is a sad-faced 19-year-old who seems to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders.

She works in a small industrial town for a factory that makes intravenous drip kits for hospitals. Once she lived with her family in a dirt-floored hovel at the end of a mud road in a forgotten hamlet called Two Dragons.

She left home at age 15 because her father decided she must. The family was poor, but there was an option: Every day, it seemed, more people from the villages were leaving for work in the city.

Bai Lin remembers clearly the day her father took her to the bus station. He cried. She held in her tears.

Her stoic nature defines her still. Bai Lin is a factory nun. She lives cloistered in the dreary compound of the medical instruments company, where she works 11 or 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for 11 months straight until the New Year's break. When she returns home for a month, her year's wages in her pocket, it amounts to about

\$500.

Bai Lin belongs to one family from one village that represents a piece of a very large story: One of the largest industrial migrations in human history.

Strict divide relaxed

Over the past decade or so, legions of Chinese have left their farms for cities as their communist government relaxed the travel and housing restrictions that once strictly divided urban workers and country peasants.

China's cities teem with these migrants, some comfortably settled in jobs, others arriving daily, risking everything - though often they have nothing to lose.

Many of the people working in China's newly established factories are from the countryside.

The men living and working round-the-clock at construction sites often are migrants.

Today there are more than 100 million peasants in the cities, but so many have come and gone through the years that the total number of participants likely is far higher. These migrant workers fit different categories. Some are seasonal workers who go home for the harvest. Others have been living in the city for years but are not recognized as official city dwellers because residency laws are murky and changing.

Industrial workers typically put in punishing hours, often for little or no overtime pay, in factories that can rely on antiquated equipment and provide little training. China has one of the world's highest rates of industrial accidents; at least 5,000 workers die each year in the coal-mining industry alone. Stories are common of inadequately trained machine operators who lose limbs in accidents.

There are national labor laws governing workplace conditions, but oversight and enforcement often are lax or nonexistent, and there are no minimum-wage rules. There also are no independent unions and no labor activists to defend workers' rights because the Communist Party does not allow challenges to its authority.

Sometimes workers revolt, but mostly they endure. But at the end of

the year there is money their pockets, where there would be little or none at home on the farm.

This is what the Bai family understood.

A wrenching decision

Bai Lin's father, the second-oldest of the five Bai brothers of Two Dragons, is illiterate and realized he could not make it in the city. So he needed to make a wrenching decision: One of his older daughters would leave home.

It was decided that Bai Lin should go to Changshu, where an older cousin was employed with her husband. At least there would be someone to look out for her if things went badly.

Bai Lin wanted to stay home, but if she went to work in the city, perhaps her younger siblings would have a chance to at least finish middle school. Her dream to go to high school had been dashed years ago when it was clear that the family could not afford it. She had no real plan for her future.

"Who would want to marry a poor peasant girl with two younger sisters and a younger brother to support?" she asked.

Changshu is a city of 1 million people. On its outskirts is a small industrial suburb. There is no commercial center, no high-rise buildings. At night it's dark except for the fluorescent lights from small factory compounds. These are mainly garment-makers, plus a few medical instrument companies -where Bai Lin found work.

She is in her fourth year at Changshu Medical Instruments Ltd. Day after day she sits quietly alone in her factory's "clean room," covered head to toe in surgical garb, carefully snipping and stacking pieces of rubber hose that will become feed tubes and IV drips in Switzerland, France and other countries. An odor of glue fills the room.

Bai Lin never ventures outside the walls of the factory and knows little of the real world, having visited no place beyond Two Dragons or Changshu. She has never used the Internet. She has no cellular phone. She has seen perhaps one or two Hollywood movies on TV; she recalls seeing "Titanic." She doesn't read newspapers. Or magazines. There is no dating at the factory - there are few males working there - no chance to meet men.

She just works.

When work is over, Bai Lin walks the few yards to the factory dormitory, a line of concrete rooms that look like connected sheds. They are dusty and foul-smelling. It is cold inside. An unframed mirror sits on a bureau. Boxes are strewn about.

Yet when Bai Lin's parents see photos of their daughter at work and in her dorm, nothing seems amiss. To them the factory looks clean, and her dorm seems a step up from home. At least there is a concrete floor.

"The conditions seem pretty good," her mother says, satisfied.

Bai Lin makes life harder on herself by watching every penny. She rarely buys clothes; her most expensive item is a \$7.50 winter coat. She will not eat in the company cafeteria because it charges 40 cents a meal. She prefers to make rice and eat it in her room with some vegetables. She considers meat too expensive.

She gets about \$12 a month for living expenses and \$500 annual salary, paid in January just before the New Year's break.

When Bai Lin went home for the last Chinese New Year holiday, she turned over her entire year's earnings to her father. About half went to help pay for the wedding of her older sister, who subsequently moved to the city with her husband. The other half went to help pay for school fees for her two younger sisters and youngest brother.

Bai loved being at home, helping her mother keep house by pumping well water, stoking the stove fire and chopping vegetables. Yet she looked worried, unable to hide her sadness at being home for so short a time, but also feeling guilty that she could not earn more for her family.

She returned this month for another year at the factory.