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Writing Factory Girls

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By Leslie T. Chang

I started writing my book on a March morning in 2006. About fifteen minutes into it, panic hit: I am no longer earning a salary just sitting here at my desk. By mid-morning, another realization had set in: I can’t go back to being a newspaper reporter.

The book, Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China, opens inside the world of the young women working on assembly lines in the south China factory city of Dongguan:

When you met a girl from another factory, you quickly took her measure. "What year are you?" you asked each other, as if speaking not of human beings but of the makes of cars. "How much a month? Including room and board? How much for overtime?" Then you might ask what province she was from. You never asked her name.

To have a true friend inside the factory was not easy. Girls slept twelve to a room, and in the tight confines of the dorm it was better to keep your secrets. Some girls joined the factory with borrowed ID cards and never told anyone their real names. Some spoke only to those from their home provinces, but that had risks: Gossip traveled quickly from factory to village, and when you went home every auntie and granny would know how much you made and how much you saved and whether you went out with boys.

Almost everything is wrong with that opening, from a newspaper editor’s point of view. Who is speaking here? What is this story about? How do you know this? From the opening inside the factory, I move on to introduce a sixteen-year-old migrant worker named Lu Qingmin, tracing her arrival in Dongguan, her early job-hopping, and the overwhelming sense of isolation that is what most migrants remember from their first days in the city. Only ten pages into the book do I give some background: Today China has 130 million migrant workers...Together they represent the largest migration in human history, three times the number of people who immigrated to America from Europe over a century. But I have faith that the reader will stick with me—to be absorbed in the details of the factory world and a single young woman’s story before I stop to explain the broader context. Newspapers have no such faith: An editor would insist that these facts be up high. The reader must be told right away that this is a Very Important Story.

I hear the voice of this imaginary editor in my head all the time—I suspect that every newspaper reporter does. It is the voice that reminds you of all the rules you must follow in order to write an airtight story based on attributable facts. Journalism is a self-congratulatory profession; it likes to celebrate its courage in speaking truth to power and breaking taboos. What is almost never acknowledged is how rigid are its conventions when it comes to itself.
After graduating from college, I did a reporting internship at the *Miami Herald* and then worked at an expatriate newspaper in Prague. I joined the *Wall Street Journal* in 1993, first in Hong Kong, later moving to Taiwan and then China. I thought that newspapers offered the most writing opportunities to a young person. Only gradually did I realize that journalism is not writing, that its value lay elsewhere—particularly in explaining a place as complex and misunderstood as China. *The Wall Street Journal*, with its emphasis on long features that upset the conventional wisdom, suited me. Not every newspaper would run a series presenting grinding factory work as a path to upward mobility—as my bureau chief put it, “the happy face of exploitative capitalism.” I liked and respected my fellow reporters, and my editors as well. My quarrel has never been with them, but with the inflexible rules of the trade that they were called upon to enforce.

As I began writing my book, I realized I would have to unlearn a lot of what I had learned as a journalist. The biggest limitation in newspaper writing is its lack of a distinctive voice; use of the first person is frowned upon, perhaps because it detracts from the ideal of the neutral observer. When a journalist occasionally runs into himself in a story, the result is comically awkward: The subject of an article spoke to “a reporter” or “a foreign visitor” or perhaps “a correspondent for this newspaper”—any contortion to avoid the forbidden “I.” A journalist learns to write as if she does not exist.

Figuring out how to write about myself was the biggest challenge of the book. Along with following the lives of several young migrant women, my book also traces my own family’s migrations within China and to the West. That was my plan from the start, but carrying it out was painful. “You seem almost a frozen observer,” commented a friend after reading a first draft. “You seem almost a frozen observer,” commented a friend after reading a first draft. “You are the connection between the stories of the girls and the family stories,” my editor reminded me. “Without you, the two parts don’t hold together!” It took two substantial revisions to write myself into my own book.

In place of the personal voice, journalism substitutes the voice of absolute authority. This posture is not only dangerous—it’s easy to be wrong—but it infects one’s writing style in subtle ways. Ideas are rendered in short, clipped statements of truth. Sentences follow an identical and repetitive structure, the better to hammer home a point. Paragraphs are frequently truncated—this is writing as PowerPoint presentation, one fact per paragraph, leading the reader to the inevitable conclusion.

The journalistic voice strangles the imagination. The editor’s eternal question—*How do you know this?*—leaves almost no room to bring a person or a place to life. In my book, this is how I describe Lu Qingmin, the sixteen-year-old migrant worker:

*She was short and sturdily built, with curly hair and keen dark eyes that didn’t miss a thing. Like many young people from the Chinese countryside, she looked even younger than she was. She could have been fifteen, or fourteen, or even twelve—a tomboy in cargo pants and running shoes, waiting impatiently to grow up. She had a child’s face. It was round and open to the world, with the look of patient expectation that children’s faces sometimes wear.*

In the *Wall Street Journal* story, I nailed her in one sentence: *Min has a round face, curly hair and big eyes.* I didn’t realize at the time the inadequacy of that description, because I was too busy fighting other battles against the newspaper’s rules of style. I didn’t want to refer to the teenage Min as “Ms. Lu,” which seemed jarringly formal; I argued against having to attribute every detail to a source, as is journalistic convention. I won those battles, but there were others I lost, and still others I didn’t even fight. As I said, the voice of the imaginary editor is always in my head.

The primary flaw of journalism is impatience. Ever mindful of the competition, editors always want the story sooner, and reporters internalize this urgency in their tendency to move in and out of places quickly. But this approach not only misses the nuances, it risks missing the story altogether. When I first met Min in February 2004, she had just finished a year at an electronics factory marked by bad conditions, low pay, and thirteen-hour workdays. Over three years, she jumped jobs six times, working her way up from the assembly line to a clerical position to human resources and finally a factory’s powerful purchasing department. At one point, she considered throwing it all away to follow her boyfriend to Beijing where he would work as a security guard; another time, she was robbed of...
her mobile phone and nine hundred yuan in cash as she slept in a cheap hostel. If a reporter had met her at any of those points, he would have come away with a grim story. Because I was able to follow Min for three years, I could see that migration, for all its ups and downs, had brought her opportunity and success.

The discoveries that come from patient observation are not necessarily things that your subjects will share with you. The lives of most Chinese have changed beyond recognition in the past two decades, yet it is rare to hear someone speak thoughtfully about this transformation. The instinct against introspection runs deep, and people are so caught up in the present that they often lack perspective. None of the factory girls I knew in Dongguan ever talked about what they had achieved since coming out from home; maybe they worried they would lose momentum if they looked backward. After my first article about Min was published in the Journal, I gave her a translated copy. She read the piece like a revelation—almost as if it were the story of someone else. Seeing the self I used to be, she wrote me in an e-mail afterward, I realize that I have really changed.

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I don’t regret my years as a journalist. I learned how to get information, how to keep asking questions until I understood something, how to cobble together bits and pieces from multiple sources if there was no one Deep Throat—as there almost never is. Especially when reporting in a place as rapidly changing and statistically blurry as China, it is important to have faith that the truth can be found. For example, in my book I wanted to draw attention to the heavily female migrant population of Dongguan, but the city government did not have an official statistic; its figure, which counted only locally registered residents, was useless to me. So I did what I had been taught at the Journal: I began asking everyone I met what they thought the figure was. Eventually I combined the findings of a talent market executive, city officials, factory bosses, and a local newspaper survey to estimate that the city’s population was 70 percent female. The shortcomings and cautiousness of others should not keep you from making conclusions—this is one lesson you learn as a journalist.

Early in my newspaper career, I argued with a copyeditor who had changed a sentence in my story to something less graceful. “We’re not trying to be Emily Dickinson here,” he snapped—a remark whose sting lingered for years. I wish I had known then how many others had fought this fight before me. The young Mark Twain was regarded by his editors at the San Francisco Call as “incurably literary,” and his idiosyncratic writing style eventually got him fired. Ernest Hemingway, correspondent for the Toronto Star, complained, “this goddam newspaper stuff is gradually ruining me.” Both men became not only great novelists but also pioneers of literary nonfiction, using subjective impressions and the techniques of fiction to bring true experiences to life. As a longtime journalist, I feel some consolation to see the connections between the reporters they were and the writers they became.