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Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

A better life?

China’s expectations are rising, with no end in sight. What’s next? By Peter Hessler

The beginning of a Chinese factory town is always the same: in the beginning nearly everybody is a construction worker. The growing economy means that everything moves fast and new industrial districts rise in several stages. Those early labourers are men who have migrated from rural villages and immediately they are joined by small entrepreneurs. These pioneers sell meat, fruit and vegetables on informal stalls, and later, when the first real shops appear, they stock construction materials. After that, cellphone companies arrive: China Mobile, China Unicom. They sell prepaid phonecards to migrants; in the south-eastern province of Zhejiang, one popular product is called the Homesick Card. When the factories start production, you start to see women. Young women have a reputation for being hard-working. After the arrival of the women, the clothes shops appear. An American poet once described an industrial town in the USA as ‘springing up, like the enchanted palaces of the Arabian tales, as it were in a single night.’ Today it’s the factory towns of China that seem to belong to another world. The human energy is amazing: the courageous entrepreneurs, the quick-moving builders, the young migrants. A combination of past problems and present-day opportunities has created an extremely motivated population. Most people in China have seen their standard of living go up in recent years.

The size of the population is both a strength and a challenge to China. Of the 1.3 billion people, 72 per cent are between the ages of 16 and 64. The movement of people from the countryside to the cities has transformed China into the world’s factory floor. In 1978, there were only 172 million urban residents. Now there are 577 million. Social scientists predict that the urban population will be 60 per cent by 2030. Each year about ten million rural Chinese move to the cities, so the factories have a constant supply of labour.

Chinese schools have been very successful. The literacy rate is over 90 per cent. The next step is to develop higher education. Many people are looking for better training. In a Chinese factory town, there are many private courses: English classes, typing classes, technical classes. In Zhejiang I met Luo Shouyun, who had spent a quarter of his wages on training. Now he is a master machinist, with a salary that makes him ‘middle class’. Another young man had learned Arabic in order to translate for Middle Eastern buyers.

Clearly there are environmental costs from China’s rapid growth. Collaboration between China and other countries will be crucial in managing environmental problems. Nobody in the developed world should criticise China without taking a look in the mirror. The nation has become successful by making products for overseas consumers. There’s nothing foreign about the materialistic dreams of the average Chinese worker.

literacy rate (n) /ˈlɪtərəsi reɪt/ the number of people who can read and write

materialistic (adj) /məˌtɪəriəˈlɪstɪk/ interested in possessions and consumer goods

migrant (n) /ˈmaɪgrənt/ someone who moves to a different area, often for work

overseas (adj) /ˌəʊvəˈsiːz/ foreign, from another country

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