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Life Is Elsewhere

They sit in courtyards on crowded village lanes. Many are in their 20s, most are farmers who dream of better days somewhere else.

They talk about doing business and finding work in the city; their talk has become the background music of the village.

They catch glimpses of the modern life they aspire to in TV programs from Hong Kong and the United States. They see new gadgets and appliances in the Zhanjiang department stores.

There's a fire sweeping across the countryside and almost everyone is getting swept up in it; almost everyone is being transformed by it.

A young girl says the one thing she really wants is a television. If she had her own television, she could stay at home rather than go to a neighbor's house to watch her favorite programs.

But her family hasn't enough money to buy one, she says. They need whatever extra money they have to keep life going.

You need about 3,000 yuan to buy a television, she says, but it's hard to save so much money here.

She doesn't know exactly what the good life is but she knows that having a new TV is part of it.

A young woman sits in the courtyard of her village home and washes her clothes by hand. She's 21 years old and works as a farmer.

Of course, if she had the chance, she would like to live and work in the city. But it's not easy to move from the countryside to the city. She is officially registered as a resident of the village and so must live and work here.

It's hard to find work and a place to live in the city, she says. It's hard to change your hukou (official place of residence) from village to city.

Here in the countryside you work long hours for little money, so of course it would be better to move to the city, she says. The money is better and the work more comfortable there.

If she had more money she would buy better clothes. In her imagination she sees herself living in the city dressed in beautiful new clothes.

A young man draws on a long water pipe and talks. His idea of the good life isn't so complicated, he says. It means having enough food to eat and nice clothes to wear.

He agrees with the others that life in the city would offer them a better life than what is possible in the countryside.

Sometimes he earns a little extra money taking temporary construction jobs building new houses.

But he sees little chance of leaving the village for good and making a new life outside Long Wan.

The people in the village know that city life is better, he says, but most of them don't think they will ever be able to move there.

It's not a question of liking or not liking the village, he says. We were born

here and have no choice but to live and work here.

A young farmer talks about family life in Long Wan. Each village family has their problems, he says. Life in the family isn't always perfect.

Sometimes there are quarrels between husband and wife, child and parents; sometimes brothers argue over how the family property will be divided when a parent dies.

Family life in the village isn't always perfect. There are lots of arguments that people outside the family don't see.

A 13-year-old boy pauses a moment in a village lane to talk. He's a student at the Commune Middle School in nearby Mao Village but also helps his family out with the farm work when he is not in class. One of his jobs is to take the family's water buffalo out to graze and make sure he doesn't run away. He says he spends his free time playing ping-pong, cards, and Chinese chess with his friends.

When he is old enough he would like to leave Long Wan, he says. He doesn't want to spend his whole life working hard as a farmer for so little money.

A 21-year-old girl stands in the kitchen of her mother's village house. She grew up in Long Wan but lives in Shuixi County now.

She lives in the city with her sister and her brother-in-law, a rich businessman who recently bought a new house there.

She says she felt ill in recent days and decided to come home for a few days to stay with her mother. She says her father died when she was very young and her mother raised her.

Dressed in stylish new clothes, she seems out of place standing in her family's dirt-floor kitchen. Most villagers wear dark-colored clothes that have been mended countless times but she is dressed in a bright white shirt and pants.

She says she recently opened a small clothing shop in Shuixi County. She says her brother helped her get the business off the ground by giving her 8,000 yuan to buy clothes. As soon as she got the money, she and her girlfriend traveled to Guangzhou to buy stock for the new store.

She says she earns several thousand yuan a year running her business now, which is much more than most farmers make cultivating the land. She enjoys having her own business but wishes she had more education. She says she regrets not taking school more seriously when she was younger because higher education would be very useful to her now.

She attended middle school for a while but like most villagers dropped out before completing senior middle school. In those days she thought education would be of little use to her in the future. Back then she didn't know then what she knows now.

She says many of the young people in the village would like to do what she has done. There are many villagers working in the city now, driving trucks, cutting hair, sewing clothing, doing whatever jobs they can find to make a living and escape the farmer's life that awaits them in Long Wan.













