

CHAPTER ONE

The Veggie Vendors

The sun sets on the High-Tech Zone as a hazy-orange disk sinking beneath a blanket of smog. It is soon replaced by a muted moon shining down on the day's last surge of activity. Gradually the traffic clears, the glitzy shops close, and the interminable construction work grinds to a halt. The last stragglers head home shortly after midnight and finally even the ever-present battalion of taxis camps along the empty roadways for the night.

By 3:00 a.m., the High-Tech Zone is a dead zone.

Suddenly, out of the silence bursts Li Donghua, reining in his three-wheeled motorcycle as it bounces and lurches along the city's deserted avenues. His wife, Chuan Shuanghai, sits behind him in a rickety metal cart, head tucked between her knees to avoid the brutal autumn wind. As they whiz through the district, they catch up with a nearly identical vehicle—right down to the tightly bundled woman riding in the back. Another three-wheeler cuts in from a side street, and then another, and another. Donghua guns ahead, jockeying for position at the front of the caravan.

Within minutes they pull into a sprawling, iron-gated compound and their daily trek comes to an end. Bright stadium lights extinguish the early-morning darkness and the clamor of frenzied business transactions engulfs them from every side. Donghua squeezes the motorcycle into a parking space and peers off toward a sea of flatbed trucks filled with eggplant, zucchini, cucumbers, and countless other vegetables, all stacked high and selling fast.

This is rush hour at the High-Tech Zone's wholesale market, an outdoor foodstuff super center of sorts where Donghua and Shuanghai start each day. They have a little over three hours to stock up on veggies, load them into the cart, race back to their local retail market, and unpack everything before their own customers start trickling in. Donghua looks at the throng of other small-time vegetable peddlers already scouring for deals and starts to feel antsy. It's 3:30 a.m., time to get to work.

When Donghua and Shuanghai finally arrive at their own neighborhood market, their three-wheeler stacked high with the morning's freshly purchased produce, it's nearly 7:40 a.m. and they are running late. They navigate through the mob at the front entrance and push their motorcycle toward the interior, where small-time entrepreneurs stand over coal-block heated woks, cooking up local specialties hot and fast throughout the day and late into the night. With the cheapest breakfast selections in the neighborhood—piping-hot soy milk, tea-boiled eggs, and a batch of salty fried donuts, all for well under a dollar—business is already booming. Donghua's stomach growls faintly, but there's no time to stop and eat today.

Instead the couple moves past the dining area to the rickety, market-supplied wooden tables where more than twenty vege-

table merchants display their wares. If there's one thing that makes Shuanghai and Donghua extraordinary, it's how painfully ordinary they are among their peers. Like all the other vendors here, they grew up in the countryside; they have low education and even lower life expectations. They dress simply, clad most often in hand-knit sweaters and old-style cloth shoes. And though the circumstances that compelled each of these peddlers to head city-ward vary, their purpose here in the market—and, for that matter, the purpose of the more than 200 million rural migrants residing in China's burgeoning cities at any given time—is very often the same: a quest for financial stability and opportunity that simply doesn't exist back in their villages.

And so for 200 yuan a month—the equivalent of about \$30—Donghua and Shuanghai rent out one of the market's shaky little tables and hope for the best. Seeing that the other tables are already overflowing with a potpourri of red, green, yellow, and orange vegetables, Donghua quickly parks the motorcycle beside a small cement fish pond and then makes a beeline for the last and arguably worst spot in the market—the table right across from the dinky, hardly used back entrance, the table they call home.

They scramble for the next twenty minutes to lay out their produce, Donghua muttering all the while about the morning's already lost opportunities. They're not usually late—in fact, they almost always arrive first so that they can snatch up as many early-bird customers as possible. But tomorrow is October 1, the beginning of China's week-long National Day celebration, and they had spent a little extra time at the wholesale market stocking up for what they hope will be a big holiday rush.

Among the last items to make it onto the table are dried red pepper strings—hot sellers as popular as they are hard to get. As

soon as Donghua sets them out, a customer materializes and, without even asking the price, snaps up two *jin*, a standard half-kilo measure used across China. An older lady with hair cut in a trendy Japanese-style shag and streaked with color scoots down the aisle, with grandson in tow, eager to get a look at their peppers. Donghua stretches a string between his arms. “I can cut this to any length you want,” he encourages her.

“How much?” Grandma asks.

“1.5 per *jin*.”

“1.5?” she says. “That can’t be. That’s way too expensive.”

From across the table, Shuanghai looks up from the Chinese cabbage she’s preening. “They were 1.3 wholesale,” she says flatly.

Grandma isn’t ready to pay that much and so she shuffles away, pointy-toed shoes clacking against the pitted concrete floor. Shuanghai returns to her cabbage, while Donghua moves on to the yams. But a minute later, Granny’s back, arguing for a price of 1.3 yuan and hinting that anything more would be a rip-off.

Shuanghai’s cheeks flush red. It doesn’t bother her so much that these wealthy city people want everything so cheap. What really gets to her is their impression that all small-time vegetable peddlers are dishonest. Sure, some sellers—especially those with a prime location up front—mark prices way up when they think they can get away with it. Those are the same people who slide the market’s management extra money to secure the best tables. But other than that, for the most part, they’re all just people like Shuanghai and Donghua, trying to squeak out a decent living. That’s hard enough without all these rich folk wanting their peppers and potatoes practically for free and yet still feeling like they’re getting cheated over every cent. “We bought these peppers for 1.3, so how can we sell them to you for that price?”

Shuanghai snaps at Grandma. “We should be selling them for 1.8, but we’re only asking 1.5.”

“Yesterday I saw them for . . .”

“Yesterday? Yesterday!” Shuanghai brews. “Today’s wholesale prices are not the same as yesterday’s!”

Donghua pipes in, voice calm, playing the good cop to Shuanghai’s bad cop as he explains to Granny what a good deal she’s getting. He shows her how tightly the peppers are tied on the string and how thoroughly they’ve been dried. Just then, another lady swoops in to get a closer look, and Grandma, noting the dwindling pile and waxing enthusiasm, quietly relents. She’ll take 4 *jin* at 1.5 yuan.

Shuanghai tucks a loose strand of hair into her ponytail and turns back to her produce with a hint of a smile.

Mid-afternoon is the slow time at the market, but even so the din can reach deafening proportions. From the whining of motorized steamers warming impossibly high stacks of *mantou*, or steamed buns, to the squawking of chickens as they’re weighed, killed, and shoved into brightly colored plastic bags, layer upon layer of noise builds into a single buzz of activity that, for the uninitiated, can be nearly unbearable. But none of it even registers for Shuanghai—not the individual sounds, and surely not the hum itself. No, her attention is on adding right now, and that, for the moment, is her world.

“1.2, 2.4, 3.6 . . . right?” she asks as she pulls a sack of zucchini off the scale and hands it across the table. An old man with an MP3 player tucked neatly in the front breast pocket of his fading blue Mao suit simply grunts, tosses a few crumpled bills her way, and walks further down the aisle. As he goes, he catches sight of Shuanghai’s round, black eggplants—the ones that are a little

harder to find than the typical oblong ones, the ones Shuanghai knows sell well, despite their slightly higher price, the very ones she and Donghua scoured the wholesale market for early this morning until, triumphantly, she snagged a 10-kilo sack of them. When they got here this morning she noted, with a glint of satisfaction, that only a few of the other vendors had them.

And so the old man stops, pulls the headphones off of his ears, and picks up one of her black beauties. “How much for these?”

“1.8 for a *jin*.”

“That’s too much,” he whines. But there’s no way she’ll go down on the price, not with eggplants that look this good, and so he nods at her to hand him a plastic bag.

Soon Donghua arrives, back from his afternoon nap, and he and Shuanghai fall into their unspoken rhythm: she manages the front of the table, answering pricing questions up between the scale and the blue silk money box, while he works the back half, stacking and restacking the heavier veggies. Donghua thwacks a *donggua*, or winter melon—a watermelon-like vegetable with green outer skin and white flesh—and presses his fist down its length, subconsciously calculating how much longer it will last.

A little lull descends on the market, and he starts chatting with a neighbor who’s peeling a pear with a butcher knife, working the giant blade from his body outward so that the peels fly onto the floor’s ever-growing pile of discarded scraps. When he finishes, he hands the fruit to Donghua and starts working on one for himself.

Shuanghai points under the table to the pears they bought the other day, the ones that are already going bad. “You can’t keep pears, they rot too quickly,” she tells Donghua. It’s the first time they’ve spoken about anything other than vegetables all day.

An old man wearing oversize glasses appears and asks about the price of their tomatoes. “1.6 yuan,” Donghua and Shuanghai chime in unison, as if it were a rehearsed script. Even after so many years it sometimes still surprises them that they can do that. Though prices fluctuate each and every day, depending on what they pay at the wholesale market in the morning, they can still spit out the current price of any of their thirty-plus vegetable varieties without a second thought, despite the fact that they never discuss what the day’s new amount should be. That, according to Donghua, is because “it’s impressed on our hearts.”

Yes, Shuanghai agrees, their hearts are full of many of the same impressions, full of vegetable prices and seasons and sellers and locations. But it hasn’t always been that way, especially not at the beginning of their marriage. Shuanghai’s two older sisters had already married men from villages several hours from theirs, and her mother didn’t want to lose her third and final daughter in the same way. She was determined that Shuanghai should stay by her side, and the best way to make sure that happened was for her to marry someone local. And so it was that Shuanghai’s mom picked Mr. Li Donghua, a young man whose parents worked the plot of land adjacent to theirs. He was the last of seven kids from a family not nearly as well off as theirs—which wasn’t saying much, except that they’d surely be glad to marry their son off to her. And so her mom decided he was the one.

The only problem was that Shuanghai didn’t agree. She couldn’t stand the thought of it, to be more precise. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Donghua—she “never thought about that too much”—but, rather, that she didn’t want to stay in their village, didn’t want to live such a tired peasant existence tending the

land. Simply put, she wanted a better life, and that, to her, meant life in the city.

But now, as she stands behind their table at the open-air market, feet and back and neck and knees aching from years of long, incredibly long, hours—3:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., 360-some days a year—every inch of her body concedes that life here is certainly more tiring than anything she could have experienced in the countryside. She examines her fingertips, calloused, peeling, and stained black with dirt that won't wash away no matter how hard she scrubs. Then she laughs and thrusts her palms into Donghua's. "I'm only in my thirties and already they're like a sixty-year-old lady's hands."

Migrants like Shuanghai and Donghua may drudge through each day with their own financial concerns in mind, but their collective endeavors form a key component of China's double-digit economic growth. It's not just that they provide a nearly endless supply of cheap labor, but that they do so with unimaginable tenacity and grit—a strength of character and work ethic reminiscent of America's early immigrants and the country's struggles through the Great Depression.

In Chinese, that ethic is called *chiku* or, literally, *eating bitterness*, a term that has no direct correlate in English but that means, roughly, to endure hardships, overcome difficulties, and press ahead all in one. While long considered a virtue in Chinese culture, the country's upheavals over the past sixty years—including the Communist and cultural revolutions, market reforms, and the recent spread of materialism—have honed this ability to a new degree of perfection. This is especially true among peasants, who have had to be far more savvy and entrepreneurial than their urban counterparts to survive this tumultuous period.

And so it is that no matter how greatly city life may differ from their expectations, China's peasants don't often turn tail and head back home at the first sign of difficulty. Instead, they *chiku*, accepting and enduring and adapting as each situation demands and ultimately filtering into distasteful factory or service jobs, searching out petty business opportunities, and even inventing new channels of their own. In so doing they provide the country with an unusually resolute and yet highly flexible workforce that is helping vault China onto the world stage. But when all is said and done, by molding themselves to the vagaries of a society in extreme flux, Shuanghai and her peers often find that they no longer belong to the nation's traditional past and yet neither do they have a place in its modernized future; they are a people caught in between.

Nobody needs to tell Donghua that it's almost dinnertime. He knows by the eerie glow of the market's fluorescent lights, by the clouds of chili-laced smoke drifting over from the dining area, and by the merchants hustling back and forth to their motorcycles to grab extra provisions. But most of all he knows by the way customers are suddenly pressed three-deep around their table, eager to get hold of some fresh produce for the night's meal. This is prime time at the market, and he and Shuanghai are working double-time.

From the very beginning, when Donghua first saw the High-Tech Zone six years ago, with its wide roads and new schools, he was hooked. "I knew that this place was better than others. I knew there'd be development potential here," he says.

Despite the district's obvious wealth, the open-air market itself was slipshod and simple, thrown up for the temporary convenience of nearby residents. But that didn't daunt Donghua and

Shuanghai—after all, how else were they going to get a chance to work in such a ritzy area? Besides, they weren't planning to strike it rich. This just seemed to be a better opportunity than the petty peddling they'd been doing out of the back of a manual three-wheeled bike—a step up the mercantile food chain, so to speak. So they scraped together 2,000 yuan to buy a motorized three-wheeler—a necessity for hauling large quantities of veggies from the wholesale market—and that was that. “We never really thought about it too much,” Shuanghai says. “We just did it.”

At times like this, with customers swarming the mushrooms, the potatoes, the spinach, and the bamboo shoots, Donghua has to admit that things have worked out okay. They could, of course, always be better—he and Shuanghai could be renting out one of the tiny shops at the perimeter of the market where people sell things like grains, meats, noodles, and spices. Those vendors pay more for their spot, but then they make more, and they get running water, a cooking space, and even enough room to cram a little bed inside. As it is now, Donghua and Shuanghai get nothing more for their 200-yuan rent than a barren table.

And so it is that when their twelve-year-old daughter, Ming, comes back from school a half hour later, there's no hot meal waiting for her, nor even a hard surface on which to do her homework. Instead she sits on a six-inch-high mini-stool next to a pile of turnips and tries to study. Donghua hovers over her shoulder for a minute, shaking his head as she opens her English book. “I don't understand any of it,” he says, finally, and turns his attention to a shrinking heap of carrots.

A well-dressed businessman with a Bluetooth headset plugged in his ear approaches the cucumbers as he talks on his cell phone. He points to them silently, and Donghua indicates a price of 1.8 yuan. The man sighs and starts filling a plastic bag, only inter-



Li Donghua stands by his table at the produce market.

rupting his phone conversation to mutter “*Zhe me gui*,” or “That’s so expensive.”

Zhe me gui is a constant refrain here at the market, but what, Donghua often asks himself, do these urbanites with their nice clothes and expensive electronics really know about *zhe me gui*? In recent decades pennies have become increasingly irrelevant, and now the smallest unit of change is the *mao*, a ten-cent piece. In the last few years, many businesspeople have stopped dealing with that too; it’s simply too small for big-time concerns. But here, for Donghua and Shuanghai, the *mao* is their lifeblood.

Donghua’s Bluetooth-wielding customers may choose not to acknowledge it, but the lifestyles they enjoy are made possible in large part by these *mao*-dependent migrants. Never mind the convenience of having cheap produce available on virtually every block; thanks to them, regular facials and foot massages are within reach for even lower-middle-class urbanites, as are housekeepers,

nannies, and tailors. Thanks to them, there's someone to re-sole shoes, repair zippers, or copy keys hovering in every neighborhood, and eating out is almost as cheap as eating in. In essence, it is thanks to migrant labor and ingenuity that people like Mr. Bluetooth are able to focus the bulk of their time and energy on the much more glamorous business of becoming upwardly mobile.

But all that is lost on Donghua, who feels more like a piece of the city's hardware than a real, live contributor to progress. Poorly educated, unsophisticated, and uncultured, he is unconvinced that he and his wife have much to offer the China of the future. "We are the people at the lowest level," Donghua says, hefting a load of potatoes onto a woman's bike for her. "The people here have knowledge as their foundation. All we have is the power of our bodies, so all we can do is hard labor."

He's thought about trying to do something else, something with shorter hours, something less tiring, but each time he comes to the same conclusion: "Anything else we wouldn't understand. We don't make much now, but we don't lose money, either. It's not guaranteed that every business will be like that."

One thing Donghua and Shuanghai hadn't counted on when they moved here was just *how* fast the area would develop. Since the 2000 inception of *Xibu Da Kaifa*, the central government's policy to develop China's western region, Xi'an—and particularly its High-Tech Zone—has undergone rapid transformation. The couple's vegetable market, once nestled in what was considered one of the district's lower-end neighborhoods, is now sandwiched between towering apartment complexes and sparkling-new office buildings. Although established only six years ago, the market has already become an anachronism in this zone, sure to face extinc-

tion in the near future. “The location is super good,” Shuanghai says. “They can’t possibly leave it empty like this—the market definitely isn’t long term; it could be torn down any minute.”

That’s already happening to their current residence, located in Gan Jia Zhai, one of the few old villages left in the midst of the rapidly expanding High-Tech Zone. Though Gan Jia Zhai starts just a block and a half up the street from their market, it might as well be another universe. Composed mainly of ramshackle three- and four-story buildings rented out room by room, it houses an estimated thirty thousand rural migrants who, like Donghua and Shuanghai, work in the High-Tech Zone but could never afford to live there. Most of the vegetable market’s middle-class customers have never been to Gan Jia Zhai, since traffic seems to flow in one direction only—out of the village and into the High-Tech Zone.

For years, rumors of its imminent demise have run rampant, but this time the threat seems real. Still, that’s months away, and Donghua and Shuanghai plan to stay put as long as possible. It may not be glamorous, but their so-called home—a windowless, one-car garage on the bottom level of a crumbling apartment house—is cheap and familiar.

As usual, tonight Shuanghai and Ming walk home around 8:00 p.m., leaving Donghua at the market to pack up for the night. When they arrive, Shuanghai unlocks and lifts the garage’s sliding metal door, and Ming rushes in to pull the string on the room’s lone lightbulb. Two beds, pushed end to end, line one wall, with a flimsy curtain between them to give Donghua and Shuanghai a small degree of privacy. Along the opposite wall is an old cardboard box, turned on its side to serve as a countertop on which to place their electric rice cooker. There’s also a small table for

cutting vegetables and stacking cooking supplies, as well as the centerpiece of the room, a three-drawer dresser with a sizable new television set on top.

But there's no time for TV now. Ming immediately launches back into her homework, sitting on a tiny stool and using the top of her bed as a writing surface. Shuanghai uncovers lunch's shredded potato leftovers and then goes out into a common hallway where the building's first-floor tenants keep their kerosene-powered cookstoves. She begins heating water to make *miantang*, or thickened flour water "soup."

Once dinner is under control, Shuanghai peels a pear, letting the skin fall onto the room's cement floor, and hands it to her daughter. Then she sits on Ming's bed and peers down at her homework.

"Mama, how do you write this character?" Ming asks.

Shuanghai thinks for a moment, but she isn't sure. "Let's look in the dictionary," she says, finally, and pulls an ancient volume off a shelf above the bed. While she leafs through the book, Ming sweeps up the pear skins.

Shuanghai and Donghua worry about their daughter's studies as much and as often as they can. When she was young, they left her with her grandma in the village while they worked in Xi'an, some six hours away. When she got older, they wanted her to live with them and go to a higher-quality city school, but they had no way to look after her properly, given their crazy work hours. So they settled instead on sending her to live with Shuanghai's sister, who, though still in the countryside, was only an hour away from Xi'an. Finally, when Ming turned nine, they decided she was old enough to get herself up and off to school in the morning, and she came to live with them. But somehow it seems those first few years in village schools left her so far behind in her

studies that even now, three years later, she can't catch up. They pay for special after-school and weekend classes, but so far that hasn't seemed to help much. Maybe, they fret, she's simply just too dumb.

The sound of a pot boiling over interrupts Shuanghai's thoughts, and she looks up from the dictionary, momentarily confused, and then rushes into the hallway to tend her flour water soup. Ming laughs at her mother, a woman who might be able to remember the fluctuating prices of more than three dozen produce items without any effort but who is renowned for her forgetful spells at home. Just last week she cut up a pile of green onions and then absentmindedly dumped them into the trash before she could use them.

In the midst of all this, Donghua arrives, befuddled that he can't get the three-wheeler up over the curb and into the building's entryway, where he parks it at night. The bricks he usually uses as a ramp are suddenly missing, so all three of them file out into the dark street, first scouring for the missing bricks and then, when they can't be located, working together to push the vehicle inside. When they've finished their task, Ming grabs a flashlight and a few *mao* from her dad and disappears down the dark alley toward the public restroom on the next block.

"Living in the city is such a hassle," Shuanghai sighs. "Everything takes money, even going to the bathroom."

"Yeah, in the city if you have money you have everything," Donghua agrees. But here in their garage, with its high ceiling stained with mold and draped with years of black cobwebs, it's clear they don't have everything and probably won't any time soon. Sure, Donghua is quick to concede, if you use the village standard, where a laborer might only make 15–20 yuan per day, selling vegetables isn't bad business at all. But if you use the city

standard, the 2,000 yuan they usually bring home in a month is not much more than two factory workers would make. And if you use the High-Tech Zone standard, well then they don't even make enough to pay rent for a proper apartment. As it is, they're paying 120 yuan just to live in a garage.

Ming returns and they slide the metal door closed behind her, revealing a host of phone numbers scrawled in chalk across its surface—Shuanghai's way to make sure important information doesn't get lost. Donghua tips a yellow plastic crate on its end and balances a large cutting board on top to serve as a makeshift table. Shuanghai puts the potato dish on it, scoops out three big bowls of *miantang*, and dinner is ready. They tend to eat simply—most meals consisting of just one dish and one staple—not, Donghua says, in order to save money but simply because it's too inconvenient to prepare big meals in such a tiny room.

“Our place here is very small, very messy,” he says. “Not like our home in the village. There we've got everything.”

From the day Shuanghai's mom first brought up the idea of marriage, Donghua started thinking about how he could afford to build them a house. Never mind that Shuanghai hadn't yet consented to be his wife; he knew she wouldn't refuse forever. So he started doing construction work for a local contractor, and by the time Shuanghai finally did agree, he had scraped together just enough to build and furnish a little two-room house. But now there it sits, locked up and unused for the past ten years, while they've stayed in rundown places like this.

Sometimes Donghua talks about going back to the village, and Ming is always quick to jump in, extolling every stone and pebble of her idyllic childhood. But Shuanghai will hear none of it. “We definitely want to go back, but there's no opportunity for development there,” she says.

“Yeah, but selling vegetables doesn’t give us any opportunity to grow, either,” Donghua replies.

“You have to go back to the village on a solid financial foundation,” she explains. “If you have money, you can go back and open a store or a factory. If you have money, you can do a lot back there. But if we go back without money, what are we going to do, live off a farmer’s salary again?”

It’s a logic that Donghua knows is right. Though he loves to talk about going home, he can’t imagine actually being able to do so until he’s old, until his body wears out and there’s nothing more he can do here. Besides, right now their goal is to let Ming study and grow up with chances they never had, and that means staying in the city where they can make more money and she can attend better schools.

“If she goes to a university, we’ll need 20,000 to 30,000 yuan per year. If she doesn’t get in, then we’ll want her to go to trade school or do some other type of study,” Donghua says. “As long as our daughter’s life is better than ours, it’s all worth it.”

Shuanghai agrees: “You see we’re so tired, it’s all for her. Our child is our biggest responsibility. We don’t want her to be as tired as us. We don’t want to let her follow in our footsteps.”

After they’ve finished dinner, Shuanghai flips on the TV and they clear away the dishes. Most nights they don’t finish eating until almost 10:00 p.m. If they’re not too tired, they’ll watch television for half an hour before they fall asleep, mindful that their 3:00 a.m. wake-up call is just around the corner. Ming likes to spend that time drawing, but for Donghua indulging in any sort of recreation is unthinkable.

“My dad just loves sleeping,” Ming says. “That’s his hobby.”

“I’m always so tired,” he agrees, yawning. “There’s no time to think about liking anything else.”

It's too soon to tell yet whether Shuanghai and Donghua's dreams for Ming's future are realizable. It's not a mere question of funds, or ability, or even desire; for children of rural migrants, the equation is more complex.

Until recently, kids from the countryside had to pay substantially more than their urban counterparts to attend city schools. Though the law now mandates that they are charged the same price as everyone else, good schools are typically so expensive as to be non-options and many schools simply refuse enrollment to migrant children. Even at the cheaper urban schools, competition is extreme, and there's a huge gulf between kids like Ming and her city-born-and-bred classmates. To address these problems, unofficial schools for migrant children are popping up in many of China's metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, the quality of the education there isn't much better than countryside schools, where typically almost half of the students don't test past junior high, much less make it to college.

Many parents simply avoid these hassles by leaving their children with relatives back in the village, telling themselves that the monetary gains are worth the separation. Though they took that route for Ming's first few years of primary school, it was hard on Donghua and Shuanghai—if they allow themselves one indulgence at all, it's an uncharacteristic touch of sentimentality toward their daughter. But their dilemmas are lost on Ming, who looks at the rundown market, their rundown living quarters, and her parents' increasingly rundown faces and can't understand all the hype about city life. And though her parents continue to plow ahead, hopeful for her future, Ming longs to go back to the village where she remembers spending a tranquil, playful childhood.

Early mornings at the wholesale market can be dangerous. Never mind the overcrowding and the freezing cold. By 4:00 a.m., its cement floor is covered with discarded veggie scraps that have been trampled into a thick, slick paste. Shuanghai skids a bit as she hustles between trucks, looking for the perfect batch of cauliflower. They've been here forty minutes now, and she has yet to make a purchase. That's because yesterday Donghua bought cauliflower that was already turning black, and they lost 50 yuan on it alone. She's determined to do better today, but the challenge to buying vegetables here—in addition to being tired and pressed for time—is that, unlike the way business is done at their own market, there is no negotiating on prices and no rummaging to find the best-quality merchandise. Instead, most produce is already bound up in big clear plastic bags, leaving buyers to judge from the ones that are visible and hope for the best. But of course the best doesn't always happen, and so most days Shuanghai and Donghua end up losing money on something.

Unable to make up her mind about the cauliflower, she decides to buy some chives first. She heaves them up onto her shoulder—the transport method of choice for heavy parcels—and scurries across the pulpy ground to deposit them in the motorcycle cart. Donghua also happens to be there, dropping off 16 *jin* of shallots that he just bought for 30 yuan. He's excited, as this is the first day they've been available. "I haven't seen these yet this season," he says. "But 30 yuan... is that too expensive?" Shuanghai is busy unloading the chives, and in her silence he decides that, indeed, he's paid too much. "I'm already regretting this," he sighs.

Before they part ways again, he tells her to buy some cucumbers, but she's not willing. These days they're too expensive and haven't been selling well. Besides, it's already 4:35 a.m., and so

far all that she's bought are these chives. Instead, she tells Donghua, she's off to buy cauliflower, since she's seen some that's very white, if not a bit big. He snorts. "When you look at them here they seem so white, but when you get them back to the market, they're not white at all."

Funny how life is like that—never quite what it seems, and certainly never what one is expecting. When Shuanghai refused to marry Donghua it was because she wanted out of the countryside—but when she finally gave in, she had reconciled herself to staying put, she really had. It was destiny itself that thrust city life upon them. Near the end of their first year of marriage, just a month before Ming was born, Donghua was still doing part-time construction work when a building collapsed on him. He came within inches of dying, and recovery meant numerous surgeries and nearly two years in and out of the hospital.

They borrowed more than 40,000 yuan to cover the medical expenses—an amount so astronomical that they would have no chance of ever paying it back, at least not on a farmer's income. And still he needed more medicine, more trips to the hospital. They'd already tapped all their friends and family dry, and so Shuanghai headed to Xi'an—not to satisfy the wanderlust that had consumed her just a few years earlier but to see if she could start sending money back home to pay off their skyrocketing debts. She scrounged up one last round of charity, borrowing about 2,000 yuan to get started in the city, and left Donghua and Ming—now almost two years old—in her mother-in-law's care.

Once she got to the capital city she looked up a fellow villager who was making a fairly decent living selling vegetables, and she decided to give it a try. She invested 800 yuan in a three-wheeled pedal bike, and the very next day she was in business. Early each morning she'd ride forty-five minutes to the nearest

wholesale market and then spend her day tooling around the city selling produce out of the back of the bike. She was able to make enough to fund the final stages of Donghua's recovery, and about a year later, he joined her in Xi'an.

Living in the city is nothing like she'd dreamed it would be, but still, she says, she can't complain—not about their life, or their setup, or her husband. Whether they're happily married or not, whether giving in to her mother was the right thing to do or not—these are things she's never really thought about much. They're married now and need to focus all their attention on providing for Ming's future; for Shuanghai, thinking about anything else is just a waste of time.

By 6:10 a.m. the sky is starting to lighten and the market traffic is thinning. They meet back up at the motorcycle, which is now heaped with the morning's purchases. There is no room left in the cart for Shuanghai to sit, so instead she stands on the cart's narrow back bumper and clings to the metal side railing. Though it's precarious, she doesn't sit or stand in the back simply because that's what wives are expected to do. In fact, Donghua would like it very much if she would take the reins, but she can't because she doesn't know how to drive, and despite his urging, she has no desire to learn. "If I know how to drive, he won't get up in the morning," she says. "He's really lazy." Funny for a guy who's gotten up at 3:00 a.m. every day for nearly a decade.

If she could drive, not only would Donghua have the option of sleeping in sometimes, but he could also go back to the village for a visit on occasion. As of now, he's only gone home once in all these years, and that was to commemorate the third anniversary of his father's passing—a tradition in western China's countryside that can't be missed. Besides that, he has to stay put; otherwise they would have to close shop completely in his absence.

“No doubt he’d like me to learn how to drive. It’d be a great advantage to him,” Shuanghai says. But she is not ready to go down that road just yet. As they pull out of the parking lot, she lets out a belly laugh. “I know my idea’s not right, but still . . .”

Another thing Donghua hadn’t anticipated when he chose this retail market six years ago was the advent of the superstore. Before moving here they’d heard that mammoth chain stores were popping up in big cities in the south, but they’d never actually seen one in Xi’an, where small-time street sales were still the norm. Who would have thought that just two years later *Ai Jia*, a leviathan literally called Love Home, would be built just half a block away.

At first *Ai Jia* didn’t affect business much, since people were used to buying ultra-fresh veggies like theirs, not the wilted ones that *Ai Jia* had to offer. But recently even that has started to change. People are busier and are no longer willing to shop for groceries every day, and *Ai Jia* has begun selling some of its produce at a loss just to bring customers in the door.

To make matters worse, the High-Tech Zone has started clamping down on pedal-bike vendors, no longer allowing them to display their wares on busy street corners or in front of local housing complexes. And in some neighborhoods, small-time open-air markets like theirs don’t even exist anymore. As integral as rural migrants may be to China’s city life, it turns out that, as individuals, they are equally dispensable.

Ai Jia may be the wave of the future, but Donghua has no time to think about that tonight. Instead he looks down at their table, still flush with inventory, and knows what’s in his immediate future—losing money. Their clever little plan to stock up before the National Day break backfired: the last few days have been nothing but clear and sunny skies, which means a lot of people

headed out of town and vegetable sales plummeted, leaving them with a whole lot of goods that are not moving anywhere. As it is, he's out 100 yuan today, and he doesn't even want to think about what tomorrow may bring.

"*Zen me ban*," Donghua mutters to himself as he surveys the spread before him, asking "What can be done?" Shuanghai and Ming just left for the night, and it's time for him to begin packing up. He starts where he always starts—sorting the vegetables according to those that are still in excellent condition, those that will have to be sold at a discount tomorrow, and those that won't make it another day.

He picks up an old zucchini with several brown spots. Shaking his head, he grabs his butcher knife and cuts off the sides to reveal inner flesh that's perfectly white. "In the countryside we'd definitely still eat this. If it's something you grew yourself, you'd think it's such a pity to waste over just a few spots. But if you have to pay for it, I guess you want it to be perfect," Donghua laments, chucking it onto the floor.

A lady in a navy-blue blazer comes around the table, looking at his cauliflower. She wants to buy a fresh new head for 8 *mao*, but Donghua offers her an older, barely passable one for 5 *mao* instead.

"That cauliflower is bad," she says. "It's turning black already."

"You won't even buy it for 5 *mao*?" he asks.

"Give me the good stuff for 8 *mao* and I'll buy it," she insists. "Otherwise I won't buy from you."

"Then it looks like you won't be buying anything from me," he replies, in no mood for bargaining tonight. "Bye-bye."

Donghua turns his attention back to his vegetable sorting. Soon there's a pile of keepers towering in the corner of the table, but it's the floor, littered with rotting discards, that still has him

grumbling *zen me ban* over and over. Before long, the navy-blazer lady is back, this time under the guise of buying tomatoes—though she’s clearly still eyeing the cauliflower.

“8 *mao*?” she asks hopefully. Donghua merely shakes his head.

“Don’t regret this,” she warns, starting to turn away again.

Donghua wonders sometimes if people like her understand, if they’ve ever even thought for a moment how hard people like he and Shuanghai work for each and every *mao*, and if they have any idea what those *mao* mean to them. It took almost ten years for them to save up enough to pay back all the people who helped him cover his medical bills. But then, just when they started to build up a tiny bit of savings, his brother’s wife got sick and needed their nest egg. Now, finally, they’ve started saving again, but so far they’ve only amassed a few thousand yuan, nowhere near what they’ll need to get their daughter a proper education. No, he muses as the lady walks slowly down the aisle, waiting for him to call her back and offer the premium cauliflower at a losing price, he surely won’t regret it. Not tonight anyway.

Donghua is still pressing, squeezing, and ruing his plight when the market’s custodian of sorts—an old man with a home-made broom in one hand and a shovel in the other—pulls up a stool and sits at the end of the table smoking. Once the peddlers have put their veggies to bed, his task each night is to sweep the produce from the floor and cart it away in a wheelbarrow. Most of the others have already finished and gone home; now he’s simply waiting for Donghua to do the same.

Across the aisle the boys who work the *mantou* shop are singing as they wash their clothes in a big red basin, carefully hanging their pants along the rim of the tiny shack’s sliding metal door. They’re in no hurry, since they live right here in the market. After

all, someone needs to guard all those steamers at night; unlike veggies, they're worth something.

Donghua eventually gets all the leftovers stowed under a tarp. He uses an old bunch of parsley to dust the table off and pronounces himself ready to go. As he revs his three-wheeler, the custodian gets up from his stool and starts sweeping and shoveling his way down the aisle. For him, there's still a long night ahead.

A month later, in mid-November, the neighborhood market closes down unexpectedly under the pretense of cleaning and repair. There was no advanced warning—the merchants were doing business as usual one day and then simply told not to come the next. Donghua and Shuanghai began the sudden respite from work in good spirits, using the first two days off to move out of the garage in Gan Jia Zhai and into a room on the top floor of a five-story house in one of the only nearby villages that has not already been torn down. Though still just a single room with no bathroom, no heating, and no running water, it is noticeably bigger and brighter than the previous one, with a tiled rather than cemented floor and a large window looking out onto the High-Tech Zone. They definitely like the new place, but they're still not convinced it's worth the extra 60 yuan a month—the price of a haircut in one of the High-Tech Zone's moderately priced salons.

By their third day off, they don't know what to do with themselves, having no hobbies or interests to fill up their time. And so they spend the next two days watching TV and getting terribly depressed. Being exhausted but busy, Donghua concludes, is much better than being relaxed but bored.

Only during rare occasions like this, when there's suddenly nothing to fill his mind, does he allow himself the luxury of worrying about the future. They say the market will open up again after a week or so, but who knows? What if it closes for good? What, he wonders, would they do then? "We don't have much education. We don't have any profession or any specialty, so we can just do small-time buying and selling," he says. "Even if our daughter can't get into university, she can study something else, some other kind of craft. Then she can go out and work for someone else and use her talents. But we don't have any."

"We can do something else, or find another place to sell vegetables. Everything's possible," Shuanghai reassures him. "We don't have to worry. When it happens, we'll look at the situation, see how the society's developing, and find our place in it. That's the way you do things when you have no other way."

In a strange sense it's that lack of other options, that being battered about by the country's march toward modernization and capitalism, that keeps them going. If they are to survive here in the no-man's-land between old and new, they must stay nimble, light on their feet, and ready at any moment to seize new opportunities. With so little to lose, everything is possible.

And even in times of self-doubt, Donghua admits that having come from the countryside and living—and surviving—in Xi'an for so many years gives them a degree of self-confidence that farmers who've never left the village don't have. They may be among the lowest level of society here in the city, but if there's one thing they know how to do, it's persevere.

And so today, their fifth day off from work, they decide to have pork dumplings for lunch—a rarity for them because they're expensive and time-consuming to make. But it's something to keep them occupied, they decide, as they pull out the makeshift

crate-and-cutting-board table. Shuanghai rolls out the dough skins, and Donghua stuffs in the filling and pinches them closed.

When Ming gets home for lunch, Shuanghai fires up the kerosene stove in the hallway and starts boiling water. Within minutes there's a bowl of steaming hot dumplings in front of each of them, and they settle in to watch a Chinese women's volleyball match on TV, though none of them are totally sure they understand the rules.

As Donghua reclines on his bed, remote in hand, full, and a bit sleepy, it strikes him how different this life is from what he knew growing up. "When we were young in the countryside, we were starving, and you couldn't make even one cent. Then the big impossible dream was to have a bicycle," he says with a laugh. "Society's developed so fast. Back then there wasn't electricity in the village, we just had candles. Now most of the farmers there have motorcycles. And look at us, we have a big TV. We couldn't have even imagined it before, and we don't dare think of wanting anything else."