

Synopsis

Shanghai's Mingong

China - 2006

Lao Dongwu was a peasant in the region of Hubei near the center of China. He had to go and work in the cities as he needed money. The Chinese people from the country glorify the megalopolis. So Dongwu went stout-hearted to this new world hoping to get richer. From construction site to construction site, he ended on the Shanghai World Financial Center (SWFC) site. *"I am very proud to work on this construction site. It is the highest building in the world. I will never forget these days..."* In fact, this state-of-the-art skyscraper will be 492 meters high (532 yards) once it is done.

According to the *China Human Development Report*, more than 200 million people were in Dongwu's situation in 2005. They are called *Mingong*, peasant-workers. They have low incomes, they work seven days a week, 10 hours a day, in terrible conditions. Dongwu earns 45 yuans a day and sends most of it to his family that stayed in his native land to work in the fields. The Chinese economic growth, based among others things on the exploitation of this cheap working force, made the country side become richer.

Before Dongwu found this opportunity, he used to go from one construction site to another. He worked hard on the construction sites of the old neighborhood in Shanghai called the *Lilongs* and organized in a hierarchy. This network that characterizes the city is fading away to be replaced by new financial centers and other modern towers. The *Mingong* team on the construction sites, and each crew has a specific task : some recycle the bricks, others the wood, others the glass, others the electrical wires.

The *Mingongs* always live on site when they work on a construction site. They are crowded in prefabs : there are 8 Mingongs in all of the 15 square meter rooms, with straw mattresses, an old electrical stove for the cooking, a bowl for the bathing. The weather in Shanghai is subtropical : in the summer time, the temperature and the rate of humidity are very high, and the only air conditioning that is available in the homes is the old fan. But for Dongwu, the conditions of life in this construction site are much better than what he was used to before. He enjoys having hot water in the common showers and a regular medical examination.

At the 30th floor of the Shanghai World Financial Center, the concrete is about to be poured. The steel bars that are used in the reinforced concrete are bent one by one, then made into a concrete block, then they are attached by hand from one to another. The workers work in the deafening noise of the impact of the steel bars on the aluminum plates on the ground. As they are kneeling in a straight line and when the rain enters the building, they cover up with plastic bags or cloth. Wearing a protective headgear is the only security instruction that is observed. The workers work with no body harness nor footwear industry. A woodcut between two beams gives access to the construction site.

In China, we don't speak about life's difficulties. We prefer smiling.

Pierre Henniquant

