

IV



Making It Big in Long Wan

Liang Jie Li guides his bullock cart down a narrow village lane and stops in front of his new three-story house $\frac{3}{4}$ one of the largest in Long Wan now.

Although construction has not been completed, Liang and his family moved into the house a few days earlier because an astrologer said it was an auspicious time to start living there.

Although he dresses like the other farmers in simple work clothes and a straw hat, Liang is the richest resident of Long Wan. He says he will spend about 70,000 yuan to build his house, compared with the 10,000 yuan usually spent to build an average-sized village dwelling.

Not only is his house larger than other homes in the village, rising proudly above the surrounding houses, it is also more attractive, with brightly-colored tiles covering the living room floor and geometric designs on the exterior.

A successful businessman and farmer, Liang could afford to build such a lavish house.

Several years ago he purchased a stone-crushing machine and used it to produce gravel for construction companies. In recent years, the countryside has been abuzz with talk of "doing business," but Liang is one of the few villagers who have succeeded in doing it.

The key to his success and what sets him apart from other villagers is his willingness to take a chance on the future, says his 21-year-old son, who sits in the living room of the family's new home watching television.

Liang Jie Li received only five years of schooling, all of it as an adult. He began primary school at the age of 18 at a time when the new Communist government wanted more people to become educated. He finished primary school in three years and attended middle school for another two years. He wanted to continue his studies but the government forced him to stop, saying he was too old to be a student.

Over the years he has been a factory worker, a teacher, a village accountant, and a power-station worker. The villagers always considered him cleverer than others in Long Wan and often asked him for help in writing letters.

Liang says his success in business wouldn't have been possible if it hadn't been for the economic reforms that permitted the farmers to cultivate their own plots. The new policy generated excitement and optimism in the countryside because the farmers suddenly believed that hard work and perseverance would lead to greater profits and a higher standard of living.

Although the land still belonged to the government and the farmers still had to pay a rice tax, Mao Zedong's dream of a classless, communist society was scrapped in favor of letting people fend for themselves and get rich if they could.

China's new rural policy was liberating for most of the farmers, but Liang quickly concluded that farming would not be very profitable in the long run. The villagers would need to find other ways to generate income if they hoped to increase their long-term profits.

When he heard that the local military was interested in selling a stone-cutting machine, he and several friends decided to buy it for 4,000 yuan. Liang says the army had tried but failed to earn money with the machine because they did-

n't know how to manage the business. Liang thought he could do better.

The villagers' plan was to extract stone from a site in the village and crush it to make gravel for use in construction. It was a large and risky investment for the villagers, he says. If their enterprise failed they would lose all the money they had struggled so long to save.

In the beginning it was difficult to find customers, says Liang. He had to look for them outside the village. But after a year and a half of hard work, his perseverance began to pay off.

Builders in the area learned about their business and started to seek them out. The business began to flourish and Liang was able to hire workers to perform the day-to-day labor, leaving him more time to focus on managing the enterprise.

Liang's company now employs about 20 people, including northerners from less prosperous provinces who have migrated to Guangdong to find work and will work for less money than the local people. One of Liang's workers says he is paid only five yuan a day.

Since the village stone isn't owned by anyone, Liang says he is able to extract it from the hills above the village free of charge.

Liang's success has also paid off for his son, who now has a small business transporting construction materials. Liang bought his son a small truck - a tractor-like vehicle with a trailer - for about 3,000 yuan, and the son uses it now to haul stone and sugarcane, earning about 30 yuan for each load he carries.

Liang says he isn't optimistic about the future of farming in Long Wan. In the days ahead, he says, there won't be much progress for villagers who limit themselves to cultivating the land. Their income rose rapidly over the last 10 years but additional increases will be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain, he says.

Most of the fields have already been cultivated, so it will be hard for farmers to increase their income by cultivating more land. If farmers want to raise further their standard of living, they will have to explore other kinds of work, such as starting small sideline businesses like his to supplement their farm income, he says.

Getting Ahead

Liang Chao Li is taller and more sturdily built than most of the other men in the village. When he smiles he shows a perfect set of white teeth.

He sits along the side of the road above a stream that runs under the bridge at the edge of the rice paddies. Like many young villagers, Liang Chao Li has dreams of getting rich.

He and several of his friends have been extracting sand from the village streambed and selling it to local construction companies. People in the village have seen the success of Liang Jie Li's gravel business and are eager to duplicate it.

Liang Chao Li says he and his friends have already started to earn money, though not enough to pay for the machine they purchased to extract the sand.

He says some people in the village oppose what they're doing, arguing that removing sand from the streambed will damage the bridge that crosses the stream. But Liang offers another explanation for their opposition: They're jeal-

ous, he says. They're afraid we'll get rich.

Liang Chao Li attended school for eight years before dropping out. He says he and his friends had little interest in school because they thought it wouldn't be useful to them in the future.

But he doesn't think that way now. If he could relive those days he would take his learning more seriously, he says.

In the past, many villagers believed they wouldn't have a chance to use their education as adults. Most thought they would have no choice but to spend their lives working as farmers in Long Wan.

At school, Liang had difficulty getting along with his teachers. There was one teacher in particular whom he disliked. He says the teacher ordered him to write a self-criticism after he failed to show up for a work detail. Liang refused to write the criticism and began to hate the teacher. Soon he stopped attending school altogether.

Liang says he often got into fights with other boys and was disruptive in school when he was younger. Once he tossed a firecracker into a classroom, upsetting both the students and the teacher.

He says his parents told him to be kind to others and avoid trouble, but he ignored their advice. They hit him when he refused to behave, but their punishments had little effect on his behavior.

After leaving school, Liang Chao Li found a job as a laborer, working for a construction company that built houses. But this experience also ended badly: he got into a serious fight with another worker and was fired.

After losing that job he worked for a company that provided sand for construction projects. His job was to assist the truck driver who hauled the sand.

He also moved to Zhanjiang, where he spent much of his time watching movies and wandering through the shops. There were many new sensations to experience, many new things to see and buy in the city, he says. City life was quite different from the simple village life he had left behind.

The world outside can open your eyes, he says. I liked to watch the crowds; I liked to look at the different kinds of people.

But he was always drawn back to the village even though he knew there was no future for him there. The outside world is better, he says, but if you're away from the village for a long time you start to miss it.

Liang knows it will be hard for him to improve his situation in Long Wan. There are too few opportunities for change here, he says. Life remains the same day after day, but he finds it hard to leave now.

Liang leads a simple life in Long Wan these days, working in the fields and helping his family out at home. Occasionally he does temporary construction work outside the village to earn extra money.

In the evening he and his friends get together to drink tea, watch television and devise strategies to catch up with those who are becoming rich, he says.

Earning more money and finding a wife are his main concerns now. He has tried several times to find a wife but has failed each time. A matchmaker introduced him to two different girls, but neither would accept him. My life wasn't

what they were looking for, he says, matter of factly.



















