

FOCUS

The loneliness of a long-distance worker



Migrant worker Chen Jinzhu, 18, from Shantou, Guangdong, prefers working in a restaurant than on a production line in Dongguan. Photo: Felix Wong

A search for identity, not just a job

Many 'second generation' migrant workers come to the cities not just to seek wealth, but a new life

When Chen Jinzhu (陳金珠) came to Dongguan (東莞) for the first time in August last year, she had her first taste of the excitement of city life in "the factory of the world".

The 19-year-old migrant worker from Shantou (汕頭) on the east coast of Guangdong became a waitress at a fine-dining Western restaurant in a posh residential area of Dongguan called Dalang. She chose an English name, Cherry, learnt some simple English, made new friends and began studying accountancy.

Chen is among a growing number of the second generation of migrant workers, usually born in the 1980s or 1990s, with a higher literacy level than their predecessors and a preference for work in the services sector over manufacturing.

"I want to see the world outside Shantou," said the fresh graduate. "I also managed to escape from my parents, who have tight control over what I do."

Chen, the eldest of five children, chose to work at a restaurant with a monthly salary of about 2,000 yuan (HK\$2,460) rather than in a factory, where she could easily earn at least 2,500 yuan a month.

She sends about half of her monthly wage home, and uses the rest to repay loans from friends to pay the annual 2,000 yuan fee for accounting courses in Dongguan.

"My parents work in a handbag

My parents work in a handbag factory in Shantou, but I don't like working conditions in the factories

CHEN JINZHU, WAITRESS, DONGGUAN

factory in Shantou, but I don't like working conditions in the factories," Chen said. "It's boring with long hours, which won't give me much time to relax after work."

Tempted by the stories of city life told to her by cousins who worked in Shenzhen, Chen thought Dongguan sounded colourful and interesting.

"I work in a Western restaurant, which has air-conditioning and gives me a chance to learn some simple English and what Western dishes are like," she said. "I like Dongguan."

Some social workers said the younger generation cares more about quality of life than the salaries they earn, and would not tolerate the level of hardship their parents went through during the first three decades of economic opening in Guangdong since 1978.

Zhang Yuewu (張越武), the secretary general of the Shenzhen Public Emotional Care Centre, a psychological counselling hotline, said the younger generation of migrant workers thought quite differently from their predecessors.

"They are more willing to settle down and try to make a home in the city," he said. "They want more than a job – they want to create an identity for themselves in society."

Zhang said the centre had received about 10,000 calls since it was set up three years ago. About 100 calls came from people who contemplating suicide or even murder.

Part of the problem is that the current generation of migrant workers is confronted by the conspicuous

wealth of cities like Shenzhen, where luxury-goods stores and expensive cars are becoming more common, said Ken DeWoskin, Beijing-based director of Deloitte China Research and Insight Centre. "The second generation coming in now, their goal is to have a Maserati, to be able to buy Gucci purses or a 10-million-yuan apartment."

What's more, many migrant workers are choosing to return home. All of Xu's 30 friends and relatives who went to southern China for work 20 years ago have gradually come back to Luzhou, some as recently as last year. His wife, Huang Xianjun, returned to help look after their grandchildren.

Sichuan, which traditionally produces more migrant workers than any other province, has seen the number of labourers seeking work outside the province stabilise since 2009. Meanwhile, factories are relocating nearer the worker pool. A prime example is iPad and iPhone-maker Foxconn, which recently opened a factory in the inland province of Zhengzhou (鄭州) and recruited 95 per cent of its 130,000-strong workforce locally.

The organic growth of second-tier cities like Luzhou also means young

people entering the workforce can find jobs at home. An ancient city on the most westerly part of the Yangtze River, Luzhou is home to one of the oldest state-owned wineries, 439-year-old Luzhou Laojiao. Today, the city's skyline is ringed with construction cranes. A fourth mega-industrial park in five years is under construction to house the city's four pillar industries of wine, petrochemicals, heavy-duty machinery manufacturing and energy. Last year, Luzhou's economy grew 16 per cent, outstripping the national 9.2 per cent rise.

"I have come home only five times in the past 20 years, and every time I found new residential skyscrapers towering above where the farmlands were," said Xu, whose parents used to farm rice 60 kilometres outside Luzhou.

"Traffic jams are dreadful. It takes me almost an hour to cross the Yangtze River bridge and get into the city centre, compared with 10 minutes previously."

Xu Guanghui is one of many economic migrants who are strangers in their own homes, but the flood heading east is ebbing as development spreads west

Denise Tsang in Luzhou and Dongguan
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Xu Guanghui (徐光輝) had not seen his family for two years when he sat down for a celebratory feast in Luzhou (瀘州), Sichuan (四川) province. The 34-hour bus journey over bumpy roads to get to his family from his job in Guangdong had taken its toll, and he was apprehensive about the homecoming.

Over Sichuanese dishes of *shuizhu huangshan* (spicy yellow eel) and *fenggan niurou* (wind-dried sliced beef), washed down with *baijiu*, a strong white liquor, the migrant worker was welcomed by his wife of 26 years, his elderly mother and his two children and was introduced to a new granddaughter, already 16 months old. About 20 relatives crowded around two large dining tables, cracking jokes and laughing loudly.

"Come home, come home," a brother-in-law, Li Tinghui, cried out, while pouring *baijiu* for Xu. "You will earn far more over here than in Dongguan, like me."

The circumstances 49-year-old Xu and his family find themselves in today reflect China's ambitious economic development. Wealth, once concentrated along the coast, has spread inland. At the same time, expectations have altered with the generations, reshaping the country's labour force and the businesses that

I want to work until retirement age. Luzhou is my home, but I am like a tourist here

XU GUANGHUI

depend on it. Xu was among the first wave of mainland workers who opted to leave their families in search of work after China's economy opened three decades ago. His children, though, have different ideas.

The goal of the first generation of migrants who went to Guangdong's factories "was to earn enough money so that they could send it back to the families", says Ken DeWoskin, Beijing-based director of Deloitte China Research and Insight Centre. "The second generation coming in now, their goal is to have a Maserati, to be able to buy Gucci purses or a 10-million-yuan apartment."

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Xu is now the only member of his family who remains in Guangdong. He more or less regards himself as a resident, having moved to the south 19 years ago, and has worked as a security guard at Kam Pin, a Hong Kong-owned curtain-wall plant in Dongguan, for 15 years. When he left Luzhou, his son was six years old and his daughter three.

He goes home once every four years on average, buying a bus ticket that costs 260 yuan (HK\$320) one-way instead of 780 yuan for the two-hour one-way flight from Shenzhen to Luzhou.

He earns about 2,500 yuan (HK\$3,050) a month for his efforts and sends most of his salary back to Luzhou, rarely splurging on so much as a bottle of water during his factory shift. His wife spent 10 years in Dongguan working in a handbag factory. While she was there, the couple rented a room in a sub-divided flat for 200 yuan a month. They managed to support their two children, Xu's widowed mother and pay the 24,000 yuan fee to put their daughter through university. They also saved enough to buy an 80-square-metre apartment for 90,000 yuan in downtown Luzhou, with the help of loans from friends, who have since been repaid.

The value of his apartment has tripled to 270,000 yuan over the past five years. Still, Xu said it was only a gain on paper and did not make him feel that financially secure. And anyway, given current property prices, he worried it would be too expensive to sell the apartment and buy another home.

Now he lives by himself in the same room he used to share with his wife in Dongguan, near his workplace. And he is a stranger in his own home in Luzhou. On this visit, each time he tried to hug his 16-month-old granddaughter she pushed his arms away and fled.

Two years ago, Xu said, he could not recognise his daughter when he

Until I called him father, he didn't realise it was me... I have only seen him five times

XU XIAOLAN



Xu Guanghui (far right) has a celebratory lunch with his family after returning home for the first time in two years. Photo: Dickson Lee

230m

The estimated number of people who have migrated to the cities in recent years. About 13 million new people join the legions every year

went to pick her up at the Dongguan train station during her first and only visit to Guangdong.

"Until I called him father, he didn't realise it was me," said 22-year-old Xu Xiaolan. "We talk over the phone three times a week, but I have only seen him five times since I was born."

Xiaolan, who finished her university studies in Chengdu (成都) earlier this year, has joined an advertising business that her brother, Xu Tao, recently opened in Luzhou. A former soldier who served in the far west province of Xinjiang, Xu Tao, who is three years older than Xiaolan, borrowed 50,000 yuan from his parents to set up the business, inspired by friends and schoolmates who became entrepreneurs.

"I want to make some money, enough to cover daily family needs and medical expenses, if any, and live happily with my parents, my wife and my daughter," said Tao, 25. "I don't aim to be super rich."

"Labourers are doing the same job every day, which is dreadfully boring and harsh," Xiaolan added. "I will never work in a factory."

According to a recent study by Tsinghua University and the mainland's largest online platform for blue-collar jobs, gzhong.cn, the proportion of workers moving to regions closer to home has been rising since 2008 as the wage difference between inland provinces and Guangdong narrows.

For example, the average migrant worker's monthly wage in Hunan (湖南) last year was 1,887 yuan, more than the average of 1,744 yuan they earn elsewhere.

The study also showed that the second generation of migrant workers – those born after the 1980s – preferred jobs in the service sector like advertising rather than factory work.

Both of Xu's brothers-in-law, Li Tinghui and Liu Yongji, (married to his two younger sisters) were migrant workers in Guangdong in the 1990s but found the factory floor life unbearable and returned to Luzhou. Li, 39, and his wife spent 10 years working in various factories in Dongguan. They packed up for Luzhou in 2000.

"The pay was so poor that I was paid 300 yuan a month, and my wife and I saved up only 30,000 yuan in 10 years," Li said while having afternoon tea with Xu and Liu along the banks of the Yangtze.

Liu, 45, gave up after a tough eight months of being a migrant factory worker in Shantou (汕頭), Guangdong, in 1993, producing heavy-duty machinery. After he came back to Luzhou he worked another decade to save enough money to set up Shen Bo, a lighting company that is thriving in the city's relatively buoyant property market. Gross profit margins are running as high as 50 per cent, and the company recently won a project valued at three million yuan.

"Being a blue-collar worker has no prospects. Be a boss," said Liu, who recently spent 280,000 yuan on a car. His 90-square-metre apartment, in the city's prestigious government office area, saw its value appreciate five times in the past few years.

Li works at Shen Bo installing advertising banners and LED displays. He earns 5,000 yuan a month – twice as much as Xu's monthly salary as a security guard in Dongguan. At 60,000 yuan a year – excluding discretionary year-end bonuses – it is twice as much as Li and his wife together were able to save in an entire decade as migrant workers.

Sipping his tea as the muddy Yangtze flows gently past, Xu ponders his dilemma: throw in his lot with a family business that is reliant on a volatile local real-estate market, or stick with his long-term job in Dongguan.

"Even though my children have grown up and my financial burden is much lighter, I want to work until retirement age," he said.

"Luzhou is my home, but I am like a tourist here."

BUSINESS



Getting a boost
Rail builders expect increased spending for rest of the year

> TRANSPORT B3

Digital move
HKMA unveils plans to set up e-billing system next year

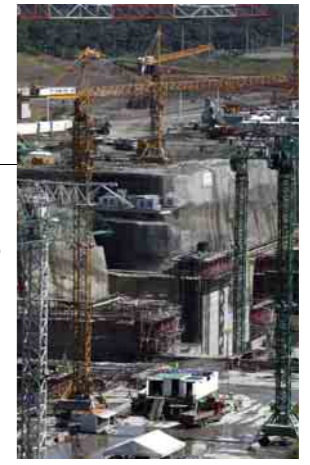
> BANKING B4

Snapshot
H-share index: 9,195.78
-91.73 points, 0.99%
Top blue-chip mover:
Citic Pacific
-4.17%



Panacea for all?
Who will gain most from the widened Panama Canal?

> SHIPPING B2



BUSINESS DIGEST

US manufacturing falls most in three years

US manufacturing shrank at its sharpest clip in more than three years in August, the third month of contraction in a row, and firms hired the fewest workers since late 2009, a survey yesterday showed. The Institute for Supply Management said its index of national factory activity fell to 49.6 from 49.8 in July. A reading below 50 indicates contraction in the sector. The index's employment component fell to 51.6, the lowest since November 2009, from 52.0 in July. Separately, US construction spending in July fell by the most in a year. Reuters

Former NVC Lighting chairman rejoins firm

Wu Changjiang, the former chairman of NVC Lighting Holdings, is rejoining the Hong Kong-listed firm from which he resigned on May 24 citing "personal reasons". The lighting manufacturer announced last night that it had formed a temporary operations committee to manage its day-to-day operations, which was headed by Wu. On August 14, NVC said it would be inappropriate for Wu to be re-appointed as chairman and director in light of its investigation into Wu. In July, strikes broke out in some of NVC's factories, with the strikers demanding the reappointment of Wu as chairman. Toh Han Shih

JAL's proposed IPO attracts strong interest

Japan Airlines' 663 billion yen (HK\$65.67 billion) initial public offering of shares, the largest since Facebook, drew orders for all the stock being sold, said two people with knowledge of the deal. The carrier's government-backed parent is offering 175 million shares for 3,500 yen to 3,790 yen. Bloomberg

Samsung to probe more Chinese suppliers

Samsung said it plans to examine all of its Chinese suppliers for possible violations of labour policies. Samsung Electronics said it would carry out audits this month of 105 Chinese companies that were its exclusive suppliers. The move comes after Samsung's audit of a supplier, HEG Electronics, in response to an allegation it used child labour. It said it found no under-age workers. AP



INDUSTRY



The labour shortage in the Pearl River Delta is acute as fewer migrants are seeking work in the export hub. Photo: Reuters

GLOBAL CRISIS, LABOUR LAWS HIT PRD PLANTS

Hong Kong manufacturers are forced to shut or cut production in response to the 2008 economic crisis and mainland contract rules

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About 15 per cent of Hong Kong manufacturers operating in the Pearl River Delta have either curtailed production or closed down since the global economic crisis of 2008 and the implementation of new labour contract laws.

More factories would shut if the downturn continued to hurt exporters in the export hub, a leading industrial trade body warned yesterday.

Deserted factories are now commonplace in industrial areas across Guancheng, Changan, Humen and Tangxia, in Dongguan, the first place Hong Kong manufacturers established on the mainland about 20 years ago, said Stanley Lau, the deputy chairman of the Federation of Hong Kong Industries.

Several thousands of the about 50,000 factories owned by Hong Kong companies in the delta had closed, Lau said.

Dongguan, an export-oriented city, has been hard hit since export demand from Europe and the United States waned. Growth in the city's gross domestic product dropped to 2.5 per cent year on year in the first half from 8 per cent a year earlier.

It lagged behind all the major cities in Guangdong province and fell short of the national guideline of 7.5 per cent growth for this year.

The city's export value growth plunged to 6.1 per cent from 15.9 per cent.

Factories had seen their or-

ders cut by as much as 30 per cent since 2008 because of the sluggish consumer demand in the West, Lau said.

Wilson Shea, the owner of packaging material manufacturer Success Products, said its current orders were just 70 per cent of what they were in 2010. The drop prompted him to cut the number of workers to 60 from more than 300 in 2008.

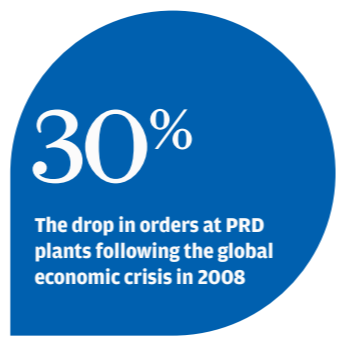
"I have even shut down the kitchen and laid off the four full-time staff to cut costs," he said.

But Shea is not alone. The introduction of the minimum wage and new labour contract laws on the mainland have forced scores of factories out of business.

"About 30,000 factories in the province have closed down since 2008," said Edward Tsui, a vice-president of the Chinese

Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong.

The new law enforces permanent contracts between factories and workers, versus the time-definite contracts of the past. In addition, workers employed for 10 years in the factory are entitled to as much as 100,000 yuan (HK\$122,160) compensation on termination of their contracts.



"The incentives for workers to work harder have been compromised as they would rather be fired in some cases," Tsui said.

Moreover, the labour shortage in Guangdong is still acute as immigrant workers, who used to be the major labour source for factories in the southern region, have become reluctant to leave their regions as local economies closer to home start to flourish.

Factories are now leaving Guangdong to relocate to other cities in Jiangxi or Hunan to take advantage of lower costs. Some were even winding up and moving to Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam where they could halve their operating costs, Lau said.

In response to the difficulties being faced by the manufacturers, the Guangdong government tried to ease their pain by delaying the rise in minimum wages, he said. The new minimum wages were supposed to be launched in January.

Tax rebate rise tipped to lift exports

Bloomberg in Beijing

The mainland may expand exporters' tax rebates to help them cope with a slump, deploying a stimulus tool used during the global credit crunch, according to three people with direct knowledge of the plan.

The government may give exporters a full rebate of the 17 per cent value-added tax on products including furniture, shoes and toys, up from the 13 to 15 per cent.

The policy might be rolled out

as soon as this month, depending on whether trade remained weak, the sources said.

Premier Wen Jiabao has pledged policy "fine-tuning" to cope with a deepening slowdown in the world's second-largest economy that saw export gains slump to an annual 1 per cent in July from 11 per cent in June.

The deterioration in trade escalated the risk that Wen will miss his full-year economic expansion target for the first time since he took office in 2003.

"Further policy loosening is

needed to prevent a further slowdown in production growth," Sun Mingchun and Sun Chi, Hong Kong-based economists at Daiwa Securities, wrote in a note yesterday. "Export growth should remain weak."

Beijing used the tool in 2009 to help the economy when exports plunged during the global financial crisis, at one point raising tax rebates on 553 products.

Shipments abroad of products covered by the tax change were about US\$130 billion last year, or 6.8 per cent of exports.

REAL ESTATE

August flat sales soar 42pc and the ride isn't over yet

Registrations top 8,000 and analysts expect strong demand will continue this month

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Registered home sales surged nearly 42 per cent last month, signalling a return to robust demand, which analysts expect will continue this month.

Land Registry data shows it registered 8,087 sales and purchase agreements for flats in August, up 41.7 per cent from 5,709 in July. It includes sales conducted in July, as deeds can be lodged with the registry within 30 days of completing a transaction.

"The rise in sales was caused by panic buying, fuelled by the possible launch of QE3 [quantitative easing]," said Patrick Chow Moon-kit, head of research at Ricacorp Properties. "While the stock market remained sluggish, buyers rushed to purchase properties to hedge against inflation."

With the launch expected this month of residential projects such as Sun Hung Kai Properties' Century Gateway Tuen Mun and the Henderson Land-led consortium's Double Cove in Lok Wo Sha, Chow predicts the number of sales and purchase agreements could climb a further 17 per cent this month to 9,500 transactions or more.

The value of sales could surge from HK\$39.7 billion to between HK\$50 billion and HK\$60 billion, he added, boosted by both higher sales and rising home prices.

SHKP's deputy managing director Victor Lui Ting said a 2,570 sq ft duplex at Century Gateway cost HK\$70 million, or HK\$27,000 per sq ft. The developer may launch at least 30



Home sales and prices reaching for the sky. Photo: Reuters

units as early as this Saturday at an average price of HK\$13,000 per sq ft, or at least HK\$15 million per unit.

Henderson Land's general manager of sales Thomas Lam Tat-man said one of the top-floor units at Double Cove would be priced at around HK\$98 million, or HK\$28,000 per sq ft.

The August data from the Land Registry shows total sales and purchase agreements lodged for registration, including the sale of non-residential properties, increased 34.7 per cent month on month to 10,377, or up 41.2 per cent year on year.

The total value of all property transactions registered in August was HK\$54.2 billion, up 15.7 per cent month on month and 32.6 per cent year on year.

Midland Realty analyst Bugle Lau Ka-fai said the effects of last week's measures to raise the supply of land and flats would only begin to be seen in Land Registry data for October.

Since the secondary home market was active in the first half of last month, he expected the number of registered sales would rise to 10,000 this month.

EURO-ZONE CRISIS

Moody's downgrades outlook on EU

Reuters in Madrid

European stock markets fell yesterday following a downgrade by Moody's Investors Service of the outlook on the EU's long-term AAA credit rating from stable to negative.

Moody's said its move reflected credit risks faced by key European Union budget contributors, including Britain, France and Germany, all of which now have negative outlooks due to the continent's economic crisis.

"It is reasonable to assume

that the EU's creditworthiness should move in line with the creditworthiness of its strongest key member states," a Moody's statement said.

Moody's said the main reasons for holding its highest rating for the bloc at the moment remained unchanged: its "conservative budget management" and "the creditworthiness and support provided by its 27 member states".

Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands—which together account for about 45 per cent of the EU's budget revenue, accord-

ing to Moody's—also maintain an AAA credit rating.

The agency did not exclude the possibility of a future EU downgrade, however, saying that a "deterioration in the creditworthiness of EU member states" could prompt such a move.

Separately, the Spanish Treasury will inject €6 billion (HK\$58.5 billion) into the state's bank rescue fund to beef up its firepower after the emergency recapitalisation of troubled lender Bankia, an Economy Ministry source said yesterday.

The rescue fund would re-



Luis de Guindos

ceive state debt and cash, the source said, adding that the operation would boost its capital base to €15 billion.

"This has happened because of Bankia's recapitalisation," the source said.

FOCUS

BACK TO where the heart is



Xu Guanghui (centre) with his son and daughter, who have started a business making signboards.
Photos: Dickson Lee



After 20 years in Guangdong, a migrant worker decides it's time to reconnect with his family back home – one of millions to make that choice

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Xu Guanghui is determined to prove that you can go home again.

In May, the 49-year-old migrant worker quit his job in southern China and went "home" to Luzhou (泸州) in Sichuan (四川) province. The move ended a 20-year stint in Guangdong province, the past 15 as a security guard at a curtain-wall manufacturer in Dongguan (东莞), a factory town.

Xu returned to a family he had seldom seen and to children and a grandchild he hardly knew. Having left behind a secure job and a steady income, he's embarked on a new life in a

precarious family start-up company.

"Life back home is harsher. I work from 9 am until the work is finished, Monday to Sundays," Xu said with a big sigh. "But I work with my kids every day and can come home to have dinner with my mother and my folks."

Xu was part of the first wave of mainland workers to become migrant labourers as China opened up three decades ago. The *South China Morning Post* chronicled Xu's situation in an article earlier this year as he wrestled with whether to continue the lonely

life of a migrant for a few more years, or try to re-enter his family circle in the town where he grew up. When we interviewed Xu in March, he was resisting entreaties by family members, them-



The business has grown even faster after I came home. We want to buy a car

XU GUANGHUI

selves former migrant workers, to return to Luzhou, an ancient city on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. "Luzhou is my home but I am like a tourist here," he told us then, during a rare visit to his hometown.

Millions of migrant workers like Xu are expected to crowd into cities as Beijing fast-tracks its urbanisation agenda. Part of the aim is to lift incomes and redress disparities in wealth distribution between rural and urban areas. The government hopes this will help boost domestic consumption, reducing the economy's reliance on exports.

Today, about half the country's population are urban dwellers, up from 18 per cent in 1978, when the nation started to open its economy, said Peng Wensheng, chief economist of investment bank China International Capital Corp. By 2030, according to the World Bank's projections, nearly two-thirds of the nation's 1.3 billion people are expected to be living in urban areas.

Meanwhile, fewer people are migrating to the Pearl River Delta region for work, dramatically altering the country's labour force and its industry. Stanley Lau Chin-ho, deputy chairman of the Federation of Hong Kong Industries, said fewer workers were coming from places that previously were big providers of labour, such as Hunan (湖南), Guangxi (广西) and Xu's home province of Sichuan. Many factory owners in coastal and southern regions have chosen to relocate production to inland regions such as the west, where wages are relatively low and workers more plentiful, he says.

Workers "have no need to travel day and night to the south for jobs and what they can earn in their hometowns may be similar to the wages in Guangdong," Lau said. Moreover, he said, "job security is getting worse in Guangdong, where factories are locked in a fight for survival of the fittest

and are troubled by labour disputes over welfare and demands for democracy in management".

Lau forecast that by 2015, the number of Hong Kong-owned factories in the Pearl River Delta would shrink to about 35,000, or 30 per cent below the 50,000 operating at the end of last year. In 2007, there were about 60,000.

Soaring wages are mostly to blame, a consequence of Beijing's grand plan to lift incomes and spending power to transform the national economy.

While Xu's long-time job at the Dongguan curtain-wall factory looked secure, his personal tipping point came after the March visit to Luzhou. That trip was only his fifth in all those years. His hometown had morphed into a city of skyscrapers and construction cranes, and the local authority was thriving.

Xu's wife, who was also a migrant worker in Dongguan, had already moved back to Luzhou. Many of his friends and relatives, including two brothers-in-law, had also returned, and appeared to be prospering. After returning to Dongguan, a bone-jarring, 34-hour bus ride away, Xu thought hard about his future.

Two decades as a migrant worker had enabled him to feed his family, send his daughter to university and help fund the purchase of a relatively spacious apartment in Luzhou. He was feeling financially secure.

His son, Tao, and his daughter, Xiaolan, both in their twenties, had started a company in Luzhou in February to make advertising signboards and were expanding into commercial LED [light-emitting diode] light boxes used in outdoor advertising. By May, his mind was made up.

"I had just paid off my debts from buying the apartment and my kids' business was growing fast even though it was still in its infancy," Xu said of his decision to return to Luzhou. "The business has grown even faster after I



Former migrant Xu Guanghui reunited with his granddaughter and other family members in Luzhou.

came home. We want to buy a car next year."

In fact, business has been so brisk that the family has had to work seven days a week, and been forced to hire several workers to handle projects.

Xu sees more business opportunities arising from rapid urbanisation in Luzhou, a second-tier city of about five million people that is seeking to turn itself from a winery capital into a modern, industrialised metropolis.

Seven months after his return, Xu is still settling in.

"Working hours are longer here and the salaries vary according to the business situation," he said. "It's so different from Dongguan, where I got regular work hours and pay."

He now earns about 4,000 yuan (HK\$5,000) to 5,000 yuan a month, which is far higher than the monthly salary of 2,500 yuan he made in Dongguan.

And he has gained something far more valuable – a chance to rebuild ties with his children, and connect with his young granddaughter, Ruiqi.

Xu boasts he has become "a good friend" of the two-year-old toddler, who treated him as a stranger on his March visit, fleeing whenever he wanted to hug her.

"She now even calls me *yeye* [grandpa]," Xu said gleefully.

Just this month, he was able to join with four generations of his family, including his elderly mother, to celebrate his brother's 50th birthday. It was the kind of special occasion he has missed over the past two decades.

From time to time, Xu thinks of the fellow migrant workers with whom he used to toil in Guangdong and the factory he patrolled for so many years, and admitted that he sometimes felt "homesick", like the way he used to feel about Luzhou.

"After all, I spent almost 20 years there," he said of Guangdong. "I miss it."

MIGRATIONS

1963 Xu Guanghui born
1987 Xu's son, Tao, born
1990 Xu's daughter, Xiaolan, born
1992 Xu leaves Luzhou to work in Dongguan
1996 Xu makes his first visit home, for Lunar New Year
2000 Xu returns home, again for Lunar New Year
2001 Xu's wife, Huang Xianjun, leaves Luzhou and joins Xu to work in Dongguan
2004 Xu and his wife return home for Lunar New Year
2008 Xu and his wife again visit home for Lunar New Year
2010 Xu and his wife go home to see newborn granddaughter, Ruiqi, their son Tao's daughter. Later, Xiaolan visits Xu in Dongguan
2011 Huang decides to leave Dongguan for good and goes home to take care of granddaughter Ruiqi
March 7 – March 21, 2012 Xu makes his first visit home in two years
May 22, 2012 Xu packs up and bids farewell to Dongguan, perhaps for the last time, returning to Luzhou for good