


Chongming has many rural charms, but for young migrant brides eager for excitement and the bright lights of Shanghai, marriage to a Chongming Island farmer may not be wedded bliss. Zhao Wen reports on divorced and runaway wives.

Migrant brides flee boring rural life



Shi Zhouqi, accompanied by his grandmother Wang Shengyin, always believes that his mother will be back one day.

— Dong Jun

AN old Chinese saying describes marriage as a woman's second birth. With such a mindset, many young women, with stars in their eyes, leave poverty-stricken hometowns in rural areas of China to wed Shanghai men.

Many of these women end up on Chongming Island, a heavily rural county about 100 kilometers from the downtown.

For out-of-town women who believed Shanghai would be a fairytale come true, Chongming comes as something of a disappointment. Many find life on the island boring and remote from the fun and glitz they imagined. Small wonder that the divorce rate is climbing in Chongming County People's Court.

Since January 2012, the tribunal in Miaozhen Town in western Chongming has settled 49 divorce cases involving out-of-town spouses, accounting for about 29 percent of divorces cases in a town of about around 60,000 residents.

"It was once very popular for men in Miaozhen to marry out-of-town brides because the town is so poor that they couldn't attract locals," says Shi Huikang, the judge in charge of divorce cases.

"Miaozhen has remained almost unchanged in the past 10 years," Shi says. "The eastern side of Chongming is more developed, with villas and modern hotels, since it is nearer to the tunnel-bridge that links the island to the city downtown."

Naturally, few out-of-town brides are aware of the island's geography or e-

conomic situation before they arrive, expecting the bright lights, higher incomes and throbbing entertainment of Shanghai.

The brides are often introduced to local farmers by fellow villagers who came to work on the island. Most are from rural areas in the neighboring provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui. Some come from impoverished areas in the southwestern province of Guizhou and from southeastern Jiangxi Province.

In a sense, they have not been cheated. Their Chongming husbands are better off than most eligible males in their rural hometowns. But it's hardly the lap of luxury. Chongming farmers are still relatively poor, with an average annual income of several thousand yuan.

The story of Lu Min tells the saga of so many runaway wives in Chongming.

Lu, a rural woman from Jiangxi Province, married Shi Zhigang, a farmer in Miaozhen, in 2002. They had a son the next year and lived the life of common farm folks.

To cope with the cost of raising a son, Shi left the soil in 2005 and found a job as a factory worker in Shanghai's Songjiang District. To save on transportation costs, Shi came home infrequently.

One day his mother called him to say that Lu was missing.

Shi rushed home and began looking for his wife. He lost his job in the process. He found her once and

brought her back to Chongming, but she ran away again in 2008, never to be heard of again.

In 2011, Shi filed a divorce. Lu was absent from the hearing. No one knew her whereabouts. Last year, the divorce was granted on the grounds that the couple had been living apart for more than two years.

"Low wages have led many locals to migrate to mainland Shanghai for work, leaving their wives and children alone on the island," says judge Shi. "Husbands and wives who may have met through blind dates arranged by a friend didn't have a solid emotional basis to cope with long-term separation."

Often the only consolation for the lonely wives of Chongming is commiseration with other women in the same situation.

"Lu was a good daughter-in-law," says Wang Shengyin, Shi Zhigang's mother.

The 60-year-old says Lu left not only because her son didn't come home often enough, but also because she fell under the influence of another out-of-town wife — a friend who first introduced Lu to Shi. The friend had a fight with her husband and left the island.

"They were like real sisters," Wang says. "I know Lu was very sad and distracted after her 'sister' left."

Judge Shi says, in some cases, a group of out-of-town wives vanish together as if their escape from unhappy marriages is carefully planned.

"Wives on the island have little to do

except raise a child and help with the farm work," he says. "There is little entertainment. This is not the Shanghai they dreamed of. This is not the gaiety and splendor of the metropolis."

The break-ups are hardest on the children, the judge says. "A man may find another wife, but a child has lost his mother forever," he laments.

Lu didn't take a penny of the household money when she ran off. She left all her valuables behind, including her then 5-year-old son, Shi Zhouqi.

The boy turned 10 this year. His father, who now works as a deliveryman on the island, lives with his son and his parents in a two-story light gray cement house that the family built 20 years ago. The boy's little bed is covered with a blue mosquito net, next to his grandparents' old four-poster canopy bed.

The boy smiles and remains silent when neighbors gossip about how his mother abandoned him. "He is just stubborn and reluctant to say he misses her," Wang says.

If Lu wanted to come home, her mother-in-law says she would be welcomed. "It's better than separating a family," she says.

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