

WORKING TITLES

What do the most industrious people on earth read for fun?

BY LESLIE T. CHANG

Most of the officials in Qinglin spend their days playing mah-jongg and getting drunk, but Hou Weidong is determined to make something of himself. He sweeps the work team's office every day. He organizes villagers to build a new road. Although he is drunk a fair amount—that's a given for anyone in government service—he usually makes it home before he passes out.

The mountains around the fictional town of Qinglin, in southwestern China, consist of especially hard rock. And so in the first novel of a multivolume series about the life of Hou Weidong the protagonist invests in a stone quarry, even though officials are banned from commercial ventures. His timing is perfect: the county names 1994 the Year of Transport Construction, and demand for stone soars. But getting paid is another matter; anybody doing business has to bribe the government finance department in order to get the money he is owed. Hou Weidong learns how to do this, just as he learns how to win contracts that have not yet been announced and how to pay off the police. His bank account grows to three hundred and thirty-seven times his yearly civil servant's salary. He buys a pager and then a Motorola mobile phone; his house is the first in town to have air-conditioning.

Eventually, Hou Weidong is detained and questioned in a corruption investigation. But he does not inform on his official patrons. After his release, friends get him elected deputy township chief. He makes plans to marry his college sweetheart, whose parents have long opposed the match. They change their minds after visiting his new fourteen-hundred-square-foot apartment with two bathrooms—a climactic scene that ends the first volume of "The Diary of Government Official Hou Weidong":

Xiaojia said, "Husband, the two of us finally have a house."

Hou Weidong said, "This is our little nest.

We will spend 100,000 yuan to renovate it properly."

Xiaojia said, "We should buy a full set of home appliances, a VCD player, a 29-inch television set, an automatic washing machine, an air-conditioner, and a complete set of wooden floors." And so the door to happiness opened.

What do the Chinese, some of the hardest-working people on the planet, read in their spare time? Novels about work. The seventh volume of "The Diary of Government Official Hou Weidong" was published last July, with an initial print run of two hundred thousand copies. An official-looking red stamp on their covers proclaims that the books are a "Must-Read for Government Employees," but managers and entrepreneurs read them, too. *Zhichang xiaoshuo*, or workplace novels, have topped best-seller lists in recent years. "Du Lala's Promotion Diary," by a corporate executive writing under the pen name Li Ke, is the story of a young woman who rises from secretary to human-resources manager at a Fortune 500 company. It has inspired three sequels, a hit movie, and a thirty-two-part television series. The books have sold five million copies. In "The Get-Rich Diary of China's Poorest Guy," an unemployed man becomes a millionaire in three years by selling electric cable; the book's editor attributes its success to a clever title, a flashy cover, and the fact that "getting rich is the dream of all Chinese people."

Certain professions have their own subgenres. The "commercial warfare novel" pits sales teams against each other in mortal combat over a large order. The "financial novel" wrings drama from stock prices. The "novel of officialdom," which dates to imperial times, trades in the secrets and scandals of the bureaucracy.

Like their protagonists, these books strive to be efficient and useful. They include rules for getting ahead in the workplace:

Socialize with rich people. They know more than the poor.

Avoid unpromising work assignments by feigning illness. Women should fake pregnancy when necessary.

If your boss makes a pass at you, smile and flirt back.

Hire subordinates who are barely adequate or they'll make you look bad.

When bribing an official, have your business partner deliver the money so your hands stay clean.

"Du Lala's Promotion Diary" contains a long disquisition on how to calculate the budget for an office renovation. Elsewhere, the author interrupts the narrative to explain what a non-compete agreement is. "The Get-Rich Diary" puts entrepreneurial tips in boldface: "It takes many incidents to establish a reputation and only one to ruin it," and "Selling the same item in a different location may increase your profits."

In America, writers might feel pressured to add romance and sex to a novel; in China they're told to take it out. "Traps and Links," a thriller about sales teams competing to win a \$1.7-million computer-equipment contract, was edited to tone down a love interest. "When we first saw this book, we told the author, 'We don't want to publish a romance novel. Can you make it more of a financial novel?'" Zhang Lihong, the chief editor of Tsinghua University Press, which published the book, told me. "We knew that's what would make it sell better." The book has sold almost four hundred thousand copies and inspired two sequels.

Most workplace novelists do not have a literary background: one was a pioneer in the securities industry, and another sold computers for Dell. They typically begin writing anonymously on the Internet and are signed by publishers after they gain an online following. "The Diary of Government Official Hou Weidong" is published under a pseudonym, and the book jacket identifies the author only as "a certain deputy bureau director in a certain city in a certain province." But in late 2010 newspaper reporters outed a mid-level functionary named Zhang Bing. He worked in Yongchuan District, one of the countless regions administered by the sprawling city of Chongqing. The author of the Hou Weidong series, which has sold three million copies, was the deputy director of the Bureau of Environmental Sanitation.

Zhang Bing doesn't smoke, doesn't drink at lunch, and doesn't praise the Communist Party. He is forty-one years old but, with his sturdy round face, crewcut, and keen black eyes, he resem-

bles a schoolboy eager for trouble. He is like no Chinese official I've ever met. In literary circles, Zhang Bing is famous for earning royalties of two million yuan, almost three hundred thousand dollars. His day job is to oversee the disposal of the three hundred tons of garbage that Yongchuan District generates every day. He has a staff of twenty-two, a crew of six hundred trash collectors, and a fleet of trucks. "Our job is to collect garbage, transport garbage, and treat garbage. This is what I do," Zhang Bing told me. "And at night I write."

On a spring morning, I accompanied him on an inspection of the old city dump, whose surrounding area is a popular getaway for residents. The dump was closed three years ago, because, as Zhang Bing explained, it "did not suit the atmosphere of a leisure area." The trash was buried under a long field that slopes down to a stone dam.

Old Zhao, the foreman of the site's work crew, approached. Zhang Bing pointed to a patch of land below the dam. "I want to make sure no water seeps into the ground here," he said.

"There won't be much water," Old Zhao assured him. "Don't worry about that."

Zhang Bing worried. "What if there's a sudden rainstorm and twenty millimetres of rain falls? How much water will collect in this spot?"

Old Zhao did some quick mental arithmetic. A hundred cubic metres, he said.

"So I'd need ten trucks to get rid of all the wastewater. I want you to build another channel to drain off more of the water," Zhang Bing said. Old Zhao nodded. "If you spend money now, you'll spend less later," Zhang Bing told him.

Like the hero of his books, Zhang Bing started out supervising road maintenance and family planning in the farming villages around Yongchuan. He joined the

district's forestry department in 2007 and began to write a novel the following year, anonymously posting chapters online. In the series' ninth installment, Hou Weidong will become the Party secretary of a major city. As a district deputy bureau director, Zhang Bing is four grades below that in the civil service. "The series will end there," he told me. "I don't really understand the world above that,

person's fate could be determined by political whim. He came of age during Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, which brought opportunity but also opened up a gulf between winners and losers in a hyper-competitive economy.

I asked Zhang Bing if the series had a moral. "Maybe professional writers stand on higher ground and look at things from that vantage point," he said. "But I write about very real, very practical things. I don't write about theory. I just want to tell a story."

The first success manuals to appear in China were American imports. In the late nineteen-eighties, some people abandoned their government jobs to start businesses of their own. Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People" (translated into Chinese as "The Weaknesses of Human Nature") was popular, as was L. Ron Hubbard's "Dianetics" ("Techniques for Psychological Adjustment"). Over the next two decades, though, many Chinese authors rejected the sunny self-actualization message of the American self-help movement. A favorite among factory workers was "Square and Round," which preached how to get ahead through manipulation and deceit. "Do not show concern for others," it advised. "It insults your self-respect and will only

make other people look down on you."

Competition in the workplace is a new experience. For decades, people inhabited familiar and stable settings—the village, the school, the work unit. A nationwide system that assigned jobs to all college graduates was abolished only in the late nineteen-nineties. A decade later, promoting oneself in meetings and interviews still feels unnatural; one person's advancement means that everyone else is left behind. Workplace novels present white-collar jobs as a form of gladiatorial combat, because to most people that's how it feels. In "Traps and Links," which



Among best-sellers, the "financial novel" wrings drama from stock prices.

so if I keep writing it won't be authentic."

Zhang Bing has never considered quitting his job to write full time. The economics of publishing are poor: in China's fragmented market, a successful book may sell ten thousand copies and pay five thousand dollars in royalties before taxes. "If you add up the income of the ten top-earning writers, it's not as much as the profit an average building brings a developer in a third-tier city," Zhang Bing, then No. 22 on the list, said in a newspaper interview. But his reluctance is also a question of generations. He was born during the Cultural Revolution, when a

in 2006 inaugurated the commercial-warfare genre, the drama of duelling sales departments is treated as a fight to the death. “Sales is like war: in some cases it’s better to die on the battlefield than to suffer defeat,” Zhang Lihong, of Tsinghua University Press, told me. “I did not enjoy reading this book and couldn’t finish it,” she admitted. “It’s so brutal—people behave like animals! But it’s very authentic.” The novel is based on a true story in which all but one person in a company’s fifteen-member sales department were fired when a rival team won a computer contract.

This Darwinian view of the workplace is widespread. Yu Zhenghua, a professional investor, wrote a best-seller called “The Stock Picker.” In 1993, when the government opened the market to institutional investors, it organized a training program to teach executives at a few select firms how to handle the trades. Of the thirty-three people in that class, Yu Zhenghua is the only one who still works in finance. “Some have gone to jail, some have fled abroad, some have lost their faith and are now driving taxicabs,” he told me. “Are those the only options?” I asked. “Oh, and some have committed suicide.”

In the opening pages of “Du Lala’s Promotion Diary,” the heroine lands an entry-level job in the China office of an American telecommunications company. At first, Lala works hard and doesn’t complain. Then, realizing that her American bosses don’t value her at all, she takes charge of a seven-hundred-thousand-dollar office renovation. (In the literature of the Chinese workplace, renovation is an obsession akin to inheritance in the Victorian novel.) Afterward, she hectors her boss for a promotion:

She swallowed and said, “The project is finished. Will there be a bonus?”

“Our chairman hates when people talk of money. It’s not good to speak of money.” . . .

Lala said to herself: “If I don’t fight for myself, I can’t count on others to defend me.” She gathered up her courage and said, “Boss, can I have a raise?”

Modernity is the book’s true theme. Lala advances to management by learning how to promote herself, to speak up in meetings, to be pushy and friendly at the

same time—in other words, to act like an American. She masters the corporate-speak of management consultants—SWOT analysis, SMART objectives. “Multinationals in China represent advanced ideas and systems,” Cai Mingfei, who edited the Du Lala books, told me. “If you understand these ideas, they can help you no matter what kind of place you work in.” While Americans try to learn from China’s economic rise, the Chinese still look to the West for inspiration. “Du Lala” is filled with English phrases that, taken together, offer a paean to the mixed blessings of globalization:

value-added
C.E.O.
sexual harassment
cubicle
we wish him a bright future
HBO
Nike
condom
Foreign Corrupt Practices Act
pay for it
Louis Vuitton

The novel is also striking for what it leaves out. Lala is an attractive single woman in her late twenties who lacks a social life; we never see her gossiping with friends, because she doesn’t have any. A romantic interest finally appears—an arrogant sales supervisor who threatens to derail Lala’s renovation—but their love scenes are less impassioned than their discussions of sales targets. People spend all their waking hours in conference rooms and cubicles, because this is what it takes to survive. We never even learn what Lala’s company sells.

The fierce pursuit of success once figured in the plotlines of American fiction, too. Horatio Alger published more than a hundred novels intended as success manuals for youths during the late nineteenth century, an era of industrialization and economic growth that had much in common with China today. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* strives for material possessions as hungrily as any Chinese factory girl or office worker. “Here was the splendid dining chamber, all decorated and aglow, where the wealthy ate,” Carrie observes on entering a fine restaurant for the first time. “What a wonderful thing it was to be rich.” But



the literature of America’s rise was told in moral terms. In a typical Alger story, a poor young man impresses a wealthy benefactor with his virtue and is rewarded with a job that promises middle-class respectability. When Carrie becomes a leading stage actress, she learns that wealth and fame do not bring happiness.

China was once a country governed by morals. Its emperor ruled through righteous example; by showing himself to be above corruption, he assured a virtuous administration and a peaceful empire. One of history’s first success manuals was the work of a fifth-century-B.C. moralist. “The Analects of Confucius” was a guide to *zuoren*, how to behave properly: “Riches and rank are what every man craves; yet if the only way to obtain them goes against his principles, he should desist from such a pursuit.” Today, the focus is on *zuoshi*, how to get things done. All the rules for getting ahead can be reduced to one: Do anything to survive, because you’re on your own.

If sales is war, so is publishing. Many Chinese publishers wait to see how a book sells in its first week before deciding whether to promote it; many writers respond to this pressure by buying hundreds of copies of their own works. Some contracts actually stipulate that an author purchase a set number of copies of his book and sell them however he can. Sales in China’s eleven-billion-dollar publishing industry grew nineteen per cent in 2010, according to the monitoring firm Beijing OpenBook Company, but almost seventy per cent of the trade is in textbooks. What’s more, the retail price of an average book is about four dollars and has barely budged in a decade. “People are willing to spend a lot of money to go out to dinner or to sing karaoke, but they are used to having books be very cheap,” Peggy Yu, of dangdang.com, China’s largest online book retailer, told me.

The cutthroat nature of the business is on display in any bookstore. “Du Lala’s Promotion Diary” was followed by “Hu Keke’s Beijing Success Diary,” “Tian Duoduo’s Civil Service Exam Diary,” and “Su Changchang’s Struggle to Get a Raise Diary.” Is it enough to have one novel called “Mayor’s Secretary”? Apparently not, because there’s also “County Party Secretary,” “Inspection Committee Party Secretary,” and “Municipal Party Committee Secretary.” The undisputed king of

the genre is Wang Xiaofang. He has written fourteen books drawing on his experience working for Ma Xiangdong, the former vice-mayor of Shenyang, who was executed in 2006 for corruption. You can't buy that kind of publicity.

These works owe their existence to a sweeping liberalization of the publishing business. In a push to modernize its culture and media industries, the government recently gave publishers more autonomy. Bureaucrats formerly bought books; now editors act as aggressive scouts. The Shanghai Translation Publishing House, the largest publisher of translated books in China, releases titles that it wouldn't have touched before, such as Lawrence Wright's "The Looming Tower" (too much religion) and the novels of Haruki Murakami (too much sex). "In the past, we preferred to avoid trouble at all costs. If you were punished, all the people involved from the managing director on down would be fired," Zhang Jiren, an editor at the firm, told me. "Now we're willing to take risks."

Officially, all book publishers in China belong to the state; in reality, private entrepreneurs have been operating as publishers for years. Independent presses, which invented and dominate lucrative categories such as young-adult novels, were the first to send sales teams to bookstores. They've published many of the workplace novels and were instrumental in establishing the novel of officialdom. The first such work, titled "Painting," was published in 1998 by the state-owned People's Literature Publishing House. It arose out of an older genre known as the "anti-corruption novel," whose story line typically involved the punishment of officials who flagrantly abused their power. But where those earlier stories blamed graft on a few greedy individuals, with justice prevailing in the end, "Painting" showed how deeply corruption was embedded in the Chinese political system. The government was not happy with the book, and state-owned publishers shied away from the market, but private presses quickly took over.

"The private companies were braver and less accountable than the state publishers because they are not part of the regulatory structure," Jo Lusby, the managing director of Penguin China, told me. She is publishing Wang Xiaofang's "Notes of a Civil Servant" in English. "Now these novels are such an established



"Spoiler alert."

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part of the literary culture that the government can't do anything about it."

That loss of control hasn't been good for the bureaucracy's image. In the Hou Weidong series, officials skip work for days to play mah-jongg, or they show up only to drink tea, read newspapers, and enjoy the air-conditioning. Every meeting is an excuse to eat and drink at public expense, and there are endless descriptions of cadres throwing up—on themselves, on dining tables, in public toilets, on country roads. They set up illegal companies and profit from sweetheart deals. Hou Weidong marvels at the scale of bribery but quickly masters the etiquette of the payoff. The corruption of a young man by the wide world has rarely been presented in such triumphant terms. An egalitarian universe, the author implies, is one in which even an unconnected nobody can learn to buy off officials and subvert the law.

For a man who wrote a best-selling novel that has a giant gold ingot on the cover, Lao Kang is surprisingly modest. Only a few friends know that he is the author of "The Get-Rich Diary of China's Poorest Guy," and his wife has not read the book. "She likes Korean soap operas," he told me. He owns a small company that sells electrical wiring, and he agreed to meet me on a rainy afternoon in his native Chongqing, on the condition that I not take his photograph. He never told me his real name.

Lao Kang is forty years old. He has a big, open square face with a wispy goatee, like a peasant crossed with an artist. He rejects the get-rich gospel and boldface success tips advocated by his own book, which he conceived as the story of a self-made man's struggle to overcome hardship. "The publisher packaged the book as a manual for success, which I very much disagreed with," he told me. He was asked to rewrite the ending to emphasize the protagonist's material wealth.

"I worry that the book will mislead young people," he said. "It will make them focus too much on making money. If everyone in our country focussed only on getting rich, that would be a very dangerous thing."

"But aren't we already at that point?" I asked.

He was silent for a moment and then laughed in embarrassment, as if the national ethos were a personal failing. "But I think this will change," he said. "A lot of people are already changing their thinking. They want to spend time with their loved ones, and to travel. They don't need too many material goods—just enough not to have worries."

"The Get-Rich Diary" tells the story of an educated man who has been out of work for several years and is estranged from his wife and son. He is inspired to pursue success after watching an "American Idol"-type reality show on television. "They were not necessarily good singers, but they made

the attempt and took action," the narrator says. "This was the origin of their success. So I must take action." He finds work as a laborer on a construction site, assembling scaffolding for buildings. ("If you don't act," the book counsels, "you'll be poor forever.") In his spare time, he starts distributing construction materials, sets up a sales showroom, and eventually buys a scaffolding factory. ("A person's job opportunity is to be found in the midst of work, not through sitting and imagining it.") In three years, his company achieves sales of a million yuan. His wife returns home and they buy an apartment together. (In the Chinese workplace novel, the climax often involves an apartment purchase.)

The book describes how it feels to be a failure in a place as ambition-mad as China:

I am thirty years old.

I don't own an apartment but live with my wife's parents.

Every day I sleep until ten, cook a huge bowl of noodles to ravenously fill my stomach, then leave and "go to work." . . . My work involves finding an Internet café to go online. I read the news, roam the online forums, or play some computer games.

If I have no money to go online, I will go alone to an out-of-the-way place and sit quietly staring into space. This is also part of my daily work.

At any rate, I will avoid people's gaze, and I have gone into hiding from everyone I know.

Lao Kang reluctantly agreed to take me on a sales visit that he assured me would be of no interest. "All we'll do is go in and sign a piece of paper," he told me. It was his second meeting with Boss Peng, and he hoped to close a deal to supply Internet cable to a prison in the city of Fuling. Boss Peng's office was a drafty room in an unfurnished apartment, lit by a flickering fluorescent bulb. The pounding of a hammer next door started up like a welcoming orchestra the moment we arrived.

"I'm not making money on this project, because the construction company is paying me such a low price," Boss Peng, a stocky man with a meaty crewcut head, said.

"I'm not making money on this deal, either, because my costs are so high," Lao Kang replied.

Having taken their vows of poverty, the men got down to negotiations. ("Any business opportunity needs two people: one who wants to spend money and another who wants to earn it.") Boss Peng wanted to pay only ten per cent up front; Lao Kang required a twenty-per-cent down payment. Boss Peng protested—"I

thought we had already agreed on this point last Friday"—and pulled out a brick of hundred-yuan bills, like a showgirl flashing a bit of leg. The brick disappeared almost immediately into the breast pocket of his windbreaker. Lao Kang stood firm. Next door, an interval of silence was followed by a second movement: power drilling.

In the next hour, Boss Peng requested that the boxes of cable be delivered to the construction site that afternoon. Lao Kang said he needed two days. Boss Peng explained that he had only fifteen days to finish the job. Seeing his advantage, Lao Kang said he could guarantee delivery the next day if Boss Peng paid him on the spot. The brick of cash reappeared and changed hands. The drilling continued and the hammer joined back in, building to a crescendo as the two men signed the contract.

This negotiation had taken two hours. "I'm very tired," Boss Peng said.

"I'm very tired, too," Lao Kang said. "In our next life, let's not do business. Let's be government officials instead." For supplying six thousand dollars' worth of Internet cable to Boss Peng, Lao Kang earned less than fifty dollars—a profit margin of seven-tenths of one per cent.

As we drove back to his office, Lao Kang told me that he could imagine a different way of life. His wife's sister and her husband have lived and worked in the United States for years. "They don't focus on money," he said. "All they care about is living a pleasant life. Every weekend, they drive somewhere on an outing."

I suggested that he could also spend weekends this way.

"Yes," he said. "But every time I think about doing it I immediately think I should be doing something more meaningful. Like working."

In a nation that so worships material success, even the heretics are high achievers. Zhao Xing is a twenty-six-year-old executive at an American public-relations firm in Beijing who also writes a blog aimed at office workers in their twenties. But Zhao Xing does not offer tips on becoming a manager or a millionaire. Instead, she advises readers on how to fulfill their dreams while surviving the workplace—an explicit rejection of the work-obsessed society she lives in. "We disagree with Du Lala," she told me. "All

she does is fight. It is very tiring. I keep telling my readers that we don't have to be like that. If we're just like our elders, society will never develop."

Zhao Xing's first book, which comes out in China this spring, is not about work. It's about an eleven-day trip that she made to Taiwan in 2010, sleeping on the couches of families she met online. Chinese tourists are not allowed to travel to Taiwan except in organized groups, so the book, which sold well in Taiwan, is getting a lot of attention. "It's been my dream to visit Taiwan since I was seventeen," she told me. A second book, combining essays and fiction about the workplace, is due out later this year.

Zhao Xing is part of what the Chinese call *baowuhou*, the post-1985 generation. Accustomed to a life of material comfort and choice, they don't define success in the standard ways. "We grew up along with China's reforms," she said. "You can't motivate us with money—you have to appeal to our dreams. For example, a post-'85 may quit a job so he can take a trip. This is unimaginable to the older generation." Readers often write her about their aspirations: to be a good teacher, to buy Louis Vuitton, to direct films, to take their parents on a plane trip for the first time.

Zhao Xing would like to visit "the places other people cannot go, like Iceland, Fiji, and the Vatican." She wants to improve her piano-playing. She was the only workplace writer I met who offered her own definition of success. "Success means that you can live the way you want, that you can be yourself and not the person others want you to be," she told me. "I can't say I've achieved this, but I'm pursuing it."

"Don't get wrapped up in your title and the words on your business card," she tells readers in one blog post. "Life is not lived for the sake of those few words. . . . You can change the company, you can change the profession, but your own youth comes only once, and of your own inner being you have only one. Don't sacrifice your soul and your ideas for anything. You must have diligent behavior and a brave heart."

Though Zhao Xing represents something new in contemporary fiction, she is also a throwback to an earlier generation of Chinese writers: those who were concerned not with how to work but with how to live. ♦