

CITY

In Formation

A word from our featured City Snapshot photographer, p10



Standing Its Ground
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CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

Men of the Street

By Sky Thomas Gidge

THE DIRTY DETAILS

Monthly salary: RMB4,000

Days per week: 7

Hours per day: 8

The shipping container arrives first – windows and a door cut into opposite ends. Then crowd control barriers appear, bearing illustrated banners with rules, including ‘no drinking before work’ (a maxim that will be violated as early as 8.30am).

Finally, the men arrive, migrant workers from Henan province sleeping ‘five or six’ in prefab housing, and spending days laying a span of sewer then retiling the torn-up pavilion.

They are the shock troops of the China miracle, arriving, doing a job and moving on. Wherever you go, they came first. They built the road you walk, the store you shop at and the room you sleep in.

“In Henan, there’s nothing to do,” says a worker, 38, wearing a safety hat. He smiles around his cigarette in the afternoon sun, and says to call him ‘friend.’ “So I came here.”

Friend’s journey from Henan to wealthier Shenzhen is a story played out across China by an estimated 56 million migrant construction workers, who left their homes for a piece of the wealth in the major cities – taking in an average wage of RMB4,000.

It’s an industry that uses half of the world’s concrete through a web of contractors, and subcontractors that do everything from set bricks to construct the buildings you’ll see on postcards in 20 years.

But for Guangxi-native Chen Sheng, 21, it’s as simple as a pickaxe and a stubborn stretch of Dongguan sidewalk.

Chen returned to Dongguan from Guangxi province three days earlier and is back to his eight-hour-a-day job. When we approach he is laying fiberoptic cable – no special equipment, just a red tube he pushes into the torn up ground.

How much he makes monthly is “hard to say” but he works eight hours a day, and – he assures us – does get paid for his work, an apparent reference to the bad players in the industry that stiff manual workers after a job is done.

After wiring up Dongguan – what’s next for a man like Chen? He pauses: “I’ll decide as I go along.”

Man on the Street is a monthly feature where we talk to someone doing an everyday job to gain insight into the lives of ordinary Chinese people.

