

Notes on Chinese Factory Work
Or, Shut Up and Make Me a Vegetable Bottle

For weeks after I stopped working on the factory assembly line, my skin smelled like Chinese vinegar. I know now (and think I knew then) that there is no such thing as “Chinese vinegar.” Vinegar is named after its source (rice vinegar from rice, malt vinegar from malt) not after the location in which it is made. But at 16 years old, I knew only that the vinegar we were using in our factory was different from the kind I had grown up with in California. And being stranded in the middle of China, spite led me to refer to the vinegar solely by its geographic origin. Of course, I did not speak enough Chinese to tell anyone the new name. I did not mind. Spite is often a masturbatory exercise.

Chinese vinegar differs from California vinegar mostly in its intention. California vinegar is meant to exaggerate: add kick to fish and chips, dress up potato crisps, attach zing to sandwiches. Chinese vinegar is meant to halt. The factory I worked at used the substance to stop the process of aging. Chinese vinegar has a particular way of crawling under the membrane of things and holding them there steady in time, as if the vinegar convinced the molecules to stop and pose for a picture that never got taken.

The trip to China was to be an experiment in independence. I was 16 and had studied a bit of Mandarin in high school (enough to get me to a restaurant, not enough to order anything). I thought that spending some time in China would help my language skills, and — more importantly — fulfill some kind of naïve fantasy of life in the Big Asian City. I had a bad habit of seeing my life through movies, and this was to be my *Fivel Goes East*. My father, who taught me how to rollerblade by buying me a helmet and sending me out to the street, thought this was a great idea.

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We found a local Californian who could place me in a factory job in one of the country's smaller cities. Three weeks later, I was hitting the tarmac in the northern city of Qingdao, China.

Qingdao is most famous for its local ale. "Tsingtao Beer" is the region's crowning achievement, and can be found in intermediately authentic Chinese restaurants around the world. I, however, was working at a company that produced home goods. Our specific factory produced decorative glass bottles filled with vegetables meticulously arranged in different designs and sold as ornamental pieces for kitchens. The bottles are wildly popular in the United States, selling at K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Target, Costco, Walgreens—they have become fairly commonplace in suburban homes, restaurants, two-star hotels. More than anything, the bottles make great gifts. They are flawlessly meaningless — a midsize aesthetic ornament that is benign enough not to offend anyone, yet has enough volume that it looks great under wrapping paper. They are a great starting place for sterile housewife-to-housewife gift exchanges. "Thanks so much for keeping an eye out on the house while we were gone." "Oh it was absolutely no problem!" "Here, I got you a jar of decorative vegetables bathed in vinegar." "Oh, you're always so thoughtful." So on and so forth.

I found myself sleeping in a motel in the city and waking up each morning to make the hour-long trek out to the factory just beyond the city limits. I wasn't officially being paid, although the company agreed to pay for my living arrangements. This, in itself, was more lucrative than the going daily factory wage of \$2.

I quickly realized that I was the youngest on my assembly line. Almost everyone at the factory was between 18 and 22. The factory never closed, producing bottles 24 hours a day in two separate

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twelve hour shifts: 7am to 7pm, and 7pm to 7am. But actual clock time was largely irrelevant. We functioned in relation to the ends of our work shifts. “What time is it?” “Two and a half hours left.”

The factory employed three thousand workers, all of which lived on site. When the 22-year-olds left the factory, more 18-year-olds came in their place. We wore body covers, masks and hairnets so we as not to contaminate the vegetables, leaving only the space around our eyes exposed. We began to know each other by this region alone: Xie had an extra wrinkle under his right eye. Huang’s eyelashes were thick and clumped. Though you couldn’t hear Jing laughing, she would squint her eyes when she thought something was funny. But most hours we stood straight and worked on our bottles at our impossibly long tables, meticulously filling them with vegetables and then drowning them in vinegar. Wang once told me he imagined he put a tiny piece of his ancestors into every bottle he made. The company’s website says that a good bottle will take eight years to go bad.

The process of actually filling the bottles was genius in its simplicity. Before going over to Qingdao, I was eager to see how the whole process was done. Intricate vegetable arrangements in a bottle with a tiny opening were a bit of a ship-in-a-bottle affair; I was excited to see the machinery that split the bottles in two for the vegetable designs to be laid out, and the following contraption that melded the two glass halves back together so seamlessly. When I got there, I realized I was largely mistaken. The process consisted solely of factory workers using the equivalent of an unbent wire hanger to shove vegetables in the opening of the glass bottle, moving the vegetables around with the wire until they were in the right place. And yet— however crude— skill was a significant factor. Gao Gao, who worked at the end of the assembly line, could string a row of different colored

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vegetables of the end of his wire, get them inside, and arrange them in the proper order in roughly fourteen seconds. This process took me about three minutes.

Because of my ineptitude, I was delegated to more simple filling tasks. For three days, I took bottles and gave them each eight cloves of garlic, to be passed along and arranged by someone else. For hours upon end, I stood in place and put a handful of garlic into a hole. The body does strange things when it becomes fully mechanized. Minutes feel like they are physically slowing down – like a tired marathon runner slowing pace after realizing there are still many miles left to go. I began to have fully fleshed out conversations with myself, and then realize only 30 seconds had passed. I started to play mental games to pass the time: I will complete four more bottles and then I'll let myself scratch my nose; I'll quietly tap each bottle twice on the table before I hand it off; I'll close my eyes for two seconds at the beginning of every sixth bottle. Sometimes I would try to envision the entire lifespan of a bottle after it left the factory: On the plane to some warehouse in Arizona. Being unpacked by a fresh-faced trainee at a Wal-Mart in Chicago. Sitting quietly in the corner of some corporate office kitchen, left over from the last tenants but Margaret from accounting thought it looked nice and kept it. Or my mother putting it next to the big window in the kitchen.

The bottles refuse to disappear from my life. They emerge unannounced, staring back at me from the countertops of cheap Italian restaurants, the insides of well-lit suburban cupboards, the shelves of Ivy League cafeterias. They sit with their melancholy stories, like some distant memory I can't remember whether I actually lived through or just dreamed up. Sometimes I ask their owners where they bought them, just to see their reaction. Blank stares, most often.

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People like to say that China is the factory of the world. This sounds nicer than calling China a country filled with factory workers. These days, I can look at one of the company's bottles and tell which specific province in China it came from after a few glances. Sometimes, I can remember the names of the people who took the time to put it together.

A month after I return from China, I am eating dinner at a friend's house. Halfway through the meal, I notice a bottle on the kitchen counter. It is a bottle from our factory. After a few moments of hesitation, I announce to the table that I recognize it. I tell them that a shy man named Wang Tiao was in charge of making it, and he would be very proud to know it was here. Half laughing to cover up my own uncertainty, I joke that a piece of his ancestry might be at the bottom of the bottle.

After a few moments of silence, someone asks the table if they want anything more to drink.