

Wang Ping

### **SHE SHINES SHOES AT THE METAL CITY OF YONGKANG**

No, I'm not from this town. The locals are too rich for this kind of thing. Only peasants shine shoes on streets. You're right – I'm from Jiangxi, a poor village in the poorest province. My husband is here too, pulling a rickshaw. My kids? The boy is working in some factory, I don't know where. Haven't heard from him for a year. He wanted to go to college, but couldn't afford finishing high school. He cried so when he had to quit. He was Number One student since the first grade. Very smart boy. I cried, too. But what could we do? We made nothing from the soil. Had to pay taxes for everything – the crops, the house, the birth control, and school, even for the pigs and chickens we raised. We worked hard all year and ended up owing money to the government and the village. I escaped here three years ago. Make a yuan for each pair of shoes. On a better day, if I'm not caught by cops, I can make thirty yuan. That's 9,000 yuan a year, barely enough to pay for the college tuitions. And we have to live, right? That costs money. It's fate. Some are born into money, to go around in Mercedes and live in mansions. Others are doomed to labor till their last breath. I started working since I learned to stand. I'm thirty-seven, have lost all my teeth. You're crying. It's nothing. I'm strong, never sick, thank heavens. I roam streets, rain or snow. Saving money for my daughter, a junior in high school. Her teachers said if any peasant child can go to college, it'd be her. We're all saving money, even my boy. She's our only hope. To get out of the grime.